

The rage epidemic



Illustration: *Harry Afentoglou*

Sydney Morning Herald
August 2, 2008

Common to the world's indigenous peoples are the traumas that contribute to self-harm, writes Germaine Greer.

Rage is not just an extreme form of anger. Anger, which can range from mere crossness to blazing indignation, is an emotion like any other. Rage is a disabling mental condition that can be lethal. It is the end product of repeated insult and humiliation that the sufferer has been powerless to avenge, and it is utterly destructive.

Our understanding of the real nature of rage is not helped by the media's habit of racking up the rage quotient in everyday events. A direct statement of annoyance will be called an outburst, no matter how coolly it is delivered. A critical remark will be called an "attack". People are described as enraged when they are simply annoyed. An account by Tariq Ali of the events of 1968 carried the newspaper headline "Where has all the rage gone?", although Ali did not use the word in his article. It is not rage that drives protest; indeed, protest may be the therapy for rage. People who can express their grievance and take action to redress it are not the ones who will throw a rope over a branch to hang themselves.

Most people think that suicide is an act of grief; in fact it is part of the spectrum of self-destructive behaviour that we should associate with rage. The prime mover of self-harming is rage. The typical self-harmer has endured physical violence, emotional abuse or sexual abuse as a child or young adult; according to the British charity mental health charity Mind, "They might have been neglected, separated from someone they loved, been bullied, harassed, assaulted, isolated, put under intolerable pressure, made homeless, sent into care, into hospital or to other institutions."

Humans can live with grief but they can't live for long with rage. Part of rage is self-loathing; self-loathing expresses itself in hostility towards those close enough to get hurt. Those who love the enraged person the most can expect the cruellest treatment.

We have learnt how to recognise rage in traumatised children, and to distinguish real rage from the performance of rage, which we call a tantrum. Tantrums can be discouraged; rage is a different matter. Enraged children are a danger to themselves and to others. As rage chemicals flood their bodies they will tremble, clench their fists, go stiff, "zone out", become frenzied, revert to baby talk or gabbling, bang their heads against the wall and do their best to hurt anyone who comes close. They are so unaware of their surroundings that they cannot be allowed outside the house.

We are less good at diagnosing terminal rage in adults. In Britain two women every week will be killed by a partner's blind rage. Rage seizes on any victim, especially the innocent. Rage has nothing to do with creativity, nothing to do with communication. Rage cannot argue. Rage is the murderous child of inarticulacy.

When Ewan Morrison, whose second novel, *Distance*, was published a few weeks ago, was 10, he stammered so badly he "could barely say a single word ... " He described his condition in an article he wrote for *The Guardian*: "In those years I was livid with rage and hatred ... full of an almost apocalyptic vengeance ... In stuttering there is a kind of rebellion ... " He describes himself then as a "silent, suicidal boy". His son is now the age Morrison was when his stammer developed. "I would rather spare him the rage I have lived with. The rage that nearly destroyed me ... "

Rage is what overwhelms us in unbearable situations that we can neither fight nor flee. The exact sequence of events is difficult to determine. Effects may masquerade as causes, and even become causes as the syndrome develops. When an insult or threat is perceived, long before the cortex can bring judgment to bear, the part of the brain called the amygdala sends out the rage signal. Neurotransmitters called catecholamines trigger an accelerated heartbeat, blood pressure rises steeply, muscles grow tense, pupils dilate, palms sweat, breath comes short, body temperature rises and, as blood sugar burns, the affected person begins to shake. The pituitary produces more adrenocorticotrophic hormone, so boosting the secretion of adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol.

Serotonin levels drop. The mind focuses on the immediate stimulus, to the exclusion of all else. Though the condition should be of short duration, failing the outlet of fight or flight the excitement will ebb gradually, to become tension and fatigue. In this latter state, events that should occasion no more than irritability or anxiety can set off the thwarted rage in all its fury. Eventually, as physiologic structures are repeatedly

battered by these distorted processes, rage develops its own pathology. Enraged people produce more homocysteine, strongly implicated in coronary heart disease.

Most people afflicted by rage can give no account of what is happening to them. An exception is Clarence Thomas, the first black man to serve on the US Supreme Court, who has written his autobiography, *My Grandfather's Son*. After the shock of the killing of Martin Luther King, and the emotional battery of the brutal racism of the Catholic seminary where he was a student, from which he escaped only to incur his father's curt rejection, he knew black rage.

"At long last I felt the blind, self-destructive rage that haunted so many of the people I knew ... Every southern black had ... felt the rage that threatened to burn through the masks of meekness and submission behind which we hid our true feelings."

Thomas tells us he used "alcohol to deaden the pain and anger that dominated his life". Substance abuse produces its own pathology, driving the rage deeper down under layers of neurasthenia.

In *The Guardian*, "Clare" described how she felt when she was sent back to her white father in England by her black mother: "I hated my mother with a passion and didn't know what to do about it. I didn't know how to begin talking about the emotional turmoil I was in, and I didn't recognise it for what it was ... I didn't cry; I shouted. I didn't hug; I'd lash out ... By the time I was 14 years old, I'd secretly guzzle alcohol at the local bus stop with other teenagers. I soon started smoking weed and taking speed, but I was looking for calm oblivion. Then I discovered Valium and sleeping pills. They gave me a reprieve from the dark feelings of abandonment and the fury ... that lived inside me."

To the cumulative effects of substance abuse must be added the effects of physical trauma. People poisoned by rage are accident-prone. They also provoke violence in others. Anyone who has been bashed around the head or bashes his own head may suffer damage to the prefrontal cortex so that the perception of even a minimal threat leads to an explosive reaction.

When the person in the grip of rage seeks a palliative for his agony, we can expect him to abuse it, so incorporating it in the general scenario of self-harm. In a culture of reticence, such as Australian Aboriginal culture, disinhibition is an aim in itself. Drink allows the festering poisonous rage to find an inefficient outlet in incoherent yelling and screaming, and finally in violence towards the self and others.

Aboriginal peoples the world over have endured all the traumas that Mind lists as the cause of self-harming. Successive generations of aboriginal people have been "neglected, separated ... bullied, harassed, assaulted, isolated, put under intolerable pressure, made homeless, sent into care, into hospital or to other institutions", and not just in Australia. The Bushmen of Africa, the Innu, Inuit, Inupiat and Yupik of North America, the Andamanese, the Khanty of Siberia, the Wanniyala-Aetto of Sri Lanka, hunter-gatherers on every continent display different stages of the same disease process as rage eats through their social fabric, their identity and their sense of self-worth. Extremely high rates of addiction, domestic and spousal abuse, parasuicide and suicide are so common as to have become typical.

The colonialist sincerely believes that he has the indigenous people's best interests at heart, even as every move he makes drives them further into the dead end of helpless, anguished rage. As money is the cure for all that ails him, he assumes that it should be the cure for their agony too. When they drink the whitefella's money instead of spending it "wisely", he washes his hands of them.

In considering the desperate condition of Australian Aboriginal people after 200 years of abuse physical and mental, we should not be surprised to find towering rates of domestic violence. Children taken from their parents and treated cruelly in institutions will learn cruelty. Children who are bashed by their parents will bash their own children; children who see their fathers bash their mothers will replicate the same pattern in their own relationships.

There are some who believe that extreme spousal abuse was always a feature of Aboriginal society; observers like Louis Nowra, in his 2007 book *Bad Dreaming*, quote witnesses from Watkin Tench, Governor Arthur Phillip and Francois Peron to our own day, to illustrate the case that Aboriginal men were always murderously violent towards their womenfolk, and that women left their communities to live with white men because they were so barbarously ill-treated by their native husbands.

Nowra sees the Aboriginal men's demeanour then and now as dispassionate and casual, and assumes that, even though all the cases he is citing are post-contact, the behaviour is not pathological but normal. He may be right. If he is, we can only wonder how societies with such a high rate of death and maiming of people of reproductive age managed to survive in such a demanding environment for 40,000 or more years. What is dysfunctional now would have been dysfunctional before contact. The report of the Women's Task Force has already voiced the fear that, with the current rates of violence, Aboriginal society cannot survive; we would have to infer therefore that they are relatively new.

In many Aboriginal societies husbands and wives do not cohabit continuously but spend quite long periods in segregated camps. Being forced to live in a nuclear household could involve kinds of friction and tension that were absent from the traditional lifestyle, but this would hardly explain the extraordinary levels of murderous violence that Aboriginal women suffer every day. What is obvious is that when the Aboriginal man was dispossessed by the white intruder he lost his moral authority over his family.

How was he supposed to cope when the woman who was his designated wife was taken from him and used by the white intruder, and then as insolently abandoned with her children by him at foot? If she went voluntarily it was bad enough; if she was kidnapped and he was powerless to rescue her, his misery would hardly have been less. When he found himself with the responsibility of rearing the children of the white man who would neither acknowledge them or support them, his feelings toward them and their mother can hardly be expected to be benign. Aboriginal people do not discuss this, but that in itself should not be taken to mean that it is unimportant. Rather the opposite. Next time you go to see the movie *Ten Canoes* ask yourself if the invisible and unpunished wife-stealer in David Gulpilil's subtle story might not have been a white man.

Most Australians are neither inhuman nor callous. Most of us cannot look on unmoved as Aboriginal societies tear themselves to pieces. We wish we knew what to do to reduce the quantum of unbearable suffering that is the life of so many of our indigenous people. If they are to survive, their rage must find an outlet that is not senseless violence and early death.

Aboriginal people pass through our courts every day, but we have never allowed Aboriginal people to judge us. We hear every day of their crimes against our laws, but nothing of our crimes against theirs. As long as the Aboriginal silence is filled with whitefella noise the situation can only get worse.

To the soul crushed by rage, words like "reconciliation" and "apology" sting worse than taunts. As for intervention, it is simply more of the same.

Germaine Greer contributed *On Rage* to a series of essays published by Melbourne University Press, and will be the keynote speaker at the Melbourne Writers' Festival on August 22.