

2004-10-17 **Revenge**
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Opening Words

We are here
amid the gold and red splendors of autumn
to worship, to be open but not impulsive,
to question without giving up praise,
and to recognize our small but luminous part
within this vast universe of stars and silence.

And so we pray:

Living our lives with purpose and gratitude, moved by the beauty of the world and claiming justice for all who live upon it, we open our hearts to greater loving, healthier knowledge, deeper compassion and hope of peace.

Sequence

During this season of Ramadam, Muslims around the world reconsider their relationship with what *really* nourishes them. During this pre-Election season, Americans reconsider what really nourishes their political lives in our greater communities. During this season of Autumn, citizens of every northern clime reconsider the colors of the natural world around them, saying farewell to summer's steady green and welcoming the spiritual nourishment of maroon and orange and lemon yellow.

During these days of October, we reconsider which holidays nourish us, as fewer pause to remember Columbus's voyages, and many more pause to remember the English-rooted holiday of costume and Mardi-Gras-like revelry. During this Sunday hour in mid-October, we reconsider the relentless and sometimes unnerving rush of demands on our lives which make us fragile, and

pause a bit so our hearts are nourished by release and the gift of silence.

silence for a time

During this worship, we pause to remember our larger lives, knowing that theme and subject and motif are for this day, but our lives are for always. Thus we remember and lift up all in our lives whom we love, or struggle to love, all who live in the world, or are alive in our hearts. Aloud or quietly, we name them as a sign of our communion with them.

naming of names

9 AM During these, our October days, we are sometimes fragile, sometimes strong, sometimes in-between, sometimes wondering, but always, always, a song that nourishes us is possible.

11 AM During these, our October days, we find a certain comfort in the red and yellow leaves. A thousand years ago, they changed as well, and a thousand years hence. This is only our blest moment to dance in their light.

The First Reading *comes from the Scroll of Shmuel/Samuel, in the Tanak, the Hebrew Bible. It is part of the David Saga, a compilation of legends of the great and undeniably human chieftain David, the son of Yessai. Scholars debate the historicity of parts of the David saga, but it is by far, in my mind, one of the most compelling pieces of literature to come out of the ancient world. Part of the David saga was put down on paper as early as 700 BCE. It is, however, I note, a rather violent, angry and explicit story sexually. Absalom was the son of David. He took revenge on his father for not punishing Amnon, David's firstborn, after he had raped Absalom's sister Tamar. Eventually, the revenge turned into a blood feud, and the feud into war, son against father, with no holds barred.*

Absalom asked his advisor what to do next. His advisor said, “Go and seduce some of your father David’s favorite concubines, the ones he left alone in the palace, and make sure that afterward, everyone in the nation hears that you have slept with your father’s favorites. When they see that you have dared to throw mud in your father’s eye, they will be on your side, because you are so insolent and confident in your action.”

So he did as his advisor suggested. And so David then mustered his troops and crossed the Jordan, and then David entered into battle with the troops massed by his son Absalom in Ephraim Forest. Absalom’s troops suffered massive losses that day... David’s army clearly won. The slaughter was terrible there, but Absalom fled the scene, riding away on a mule. As the mule rushed under a thicket of low-hanging branches of a terebrinth tree, the handsome Absalom, with his ample long locks, was suddenly snagged by the branches, right off his mule, which continued alone on its course. There hung Absalom, suspended by his hair between earth and sky. One of David’s recruits saw the whole event and went and told Joav, David’s chief strategist. Joav said, “You saw him hanging there helpless and you didn’t kill him?” “He’s the king’s own son, sir. How can you expect me to kill the king’s own son? Besides, if I had killed him, and word got back to David that I did it, I don’t think you would have rushed forward to defend me and so I would’ve been killed next.” “Very well,” said Joav. “I am not going to wait any longer. Then he took three darts with him, found Absalom hanging from the tree and stabbed him in the heart. His young recruits then finished him off with spears.

The Second Reading comes from the delightful and clever book Sweet Revenge by Regina Barreca, written 9 years ago.

If it seems that at times the very essence of revenge eludes categorization, what remains clear is that revenge serves as a lightning rod for larger emotional and intellectual issues in our lives and in our society. It can act as a catalyst, requiring us to call

into question our conventional definitions of fairness, justice, and equality.

Examining the desire for revenge can unhinge the routine belief that we all have the same access to impartial justice; it can help underscore personal—and political—needs for reform. The loss of fear about revenge can be the beginning of the process of working through a need for it. Perhaps, instead of seeking a way to restore balance, we should be thinking about the creation of an entirely new balance, one that wouldn't reproduce the same injustice that sparked a craving for revenge in the first place. The desire for revenge can force our deeply hidden beliefs and ideas into the open so that they can be confronted and perhaps even transformed into less threatening and more useful energies. Revenge, as a concept, can oblige us to explain—to others, but more importantly, to ourselves—what we need and want from the world.

The desire for revenge can be transformed into forgiveness—but only if there is a belief that justice will prevail. Swords can be turned into plowshares only if there is a belief in closure, coupled with an assurance that the balance of power is guaranteed. Balance, however, can only be achieved if everyone has equal access to power; the powerless are fearless because they have nothing to lose. If the world were anything like what it should be, revenge would be as difficult for the ordinary person to understand as nuclear fission.

Sermon: On Revenge

I have to admit that the idea of preaching on revenge never occurred to me. A member of this congregation has simply suggested for the last couple of years that it might be an interesting topic. This year, I thought I would give it whirl.

To my surprise, I found I had a hard time thinking about the subject, wondering what stories in my life might best illustrate my wrestling with the issue, but none were forthcoming. So then, to

prod my self-exploration, I began to research it. Read a few books. Talked with friends about it.

And soon I was dumbfounded at how this topic cuts across almost every other idea I can think of, and touches deep in the human psyche.

Look at how many ways we can say it in English. *Getting even. Sweet revenge. Vengeance. Vindication. Vendetta. Tit for tat. Payback. Retaliation. Satisfaction. Reprisal. Recompense. Retribution. Just deserts.* And of course, *An eye for an eye.*

That last famous phrase, of course, comes from the Bible, specifically from the Book of Exodus / Shemoth. I often hear it quoted by people who have no idea where it comes from. They cite it as if it were simply a logical statement against which no one could possibly argue. Interestingly enough, the oft-quoted phrase is found in a passage on domestic violence: “When two men are fighting and one of them so shoves a pregnant woman that her pregnancy is ended, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined by an amount set by the husband. But if any other violence ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”

Scholars who have studied this passage at length often point out its meaning for a more liberal theology of abortion, since, in this passage, the end of a pregnancy is clearly not considered the same as murder. However, the passage that follows, when placed in the context of the time, is actually quite radical. It basically means “no *more* than an eye for an eye. No *more* than a tooth for a tooth, etc.” In other words, in those rough and bloody days, if someone killed a friend of yours, you might think it was your right and even responsibility to get even by killing a whole bunch of your enemy’s friends. Not life for life, but many lives for one life, many eyes for one eye, etc. Blood feuds and vendettas of that kind exemplify a great deal of human history...in war, in skirmishes, in

organized crime, even in genocides. Look at the horror of five-hundred year old revenge dramas in the land formerly known as Yugoslavia. Getting even in such cases is disproportionate... one death is avenged only by the death of many. One wound calls for the destruction of a whole populace. Caesar loses a battle and retaliates by wiping out whole towns. Or, in our more recent memory, America is attacked by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor, and two whole cities in Japan are wiped off the face of the earth. No, the words “eye for an eye” are actually quite radical, as far as human history goes.

But for me, this sheds a spotlight on the chief problem with the whole idea of getting even. Who gets to decide what “even” is? How does one retaliate for an emotional wound, for instance? Say your best friend runs away with your spouse. (History is filled with that kind of event, too. Literature would hardly exist without it.) But still, no bloody wound, that. A wound to the heart...sure, a betrayal certainly hurts the psyche. But what does it mean to get even there? Violence? Planning some equal sort of betrayal? Letting the air out of the culprit’s tires? What is it?

Furthermore, there is the time factor involved in any act of revenge. Retaliation exists not just for the moment, but generates its own offspring forever. Many of you have probably heard of the Hatfields and McCoys, two fabled families on the Kentucky/ West Virginia border that vengefully killed each other off for a period of ten years...in retaliation for what? It almost makes no difference. After ten years, the original problem had faded. It was the new dead body outside on the doorstep that called for vengeance, not some event that happened ten years earlier. Retaliation breeds other retaliations over time. “Tit for tat” can go on for years, like a mindless machine, no one any longer knowing what the original offence was.

This is certainly the central thrust of the David saga in the Book of Samuel. In this book, “getting even” takes on a life of its own, until

nothing is even, and everything falls apart. Revenge for an undeniably horrible and incestuous rape and an indecisive father's response to that rape leads to the murder of the crown prince. That murder leads to an all-out family feud, and then to all-out civil war. This war decimates the whole next generation of capable leadership. People not even part of the family, like General Joav, end up getting caught up in the vengeance cycle. When Absalom is killed, neither of his surviving brothers is very skilled politically, which means, at the very least, being able to keep things together *somewhat* harmoniously. And so, it's not long before there are two governments where before there had been one. Corruption follows corruption for centuries, until both crumbling governments are overrun by the powerful new empire of Assyria.

Revenge in this centuries-long story sweeps whole nations into the dustbin of history. And I assure you, this story is quite typical of other stories which have come down to us from the ancient world. The principle of vengeance itself ruled the world once, including famous individuals like Julius Caesar. In fact, we tend to ignore the vengeful nature of people like Julius Caesar...we speak of his love for Cleopatra, his stirring and liberal leadership of Rome, but neglect to mention that his hot-blooded vengeance demanded the lives of literally tens of thousand of people over his brief life. He is never described as a mass-murderer, but fair-ness, it seems to me, demands that at least his vengeance is reported.

It seems clear to me that vengeance is first and foremost emotional, not rational. Revenge is how I act out about how I am a feeling toward someone who has done me wrong. I feel that I want to inflict the same hurt on him or her as he or she inflicted on me. I feel their suffering will make me feel better. But does that hurt really end things?

It's then when I remember the undeniably creepy teaching of many modern fundamentalist preachers, who tell their flocks that one of the joys of going to heaven will be to look down and see God

taking revenge on all the sinners in the world by burning them in hell. And I ask myself...is this really the way I am feeling too, when I feel that I want someone else to feel pain for my pain? It's a chilling thought...

Even the concept of hurt requires a bit of meditation. For I notice that a lot of hurt in this world is simply caused by ignorance and prejudice, two ways of approaching things that humanity could do much better without.

The Aesop's fable we told earlier this morning is a case in point. The fox seems to think that the stork's differences in form and face make the bird worthy of torment. Here we have ignorance *and* prejudice made plain in the storyteller's shorthand. But the stork responds with an act that is meant to cut into that smug foolishness, and gives the fox, as we say in English, "a taste of his own medicine." Is this revenge? I am not so sure. The point of the tale is to reveal the folly of ignorance and prejudice, and it suggests that the fox, by experiencing a similar frustration as the stork, might actually learn something because of it, and thus not act that way again.

But who knows? The story ends where the story ends, and we never find out if the fox learns anything. Anyway, in my experience, some people learn by such methods, and others simply don't. I don't know...if the stork had simply and quietly *called* the fox on his foolish stunt, perhaps the lesson might have been plainer, and would have sunk in more directly. Or maybe the fox would have said, as so many clueless folks do, "Oh, you have no sense of humor, do you?" But I am not sure in any case that what the stork did is revenge, per se. Revenge for me is never as much about teaching a lesson as about trying to passionately make things "even." Let me give you a case in point.

As I read through all these books, thinking about when I might have desired revenge, I suddenly remembered an event early in my San Francisco days. A member of my congregation named Stewart

was in seminary. He was what many people called a “golden boy,” both because of his looks, and his considerable talent and energy. He was the only child of his parents, and they adored him, as did the rest of the world. One evening, while Stewart was standing on the curb at Gough Street waiting for a light to change, a drunk driver leapt over the curb, struck Stewart, and killed him. We found out later that this man had been brought to court *seven* other times on drunk driving charges, and all of them had been dismissed on technicalities. I assure you that I had thoughts of wanting to retaliate against both the court system with its technicalities, and against the driver who had never accepted any responsibility for his actions. I wanted to get even for Stewart, and for his utterly bereft parents. I imagined all sorts of horrible things, in my rage. But what could I have done? Killed the drunk driver? Killed the judge that let him go? Would these have brought Stewart back? Of course not. And so I did not do what my fantasies wanted, which was to inflict pain on the killer, and a stinging slap to the judicial lover of technicalities. But I did not deny my feelings, or stuff them. I faced them, struggled with them, and allowed them to be transformed by the principles I, as a Unitarian Universalist minister, claim for myself. So I took my desire to get even and poured it into a then very strong organization, Mothers Against Drunk Driving... MADD. I gave speeches for them, and worked on vigils. I tried to change the larger culture, one aspect at a time.

And this, in the end, is what Regina Barreca is saying. The whole issue about revenge is a lightning rod that brings up the issue of fair play, she says. It catalyzes us to grapple passionately with the concept of justice itself, and to work for a more just society. It reminds us that we do not all have “the same access to impartial justice.” The so-called justice system itself is often unfair...just the fact that a black man born today will have a 1 in 3 chance of entering into our prison system should be enough evidence.

(For Americans with visible European ancestry, it’s a 1 in 17 chance.) Although it’s sometimes hard to define accurately, I

think, at least for me, that the desire for revenge *always* derives from a *perceived injustice*. Thus, “The desire for revenge,” Barecca observes, “can force our deeply hidden beliefs and ideas out into the open, so that they can be confronted and perhaps transformed into less threatening and more useful energies.” Like me with my speeches on behalf of families destroyed by drunk drivers, for example.

And because injustice is found everywhere, dreams of revenge are found everywhere in the human community as well, and this is why in the end it’s a most important topic to lift up. I might even define “revenge” as “an energy in search of justice.” And justice and a sense of fair balance will be achieved in this world, Barecca concludes, if everyone “has equal access to power, and the powerless fear nothing, because they have nothing left to lose.” I happen to agree with her.

So I encourage people to acknowledge their feelings desiring revenge. But I never encourage people to act out on those feelings literally, since, as comedian Rita Rudner puts it so well, “to live such a reactionary life is to live the life of a slave.” I would hope rather that, as Unitarian Universalists, we could live free and thoughtful lives, and allow our negative feelings to be transformed, by our spiritual commitment to compassion, into social justice work, which tries to re-establish balance and equal access in a topsy-turvy world. I usually call this way of life “living well.” And “living well,” poet George Herbert reminded us 350 years ago, is ultimately, “the best revenge.”

Autumn Praises

For every branch of every tree that glows
with gold, let some small part of me that
is dry and crisp also begin to glow gold too,
with understanding, gladness and peace.
For every red leaf that flutters through the autumn mist, may some
word of blessing settle like a leaf on my heart, that I might sing

praise for my life amid the glowing trees, and set aside my worries
and will, for a time, and focus, not on
my wounds but on my gladness, not on my
slights, but on my thanksgiving. O Light come down to earth, be
praised.