

An Eye for an Eye?

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As we approach the longest night of the year, we may perceive the world to be off-balance. Too much of this and not enough of that. Too much violence, certainly, with too many mass killings in recent weeks to even name. How can we make things right?

Our desire to put things into balance can take many forms. One of these is vengeance. When we feel we have been wronged, we may want to *get even*. An eye for an eye, measure for measure, we want to balance the scales. It's a matter of fairness, isn't it? One of the building blocks of justice? Today we'll explore how revenge can be related to, and yet so different from justice.

With the ongoing violence across the middle east, our gathering hymn today can be understood as tragically ironic, but therefore all the more powerfully aspirational. Let's sing together:

GATHERING HYMN *O Little Town of Bethlehem* #246
READING from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

On his journey downriver, Huck Finn washes ashore and is taken in by the Grangerford family. One day he and young Buck Grangerford are walking in the woods when Buck suddenly dives behind a bush and takes a shot at a man on a horse. The man gives Buck and Huck a chase through the woods, but they escape.

Did you want to kill him, Buck?

Well I bet I did.

What did he do to you?

Him? He never done nothing to me.

Well, then, what did you want to kill him for?

Why nothing—only on account of the feud.

What's a feud?

Why, where was you raised? Don't you know what a feud is?

Never heard of it before—tell me about it.

Well, a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the

cousins chip in—and by-and-by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and takes a long time.

Has this one been going on long, Buck?

Well I should reckon! It started thirty years ago, or som’ers along there. There was trouble ‘bout something and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and so he up and shot the man that won the suit—which he would naturally do, of course. Anybody would.

Well, who done the shooting?—was it a Grangerford or a Shepherdson?

Laws, how do I know? It was so long ago.

Don’t anybody know?

Oh, yes, pa knows, I reckon, and some of the other old folks; but they don’t know, now, what the row was about in the first place...

Huck concludes the story this way; Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching—all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say about faith, and good works, and free grace, and preforeordination, and I don’t know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet.

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Kevin’s going to share with us now a song from Les Miserable which speaks of a character’s obsessive quest for what to him seems like justice and to others seems like vengeance.

Immediately following the song I invite you to share together an extended moment of silence to focus our goodwill upon all those caught up in spirals of righteousness or despair, beginning with ourselves.

INTERLUDE *Stars* from *Les Miserables*

MEDITATION / SILENCE (3:00)

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

A profound passion to make things right. Under what conditions should this be considered virtuous? Under what conditions should it be considered retribution? The word righteousness has a fascinating ambiguity to it, I think. People use it both in reference to an innocent, or honorable desire to make things right. But righteousness can also underlie a blind obsession or personal vendetta, also known as revenge. It’s a matter of judgment.

We make judgments with our gut—guided by instinct. We also make judgments with our minds—guided by reason, rules, and experience. We make judgments for many purposes... not

the least to protect ourselves—as individuals and as a society. Should we not nurture and refine this natural inclination? Is it not a necessary tool for our survival? Or is the opposite true: that humanity will need to overcome this urge in order to survive?

A remarkable nonfiction book called *Revenge: a Story of Hope*, by Laura Blumenfeld is here in the public library. It is a fascinating journey through the cultural history of revenge—a journey the author took as she attempted to cope with a personal burden of vengeance that she felt within herself.

Laura Blumenfeld's father, an American rabbi, had many years ago been a victim of a small Palestinian terrorist group. Her father had been shot, but unaccountably survived with little more than a scar on his head.

As a journalist in the Middle East, Blumenfeld channeled her burning desire to avenge this violent act by studying the diverse cultural norms for revenge around the world. She tried to gain some perspective this way, but in the end could not keep herself from taking the attack personally and acting upon her feelings in a personal way. She went so far as to find the family of the imprisoned terrorist. Pretending to be nothing more than a journalist, she befriended that family to look for an opening for revenge. She writes: "I set a goal that was outsized and naïve.... I wanted him to realize he was wrong."

In her interviews in countries around the Middle East she discovered that the seed of vengeance is not just in the injury, but in humiliation or shame. So to exact revenge one often has to do more than balance a physical injury. Revenge seeks to repair one's dignity. So the response to an injury may seem wildly out of proportion—to the objective observer—but be very fitting to the person whose honor has been injured.

And at the very least, if you've been shamed and can't hit back, it's standard practice to hit someone else just to demonstrate that you're not a wimp.

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Let's admit it: we expect people to seek revenge. Vigilante justice and retaliation are cultural norms. We cheer them in movies. We hope that victims will prevail over the perpetrators. In some cultures it is expected that victims and their families will take the law into their own hands. Until the 17th century, English law denied inheritance to the son who did not avenge his father's death.

Modern western courts have attempted to institutionalize, sanitize, regularize, and de-personalize getting even. And to a large degree this rationalization of vengeance has served us well. But we still see vestiges of the desire for personal satisfaction peeking through.

In the U.S. plaintiffs can receive large financial awards for their "pain and suffering." In other cultures they have something similar: "blood money" to pay someone off for not taking revenge. For example in Iran, a convicted killer may plead to the victim's family for forgiveness. If the family chooses to forgive, the killer's family must compensate the victim's family for their loss. If the victim's family chooses not to forgive, or if the killer's family cannot afford the blood

money, there will be an execution. This system is based upon one interpretation of the Qur'an. It follows strict and detailed rules in an attempt to be fair. Like our own system, it assigns varying compensations depending upon the degree of loss. For example, women and girls are perceived to be half as valuable as men, and therefore less costly to compensate for.

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Rules or no rules—consider the difficulty of trying to measure, compare, and balance the suffering of others. Consider those crimes in which there is no tangible injury: attempted murder, or crimes of terror and intimidation. Can you measure the actual loss—can you measure the intention?

I don't mean to suggest that the legal system is nothing but a surrogate form of vengeance. Law seeks to rehabilitate, and to deter. The trouble is—so does revenge.

We want revenge to rehabilitate? Sure. What do we mean when we say: "I'll teach them a lesson." Laura Blumenfeld didn't want to hurt her father's shooter, she wanted him to know that what he did was wrong... wanted him to know the pain he had caused. She wanted the shooter to recognize the humanity of his victim. She didn't want to forgive; she wanted to transform evil.

And revenge as deterrence? Certainly. One aspect of revenge is to ensure that your enemy (or her family) cannot - or does not dare - strike back.

Perhaps these stories seem too far away from home. So imagine these same matters as applied to child discipline. I don't think anyone would want to admit that their child discipline practices are tainted with revenge. But I will admit that it is very easy to get caught in a downward spiral of increasingly severe reactions.

With our own kids or other people's kids, we try to be fair. But is life fair? Is life balanced? Let's ask Santa Claus. In theory, Santa is the great judge—giving us gifts only if we've been good. Otherwise giving us coal.

But in practice, Santa is merciful—a Universalist through and through, dispensing joy to all.

Joy to all; plus presents for those with money.

SINGING TOGETHER

Every Night and Every Morn #17

Every night and every morn, some to misery are born;
Every morn and every night some are born to sweet delight.
Joy and woe are woven fine, clothing for the soul divine;
Under every grief and pine runs a joy with silken twine.
It is right it should be so: we were made for joy and woe;
And when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go.

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

Is the world just-as-it-is, JUST as it is? It certainly feels that some are given greater burdens or blessings than others.

And when we feel this personally, that we have been wronged, cheated, or victimized—that the state of universal harmony has been thrown out of balance—it’s not surprising that we would desire compensation... and personal satisfaction. We want to put things back into balance—on our own terms.

The trouble is (if we buy what we just sang) there is no natural state of universal harmony.

There is no sense in seeking perfect fairness. So then, what are the alternatives? When we believe we have been wronged, is it possible to escape the tantalizing lure of revenge?

Well, if we’ve done something wrong we might prevent revenge if we apologize. I mean, really apologize. Not making an excuse by saying we had good intentions and we couldn’t help it if there was some collateral damage.

If we want to cut off the fuel line for the flames of revenge, we need to acknowledge to those we have wronged that what they have suffered is not acceptable, period.

On a larger scale, “truth and reconciliation commissions” have done wonders in nations where entire ethnic groups have perpetrated atrocities against one another. The “truth and reconciliation” approach can work—even when there is no punishment. In these cases, to punish all evenhandedly would be impossible—and devastating to the society—as too many on both sides would be implicated. Instead, broad amnesty enables all to acknowledge the wrongdoing and the suffering, and to move on.

Another alternative to revenge, or perhaps an alternative form of revenge, is the “sulha”—an Arab reconciliation ceremony in which entire families of perpetrators acknowledge wrongdoing to the entire family of the victim.

Blumenfeld attended a sulha in Bethlehem in which two families, bound together through a car accident, sought conciliation. The families came together to engage in a highly ritualized form of negotiated confession—in which the perpetrator pleaded with his family not to admit too much, and the victim pleaded with her family not to budge until an adequate admission was made.

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Shame ignites revenge and memory keeps it burning. We remember in order to honor victims. We remember in order to be vigilant. We remember in order not to fool ourselves into thinking that the world is safe ...or that our leaders always have our best interests at heart. There are many good reasons to remember. But there are side effects too—bitterness, paralysis. So an alternative to revenge may be functional amnesia. Cutting our losses. Forgetting, in order to live. Functional amnesia, however, is not the same as being stupid ...and letting our guard down so far that we become victims all over again.

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The Hebrew and Christian scriptures offer mixed messages on vengeance. There are psalms in which the powerless express confidence that God will take care of avenging the enemies of Israel. But there are also calls in these scriptures to take up arms against the wicked—suggesting that God could use some human assistance in balancing the scales.

And in Leviticus, with all of its harsh laws we find: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Muslims face the same conundrum: whether to act in the name of God, or to allow God to act for Himself. One of Allah’s 99 names is “Great Avenger.” The implication is that those who rely on Allah, rather than taking their own revenge, will be rewarded.

The same deferred satisfaction is available to Buddhists or Hindus who understand karma or reincarnation to be inevitable within the turning of the wheel of life, in which everyone eventually gets their due.

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There’s also the question of individual versus collective accountability. In Hebrew scripture from time to time Yahweh punishes generations for sins of the fathers, and whole nations for their failure to worship him properly. Then the prophet Ezekiel pronounces that—from now on—individuals will be held accountable for their own acts.

Thousands of years later, now, we find ourselves struggling with the same difficult balance: trying to protect individual liberties by holding individuals accountable... and sorely tempted to punish entire nations.

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Can we rely upon the government and/or the justice system for our satisfaction? What if they don’t come through for us?

What if justice is not doled out evenly but skewed by race or class? Do we need to take it upon ourselves to even the scales?

The trouble with seeking balance for ourselves is that we can never get a perfect balance. So we have to keep going—a little more over here, no a little more over there... until the destruction is total or our whole life has been wasted. Of course we can also get lured in to a fruitless spiral of revenge—either as individuals or as a nation.

And whether we’re acting for ourselves or as nation against nation, there is always collateral damage. Martin Luther King Jr was putting it mildly when he said: “An eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind.”

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Alternative interpretations of reality may be what enable us to survive. Laura Blumenfeld interviewed the other victims of the gang who shot her father. One man they killed was a young

British pilgrim, a devout Christian. His family interpreted the shooting as part of God's plan. Why be upset? It was something that had to happen. Therefore there is no need for revenge.

Then there was a German couple who interpreted their shooting as an accident. They survived, and wanted very badly to think of it as an accident, even though the evidence showed otherwise. We could call this "denial," but perhaps they just didn't want to spend the rest of their lives feeling vindictive and powerless.

Finally, there is Isaac Ben Ovdiah—half Arab, half Jew. His wife (an Israeli who worked in the Palestinian community and was well-known and loved for helping Palestinians deal with the Israeli bureaucracy) was shot and killed. Her husband refused offers from Palestinians who said they would help him get even.

But he also refused to forget her. He bought 365 candles once a year, and he lit one candle every day for his wife. Until he dies, Isaac has vowed, her flame will not go out.

Isaac works for Israeli radio, hosting an Arabic call-in show giving advice to Palestinians. He considers himself a non-religious Jew. But on the day he returned to the show he felt a need to say a prayer on the air:

"O God, help me to be merciful and generous. If my enemy falls to the floor, do not let me take a dagger of revenge, but give me power to help him stand up.... O God, don't let me treat people as they treat me."

SHARING OUR GIFTS

CLOSING HYMN

Light One Candle #221