International and interpersonal transactions are motivated daily by a revenge impulse: rhetoric about our military presence in Afghanistan receives popular support because the rhetoric appeals not only to the public’s sense of justice and the need to make an example and teach a lesson, but also out of a revenge compulsion; when someone hits on someone we’re involved in, or if a loved one cheats on us, the impulse for revenge is similarly undeniable.

But the problems with the revenge compulsion are numerous: for example, we are acting on a vague concept that we can only define in terms of other vague concepts (justice, pride, closure, etc.) or through metaphors like “payback.”   But the biggest problem with vengeance is that it’s a paradox.

Few would debate that we are compelled to vengeance when we suffer unprovoked, unwarranted, or unexplainable attacks, whether they are attacks on our bodies, our pride, or our characters: when someone embarrasses us, purely out of hostility, we want revenge.

We also assume that the revenge should be just, balanced – like the scales of lady justice, and commensurate with the original attack.  We value vengeance only when it fits the crime.  *Payback*, which revenge is often compared to, implies the return of something in full.  To destroy people’s cars in order to get them back for taking our laundry out of the dryer before it finished its cycle violates our sense of fair revenge.  Revenge is therefore economic – we *exact* revenge; we get *payback*; we pay someone back; people get what they *deserve*, etc.  It’s like any economic exchange.

But if we accept these premises, then revenge **is an impossible paradox**.

The original attack, if revenge is called for, was unjust, unexpected, unprovoked, and unwarranted.  But if this is true, revenge can not be an economic repetition or return of the original attack: revenge cannot be simultaneously just and unjust, provoked and unprovoked, warranted and unwarranted, and *still be a repetition/return of the original attack*.

I have a friend who handles this paradox by rejecting the second premise. She treats any unprovoked, unwarranted, or unjust attack as nothing less than an **act of war**: A girl who referred to her as a slut behind her back ended up in jail after the police received an anonymous tip about her marijuana crops.  She lost all her financial aid, had to repay all her loans the week she was sentenced, and now has a criminal record.

Hers is a harsh, but intelligent way to handle the paradox.  It’s an unexpected, unfair attack, just as the original attack was.  But it has two other advantages.  First, it operates within the law: it exacts its toll without destroying property, and without causing bodily harm.  Hers is a revenge that leaves her inculpable.

Secondly, it serves the law rather than exploiting it, the way too many anonymous tips motivated out of revenge do.  And it’s an anonymous revenge: escalation and retaliation are moot concerns.  And like a good gift, vengeance is best when given anonymously: if you put your name on a gift, you’re giving for the wrong reasons.  It seeks something in return, whether it be recognition, attention, pride, reputation, or another material gift.  Revenge sent with a return address is given for the same misguided reasons.

From one perspective, my friend’s revenge violates our vigilante sensibilities: the punishment she dealt was more than her target deserved.  But from another perspective, she gave back exactly what she got: an unfair, unjust, unexpected assault.

When we’re dealt a blow, few of us can resist the compulsion to avenge ourselves.  But vengeance is a complicated procedure.  The revenge paradox is one complicated factor, but it’s easily addressed by simply revising our sense of justice and fair play.

But there are other factors that are more elusive and not so easily addressed.  When we try to justify revenge, a very abstract concept, we rely on even more abstract concepts: we refer to justice, or the need to teach a lesson, and more often than not, we refer to a sense of pride.  And we take these abstract words as if they were biologically hard-wired in our bodies – as if pride is an appendage that can be cut by some outside force; as if justice were a universal, natural instinct.  We seldom consider that pride and justice are defined culturally.

When plotting to avenge yourself, don’t build your plot on the shaky foundation *justice*and *pride* offer.  At the same time, don’t be limited by the assumption that revenge must be fair.  Vengeance, true vengeance, must be as unfair, as unexpected, and as unjust as the original assault.

Ultimately, the only criterion for evaluating your plan is whether or not it will *teach*.  Is the revenge you have planned the one that will change the target’s life forever?  Will she learn something about how she treats people?  Will it stop her in her tracks and make her think twice before she attempts an assault, physical or otherwise, on another person?  If you can’t imagine this person changing their ways, your revenge will be a complete failure.

Teaching doesn’t mean making the person fear you.  That’s a matter of pride; ultimately the person will have learned nothing, and more than likely will get you back threefold when you’re not looking.  If you can imagine this person doing something unreasonable to another person, *your revenge is a failure*.  They will have learned nothing except how to be proud, just like you.

Whether we’re responding to a childish prank, an act of international terror, or a brief romantic indiscretion, there’s no place for fair-play.  Neither is there a place for vague concepts like pride and justice.  There is only room to teach.