On Revenge

by Jeffrey Burghauser (March 2025)

The Bureaucrats of Medicine (Jose Perez)

> *Yes, as through this world I've wandered,*
> *I've seen lots of funny men:*
> *Some will rob you with a six-gun,*
> *And some with a fountain pen.*
> —Woody Guthrie, "Pretty Boy Floyd"

*"**Hello. My name is Inigo** Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."*

This is the iconic refrain of the Spanish buccaneer played by

Mandy Patinkin in *The Princess Bride*, Rob Reiner's 1987 classic film. Montoya's father had been slain by the Six-Fingered Swordsman, thereby giving Montoya *fils* his life's goal: to obtain "satisfaction" (as duelers put it). At the moment of the fateful encounter, our justice-seeker (who has a cinematic turn of mind) plans to deliver his line, which he rehearses obsessively … and hilariously.

"O what a miserable thing it is to be injured by those of whom we cannot complain," lamented Sir Francis Bacon, prophetically encapsulating one of the most vexatious aspects of postmodernity. "Those of whom we cannot complain" is a category including tech support, credit reporting agencies, big-box stores, self-checkout kiosks, banks, zoning boards, the IRS, the DMV, the administrative apparatus responsible for maintaining interstate water-supply ditches, and so much else besides. These are the faceless systems that convert life's *duties* (which can give a human life such meaning and drama) into mere *errands* (which can't).

But Inigo Montoya's existential estrangement has, as it were, a locus. It got me thinking. What if the Six-Fingered Swordsman was responsible for the death, not only of Inigo's father, but of a few *hundred* fathers—so many fathers that nobody could be expected to remember them. And what if he committed not just murder, but also theft? Machiavelli observed with devastating exactitude that "a man will sooner forget the murder of his father than the loss of his patrimony." Our nightmare swordsman is responsible for both. Imagine droves of Inigo Montoyas distributed evenly throughout the land.

While slaying Six-Fingered Swordsmen isn't laudable, the lurch violenceward isn't surprising, either. Albert Jay Nock quotes Bishop Butler's remark that "[t]hings and actions are what they are, and the consequences of them will be what they will be." Nock describes the "majesty" of Cause and Effect. Ralph Waldo Emerson somewhere calls Cause and Effect "the

chancellors of God."

These (and related) concerns have been waddling like drunken vagrants through my mind ever since December 4, when Brian Thompson, UnitedHealthcare CEO, was assassinated in Manhattan by a young man whose tenacity, planning, and self-control demonstrate that today's youth aren't *totally* without a sense of old-school professionalism. Although I've never really understood the expression "cool as a cucumber," CCTV footage of the murder *did* rather suggest that species of *Cucurbitaceæ*.

In January of 2017, "alt-right" malcontent Richard Spencer was in the middle of being interviewed on a Washington DC streetcorner by a film crew when a passerby landed an impressive punch on Mr. Spencer's exquisitely punchable face. What followed was a spirited national conversation about whether it's "okay" to punch Nazis. *Mother Jones* thoughtfully chronicled "the long history of Nazi-punching"; an essay published by the Cato Institute crunched the relevant numbers, concluding that "[m]ore than two-thirds (68%) of Americans say it is not morally acceptable to punch a Nazi in the face. About a third (32%), however, say it is morally acceptable."

Good to know.

Now, it should go without saying that a fist isn't a bullet, and a health insurance CEO isn't a square-jawed *Übermensch* braying for an ethnostate. The parallel, rather, is that both acts invite us to define the word "acceptable," and then to decide whether it can plausibly be applied to the violent spasm under consideration.

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The health insurance sector is easy to loathe. If it isn't infuriating by design, it jolly well could be. In "customer-service" situations, an insurance company often behaves like a clutch of malevolent Talmudists, using the full breadth of their intellectual and procedural resources to find such

loopholes as might release them from their obvious responsibilities. Once, for instance, at the end of a general checkup, the doctor asked:

“Anything else bothering you?”

I mentioned a painful bruise on my left thigh.

“Do you know what caused it?” said the doctor.

“Overdoing it in my yoga class.”

Many weeks later, a note arrived informing me that the insurance company would not pay for the checkup, since “sports medicine” wasn’t covered by my policy. After being put on hold for a half hour, I explained to the customer service rep that this was a *general* checkup, and that, according to *Merriam-Webster*, “general” meant “involving, applicable to, or affecting the whole” and “not confined by specialization or careful limitation.” I was briefly tempted to supply an illustrative syllogism:

1. *Major Premise:* A general checkup’s scope involves the entire body.
2. *Minor Premise:* A thigh belongs to the entire body.
3. *Therefore:* If an insurance company has committed itself to paying for general checkups, this must perforce include thighs.

My plan didn’t cover mental health, either. I had some questions for the company rep. If, upon entering the doctor’s office, I had responded to the customary “How are you?” with “Rather sad,” would anything said after that constitute “therapy,” thereby relieving the company of any responsibility to cut a check? What if, during the same appointment, I’d also mentioned my “sports injury”? Would I then be on the hook for *two* “unapproved” interventions? I was moved to write a silly little poem, entitled “Your Call is Important to Us”:

John Lydgate, Wilfred Owen, Milton, Donne,
Marvell & Thomas Hardy, Tennyson,
     Burns, Dunbar with his stave
Of woe (“*Timor mortis conturbat me!*”),
Verlaine & Keats all show there’s poetry
     In running from the Grave.

And Shakespeare, Homer, Nietzsche, Whitman, Hughes,
The Pearl’s composer, Blake, Amichai’s muse,
     Catullus, Kipling’s knife,
Lord Byron’s arquebus & Rilke’s lance
All show the excellent, severe romance
     In chasing after Life.

You can’t (however) confidently sing
A verse about the woe of cradling
     Your smartphone as you sigh
At such appalling existential waste,
Awaiting the absurd Calcutta-based
     UnitedHealthcare guy.

Take *that*, plutocrats.

Although I have postmodernism’s unholy trinity of conditions (melancholia, diabetes, and—up until my recent adventures with Ozempic—corpulence), I’m actually in rather fine fettle. I cannot *begin* to imagine the ordeal facing policyholders with, say, leukemia. “Abandon All Hope, Ye Who Enter Here,” as a certain exiled Florentine once put it.

“No man shall take the mill or the upper millstone to pledge,” Deuteronomy 24:6 resolves, “for he taketh a man’s life to pledge.” In other words, no lender shall accept a millstone as collateral, since, if the borrower were to forfeit the

millstone, he'd be surrendering the ability to make bread—bread being a synecdoche for food in general. The anonymous author of *Sefer Ha-Chinuch* (the "Book of Education"), a thirteenth century compendium of Jewish law, interprets this even more broadly. It protects not just the millstone, but any utensil needed for food prep. The lesson is clear: even though it might be perfectly legal to reduce a loan-defaulter to the disgrace of utter indigence, civilized men simply don't do that.

I'm about to sound like the very worst sort of ill-groomed, cannabis-addled, splotchy-faced, hysteria-prone, "*etcetera*"-mispronouncing, placard-wielding, Hamas-applauding, expensive-lettuce-eating, intellectually torpid, sexually deranged, mirthless, leptosomatic Marxist, but (deep breath) the health insurance industry *does*, sadly, maintain endless warehouses of forfeited millstones. And what's worse, the insurance industry helps *other* rascals to accumulate millstones, including the credit card companies whose resources are often enlisted by the desperate in order to pay their medical bills.

Conservatives (who are uniquely alive to the need for every type of stability) are entitled to ask the question: What recourse do patients have? Are there legitimate means of addressing legitimate grievances? And if so, what might they be?

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Loving your enemies and turning the other cheek are laudable exercises when you're a Christian enduring Roman despotism. When you're responsible for maintaining an independent nation, however, a commitment to enemy-loving and cheek-turning is a failsafe way to ensure that you won't have a country for much longer.

The early Church's intellectual heavy hitters, therefore, developed the idea of the Just War. Since this theory entails

shameless logic-chopping and a slippery redefinition of "peace," "war," "love," and "hate," the whole enterprise seems rather dubious. But perhaps a little dollop of exegetical inconsistency is better than death.

For a war to qualify as "just," it needs to be a last resort, addressing a grievance for which there's no peaceful means of redress. I wonder if James Madison had this in mind when, in declaring war against the British in 1812, he called war "the last resort of injured nations." Even though a Just War clears a half-dozen other hurdles (all of which exclude the assassination of CEOs from even the remotest suburbs of acceptability), the "last resort" stipulation is illuminating. Power is less and less accountable in the modern world, offering fewer and fewer civilized means of correcting its abuses. What are the civilized means by which the average citizen can address the mayhem produced by the insurance industry? The companies don't care; nor (apparently) does government. This apathy is shared by mainstream liberals and conservatives. I suppose you could theoretically sue your insurance company, but that's costly and time-consuming—and your wife needs her hip replacement or cancer treatment *now*.

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There's much to dislike about Karl Marx. *The Communist Manifesto* is a sneaky little tract in so many ways. One of the sneakiest things about it is that it disguises a transparently prescriptive agenda as mere description. Marx seems to be saying: "I'm not *encouraging* you to revolt; I'm simply observing the historical dynamic at play, and noticing aloud that a revolt is inevitable." Indeed, there's a belief associated with Marxism that, rather than human individuals making history, History has (quite literally) a mind of its own—that History expresses herself through human individuals.

It's an irresistible draught. In "September 1, 1939," W.H. Auden scolds us: "I and the public know / What all

schoolchildren learn: / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." Doing evil, however, isn't the "equal and opposite reaction" to experiencing someone else's evil. Perhaps those to whom evil is done *feel more justified* in committing their own evil, but it's tough to phrase this with memorable or uplifting elegance. In order for this poem to be revised in a more Christian direction, Auden would have to have recognized that evil is the world's default setting—that every man born in this fallen, sinful state is always both the inflictor and the victim of evil. As it stands, the quatrain seems to license any evil impulse, since being victimized by evil is an essential feature of this life. "Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return" functions like BLM's sinister motto: "All Lives Can't Matter Until Black Lives Matter." Activists will feel that their menacing irritability (at best) and thoroughgoing barbarism (at worst) are altogether justified so long as they believe that their own lives aren't regarded as sufficiently precious by the (implicitly white) power structure. It takes Dr. King's "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and turns it into a nihilistic threat.

Things inspired by grievance are sometimes true, rarely good, and never beautiful. *Willobie His Avisa* (1594), a book-length poem of dubious authorship, chronicles the encounters between a Penelope-like woman and a procession of suiters. At one point, a venereally overheated aristocrat is rebuffed. His response is unkind, to say the least: "I hope to see some country clown / Possessor of that fleering[*] face / When Need shall force thy pride come down. / I'll laugh to see thy foolish case, / For thou that thinkst thyself so brave / Will take at last some paltry knave."

While love aspires to build up the Other, resentment aims to see the Other reduced. In *One Fat Englishman* (1963), Kingsley Amis sketches that mindset with humorous brutality: "A man's sexual aim […] is to convert a creature who is cool, dry, calm, articulate, independent, purposeful into a creature that

is the opposite of these; to demonstrate to an animal which is pretending not to be an animal that it is an animal."

But thank heavens for small mercies. Neither Amis's protagonist nor *Willobie*'s aristocrat plans to take their respective girls by force, and then frame it as inevitable. Shakespeare understood our propensity to get lost in driftnets of denial and self-justification. See *The Merchant of Venice*. In his famous speech, Shylock reveals a distinctly BLM-ish turn of mind: "If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard[.]" Not only does Shylock want his pound of flesh, but he wants to feel unconflicted about it.

This hunger for a spotless conscience is known to everyone oriented toward savagery—which is all of us. Once we recognize how acute and persistent this hunger is, we're obligated to reexamine our gut feelings…our gut feelings about, say, the assassination of health insurance CEOs. In a 1993 interview, Leonard Cohen criticizes Allen Ginsberg's insistence that, when writing, one's first thought is reliably one's best thought: "My first thoughts are dull, are prejudiced, are poisonous." And I must confess that my first thoughts upon learning of Brian Thompson's squalid end weren't *entirely* unclouded with a certain subdued giddiness; it's the exhilaration that comes of actually witnessing the Wheel of Karma doing its thing.

I submit to you, dear Reader, that such exhilaration is wrong. And downright unchristian.

But perhaps I ought to be suspicious of my self-suspicion. After all, I'm a Puritan by temperament; I can't quite believe

that something can be simultaneously virtuous *and* viscerally satisfying. Isn't "holy resentment" at least *theoretically* possible? Benvenuto Cellini warned: "[N]one should mock the predictions of an honest man when he has been unjustly abused, for it is not he that speaks; it is verily the voice of God."

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"The main reason one does nothing about hunting," writes Auberon Waugh of a then-contentious issue, "is quite simply that the more one thinks about life, the more difficult it is to condone anything about it. When townspeople have stopped mugging each other, robbing, ridiculing, suing, and generally trampling each other, I will start wagging my finger at the Master of the West Somerset Vale Foxhounds." In other words, the world is such a sinful, windswept catastrophe that there isn't anything uniquely (or even conspicuously) barbaric about killing animals for sport.

Nietzsche takes this one step further. Not only is violence ubiquitous, he argues, but the capacity to inflict it is essential to human dignity. He provides an example: "We cannot help observing, in excuse for their usury, that without this pleasant means of inflicting torture upon their oppressors, [the Jews] might have lost their self-respect ages ago, for self-respect depends upon being able to make reprisals."

Far from being a call to cruelty, it's an insistence that no man has the power to survive if he lacks the power to behave like a brute; and anyone so weak that he cannot be assured of his own survival cannot enjoy dignity. I once heard a similar argument from the founder of a large-scale parrot-breeding outfit. Wings and talons are kept fully intact so that the bird never loses faith in its capacity to be a schmuck. And a bird that knows it has recourse to schmuckiness will have an easier time restraining it.

In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of*

the Sublime and Beautiful (1757), Edmund Burke writes: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger—that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror—is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be—and they are—delightful, as we everyday experience."

There's nothing sublime about awakening to find a poison dart frog on your headboard; it's simply bad. In a zoo, however, the same frog can provoke delight because you're able to get close to a creature that has the capacity to kill you effortlessly. It's the *capacity* for mayhem that provokes the pleasurable frisson—a capacity for mayhem thwarted by only a single pane of glass.

We're in a curious predicament. On the one hand, we don't want a primitive society in which grievances are addressed with clenched fists; on the other, we don't want a society in which elites blithely assume that they can behave in ways that are loathsome. Elites should understand that folks have the capacity for violence—not just those directly victimized by what we oddly insist on calling "the System," but those who, like Brian Thompson's alleged assassin, are keen to take up the sword in a spirit of misguided chivalry. Folksongs like Woody Guthrie's "Pretty Boy Floyd" attest to the perennial popular appeal of Robin-Hood-style bad-ass-ery.

In a land of such furious partisanship, it's odd that any position should be the subject of universal (if tacit) agreement. The position is clear: the healthcare sector (it seems entirely too chaotic to call it a "system") is, more or less, just fine and dandy. Nothing to see here, folks.

I’m writing this is January of 2025, as Los Angeles burns with Great-Fire-of-London-level intensity. It’s unambiguous that something has gone badly wrong—so badly wrong, in fact, that I wouldn’t be surprised if California’s leaders, regardless of political affiliation, actually address the underlying problems with something resembling sanity. After all, nobody can stand amid L.A.’s Boschian hellscape and claim that all is well.

The healthcare crisis, however, puts us in a complicated rhetorical position. Even though it’s every bit as destructive as a 40-acre fire, it doesn’t produce dramatic imagery. Wagner could have written an opera about a man struggling to withhold his home from apocalyptic flames—however, a single mother’s vertiginous descent into the kind of poverty that takes a few generations to get out of, all of it caused by her young son’s bout with soft tissue sarcoma…well, suffice it to say that it lacks the visual pizzaz that inspires urgency among politicians. Few of them seem to care in any meaningful way. An uncomfortable silence descends upon the land.

The consequences of this unanimity can be tragic, and not just in the usual way. I once heard of a man (middle-aged, otherwise robust) who asked his insurance company about fixing a birth defect, polydactyly, which had long caused him inconvenience and embarrassment. A surgical ligature procedure, he discovered, didn’t qualify as “medically necessary,” even though its necessity was self-evident to anyone with eyes.

He therefore never received treatment. Had it been otherwise, it’s unlikely that he would ever have been identified by a certain revenge-minded Spanish buccaneer who’d spent his entire adult life rehearsing the line:

“*Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die.*”

[*] “Fleer” = *v*. to laugh impudently or jeeringly.

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