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The Futility of Vengeance

By KATE MURPHY FEB. 7, 2015

LAST month an Australian entrepreneur created a service that allows you to send your enemies an envelope full of glitter. When opened, bits of sparkly spite will fall out and stick — as glitter and grudges do. A rush of customers crashed the company's website within 24 hours. The owner then made a tidy profit, selling the days-old business for \$85,000.

Mailing a glitter bomb may seem petty, but the demand points to a larger issue of revenge and its pervasiveness. It is the central theme of countless books, films, hit songs and television shows. Settling scores marks political, business and personal relationships. And of course, at its most extreme, the desire for vengeance fuels murder and terrorism.

Why are some bent on avenging perceived wrongs, slight or significant, while others can just let it go? In what situations is injustice so keenly felt that retaliation — whether physical violence or a wounding remark — becomes reflexive? There's been surprisingly little research on this topic given its enormous impact on individuals and society. But what is known is that nobody is above revenge. And rarely is it ever sweet.

"I would say anybody who has a sibling understands the desire for revenge before any other emotion," said Sunil Nayar, a writer and the executive producer of the ABC television drama "Revenge."

Indeed, if you want to watch vengeance in the raw, visit any preschool playground for a rousing chorus of "He hit me first!" Evolutionary psychologists say humans and

other social animals, including monkeys, elephants, dogs and dolphins, react viscerally to unfairness.

Vengeful acts were what kept our prehistoric ancestors alive. Back then, letting a slap go unpunished marked you as prey. Uncooperative behavior also threatened the survival of the group, which may be why today bystanders feel uncomfortable, if not outraged, when they see injustice and take great satisfaction when offenders get their due. Witness the Twitter thrashing of a Harvard professor who last year harassed the owner of a family-run Chinese restaurant for triple monetary damages after a mistaken \$4 overcharge.

In modern societies we tend to contract out our revenge for more serious offenses by calling the police or hiring a lawyer. “We have institutionalized revenge so when people feel mistreated they can resort to government or the courts for redress,” said Michael McCullough, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Fla., who studies revenge. (In cultures where people do not trust the authorities to treat them fairly, whether because of a corrupt system or low status, they are more likely to take matters into their own hands.)

But it’s not against the law for your girlfriend to cheat on you or your colleague to take credit for your work, so most of our first-person experience with revenge is usually over relatively trivial, and often emotional, matters. Responses can be overt or covert, harsh or more measured — everything from throwing a punch to posting nude photos of an ex online to maybe just withholding help or a friendly word when you otherwise would.

“What’s interesting is when we ask people to tell us about a time they got revenge, they can’t recall” — they say “they’d never do that,” said Thomas M. Tripp, a professor of management at Washington State University, Vancouver, who studies revenge in the workplace. “But then you ask them to tell about a time they got even and they have no problem gleefully telling you about the guy who got his just deserts.”

Allen Kurzweil said he wasn’t out for revenge when he wrote his recently published and widely publicized memoir, “Whipping Boy: The Forty Year Search for My Twelve-Year-Old Bully,” which outs his childhood bully and goes on to detail the

fellow's many adult failings and legal troubles. "Revenge suggests a motive on my part," Mr. Kurzweil said. "But does it redress a sense of karmic balance? Yes."

Call it comeuppance, retribution, karmic balance, getting even or settling a score: Researchers and psychology experts label revenge any act that harms someone who has harmed you. Intent is slippery since the act can be conscious or subconscious.

"One of the things I often hear when talking to a divorced person is that the best revenge is to lead a good life so I can show him or show her I am fine and have moved on," said Glen O. Gabbard, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. "But they aren't really moving on because their subsequent relationships and behavior are shaped by wanting that satisfaction."

While everyone might have an innate urge to get even, there is a broad spectrum of vindictiveness. The social science literature indicates people who were raised in situations where they experienced poverty, crime, violence or just plain unfair treatment have a hair-trigger response to injustice in both imagined scenarios and game-based experiments.

Not surprisingly, personality traits that predict extreme vindictiveness include narcissism, low self-esteem, pessimism and callousness. The most vengeful responses tend to be provoked when honor or identity is threatened, such as being spurned by a lover or having one's family or religion maligned. Also likely to generate instinctual outrage is any form of humiliation or violation of social or moral norms.

Moreover, anything that shatters one's sense of reality and safety tends to produce a powerful reaction. This is why so many like Mr. Kurzweil have not forgotten childhood bullies who most likely personify their introduction to cruelty. It's also why otherwise mild-mannered people might express a desire to savagely punish terrorists like the accused Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, whose actions defied all they knew or thought they knew about their communities and human behavior.

But the thing is, when people take it upon themselves to exact revenge, not only does it fail to prevent future harm but it also ultimately doesn't make the avenger feel any better. While they may experience an initial intoxicating rush, research indicates that upon reflection, people feel far less satisfied after they take revenge than they imagined.

Rather than inflicting suffering, it turns out that what victims really want is remorse from the person who wronged them, along with a heartfelt apology, which includes a promise to reform and rectify the situation as much as possible. Ironically, such reconciliation is far less likely after a vengeful act. If anything, vengeance escalates the conflict, leading to an increasingly malicious game of tit for tat.

"The only lesson a person learns after you take your pound of flesh is 'Wow, you're a real jerk for doing that,' " Professor Tripp said. "The problem with revenge in interpersonal situations is the victim is the accuser, detective, judge, jury and executioner, which inevitably leads to miscarriages of justice."

Interestingly, people who are the least likely to seek vengeance tend to believe those who wronged them will ultimately get their comeuppance — in this or the afterlife. They let some higher power or fate be the final arbiter or avenger, as it were. It could be framed as forgiveness, letting it go or giving antagonists enough rope to hang themselves.

"I'm not sure if that's not self-soothing thinking," said Dr. Gabbard, the psychiatrist. "But it's also true that when people treat people badly, eventually there will be negative consequences psychologically and socially, so one way or another they will suffer."

What goes around, comes around.

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