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VENGEANCE IS OURS

What can tribal societies tell us about our need to get even?

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In the Highlands of New Guinea, rival clans have often fought wars lasting decades, in which each killing provokes another.

In 1992, when Daniel Wemp was about twenty-two years old, his beloved paternal uncle Soll was killed in a battle against the neighboring Ombal clan. In the New Guinea Highlands, where Daniel and his Handa clan live, uncles and aunts play a big role in raising children, so an uncle's death represents a much heavier blow than it might to most Americans. Daniel often did not even distinguish between his biological father and other male clansmen of his father's generation. And Soll had been very good to Daniel, who recalled him as a tall and handsome man, destined to become a leader. Soll's death demanded vengeance.

Daniel told me that responsibility for arranging revenge usually falls on the victim's firstborn son or, failing that, on one of his brothers. "Soll did have a son, but he was only six years old at the time of his father's death, much too young to organize the revenge," Daniel said. "On the other hand, my father was felt to be too old and weak by then; the avenger should be a strong young man in his prime. So I was the one who became expected to avenge Soll." As it turned out, it took three years, twenty-nine more killings, and the sacrifice of three hundred pigs before Daniel succeeded in discharging this responsibility.

I first met Daniel half a dozen years after these events, while he was working for the Papua New Guinea branch of ChevronTexaco, which was then managing oil fields in the Southern Highlands, about thirty miles from Daniel's home

village. The fields, where I was doing environmental studies, lie in forest-covered hills near the beautiful Lake Kutubu. The weather is warm but wet—the region gets hundreds of inches of rain a year. As the driver assigned to me, Daniel picked me up an hour before dawn each day, drove me out along narrow dirt roads, waited while I jumped out every mile or so to record birdsongs, and drove me back to the oil camp in time for lunch. He was slim but muscular, and, like other New Guinea Highlanders, dark-skinned, with tightly coiled dark hair, dark eyes, and a strongly contoured face. From the outset, I found him to be a happy, enthusiastic, sociable person. During our hours together on the road, we enjoyed sharing our life stories. Despite some big differences between our backgrounds—Daniel’s Highland village life focussed on growing sweet potatoes, raising pigs, and fighting, and my American city life focussed on college teaching and research—we enjoyed many of the same things, such as our wives and children, conversation, sports, birds, and driving cars. It was in these conversations that he told me the story of his revenge.

Daniel’s homeland and other parts of the New Guinea Highlands have been of interest to anthropologists ever since the nineteen-thirties, when Australian and Dutch prospectors and patrols “discovered” a million stone-tool-using tribespeople previously unknown to the outside world, and began to introduce them to metal, writing, missionaries, and state government. Since then, changes have been rapid. When I first visited New Guinea as a scientist, in 1964, most Highlanders still lived in thatched huts with walls of hand-hewn planks, and many wore grass skirts and no shirts; now many huts have tin roofs and most people wear T-shirts and shorts or trousers. And yet Highlanders still inhabit two worlds simultaneously. Daniel’s loyalties are first to his Handa clan and to his Nipa tribe, and then to his nation of Papua New Guinea, which is attempting to weld its thousands of clans and hundreds of tribes into a peaceful democracy.

State government is now so nearly universal around the globe that we forget how recent an innovation it is; the first states are thought to have arisen only about fifty-five hundred years ago, in the Fertile Crescent. Before there were states, Daniel’s method of resolving major disputes—either violently or by payment of compensation—was the worldwide norm. Papua New Guinea is not the only place where those traditional methods of dispute resolution still coexist uneasily with the methods of state government. For example, Daniel’s methods might seem quite familiar to members of urban gangs in America, and also to Somalis, Afghans, Kenyans, and peoples of other countries where tribal ties remain strong and state control weak. As I eventually came to realize, Daniel’s thirst for vengeance and his hostility to rival clans are really not so far from our own habits of mind as we might like to think.

The war between the Handa clan and the Ombal clan began many years ago; how many, Daniel didn’t say, and perhaps didn’t know. It could easily have been several decades ago, or even in an earlier generation. Among Highland clans, each killing demands a revenge killing, so that a war goes on and on, unless political considerations cause it to be settled, or unless one clan is wiped out or flees. When I asked Daniel how the war that claimed his uncle’s life began, he answered, “The original cause of the wars between the Handa and Ombal clans was a pig that ruined a garden.” Surprisingly to outsiders, most Highland wars start ostensibly as a dispute over either pigs or women. Anthropologists debate whether the wars really arise from some deeperlying ultimate cause, such as land or population pressure, but the participants, when they are asked to name a cause, usually point to a woman or a pig. Any Westerner who knows the story of Helen and the Trojan War will not be surprised to hear women named as a *casus belli*, but the equal importance of pigs is less obvious. However, New Guinea Highlanders, whose main food staples are starchy root crops like sweet potato and taro, are chronically starved for protein, of which the island’s dark, bristly pigs traditionally furnished the only large source. As a result, pigs are prized symbols of prestige and wealth. Peaceful competition and ostentatious displays involve pigs, and they are also used as currency for buying women. Pigs are individually owned and named, and, as piglets, they are sometimes nursed at one breast by a woman nursing an infant at her other breast.

A typical Highland village is a cluster of huts housing between a few dozen and a few hundred people plus their pigs, traditionally surrounded by a fence, and situated a mile or a few miles from the next village. A village’s pigs are taken out to forage during the day, and are prone then to wander into people’s vegetable gardens, breaking down or digging under fences erected to keep them out. A single pig can root up and ruin an entire garden in a few hours. If the intrusion happens at night, or if the offending pig is not caught in the act, it is virtually impossible to prove which particular pig was responsible.

That was how the Handa-Ombal war began. An Ombal man found that his garden had been wrecked by a pig. He claimed that the offending pig belonged to a certain Handa man, who denied it. The Ombal man became angry, demanded compensation, and assaulted the Handa pig owner when he refused. Relatives of both parties then joined in

the dispute, and soon the entire membership of both clans—between four and six thousand people—was dragged into a war that had now raged for longer than Daniel could remember. He told me that, in the four years of fighting leading up to Soll's death, seventeen other men had been killed.

Soll was killed in a so-called "public fight"—one fought in the open between large groups of warriors separated by a considerable distance. With the air full of arrows and spears, it is often impossible to tell who was responsible for a kill. Even if the side achieving the kill does know, it is always careful to keep the killer's identity secret. For that reason, the target of Daniel's revenge was not Soll's killer but another Ombal man, named Henep Isum, who had organized the fight for the Ombals. By accepting the official role known as "owner of the fight," Isum took responsibility for the killing, and Daniel became the owner of fights to kill Isum. Isum suited Daniel's needs perfectly, because he was tall, handsome, and marked as a future leader, just as Soll had been. By killing Isum, Daniel would exact appropriate revenge for Soll's death.

Daniel explained to me that Handas are taught from early childhood to hate their enemies and to prepare themselves for a life of fighting. "If you die in a fight, you will be considered a hero, and people will remember you for a long time," he said. "But if you die of a disease you will be remembered for only a day or a few weeks, and then you will be forgotten." Daniel was proud both of the aggressiveness displayed by all the warring clans of his Nipa tribe and of their faultless recall of debts and grievances. He likened Nipa people to "light elephants": "They remember what happened thirty years ago, and their words continue to float in the air. The way that we come to understand things in life is by telling stories, like the stories I am telling you now, and like all the stories that grandfathers tell their grandchildren about their relatives who must be avenged. We also come to understand things in life by fighting on the battlefield along with our fellow-clansmen and allies."

Though we might wonder how Daniel's society came to revel in killing, ethnographic studies of traditional human societies lying largely outside the control of state government have shown that war, murder, and demonization of neighbors have been the norm. Modern state societies rate as exceptional by the standards of human history, because we instead grow up learning a universal code of morality that is constantly hammered into us: promulgated every week in our churches and codified in our laws. But the differences between the norms of states and of Handa clan society are not actually so sharp. In times of war, even modern state societies quickly turn the enemy into a dehumanized figure of hatred, only to enjoin us to stop hating again as soon as a peace treaty is signed. Such contradictions confuse us deeply. Neither pacific ideals nor wartime hatreds, once acquired, are easily jettisoned. It's no wonder that many soldiers who kill suffer post-traumatic stress disorder. When they come home, far from boasting about killing, as a Nipa tribesman would, they have nightmares and never talk about it at all, unless to other veterans.

Then, too, for Americans old enough to recall our hatred of Japan after Pearl Harbor, Daniel's intense hatred of the Ombals may not seem so remote. After Pearl Harbor, hundreds of thousands of American men volunteered to kill and did kill hundreds of thousands of Japanese, often in face-to-face combat, by brutal methods that included bayonets and flamethrowers. Soldiers who killed Japanese in particularly large numbers or with notable bravery were publicly decorated with medals, and those who died in combat were posthumously remembered as heroes. Meanwhile, even among Americans who had never seen a live Japanese soldier or the dead body of an American relative killed by the Japanese, intense hatred and fear of Japanese became widespread. Traditional New Guineans, by contrast, have from childhood onward often seen warriors going out and coming back from fighting; they have seen the bodies of relatives killed by the enemy, listened to stories of killing, heard fighting talked about as the highest ideal, and witnessed successful warriors talking proudly about their killings and being praised for them. If New Guineans end up feeling unconflicted about killing the enemy, it's because they have had no contrary message to unlearn.

Normally, a clan first tries to obtain vengeance within three weeks. During that period, the situation is tense, and people feel especially aggressive. As Daniel described it to me, a clan has four rapid-response options: ambush parties deployed along public roads; a special type of long-range arrow; surprise attacks on enemy houses at night; and sorcery and magic. Daniel, however, was unable to pursue any of these courses, because at the time of Soll's death he was in the coastal town of Madang, about two hundred miles from his homeland. He didn't even receive the news until two weeks later, after which the journey home took him a further week. A consequence of that delay which evidently upset Daniel was that he never got to see Soll's corpse; he saw only the site where Soll was buried.

Once home, Daniel assumed his role as owner of the fight and quickly organized efforts by his demoralized

relatives to take revenge. On the first day of the resulting fight, Daniel was wounded. "I was advancing in battle with my biological father, who was holding a shield to protect me, while I myself held the weapons," he told me. "As my father and I went up a hill towards a stone quarry from which the Ombal enemy was throwing stones as well as spears, a stone hit my father on his leg. So I took the shield to protect my father, and I told him to go faster. That was when I was left unprotected, and an Ombal spear struck me on the back of my lower left leg." He showed me an inch-long scar and explained apologetically, "If, in a fight, you receive a wound on your forehead, then you are considered to have done well, but if you only have a spear wound on the back of your leg, like this one of mine, then you are viewed as not having fought well."

All in all, Daniel's first attempt at quick revenge was a failure, and so the war entered a slower, more complex and costly second phase, involving alliance-building, negotiation, and incessant plotting. Daniel's clan realized that it would have to enlist supporters from other villages. The selection of allies posed tricky and dangerous problems. The New Guinea Highlands are full of aggressive men seeking revenge for their own reasons, and skilled at using treachery to achieve it. Whenever a battle takes place, men not hired by either side are likely to present themselves, hoping for the opportunity to kill an enemy of their own. "You have to make sure that the men that you hire as paid killers or allies are real enemies of your target, bearing grievances of their own from years ago," Daniel said. "If you make the mistake of hiring a man who actually does not consider your target to be his own enemy, he may seize the chance to kill you, then go to your enemies and claim a reward."

Another factor complicating the plans is that, if two people die in a fight, there will be at least two owners of the next fight to avenge those two deaths. In the case of Daniel's campaign, there were actually three owners, because, in the fighting in which Soll was killed, another Handa man, named Fukal Limbuzu, was also killed, and a man called Wiyo was speared in the eye and blinded, which was regarded as equivalent in gravity to being killed. Hence Daniel and the brothers of Fukal Limbuzu and of Wiyo became from the outset the three Handa owners of the next fight. Meanwhile, the Ombals, too, had their own motives for revenge, because an Ombal man named Sande had been killed in the same fight as Soll, and Isum himself had been wounded.

Daniel engaged more than two hundred men as allies for his own revenge agenda: about seventy from each of the three neighboring villages of Ingin, Komea, and Poya. Naturally, the Ombal clan was simultaneously trying to enlist allies for its cause. Eventually, out of the fourteen neighboring clans, five (the Aralinja, Ungupi, Tapol, Sandap, and Ak clans) decided to join the Handa; four (the Henep, Inga, Solopen, and Mungan clans) joined the Ombal; and five (the Yup, Ulal, Twen, Hukup, and Tang clans) opted to remain neutral.

Hiring, supporting, and rewarding all those allies was a complex logistical operation. Daniel had to feed them during the actual days of combat, to arrange for houses in which they could sleep, and even, as he delicately phrased it, "to provide ladies for the warriors when they were homesick." Daniel estimated that, in the three years that it took him to get his revenge, he had to furnish about three hundred pigs. By custom, the pigs to be slaughtered during that long phase of preparation should be not one's own but, rather, stolen from the enemy clan. Yet Daniel had to be careful to steal only Ombal pigs and not to make the mistake of stealing pigs from other clans; otherwise, he would acquire new enemies. Ombal pigs were stolen either by day or at night, with the treacherous help of three Handa women who had married into the Ombal clan, and who hid occasionally from their Ombal husbands and in-laws and advised Daniel where best to steal Ombal pigs. In a small village, it isn't easy to slip away unnoticed, and the women might have been killed if their treachery had been detected. The Handa men arranged to meet their kinswomen at secret places close to Ombal villages; though this increased the risk of the Handa men being caught, it made the women's absences as brief as possible. I asked Daniel whether, conversely, any Ombal women who had married into the Handa clan might have been equally treacherous. He answered, "If we had found that a woman married into our clan was squealing, we would have tied her up and burned her with hot wires and hot pieces of wood. That was our plan, but in fact we never found any woman married into our clan who squealed; they all remained loyal to us, not to their blood relatives."

Intermarriage complicated Daniel's preparations in other ways, because it created restrictions on who was permitted to kill whom. Because the three female relatives of Daniel's had married into the Ombal clan, Isum had become Daniel's relative by marriage—Daniel referred to Isum as an uncle—and so Daniel was not permitted to kill him, or, indeed, any other Ombal clan member, by his own hand. Yet hiring killers to kill Isum was permissible. "By killing Isum or arranging for Isum's killing," Daniel explained, "I would lose Isum as an uncle, but that would be worth it, because I would gain my revenge."

ighting among the Nipas differs in several respects from fighting among other New Guinea Highland groups, such as the Baliem Valley Dani, made known to Western readers and viewers through Robert Gardner's film "Dead Birds," Peter Matthiessen's book "Under the Mountain Wall," and Karl Heider's monograph "The Dugum Dani." In these accounts, Dani public battles emerged as somewhat ritualized, announced in advance by the issuance of challenges, confined to daylight hours, and abandoned in case of rain. By contrast, Nipa fighting is unannounced and takes place day or night, rain or shine, so clans must be always on the alert. Warriors post guards constantly, up to ten kilometres away from their village, in order to protect their houses, families, gardens, and domestic animals.

Daniel emphasized the importance of distinguishing between long-range public fights and close-range private ones. He contemptuously described the former as a "small boys' game shoot." As he explained it to me, "Public battles are open not just to experienced fighters but also to new trainees, new allies hired to come and gain confidence, and fun-seekers. In a public battle, the fight-owners have the opportunity to see who really are the best marksmen, with the necessary experience to make quick but correct decisions." Such warriors are selected for the much more dangerous task of private fights, in which hired teams of stealth killers prepare ambushes. "That requires nerve, judgment, and presence of mind, to select the right target, and not to panic and shoot the first man who moves into a shootable position," he said. "Boys and young men are prone to make such mistakes and hence are excluded from the stealth parties."

In a battle, each warrior faces dozens or hundreds of enemy warriors who constitute quickly moving targets but to many of whom he is related by various degrees of closeness, and some of whom he is not permitted to kill. Decisions must be made instantly among a seething mass of enemy warriors. Inter-marriage creates further complications: many or even most warriors may be motivated to protect relatives on the other side, and they carry blunt-tipped arrows for warning unshootable close relatives as well as sharp ones for firing at shootable enemies. Daniel mentioned that an "uncle" of his on the opposing side in a battle (presumably an uncle by marriage) had once shot a blunt arrow at him to warn him that he was in danger. Even before a fight, people on one side, such as women married into a clan other than their natal clan, make hand signs or smoke signals at a distance to warn their natal relatives that the enemy is coming to attack.

On one occasion, I asked Daniel whether there are any rules that limit how one may kill enemies. He said, "In a night raid in which we sneak into an enemy village and surround the hut of a targeted enemy individual, we can tear down the hut to force the enemy to come out so that we can kill him. But it's not acceptable to set fire to the hut and burn him to death." I then asked, "Is it acceptable for six of you surrounding a hut to attack and kill a single outnumbered enemy?" Daniel answered, "Yes, that's considered fair, because it's already extremely dangerous for us to penetrate enemy territory, where we are greatly outnumbered." From conversations with other New Guineans, I've learned that fighting etiquette varies among groups. For instance, the quest of a Tudawhe friend of mine, Kariniga, to avenge the killing of his father and many other relatives by the Daribi tribe culminated when Kariniga and his surviving relatives marched through the jungle at night to surround the Daribi village just before dawn, set fire to the huts, and speared the sleepy occupants as they stumbled out.

The psychology of fighting is a theme that Daniel discussed with me at length—especially the inevitable tension between the anger that drives one to fight, and the clear mind necessary for fighting well. Daniel summarized his philosophy as "fighting while thinking." He said, "When you hear that your own brother has been killed in a fight, then you have bad feelings, you feel anger inside yourself, you become aggressive, you cannot think clearly, and you want to tear someone apart with your bare hands." He went on, "But, if you fight when that feeling of anger is on top of your mind, you'll expose yourself, and it will be easy for the enemy to kill you." In a public fight, both sides sing taunts across the battlefield to provoke rash actions. "Both men and women on the other side sing out unexpected words, which you can hear from far away and which make you feel badly. They'll sing, 'We killed your brother, and he was a coward.' They'll sing war songs to bring up old memories in you: 'I was there on that day of battle, I tried to kill you then, we should have killed you then, you were our target and we missed, but now we won't miss.' Those words make you want to go straight to the attack and to kill the other side, but then you'll end up being killed yourself, because you are not thinking clearly and you're incautious."

In the three years following Soll's death, there were six battles. (A public fight is counted as a battle only if a man is killed.) In any given battle, different participants and their hired allies were pursuing different agendas. While

Daniel's agenda was to avenge Soll, his co-owners of the fight on the Handa side were out to avenge Limbuzu's death and Wiyo's blinding; the Ombals aimed at avenging Sande's death and Isum's wounding in the same battle in which Soll and Limbuzu had been killed; and both sides sought vengeance for accumulated unavenged deaths and maimings and woundings from earlier battles. In total, about thirty people were killed in those six battles.

In the sixth battle, while a public fight was raging, the Handas sent out several groups of stealth killers—one that went up to the north end of Karinja Village, another that went down the main road, still another that went down along the side of the river, and so on. Daniel described what happened next: "Isum was in the public fight, with his bow and arrow ready for a long-range battle, and he was shooting and dodging arrows in the open. He was concentrating on that public fight, looking at our men far away in the open, and he wasn't prepared for our attack from behind and nearby by one of our hidden parties. It was our group that had gone down along the side of the river that got him. Only one arrow hit Isum, but it was a bamboo arrow, flat and sharp as a knife, and it cut his spinal cord. That's even better than killing him, because he's now still alive today, eleven years later, paralyzed in a wheelchair, and maybe he'll live for another ten years. People will see his constant suffering. Isum may be around for a long time, for people to see his suffering, and to be reminded that this happened to him as proper vengeance for his having killed my uncle Soll."

When I asked Daniel how he felt about the battle in which Isum became paralyzed, his reaction was unapologetically positive: a mixture of exhilaration and pleasure in expressing aggression. He used phrases such as "It was very nice," and his gestures projected euphoria and a huge sense of relief. "I felt that it was a matter of 'kill or else die by suicide.' I was prepared to die myself in that fight. I knew that, if I did die then, I would be considered a hero and would be remembered. If I had personally seen the arrow go into Isum, I would have felt emotional relief then. Unfortunately, I wasn't actually there to see it, but, when I heard that Isum had been paralyzed, I thought, I have everything, I feel as if I am developing wings, I feel as if I am about to fly off, and I am very happy. After that battle, just as after each battle in which we succeeded in killing an Ombal, we danced and celebrated and slaughtered pigs. When you fight with thinking and finally succeed, you feel good and relieved. The revenge relieves you; now it can be your turn to help someone else get his own revenge."

The maiming of Isum did not end the affair for Daniel. There was still the matter of compensation to be paid to allies. Traditionally, this was paid in pigs, and today it is paid in pigs plus *kina*, the national currency of Papua New Guinea. The pigs paid in compensation to allies after the fight must be one's own pigs, and it may take a fight-owner four or five years to raise all the pigs he owes. The pay rate for a kill—payable in Daniel's case to the man who shot the arrow that paralyzed Isum—is eighty pigs plus fifteen thousand *kina*, around fifty-four hundred dollars. Highland etiquette forbade Daniel to tell me who fired the arrow, but he did say that he was a member of another clan, who lived far away and had a grievance of his own: about twenty-five years previously, some Ombal clansmen had damaged his village and killed his grandfather. When he succeeded in paralyzing Isum, his desire for revenge was satisfied, and the Handa-Ombal war ceased to concern him.

But it continued to concern Daniel, who was now, of course, a target for Ombal revenge. He told me that Ombal men tried for several years to kill him and three other Handa clansmen who had been fight-owners, but they never succeeded. "The four of us were too tough for the Ombal people to kill," he boasted. I asked him whether he had feared for the safety of his wife and young son, who were surely not too tough to kill. Daniel explained that he worried about his son but not his wife. She was not a Handa, and, if the Ombals had made the mistake of killing her, they would have acquired a whole new set of enemies.

Fortunately for Daniel and his son, several years later a shift in clan enmities and alliances, typical of Highland clan politics, ended the whole Handa-Ombal cycle of revenge killing and united both clans against a common enemy. To the west of Daniel's Nipa tribe is the land of the Huli tribe and language group. Even by the aggressive standards of the New Guinea Highlands, the Hulis are notorious. (Once, within a few minutes of my arriving with a colleague at a Huli camp on the extinct volcano Mt. Sisa, to carry out a biological survey, at the invitation of the Hulis themselves, one man grabbed an axe and threatened my colleague. Fortunately, my colleague had once been a London policeman, and so had been trained to respond to armed assailants while he was unarmed; by standing firm, he cowed the man into backing down.) Given the pride that the Nipas take in their aggressiveness, it's no surprise that they eventually came into conflict with their Huli neighbors.

Although the underlying nature of the conflict was traditional, its immediate cause and some of the weapons used were modern. In a Papua New Guinea national election, a parliamentary seat in a district shared by Hulis and Nipas

was contested by a Huli candidate and a Nipa candidate who happened to be from the Handa clan. Faced with the Hulis, the Handas and the Ombals buried their differences: the Ombals voted for the Handa candidate and received a big cash payment from the Handas for doing so. But the Huli candidate, as Daniel put it, “won the game,” and the Nipas, considering this “a personal problem,” responded by blocking highways on which supplies reached the Hulis, stopping vehicles, and killing Huli men they found in the vehicles and raping Huli women. In the fighting that followed, warriors on both sides used not only bows and arrows but also guns, most probably stolen from a government armory. Tension between the Hulis and the Nipas has continued to this day.

Since then, the Handas and the Ombals have maintained their alliance and peace agreement. Daniel, after spending the first twenty-eight years of his life being taught to hate the Ombals, constantly fearing ambushes by them, plotting and paying for ambushes against them, and fighting in wars that killed dozens of Handas and Ombals, now feels safe visiting Ombal villages, sleeping there overnight, and playing in Ombal-vs.-Handa basketball games.

Daniel seems satisfied with these developments. Once he said to me, “I admit that the New Guinea Highland way to solve the problem posed by a killing isn’t good. Our way disturbs our day-to-day life; we won’t be comfortable for the rest of our lives; we are always in effect living on the battlefield; and those feelings go on and on in us. The Western way, of letting the government settle disputes by means of the legal system, is a better way. But we could never have arrived at it by ourselves: we were trapped in our endless cycles of revenge killings.”

Nearly all human societies today have given up the personal pursuit of justice in favor of impersonal systems operated by state governments—at least, on paper. Without state government, war between local groups is chronic; coöperation between local groups on projects bringing benefits to everyone—such as large-scale irrigation systems, free rights of travel, and long-distance trade—becomes much more difficult; and even the frequency of murder within a local group is higher. It’s true, of course, that twentieth-century state societies, having developed potent technologies of mass killing, have broken all historical records for violent deaths. But this is because they enjoy the advantage of having by far the largest populations of potential victims in human history; the actual percentage of the population that died violently was on the average higher in traditional pre-state societies than it was even in Poland during the Second World War or Cambodia under Pol Pot.

Daniel seemed to recognize this when he concluded that, despite his former passionate waging of war against Ombals, the Western state system of adjudicating disputes is preferable. Why, then, didn’t New Guineans give up a way of life that obviously made their lives miserable? A striking feature of New Guinea’s history is that New Guineans traditionally practiced unchecked violence against each other, yet they offered only limited resistance to the imposition of state government and the ending of that violence by European colonial powers. That wasn’t just because Europeans had guns and New Guineans didn’t; the number of armed Europeans involved in “pacification” was often absurdly few. Daniel’s view points to another reason: as more New Guineans were exposed to the benefits of state-administered justice, they saw that they were better off living without the constant fear of being killed, though, of course, no tribe could ever have followed that course of peaceful dispute adjudication unilaterally.

This question of state government’s recent origins, and, conversely, of its long failure to originate throughout most of human history, is a fundamental concern for social scientists. Until fifty-five hundred years ago, there were no state governments anywhere in the world. Even as late as 1492, all of North America, sub-Saharan Africa, Australia, New Guinea, and the Pacific islands, and most of Central and South America didn’t have states and instead operated under simpler forms of societal organization (chiefdoms, tribes, and bands). Today, though, the whole world map is divided into states. Of course, most of that extension of state government has involved existing states from elsewhere imposing their government on stateless societies, as happened in New Guinea. But the first state in world history, at least, must have arisen *de novo*, and we now know that states arose independently in many parts of the world. How did it happen?

In the eighteenth century, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, without any empirical evidence, that state government arose historically through a voluntary social contract: people foresaw the benefits of state government, and they freely agreed with each other to subordinate their own individual rights to those of the state, in order to obtain the hoped-for benefits. Through the writings of Western travellers who have observed states arising *de novo* in various parts of the world during the past six hundred years, and through the deductions of archeologists, we now have abundant empirical evidence that Rousseau was completely wrong. No people has ever freely organized itself into a state in the absence of external pressure, and people have always been understandably reluctant to cede power over themselves to some other entity.

Instead, anthropologists, historians, and archeologists tell us that state governments have arisen independently under one of two sets of circumstances. Sometimes external pressure from an encroaching state has placed a people under such duress that it ceded individual rights to a government of its own that would be capable of offering effective resistance. For instance, about two centuries ago, the formerly separate Cherokee chiefdoms gradually formed a unified Cherokee government in a desperate attempt to resist pressure from whites. More frequently, chronic competition among warring non-state entities has ended when one gained a military advantage over the others by developing proto-state institutions: one example is the formation of the Zulu state by a particularly talented chief named Dingiswayo, in the early nineteenth century, out of an assortment of chiefdoms fighting each other.

In New Guinea, as in most other parts of the world, neither of those two sets of circumstances operated, and state government was brought in from the outside. But the traditions of Highlands clan warfare are still fresh in the memories of many living New Guineans, and tend to reappear when the current state government cannot muster credible displays of force.

I asked Daniel why, on learning of Soll's death, he hadn't saved himself all the effort and expense, and just asked the police to arrest Isum. "If I had let the police do it, I wouldn't have felt satisfaction," he replied. "I wanted to obtain vengeance myself, even if it were to cost me my own life. I had to ask myself, how could I live through my anger over Soll's death for the rest of my life? The answer was that the best way to deal with my anger was to exact the vengeance myself."

Those words of Daniel's have haunted me ever since, because, through the experiences of a relative who passed up the opportunity for vengeance and lived to regret it, I came to appreciate the terrible personal price that law-abiding citizens pay for leaving vengeance to the state. The relative was my late father-in-law, Jozef Nabel. As a result of being born Jewish in Poland in 1913, he witnessed during the Second World War the worst cruelties that modern state societies have invented. In September, 1939, when Poland was invaded by both Germany and the Soviet Union, Jozef fought on the eastern front, where he was captured by the Soviets and shipped to a concentration camp in Siberia. Nearly two years later, when Germany invaded the Soviet Union, the Soviets realized their need for more troops, remembered their Slavic brethren languishing in Siberia, and formed them into a Polish division of the Red Army, in which Jozef became an officer and fought his way westward to participate in such events as the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 and the fall of Berlin, in 1945. During the six years since the start of the war, he had received no information about his parents, his elder sister, Ruzha, or his sister's young daughter, Eva. In the summer of 1945, after Germany's surrender, Jozef, while still on active duty in that Polish division of the Red Army, requested and received his commander's permission to take an armed platoon of fellow-soldiers to his village of Klaj, near Kraków, in order finally to be reunited with his family or else to discover their fate.

On reaching Klaj, Jozef quickly learned that, in 1942, his father, trusting in human goodness and proudly insisting that his family did not stoop to hiding, was arrested by the Gestapo and loaded with other captives onto a transport train to a concentration camp, never to be heard of again. Klaj villagers had learned from inhabitants of a village farther along the railroad line that transport trains regularly stopped there, and that older people considered unfit for labor were taken into a nearby field, shot, and buried in mass graves. Because Jozef's father was in his sixties at the time of his arrest, the Klaj villagers assumed that that had been his fate. The villagers spoke openly and without hesitation, because they had not been complicit in the killing and hence had no cause to fear retribution from Jozef and his platoon.

The villagers of Klaj also told Jozef that his mother, his sister, and his niece had managed to go into hiding with the family's Catholic housekeeper in another village, several kilometres distant. Jozef and his platoon marched to that village, but the villagers there were more evasive than those in Klaj, and at first no one would say what had happened. But Jozef and his men had guns, and the villagers didn't, and eventually someone told him the story. It turned out that the three women had succeeded in remaining hidden for about two years, until October, 1944, when an armed gang heard rumors of Jews hidden in the house. Assuming that all Jews had gold and money, the gang went to the house and demanded that the women turn over what they had, but they had nothing. The gang members then shot the three women—whether in the house itself or in nearby woods, Jozef couldn't find out. The villagers took Jozef to a site in the woods and pointed out shallow graves in which lay the remains of three bodies. By this time, a year after the killings, the bodies were unrecognizable, but clothing and hair identified them as the remains of his mother, his sister, and his niece.

Jozef demanded that the villagers bring him the man who had led the gang of killers. Initially, they refused or

professed ignorance. At that point, Jozef and his men rounded them all up and he told them, “If you don’t bring me the man within one hour, I will shoot every fourth person among you.” From the expression on Jozef’s face, the villagers saw that he meant it, and they brought him the man. Finally, Jozef stood face to face with the killer of his mother, sister, and niece, his gun loaded.

But he found himself hesitating to shoot. His comrades understood his hesitation, and they told Jozef that he should leave the killer with them and they would shoot him. However, Jozef kept hearing in his mind the words “I’ve seen enough of people killing, and behaving like animals. I’ve done enough killing myself. This man behaved like an animal, but I don’t want to become an animal myself by shooting him.” One of Jozef’s closest friends in the platoon suggested that they could count on the new Polish government to administer justice, and that they should turn the man over to the police, so that he could be tried and punished. So it was that Jozef lowered his gun and brought the murderer to the police. He arranged for the remains of his mother, sister, and niece to be reburied in Kraków. The police imprisoned the murderer, investigated—and then, after about a year, released him. He was never punished beyond that relatively brief imprisonment.

Jozef met and married a woman (my future mother-in-law) who was also a concentration-camp survivor, and, in 1948, they moved to Los Angeles, where my wife, Marie, was born. When Marie was growing up, Jozef told her little of his life before 1948 or of his parents, and he became angry when pressed for details. He kept a photograph of his father on his desk, but not until Marie was in her forties, and her father in his eighties, did he even show her a picture of his mother. Only in the last ten years of his life did Jozef gradually begin to reveal more about his childhood and his wartime experiences, and to take out his stored photographs.

One day, he took out a sheaf of photographs and showed Marie a picture of three shallow excavations in a forest: the photo that he had taken of the graves of his mother, sister, and niece. Then, for the first time, he told Marie the story of how he discovered what had happened to them, and of his release of their killer. Once, when he was about ninety years old, he recounted the story to Marie and me together. I recall his talking in an emotionally flat, distant, storytelling way, as if he no longer attached feelings to the story. In fact, his distanced manner must have been a tightly controlled act, a way of preserving his sanity while living with his memories.

On other occasions, he admitted to Marie, “Every day, still, before going to sleep, I think of my mother’s death, and of my having let her murderer go.” Until his own death, nearly sixty years after the murders of his parents and his release of his mother’s killer, Jozef remained tormented by regret and guilt—guilt that he had not been able to protect his parents, and regret that he had failed in his responsibility to take vengeance. That was the responsibility that Daniel had satisfied, and the terrible burden that Daniel had spared himself, by personally orchestrating the shooting of Isum.

We regularly ignore the fact that the thirst for vengeance is among the strongest of human emotions. It ranks with love, anger, grief, and fear, about which we talk incessantly. Modern state societies permit and encourage us to express our love, anger, grief, and fear, but not our thirst for vengeance. We grow up being taught that such feelings are primitive, something to be ashamed of and to transcend.

There is no doubt that state acceptance of every individual’s right to exact personal vengeance would make it impossible for us to coexist peacefully as fellow-citizens of the same state. Otherwise, we, too, would be living under the conditions of constant warfare prevailing in non-state societies like those of the New Guinea Highlands. In that sense, Jozef was right to leave punishment of his mother’s killer to the Polish state, and it was tragic that the Polish state failed him so shamefully. Yet, even if the killer had been properly punished, Jozef would still have been deprived of the personal satisfaction that Daniel enjoyed.

My conversations with Daniel made me understand what we have given up by leaving justice to the state. In order to induce us to do so, state societies and their associated religions and moral codes teach us that seeking revenge is bad. But, while acting on vengeful feelings clearly needs to be discouraged, acknowledging them should be not merely permitted but encouraged. To a close relative or friend of someone who has been killed or seriously wronged, and to the victims of harm themselves, those feelings are natural and powerful. Many state governments do attempt to grant the relatives of crime victims some personal satisfaction, by allowing them to be present at the trial of the accused, and, in some cases, to address the judge or jury, or even to watch the execution of their loved one’s murderer.

Daniel concluded his story in the same happy, satisfied, straightforward tone in which he had recounted the rest of it. “Now, when I visit an Ombal village to play basketball, and Isum comes to watch the game in his wheelchair, I feel sorry for him,” he said. “Occasionally, I go over to Isum, shake his hand, and tell him, ‘I feel sorry for you.’ But people

see Isum. They know that he will be suffering all the rest of his life for having killed Soll. People remember that Isum used to be a tall and handsome man, destined to be a future leader. But so was my uncle Soll. By getting Isum paralyzed, I gained appropriate revenge for the killing of my tall and handsome uncle, who had been very good to me, and who would have become a leader.” ♦

ILLUSTRATION: LORENZO MATTOTTI
