

THE IRREDUCIBILITY OF HUNTING

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I would be flattered for my gravestone to read “*A good hunter; a trusted companion; an engaged and contemplative soul who lived his dreams*”. Inevitably we “do” but a small proportion of the things we plan, wish to, or dream of. There are too many engaging options swirling around for us to partake in more than a scant few of them. What hunter doesn’t daydream of African safaris, barren ground caribou hunts, Arizona javelina; speargunning for tuna in the California kelp forests, or dove hunts in Mexico? I suggest that we should carefully choose those few we can afford then partake with all our being to wring the very essence of the hunt out of these touchstone events.

In the western, privileged, consumer countries we have unprecedented and almost incomprehensible access to resources. We live in a way where simply articulating our ankle unleashes the equivalent of a 200-horse team pulling our chariot; where our chariot can bring home the edible, wrapped portions of a large ungulate without us breaking a sweat or a spear point. Indeed, our hunting heritage may have brought about altered tooth structure, bipedalism, stereoscopic vision, language development, social behavior, tool using and even sex roles. We embraced these aspects of humanity with aplomb but it raises an important question - what relict behaviors and instincts do we share with our ancestors and how do we fit them into city life full of parking lots, mortgage payments, canned food and movie theaters?

Most of us have seen the lashing tail and flicking ears of a housecat eyeing an unreachable birdfeeder; it requires little imagination to link tabby to a leopard stalking an impala. So why should we hesitate to acknowledge as instinct the quickened pulse and urgent whispers of hikers happening onto a herd of deer? It follows that those who hunt and think about their actions may be finding authentic outlets in which to exercise their instinctive drives. Might this explain the depth of commitment and satisfaction that hunters find in their pursuits? These are things we draw from our deep senses but as modern creatures we need to go one step farther to absorb and processing the meaning embedded in the act of hunting to mesh it well with our new-found culture. After all, we spend relatively few of our waking hours engaged in the hunt each year. The remainder we are expected to be gentle and civil citizens.

We are jerked backward and forward in time even as we unthinkingly munch South American nuts coated with German chocolate wrapped in aluminum foil from African bauxite mines and sold in North America; we are twitching like that window-watching cat as we sit in front of a big screen and vicariously live the panic of a tailback in full flight from a predaceous linebacker. Are these sensations authentic? . . . undoubtedly yes, because perception is reality in regard to interpreting our senses. We have all the tools, however deeply buried in our brain stems, to relish the fatty, oily richness of cocoa oils just as distant relatives relished the kidney fat of a mastodon calf. Our instincts are engaged and some flickering primal sense gratifies us with a small endorphin rush for passing that Brazil nut over our tastebuds. Elation awaits us for reaching the virtual cover of the end zone uncaptured. We are not alone in our vicarious pursuits - what hunter hasn't pondered the dreams of dogs in their whimpering, leg-twitching sleep. Those canine practice chases must be just as real as a young boy's dreams of a Gretsky slapshot or Jordan jumpshot. But that is where it ends. Right in our heads. That is no place to live, no rabbit fur, no hat trick, no three-pointer, no safari.

I would advocate spending time in pursuits that we not only have the instinctual tools with which to immerse ourselves deeply, but also those where our intellectual tools can be brought to bear. This is important for us to make sense of what we have wrought. Neither of these tasks is easy but the rewards are commensurate with the effort. I am talking about thinking through the endeavor of hunting with intent.

Birdwatching, like baseball, gets one only halfway to this goal. Hunting is the focussed intent to find, interact with and try to kill a chosen animal, sense the well-earned elation, use it to fuel our bodies, share the symbolism and absolutism of meat, tell and retell the events to others. Dwelling upon and learning from the experience brings us full circle. There may well be other activities that can do this too. Active participation in (as opposed to merely watching) most sports reaches these steps to some degree; observe, physically act, learn & grow. Elemental physical sports with great doses of anticipation, uncertainty and interaction with other identified forces come to mind – boxing, sailboat racing, whitewater paddling. However, the differences between the meaning of a hunt and the meaning of team sports seem profound in their subtlety.

Sports games are defined by rules concocted by humans to provide a challenge. An arbitrary bar height, a ticking clock, a chalk-delineated area of field. As we are engaged in sports games there is no abandonment of culture to move back in time to ancestral preparations of body, mind and equipment. Quite the opposite, we must use a fair proportion of our senses simply staying within the bounds of the rules because any lapse and we forfeit our goal. With hunting, there is an absolute touchstone goal that cuts across the entire activity- killing one's quarry. The finality of killing is an absolute consideration in hunting that is not duplicated elsewhere in sport with the possible exception of bullfighting. Though ethics and social norms are woven into the selection and methods of killing, there is an absolute finality and gravity in deliberately stopping a heart.

A culture has developed around most forms of hunting but as late as the beginning of the 20th century culture, rule minding was still a minor point. Passenger pigeons were taken with dynamite, ducks with rock-laden punt canons, bears with snares, and bison from trains. Few objected to any means used in achieving an animal's demise any more than the cat is denied its mouse for the unsporting means of taking it in an enclosed dustbin. Rules have tightened about hunting as a way of prolonging the opportunity to hunt in the face of swelling human populations and more efficient technology. Even today where technology and population lag, Inuit hunters may harpoon seals, noose rabbits, and snatch eggs from goose nests. Canada's Woodland Cree set snares for moose, and shoot sharptailed grouse on their leks. A Denesuline hunters may shoot a dozen swimming caribou at a good crossing and tow them from their motorboat's transom back to camp for dog food. As human populations increase, these activities will diminish and laws, band rulings or taboos will likely crop up pragmatically to prevent their recurrence. To most people geographically or generationally isolated from eating wild-killed meat these activities seem barbaric, heartless and . . . *uncivilized*. When "uncivilized" becomes a pejorative it speaks volumes about how far cultures have drifted from a natural way of living.

By way of contrast, a young, ethical, sophisticated dentist that wade-fishes a stream with an expensive fly rod to catch and release several dozen trout causes few emotive ripples from people that have lost their nature connection. Point of fact, however, his unintentional hooking mortality (about 10% usually) will likely kill two trout. Fifteen-inch

trout in the north are probably 10+ years old; three times as old as those caribou that were shot while swimming. The trout were not used and he accepted no responsibility for their death. He has behaved in a far less defensible (some would say honorable) manner than a Tuktoyuktuk girl who eats eider eggs for supper. Her hunting, her eggs, her pride, her nutrition, and she remembers where she got them! To the raided goose she is no different, no less natural, than the grizzly bear whose tracks she crossed as she searched the river's edge. They are both hunters driven by and gratified by the same exact events, killing and eating an egg. She has maintained a clear behavioral connection all the way back into the inky depths of our evolution and she has helped carry it forward one more generation.

All this natural interplay aside, are there other compelling reasons for hunting in a modern era? There seems to be no clear link to evolutionary fitness in the short term, or is there? What does it mean for someone to say "I am happy" or "I am content"? For most, hearing a family member say that is deeply pleasing, especially if both have played a part in the state of being happy. However, ultimately people must look within themselves to recognize happiness. They give themselves permission to be happy, then they have the sense to reflect on this condition enough to say "I am happy". Often the distractions of living in a bustling crowded environment that is divided into $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ hour time blocks doesn't allow people to ascend to the total happiness plane. Even if they manage to get there, distractions rarely allow them to settle down enough to relish the condition and roll it around in their mind. Some people learn that getting well away from other humans is the first step toward being able to hang onto their happiness and actually enjoy the privilege of being.



I, like many readers herein, am most uniformly, unconditionally and purely happy when I am actively hunting. I am also most acutely aware of it because there are almost always long quiet pauses built into the process. The setting is not devoid of distractions; it is only devoid of the demanding sort that can't be ignored. These are natural reflection periods. For one thing, there is a pure escape from the socio-cultural material world. There is no discrimination between hunters based on the weight of their wallet, the expense of their wristwatch or the kind of vehicle that transported them to the field. Those commonly used economic measures of happiness are stripped away and afield we are all equal. There is an elegance to sampling the nuances of the surroundings, and the process of getting outside of one's body, area and epoch to try on different perspectives like one tries on clothing. It is a way of being-in-the-world and feeling connected to the elemental attributes of heat, cold, muscle contractions, precise hearing, deep hunger and the exercising of very primal parts of the brain that hearken back to dark and pure urges. Whatever endorphins or internal gratification feedback loops are at

work here, they seem to be hardwired, but it takes some peeling back of the urban cultural layers to get to their honest core.

The complete absorption in some fully occupying task is fulfilling. All but the most jaded, unthinking, vicarious-livers know the satisfaction of being fully engaged in some demanding task, be it casting a fly precisely while balancing in cold water, racing through moguls on a snowboard, gluing up a tedious 900 piece model airplane, devouring a challenging book or stalking on red-alert through an Acacia woodland. Activities of total absorption. These are what psychologists call “flow-experiences” and they share certain attributes, including a complete *unawareness* of one’s feelings, a loss of the sense of time (My god! Where did the last 3 hours go?), a deep sense of calm, a peacefulness, and maybe exhilarated exhaustion after the activity is over. These flow experiences may be so valued by adults because they are so rare. We are fortunate if we have 50 hours of fully engaged flow experiences out of the 8760 hours available each year – less than 1% of our time.

Children seem much more capable of being fully in the moment and often are so deeply preoccupied with a game, contest or a painting that when they finally look up they are overly tired and famished with hunger. Some behaviorists contend that play during adolescence is preparation for life’s more serious endeavors as an adult, particularly related to physically procuring food and competing for mates. So, have we prepared ourselves during childhood for something we never get around to as adults? Maybe we love the involvements that let us return to the blissful carefree *unawareness* of childhood. Through hunting we can re-enter the zone of engagement that we carry instinctively in our bones, that we practiced as children and now reconnect and implement as adults.

Hunting is one of the most honest behaviors we can access and even then, it is not always possible to reach the full-out screaming immersion of the six-year-olds’ Ferriswheel experience. Sometimes our adult baggage creeps in and ruins the experience, or more tragically, we never get around to participating in the core activities.



There is one overriding reason hunting provides a better, more dependable passage into being fully connected, leading to a better chance of entering flow-experiences. In hunting there is an intended quarry; another entity as fully and honestly engaged in the activity of pursuit/evade as the hunter. When hunting with commitment, one is lured or channeled into the most complete level of engagement. It is the difference between waltzing alone or with a partner. If one is hunting with a dog, falcon or even a close cooperative companion, there is a second cooperative spirit that pulls one in demanding the effort to participate fully.



However, it is primarily the purity and completeness of the hunted animal's drive to elude, deceive, escape, or even attack the hunter that is the lovely expression of millennia of evolution preparing it to survive. This evolutionary response is what makes clear the steps the hunter must make to keep the dance from being a mockery. We must follow through with our best effort to kill our quarry and this for the sake of the evolutionary process that brought both of us to this point. These flow-experiences are not independent of the final milliseconds of subduing quarry. In the long pageantry of anticipation, preparation, practice, apprenticeship, travel, pursuit, killing, possessing, processing, sharing, consuming, telling, re-telling, analyzing, speculating and appreciating, the actual kill is one step on a long winding staircase. Without it though,

things would be quite different and some subsequent steps would not be reached. Hunting without the intent to kill is not hunting any more than a dress rehearsal is not theater. Without an appreciat-or there is no art appreciation. Without prey there is no predator. Without predators, grouse become chickens, deer become goats; wildfowl become barnyard dabblers and mice become small hamsters.



On a hot September fencerow with dozens of doves streaking past and a very warm shotgun barrel I am sure to be reeling with the euphoria and pure engagement of a predator. I am so very very alive and I relish the sway between periods of calm quiet and the subsequent crouching, spinning and shooting. This teeter-totter of being fully engaged interspersed with introspective boredom can make the hands on my watch spin frantically until I look up and realize the sun has set and my stomach is rumbling. It is time to return to the ordered and clock-metered life with three-squares and a foam pillow. The bumpy ride back from pasture to gravel to pavement completes my transition back to the civilized realm and is accomplished with a grin and some satisfaction, not

because I may have brought eight ounces of bird to earth but because I succeeded in leaving my routine role, my common sphere. I stepped out and back in time to exercise instincts long dormant. The sense of satisfaction, all bag aside, was in seeing life and death in a very different way for a few hours and the fact that I will carry this rejuvenation with me in reliving and anticipating my next experience. Hunting continues to renew us, give us humbling mortality insights, and provide hope for our next role escape. There are so very few things in our lives that yield these most precious of gifts: renewal, humility, insight, and hope. We must treat hunting with the same reverence we hold for our religions, our children, and the world's greatest works of art.

