Saying Yes to Revenge

Max Schupbach

Many factors are present when a successful conflict resolution happens. Dealing with feelings of revenge can often be the turning point in a long and chronic conflict.

In a refugee camp in Germany, there is a large group of refugees from the former Yugoslavia. There are Croats, Serbs and Bosnians in the group, all living together as refugees. Suspicions run high in this group about what each one did in the war that has displaced them all, and conflict is rife. One of the factors that makes resolution of these conflicts difficult is that there is so much fury and revenge here. I initiated a large meeting of about a hundred people to work on these issues in a group process.

I have been learning about working with these kinds of situations through my experience of working in 'hot spots' around the world, where traditional methods of conflict resolution have consistently failed to improve the situation. I have been collaborating with Amy and Arnold Mindell, the developers of world-work, for more than 20 years. The ideas used to work with feelings of revenge are taken from Arnold's forthcoming book, *Sitting in the Fire.*

As the meeting progresses, I explain some of the process-oriented ideas about working with conflict. I explain that I have a fundamental belief that any feelings and experiences happening in the group need to be accepted and supported just as they are — that there is a process behind these feelings which can be unfolded to bring about a change in the feeling atmosphere.

As I am explaining this idea, a man steps forward and says that he feels full of revenge. He challenges me to support these feelings. I reply, 'Yes, I say yes to your feelings of revenge'. The man continues, 'I am happy when I read in the papers that the children of my enemies are dying, that the women are being raped. Can you still say yes to my feelings?'

This is a tense moment in the group. I say, 'Yes, I support you, because I know that you must have a reason to feel as you do.' The man begins to cry. He tells his story of being tortured, of being the only survivor in his family. Others in the group stand up. They begin to tell their own stories, to share their pain and tears. As this unfolds, they realise that they are all in pain. Deep feelings are expressed and it is a very moving experience. The atmosphere in the room has changed. Where there were enemy factions before is now a group of people joined in having been hurt through the war.

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By giving permission for feelings of revenge to be stated, a process could unfold which allowed the pain and suffering, which had fuelled the revenge, to be expressed. This is different from supporting someone to act out those feelings. In the above story, it was the act of supporting these feelings without judgement that created the possibility of change. A safe enough space was created to allow the deeper feeling of grief to be expressed.

Saying 'yes' to revenge does not in and of itself provide a solution. But since feeling vengeful is often considered unacceptable, it is very difficult to acknowledge it, and therefore get past it. The process doesn't complete. Conflicts often become stuck, with each side entrenched in its own position. Most conflict techniques focus on de-escalating a conflict through practical solutions. Practical solutions to the conflict may work temporarily, but they aren't sustainable because of the deeper feelings involved. Giving permission for feelings of revenge is a way consciously to escalate a conflict which is stuck. By escalating the conflict, it can become unstuck and allow feelings which have been withheld from the conflict to be acknowledged.

For example, in working with a couple, I see that the man feels hurt and upset. The woman says that she is glad to see him suffer. I suggest that feelings of revenge are present and ask her how much revenge she would like. She says that she has had fantasies of him being killed. He suddenly sees how absolutely furious she is, something which he hadn't really understood. Once he really sees her, a new dialogue begins, the atmosphere changes and the conflict becomes unstuck.

Feelings of revenge are often in the background in difficult conflict situations which cycle round and round without any real resolution. This can happen in relationships, within groups and between groups in our society, such as women and men, or people of colour and the mainstream whites. Especially where there is a history of oppression and abuse, feelings of revenge may be in the background in conflict situations. Where feelings of revenge are present, there is often a feeling of having been abused in the background.

For example, I facilitated a large meeting of a therapy organisation where there was a conflict between students and the faculty. After working with the faculty, they were beginning to really listen to the students. But the students kept on attacking. As the process unfolded, the feelings of revenge against the role of authority in education emerged. This was due to the feelings in the background of having been hurt by the abusiveness of the educational system in our society. The revenge was being taken against a role, which the faculty represented to the students. The teachers, having been hurt by the same system, joined them in that rage and a consensus of trying to establish a group that is more sensitive to feelings emerged as a mutual goal of everybody involved.

Bringing out the feelings of revenge doesn't necessarily resolve conflicts, but it helps to identify the deeper feelings that are involved in the conflict. Of course, many people say, 'shouldn't we just forgive, isn't that a better way to solve problems?' I think this is a great idea, and if you can do it, that's even better. Unfortunately, my experience is that this approach doesn't really work most of the

time. This is because the process needs to unfold and because there are issues in the background which are not only our personal issues, but society's issues as a whole, and which need to be processed.

What usually happens when the culture expects forgiveness and doesn't validate revenge, is that these feelings go underground. I worked with a spiritual community of people who come from various backgrounds in the world. So issues about racial and ethnic identity, and gender and class issues are present. Becoming part of a spiritual community or a spiritual path doesn't make these issues go away and problems still come up. In this community, feelings of revenge are not supported by the community, so they become gossip, which makes it impossible to resolve any issues. In contrast to this, I was recently in New Zealand and two Maori elders told me of their traditional way of dealing with a conflict in their community. If two people have a conflict, the community comes together in a large room known as Marai, a tribal house. There, anyone can say anything they want, and they keep going until everyone feels complete. After that is over, no one is allowed to mention the conflict again.

We, in the white Christian culture, generally have a problem with acknowledging feelings of revenge and tend to feel guilty and ashamed about them. This makes it very difficult to say yes to revenge. But until we do, the feelings persist and the processes of resolving conflict and of healing can't unfold.

Prisons and our Addiction to Revenge

Jonathan Wallace

'We do to others what we do to ourselves' is perhaps the least likely statement to come from a convicted murderer serving his nineteenth year in prison. Frank is a burly Irishman with a steady grey-eyed gaze and clumsy tattoos. He is in his late forties. We were talking about vengeance as the hard reality that forges prison life and culture. Prisons, we both knew, are our way of taking revenge. We also agreed that we have a compulsive urge to avenge ourselves on ourselves and that prisons externalise this addiction to our inner call for revenge.

Prisons also institutionalise vengeance, making this primal need socially palatable. When our addiction to take revenge is unassuaged by war or other mass behaviour, we turn to criminals as scapegoats. Logically, we should help peo-

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