

Embrace the outrage

Rage is the new Canadian mood. And there's a strong case for staying good and mad

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Illustration by Pete Ryan

It's the quickening of your heart every time someone makes a ha-ha-ha-so-funny "joke" about Canada becoming the 51st American state. The hot churn in your stomach each day President Donald Trump waves the threat of tariffs like a back-stabbing goon sucker punching his best friend.

The rising stir of satisfaction when you lob French's ketchup into the grocery cart, and leave the Heinz bottle on the shelf, while a passing compatriot nods with approval.

The fierce and fulfilling rush you felt watching the old beer commercial circulating again on social media – the one where a Canadian and his attack beaver sit down at a bar beside two mocking Americans and ... well, you know what happens next.

The way that red and white now feel like rebel colours. This is rage, simmering and defiant, the new Canadian mood.

To hell with nice, which was always a lame description of our country's ethos anyway. It's time to incarnate the fortitude of the Canuck stormtrooper, the composure of the peacekeeper, the compassionate justice of the Charter. This will require, according to history, a carefully tended fire in our bellies. As Mike Myers signalled to Canadians on the March 1 episode of *Saturday Night Live*, with a hockey phrase that has now become a rallying cry across the country: Elbows up.



Mike Myers appeared on Saturday Night Live on March 1, wearing a shirt that reads, 'Canada is not for sale.'

WILL HEATH/NBC/GETTY IMAGES

This expression is credited to the late, great Gordie Howe, a bruiser of a player never known to skate away from a fight. But his phrase was meant to warn your teammates to protect themselves because the other side is not playing fair.

It was not intended as licence to lose your cool and jab the first elbow.

So, while it's still early in our season of national outrage, students of anger's history and science would call time out for a team huddle. Our next steps matter, and the definition of this perfect-for-the-moment, call-to-arms demands we take notice of the difference between anger that harms and anger that helps.

The first is reckless, the second is reasoned. As those who have fought – and still fight – for freedom and justice would warn, only one holds fast to values such as empathy

and tolerance, only one, with deliberate attention, won't sputter and flame out, only one is most likely to achieve the endgame.

As a country, we can be mad, and also good. But while we're raising those elbows, let's be careful not to lose our heads. "There's nothing wrong with being angry," says Meena Krishnamurthy, an associate professor of philosophy at Queen's University and the author of a new book on emotions and Martin Luther King Jr. "What matters is what you do with it."



Fifty-year-old Gordie Howe of the New England Whalers delivers one of his well-known elbows to the head of Quebec Nordique forward Curt Brakenbury on Dec. 17, 1978.

DOUG BALL/THE CANADIAN PRESS

To begin, sit with your anger.

"Listen, to what it is trying to tell you," says Laura Silva, a political philosopher at Laval University.

Pay attention to how that sense of outrage might be misfiring because human beings, let's face it, are not the most rational and even-tempered species, especially under stress. Our brains, refined by adversity and ever alert to danger, are prone to overreaction and unconscious bias.

While fear makes us withdraw to safety, anger pushes us forward, which is why angry people take more risks and act more rashly, endangering themselves and others. Purging rage is a rush – at least until regret kicks in – which is also why Canadian hockey fans get so much satisfaction from booing *The Star Spangled Banner* – and why the rapid response is having our anthem booed right back.

Anger likely evolved to ramp up energy and focus attention when we needed to fight off wild animals and other threats in our environment. These days, it mostly seizes control to stomp and shout about delayed flights, lost keys and overcooked restaurant food, flying off the handle for all to see.

Stalk a female politician and hope the recording goes viral. Spit venom at strangers on Facebook, using your real name. Curse the new Canadian serving your morning double-double, and never mind who's listening. Anger is the new fashion, wear it shamelessly.

No wonder, on a list of 21st-century contributions to (un)civil society, we can now add the signs that hang in offices, hospitals and shops: "Threatening behaviour will not be tolerated."

And yet it is tolerated, and, in certain circles of power and industry, stoked and celebrated. Anxiety makes for easy marks – and who isn't anxious about the world today? Frayed tempers are riled up by social media, which feeds on bad blood like a vampire, and by political leaders, as Pankaj Mishra writes in his prescient book *The Age of Anger*, "foaming at the mouth" with hate.



People gather for the 'Elbows up' rally on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Ont. on March 9.

AMBER BRACKEN/REUTERS

Angry voters, studies show, are loyal voters. Feed us negative news, and we'll keep clicking. There's nothing like a common enemy, even one falsely created, to make a bubbling rage overflow. Poke a soft spot – fear of change, threatened status, stranger danger – and wait for the eruption.

Canada's sour mood has been gathering steam for a while now. In January, a Nanos survey reported that for 29 per cent of Canadians, “anger” best described how they felt toward Ottawa; in 2020, only 11 per cent of Canadians said the same. Three years ago, the polling company Pollara created the Canadian “rage index” to track the country's mood when it comes to the government, economy and current events. The index hit a new high last April.

All this anger has to spew somewhere. In a mid-2024 Leger poll, 83 per cent of Canadians said they'd witnessed road rage – a five-point increase since 2022. Hate speech and racial violence have also risen: A report by B'nai Brith Canada found that

the number of antisemitic incidents in the country doubled between 2022 and 2023, to reach an unprecedented 5,791 incidents.

We don't need statistics to prove that rage, unleashed with hate, is the most terrible force in the world. "No plague has cost the human race more," declared Seneca, the ancient Roman philosopher, more than 2,000 years ago. Aristotle had more time for anger, but Seneca and his fellow Stoics argued that humanity's most troublesome and dangerous emotion had no value and was best expunged from the world. An understandable position: In their day, the emperors of Rome were known to throw fits and execute slaves over broken dishes and cold baths.

Modern science offers the anti-anger crowd further evidence. Bouts of bad temper have been found to cause headaches, insomnia, high blood pressure and heart attacks, and anger often partners up with depression and anxiety.

Unfortunately, therapists also made a significant mistake when it came to treating anger. For years, clients were advised to cool their hot tempers by screaming into a pillow or smashing trash with a baseball bat. But studies over the last decade have consistently found that venting uncontrolled anger doesn't alleviate it and often makes it worse.

So Seneca was right to warn of contagion; angry people, without proper intervention, usually get angrier – and make the society around them angrier as well.

And yet is the hot burn of anger so many Canadians are feeling these days truly the wicked plague Seneca feared?

Many contemporary philosophers, versed in politics and history, have argued that the Stoics were too quick to discard anger. In times of injustice, they say, anger is the very emotion we need.

For starters, anger does have a positive side, otherwise evolution would have dumped it long ago. When people are primed to feel angry in lab experiments, they demonstrate, at least in the short term, more creativity and persistent problem-solving, and express stronger feelings for the issues they believe are important. Like, all emotions, healthy anger is about balance.

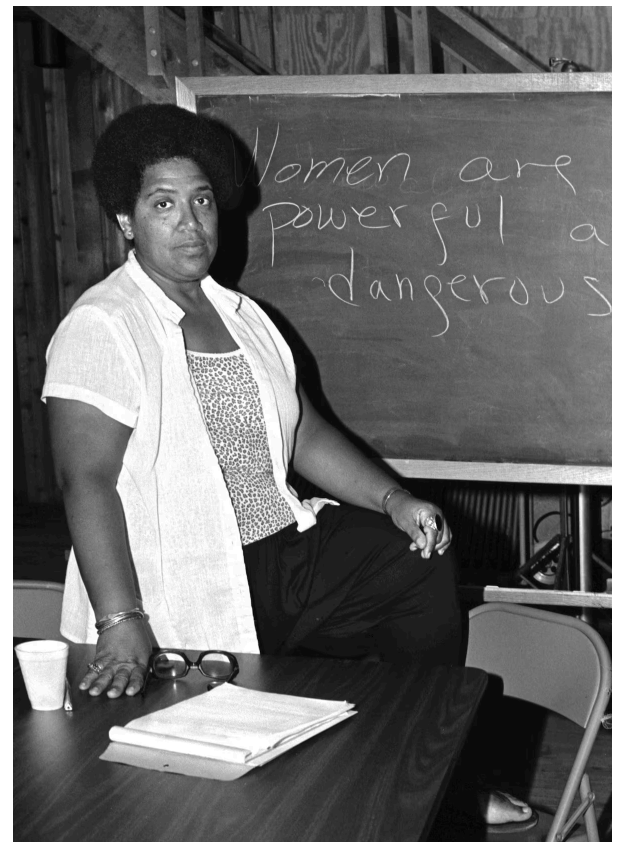
In 1981, Audre Lorde, a Black American poet and civil rights activist, delivered her own reasoned take on the real-world benefits of anger in the keynote address at the National Women's Studies Association Conference in Connecticut. She titled her speech "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," but in her talk, she also broadened anger's utility to wider injustice.

Her own anger, she said, saved and empowered her. "I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light." This anger, she said, was often judged to be improper or counterproductive by majority society, including supportive colleagues. And yet, she told the mostly white, female audience, they too possess "a well-stocked arsenal of anger" to use against oppression, if they found the courage. "Focused with precision, it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change."

In her 2021 book, *The Case for Rage: Why Anger Is Essential to Anti-Racist Struggle*, American philosopher Myisha Cherry gives this deliberate and justice-seeking anger a name: Lordean Rage.

Anger that goes wrong, Dr. Cherry writes, is selfish and narcissistic. Manipulated by misinformation, destructive rage attacks innocent targets, particularly racialized groups and immigrants, often for simply existing; it demands that society correct a perceived individual grievance, even with violence. This is the anger that fires a gun in a nightclub, escalates a beating in the streets and charges mindlessly into a house of government.

By comparison, writes Dr. Cherry, Lordean Rage is not personal. It prioritizes the injustice that others suffer and seeks to improve society by changing rules and institutions. Its goal is not vengeance, but transformation.



Black American poet and civil rights activist Audre Lorde said that her own anger saved and empowered her.

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“Anger is not the scary monster that many believe it to be,” writes Dr. Cherry. “It should not be eradicated.” Instead, she says, we should do what we can to help our anger “assist us in bringing about a more just world.”

Decades earlier, Martin Luther King Jr. had also wrestled with the purpose and meaning of his own anger, a subject explored in Dr. Krishnamurthy's upcoming book, *The Emotions of Nonviolence*. When he was 14, a bus driver ordered Dr. King and his teacher to give up seats to white passengers, as the law required, and started swearing at them for not standing up right away. Fearing for their safety, his teacher convinced him to move.

“That night will never leave my memory,” he later wrote. “It was the angriest I have ever been in my life.” Dr. King is known for the effectiveness of his non-violent strategy, Dr. Krishnamurthy writes, but he also believed that “an affront to dignity produces justified anger.” As Dr. King came to see that racial segregation was the product of an unjust system – and not solely racist individuals – he viewed this “righteous indignation” as an important driver of change.

He believed, Dr. Krishnamurthy says, that to be useful, anger should be channelled by love – a sense of goodwill and consideration for the humanity of your adversary – and then “expressed through good conduct” while focused on the right target. The goal of anger should not be defeating or humiliating your opponent, but mutual understanding and genuine moral progress.

To make this point in a sermon, Dr. King shared a conversation he had with his brother, while driving in the dark one night from Georgia to Tennessee. His brother was fuming because the oncoming drivers were not dimming their lights, and he threatened to do the same. But Dr. King stopped him, warning that it would make the road dangerous for everyone. “Someone,” he pointedly told his congregation, “must be the first to dim the lights.”

That didn't mean letting injustice drive on by. But Dr. King, fighting to end segregation and the cruelty of racism perpetrated by one neighbour on an innocent other, warned that impulsively matching anger with anger, hate with hate, violence with violence was a destructive and dangerous path. “No matter how emotional your opponents are,” he cautioned, “you must be calm.”



American civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King Jr. and his wife Coretta Scott King lead a black voting rights march from Selma, Al., to the state capital in Montgomery in 1965. Mr. King believed that anger should be channeled by love – a sense of goodwill and consideration for the humanity of your adversary.

WILLIAM LOVELACE/DAILY EXPRESS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

At the same time, justified anger must find its voice. Otherwise, left to stew, unspoken and useless, Ms. Lorde warned, it “will jump up and punch you in the mouth from the inside.”

Anger management has traditionally focused on eliminating anger, or avoiding the triggers that cause it. That might work for interpersonal anger, Dr. Cherry writes. But how can a person avoid “triggers” if their anger is caused by ever-present wrongs such as inequality and tyranny? When you are rightly angry about racism or climate change or open threats to your country’s very existence, the goal should not be to suppress it, but to use that motivating emotion to solve the problem.

Canadians, so far, have done a fine job of staying loud and united, cancelling visits to the U.S. en masse, buying Canadian in droves, supporting each other online and in person. This week, U.S. tour operators said bookings were down as much as 85 per cent. Car trips across the border fell by nearly 25 per cent, compared to a year ago. Grocers reported a 10 per cent increase in domestic product sales. Across the country, the spirit of resistance is holding.

The question yet to be answered is how long we can keep it up.

“People are very tired,” says Brett Ford, an assistant psychology professor who studies anger at the University of Toronto. The world is still recovering from a pandemic. Everyday, there’s another crisis, more nastiness, further tragedy. To cope, Dr. Ford says, people often look away and slowly adjust their attitudes until unacceptable situations become tolerable. “Opting out,” she says, “becomes a very reasonable attempt to get through the day.”



People participate in a rally in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's threats to Canadian sovereignty, on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, on March 9.

Anger is exhausting, weighed down by what German psychologist Karen Horney called “the tyranny of shoulds,” the belief that people and society should behave and function in a certain way. Outraged people are, in fact, frustrated optimists.

For this reason, well-known British philosopher Alain de Botton suggests the cure for anger is pessimism. If we lowered our expectations, we'd be less angry, and thus more happy.

Of course, settling for the status quo is easier for those with more power and comfort; holding high expectations drives progress, which, ideally, improves happiness. Productive anger is a signal that something is wrong in the world – bridging the gap, Soraya Chemaly writes in her book *Rage Becomes Her*, “between what ‘is’ and what ought to be.” It's about feeling better by making the world better.

Opting out also carries a significant cost, according to Dr. Ford's research. Those who don't feel outrage are less likely to vote or engage in political action. “The risk is that we give up,” she says. Anger keeps us in the fight, so we don't surrender to a tyrant's will or cave to injustice.

At the same time, perpetually scrolling through social media can swamp productive outrage with despair. Dr. Ford suggests, in the months ahead, that Canadians manage their dose of politics. “Stay informed,” she says, “but then put it away.”

To defend against creeping apathy, Dr. Ford says, we can accept a stressful reality while also reframing it, to identify what this moment reveals about our values and our country, and choices will we make to safeguard them.

Minimizing a very real threat shirks our responsibility to each other. Because, while wealthier Canadians will be more buffered, the pandemic, which began five years ago this month, should remind us that racialized, young and low-income people all suffer most when the economy falters – a near-certain result if the trade war drags on. Outrage and protest have little value, if they melt away just as an infusion of unity and resolve is required.

“Anger comes with a lot of energy,” says Dr. Krishnamurthy, “and we should work together to build on that energy in constructive ways – especially as we re-think

what it means to be Canadian and what we want Canada to be.”

In *The Case for Rage*, Dr. Cherry recommends finding people who support taking action but also understand that mean and misguided anger should be avoided. Beware of “rage fests,” she warns, that drain your spirits or become vengeful plots to gang up on a common enemy.

Public outrage is more risky for marginalized and vulnerable people, so don't police their anger, Dr. Cherry says. Be an ally, not by assuming their anger for them, but by enabling them to exercise it.

And if you boo the U.S. anthem, do it for the strategic awareness it raises, not to humiliate the other side, especially given that the majority of Americans have no interest in annexing Canada against its will, and half of them didn't vote for Mr. Trump.

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For while rage is associated with aggression and revenge, most of the anger we feel is not really about making people suffer, suggests Laval University's Dr. Silva. When we feel wronged by a friend's behaviour, or a stranger bumps us in line or cuts us off at an intersection, do we actually want to see them in pain? Or do we want recognition of the slight and a promise to do better?

In this case, we may be waiting a long while for either recognition of wrong-doing or repair, to whatever extent that is possible given the painful lesson we've now learned

about friendship.

However, the push for justice need not be lonely or divisive, Dr. Cherry points out. And anger, as Dr. King said, thrives when it shares space with compassion.

But then, we already knew that. Along with anger, we felt pride while waving the maple leaf on Flag Day. We experienced joy while cheering Connor McDavid's winning overtime goal against the U.S. in the 4 Nations final. We've been inspired by helping our neighbours find that homegrown bottle of French's ketchup.

Because at the end of these long days, anger may vent like pessimism, but it runs on optimism. Buried inside, like coal warmed by a flame, is hope. And that fire in your belly? It only sparks because you're standing guard to protect what matters.

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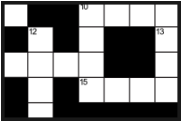
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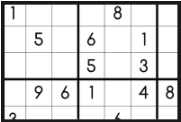
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