

The Upside of Anger (2005)

Rated R Our Content Rating: V-2 ; L-4 ; S/N-5 Running time: 116 minutes

Answer me when I call, O God of my right!

Thou hast given me room when I was in distress.

Be gracious to me, and hear my prayer.

O men, how long shall my honor suffer shame?

How long will you love vain words, and seek after lies?

But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him.

Be angry, but sin not;

commune with your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.

Psalms 4:1-4 (RSV)

You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil.

Ephesians 4:22-27

Although Anger Management groupsThe Upside of Anger have become the subject of comedy (remember the film of that title?), anger is no joke for Terry Wolfmeyer (Joan Allen in her second current film, in both of which she plays a wife and mother). Her husband, who has been playing around with a Swedish co-worker at work, is

nowhere to be found—and his lover has just left the company to return to her home in Sweden. Apparently, Terry surmises, he has accompanied her to Scandinavia. Feeling betrayed, she is filled with an anger that will not go away, one which her four daughters can do little to assuage.

On the day that Mr. Wolfmeyer has left her, their neighbor Denny Davies (Kevin Costner) knocks on the back door and asks for her husband. Obviously having drunk more than just the can of beer in his hand, it takes a couple of moments for Terry's report that he has left her to register on the clouded mind of the visitor. Offering an awkward apology, he stays, rather than leaves. Over the next few weeks—and indeed, months—the two become drinking partners, and after a very awkward start, even lovers—no, “lovers” is not quite right, “co-habituéés of the same bed might be better, the sex act being more an attempt of each of them to deal with loneliness than an act of genuine caring—at least at first.

Denny is like a big, lovable sheep dog, aimlessly drifting through the remainder of his life. Once a baseball superstar, he seems unable to move beyond the glory days. His messy house is filled with boxes of baseballs that he autographs and sells when asked to appear at a mall opening. He also hosts a radio talk show, but refuses to talk about baseball, insulting any caller who dares question him about his sports career. Drinking far more than he should, he becomes a good companion to Terry, who also has turned to alcohol and cigarettes to dull her pain.

The film, beginning with the graveside service of an unspecified dead person, is narrated by Terry's youngest daughter, nicknamed Popeye (Evan Rachel Wood), who says that

her mother once was one of the sweetest women ever. We have to take her word for this, as during the three years of the narrative leading up to the cemetery scene, Terry is anything but sweet. Because she has retreated into her anger and alcohol, the day-to-day management of the household is left to the girls. Oldest daughter Hadley (Alicia Witt), not too sympathetic to her mother, can escape because she is in college. Andy (Erika Christensen), who wants to be a journalist, and Emily (Keri Russell), longing to be a dancer despite her mother's opposition, take over the kitchen chores and the driving of Popeye to her private preparatory school.

Directing from his own script, Mike Bender skillfully weaves together the events that threaten and enrich the lives of all of the above. Although the film definitely belongs to the gifted Joan Allen, all of the other characters are richly detailed. Mr. Binder himself plays the sleazy radio producer Shep, who, at Denny's suggestion, gives Andy a job as an assistant producer, and soon is bedding down with her. There are so many wonderful little details that reveal character—such as at a picnic when the women and Denny are with Popeye's boyfriend and his father. The boy has told her that he is into bungee jumping, when in reality only his father jumps. When the father says that he will be jumping and then casts aspersions on his son, who says that he will watch, the man invites Denny to try the sport. Although it is obvious that Denny could, he repeats the boy's comment that he will "just watch," an obvious attempt to reach out in support of the put-down boy. In another scene Denny says that he loves to go to the Wolfmeyer's house because it is always filled with the good odors of cooking, so that, "I feel like there's still something ahead."

There is a bit of a surprise at the end of the film, which leads narrator Popeye to observe both the downside and what she sees as the "upside of anger." This is a film that leaves one recalling a number of moving scenes and to reflect on

those times when anger has entered one's own life like an intrusive and unwelcome visitor that will not go away.

For reflection/discussion (There could be partial spoilers in the following, so you might want to wait until you have seen the film before reading further.)

1) How does Terry's handling (or not) of her anger affect those around her? Have you or someone you know reacted this way, refusing to "let it go"? How is Denny's life also an example of not being able to move on beyond his past?

2) What do Terry and Denny offer each other at first? How does their relationship change over the months and years into a healthier one? How is this shown in the bed scenes: that is, where or how do they sleep in the bed at the beginning, and then at the end of the film?

3) What do you think of Denny's comment about how good the Wolfmeyer house smells? How does your house/apartment smell? Is this something that people will remember with fondness? (One of our daughters has commented several times about how she and her school friends loved to come to our house, where my wife was so often baking bread or cookies.)

4) How is Denny's confrontation with Terry in the bathroom an example of "tough love"?

5) How do we see the three younger daughters growing in maturity?

6) Numerous times "the project" (the development by contractors of the fields and woods behind the Wolfmeyer house) is referred to, beginning with the first time we see Denny coming over to talk about agreeing to it. How does this finally become the catalyst in Terry's dealing with her anger? What irony do you see in Terry's situation?

7) The Scripture suggests that there is anger and "sinful

anger.” How can anger be acceptable or even “righteous”? (Check out the prophets and Jesus’ cleansing of the temple.) What kind do you think is Terry’s? Does she have good reason for it initially? At what point does it become “sinful” (Check out what Paul wrote to the Ephesians)?

8) Using a concordance, the group could look up Scripture passages about “anger” and “forgiveness” and discuss their relationship.