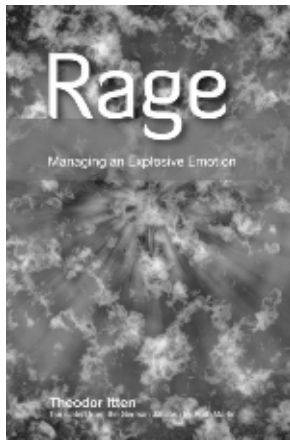


BOOK REVIEW



Rage: Managing an Explosive Emotion

Theodore Itten

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One cannot but help notice the cover of Theodore Itten's book. Its orange red depicts an explosive blast of energy which at its perimeter has streams of fury, yet near to the centre can be seen a powerful containing force holding everything. Perhaps this image illustrates for me the crucial element of the dynamic of rage in his scholarly work by Itten. Both the destruction and clarity of rage poses a question at the heart of the human dilemma. When one is caught in overwhelming states of emotion, how does one contain the impulse to destroy, while also bearing the somatic tension of living through it? How does one understand the deep shaping of these inner forces which seek to wreak havoc and yet find a way to bear these impulsive fiery upsurges and ultimately transmute them into life enhancing relationship? Itten displays a deep desire to understand the subject matter. He brings us on a journey from past to present, through mythology, literature, drama and illustrates through his work as a psychotherapist the struggle that lies at the heart of this very human dilemma.

We see in action the harnessing of the power of a searching and scientific mind to deeply open doors on a subject which is taboo and make us look in places we may not have looked in, to understand this complex dynamic which has major interpersonal and societal consequences.

He draws on a qualitative and quantitative research study he conducted to help provide some clarity on this subject. He gives us the results of a scientific survey he conducted in Switzerland between a group of 481 subjects and a control group of 94 with regard to their attitudes and experiences of rage. Throughout the book the results of this research amplify and give clarity to some of his questions.

He trawls through the language of myth, religion and literature to evoke in us an understanding of how rage has been assimilated into social discourse and also dealt with in

ancient times. He draws from his personal experience and tells us a story from his own life, when, as a young child, his uncle became possessed by an inner force of rage and hurled a pitchfork at the young Theodore. He wonders about the consequences for this act in his life and those around him. He describes an incident where a well-known footballer, Zinedine, enacted an outburst of pure rage after being provoked by one of his Italian opponents. When the full flow of anger had passed, he describes the inner collapse that he witnessed as Zinedine left the pitch with head bowed and tears in his eyes.

In the second chapter, Itten reviews his research on the triggers for sudden anger and sudden rage. He describes rage somatically. He illustrates well the wave and cycle of rage and the somatic shaping of the pulsatory momentum where a person makes a psychosomatic effort to quell an overwhelming flood of emotion. He references, further in his text, some of the insights from neuroscience with regard to these experiences. He invites us into many vignettes and lives from literature, mythology and passionate relationships. He describes, among others, the lives of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir; the compromises that they lived in their lives, their efforts to keep some ideal intact amidst searing rage and jealousy. He postulates how rage and passion acts as a thermometer of the pulse of a relationship, and, in circumstances where there is no possibility of release or a healthy sublimation of desire, that sudden rage can lead to very destructive outcomes. He makes an interesting distinction between rage and anger stating that anger defends our personal boundary, whereas rage oversteps it.

He depicts through the storylines of film and mythology a relationship to the lived reality of rage which almost goes unnoticed by us but once seen is acknowledged deeply by us. He takes rage back from the sanitised diagnostics of categorisation and DSM technology and explores the invitation to power in its highest sublimation.

He writes, psychologically, very well and asks some profound questions throughout the text. He draws the reader in very close. One almost has a sense of his thinking unfolding as he writes. He links rage with power. He quotes Walser “unless they have lost the ability to feel emotion a person can’t do anything with power. An outburst of rage is an orgy of power proving”

In the last chapter, Itten focuses on the corrective experience of the therapeutic relationship to help modulate the rage patterns in the patient. He explores the effectiveness and value of psychotherapy in providing a containing and holding environment for people overwhelmed by this emotion. In creating the frame for treatment, he emphasises the dynamic of closeness and distance in order to help the patient to form a boundary that is of ease for them. He provides us with case studies and ways of working with psychotic and borderline

states. He looks at ways to enable people regulate their impulsive emotional states. He suggests “a thinking with the heart, which slows all rage down“, and links this to the somatic experience of the emotions. He illustrates clearly the emotional legacies of rage, the feelings of power and subjugation, and the dance between both the reality of the false and real self.

The book sustained my interest throughout. The author’s style pulsates; his words have an originality of flow that invites the reader to wonder. As I received his words, an invitation was evoked in me to understand the essence of the momentum of the life of the psyche, as it turns towards Thanatos and is beckoned by Eros.

At times, I found myself in a maelstrom of words that contained many descriptions from different lenses on the dynamic and force of rage. Yet in all of it, Itten nudged us back to an understanding of the unlived life that is at the heart of the spilling forth of rage. I received a deep sense of Itten as a reflective man, and a very skilled and compassionate practitioner. In his account of the taboo subject of rage, we can hear his deep belief in seeking for the person consumed in flames so that they become able to use the fire of their life as a light in darkness rather than a flame that destroys. I highly recommend this book.

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