

## REVENGE



### *Guest Introduction by Robin Shohet*

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I can be a vengeful bastard. I write this with a certain defiance, like someone exhibiting a tattoo designed to shock, a reaction formation against my shame at the depth and breadth of my vengeful wishes and fantasies. I do not plant bombs or advocate capital punishment or any other gross forms of revenge. I simply sulk, withhold, gossip or try and make my partner feel wrong about real or, more usual, imagined hurts she has done to me.

I am frightened by the depth of my feelings of revenge. One day my son trapped his foot in the wheel of my stepson's bike as he was being taken to school. I wanted to kill my stepson whilst knowing it was not his fault (and even if it were my reaction was still insane, a defence against helplessness, as anger would not heal my son's foot — the only thing that mattered).

Since becoming interested in the topic of revenge, I have come to recognise how destructive it is to both avenged and avenger. I invented an exercise in which each partner in a pair spent five minutes taking a situation where they felt angry, vengeful, hurt and expressed all their feel-

ings in as vindictive a way as possible. After five minutes they are to continue talking, but this time with a desire for healing from themselves, another party, God, whoever. Invariably people feel better even though the situation which they are describing has not changed. I am beginning to realise that revenge is, at some level, a refusal to heal; holding on to wounds for reasons as varied as pride, overwhelming grief or loss, inability to tolerate helplessness, identity, need for acknowledgement or, as is the case with me, a wish to be, in Jampowlsky's words 'right rather than happy'. And you don't have to read the newspapers every day to know that revenge is wreaking its destructive havoc throughout the world and has been since I don't know when.

I remember at university in a psychology of learning seminar being told about monkeys who find a banana in a trap, and stay trapped rather than release the banana and escape. I thought how stupid and now realise a sizeable chunk of humanity, including me, is doing the same — holding on to revenge even when it destroys them.

*This collection of articles has been commissioned and edited by Robin Shohet on behalf of S&S. Robin is an individual and marital psychotherapist and staff team consultant. He is co-author with Peter Hawkins of Supervision in the Helping Professions.*