

PERPETUATING HUNTER TRADITION

REDEFINING HUNTING IN TERMS OF ITS POSITIVE INFLUENCE ON YOUTH, SOCIETY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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The keynote address I gave at Ontario Federation of Anglers & Hunters was entitled, “Why hunting is good medicine for *bad* kids.” The insertion of the word “bad” generated enormous, international publicity which included press releases being carried by the Canadian wire service, an appearance on “Canada AM,” largest audience TV program in the country, interviews in the major Toronto papers and two radio stations there, an interview on CBC, some newspaper coverage in the northeast and northwest US, and a live interview on BBC Radio to its worldwide audience of several hundred million people, all with a positive message about youth hunting.

I spoke about a program for delinquent boys who had to survive in the wilderness for two weeks on whatever they could catch or kill, the most successful program to date ever launched for troubled teens. The field supervisor of the 13-year program, Dr. Wade Brackenbury, was interviewed in the TV production I made, “The Sacred Hunt II: Rite of Passage.” He concluded that it was taking the lives of animals for food that had the greatest transformative influence on the boys. Hunting is good for bad kids because it is good for all kids; moreover, I was inundated for weeks by single moms wanting to know how to get their teen boys involved in hunting.

It would be wise for the hunting community to promote hunting as authentic rite of passage for boys to manhood, the subject of my forthcoming book, *FROM BOYS TO MEN OF HEART: Hunting as Rite of Passage*. Properly publicized, the theme of the book could itself have a huge impact on youth recruitment and the public image of hunting. Like the TV production I made, "Respect and Responsibility: The Truth About Kids Who Hunt," the book includes interviews of foremost authorities in adolescent psychology, wilderness education/tracking, education and youth violence, all of whom strongly endorse hunting for its importance in developing character, values and universal virtues in young people.

One of these is Michael Gurian, author of several best-selling books on how to raise boys into fine young men. Gurian has appeared on numerous national TV news and talk shows; he is convinced that if more men hunted it would be a more peaceful world, that men and women would get along better and that men would be more compassionate.

The conservation message is not bringing more young people to our door, nor will it. That traditional outdoor recreation develops youth into better adults will get the attention of parents, teachers, politicians, judges, the press and media. In focusing on conservation, a very significant byproduct of hunting, we have overlooked the human in the middle. After presenting the keynote address at DU's Leadership Conference last March I was asked for my recommendations on the future of hunting. Please see these, attached.

Why aren't we promoting hunting as a viable way to prevent teen violence and gangs? Imagine the hundreds of millions of dollars being largely wasted on prevention or treatment of juvenile delinquency. Why isn't the shooting industry promoting the work of Dr. Helen Smith, author of *Scarred Hearts*, the world's leading authority on kids who kill? She said in my TV production, "Respect and Responsibility," that, "Columbine never would have happened if those boys had been properly initiated to hunting and shooting."

“What we have here,” the Warden in Cool Hand Luke said, “is a failure to communicate.” Isn’t it time to call a spade a spade? It is time to get serious about successfully communicating *why* we hunt. We do not hunt to conserve wildlife, and we do not hunt to control game herds. We hunt because we love it, but *why do we love it so?* Scientific research strongly indicates that hunting is an instinct, at least in males. Clearly, it is *not* sport. The use of the word sport has caused much harm to hunting, giving people beyond the choir the image that we enjoy killing an animal the same way that they enjoy making a kill shot on the court. Some hunters feel good about making a difficult wing shot or a clean kill, but, as Ortega said and my questionnaire survey of 2500 hunters corroborates, no hunter revels in the death of the animal. My surveys shows that almost all hunters feel sadness over the animal’s death.

Being an instinct, part of human inheritance, hunting may be viewed in a new light. Ortega, once wrote, “Sex is the bicep of love,” which is to say that love rests on the sexual instinct. Sex is a powerful drive which propels a young man towards a sexual encounter, but a surprise awaits him: he falls in love and is transformed. The linkup of sex with the heart has enormous consequences, including marriage, parenting, taking responsibility for the human community and, ultimately, serving as an elder who mentors youth into adulthood.

The hunt also is a powerful drive, for boys anyway, most of whom kill a small animal before they are ten. The hunt also contains an unexpected, life-changing experience which comes when the young man kills the animal. His heart is opened and he becomes married to nature. He discovers at a deep, emotional level that life is interdependence and that he is morally compelled to take care of his world as much as himself. “Watching the green fire die” in a she-wolf’s eyes was Aldo Leopold’s rite of passage to a man who thought like a mountain. Just as sex is the bicep of love, the hunt is the bicep of conservation. I am saying that sex and the hunt normally lead to transcendent experiences which get us connected profoundly to life.

The next time you speak to a group of hunters, ask them how many have let a suitable specimen pass when everything was what they had wanted: a suitable animal, a clear shot at a safe distance. I assure you that most if not all of the older hunters will raise their hands. The survey I conducted revealed why hunters let suitable animals pass – because it doesn't *feel* right. Which means that they are thinking with the heart, not the ego. (Interestingly enough, the brain is entrained to the heart in which half the cells are neurons.)

In the survey I asked hunters what universal virtues they gained from hunting. The top three were patience, inner peace and humility. Patience is the other side of inner peace, which is a universal foundation for spiritual life. Humility means knowing we are part of something greater than ourself. If the world is suffering from anything it is egoism and pride. The word “religion” means to reconnect with the Source, which is what outdoor life offers. It is good medicine for humanity and the world.

How many people outside the outdoor community have a clue how hunters feel about animals they hunt? Very few, though too many have been led to believe in the media image of Billy Bob, “Let's go out and kill somethin.” How many know that recreational hunters feel respect, reverence and admiration for the animas they hunt? The same words Native American hunters use. I made the all-time, top-selling production about hunting, “The Sacred Hunt,” which won 11 awards, so that hunters could better articulate how they feel and non-hunters might understand the profound connection hunters feel toward the animals and earth. It converted anti-hunters including a Hollywood screen writer, Duba Leibell, who went to Maine and shot a moose, and in the *North American Hunter* story she wrote, “What's a Jewish Girl Like You Doing in a Bog Like This?” she described her hunt as the most spiritual experience of her life. Now she is raising her sons to shoot and hunt.

How many beyond the choir know that most hunters pray over the animals they kill? According to my survey over 80%, almost all of them spontaneously, which speaks for the hunt as spiritual empowerment.

My survey asked hunters, average age of 55, what life event most opened their hearts and engendered compassion in them? The women's top choice was "becoming a parent." The men's top choice, which ranked above "becoming a parent," "death of a loved one," "death of a beloved pet," "teaching young people," was....."taking the life of an animal." The polarities of human life are women bringing life into the world, men taking life to support life. A woman's most profound initiation to life, the one that most deeply connects her to the earth, other creatures, other humans and the Divine, is having a baby. A man's is "taking the life of an animal." Does hunting teach compassion? You bet it does.

We much encourage women in the outdoors, too. They learn many universal virtues ranging from patience, generosity and fortitude to courage and humility, and they reap many of the benefits that hunting offers from family recreation to superior nutrition and connecting with nature.

During an interview about youth hunting on a national radio show a female caller said, "You're just teaching kids violence." My response was, "What do you think Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela would say about that? They both won the Nobel Peace Prize and they are avid hunters." Something the outdoor and non-outdoor communities need to know.

Now is the time when it is imperative that we rise to the challenge of attracting more people to hunting for the benefit of our youth, society and the environment. We are launching production of a general audience documentary about "The Next Kid in the Woods" which will show that the appropriate medicine for "nature deficit disorder" is traditional outdoor recreation. We also are promoting a program for conservation professionals and the outdoor industry about how to be a better evangelist for hunting – we need to educate our ranks.

We must explore ways to elevate the image of hunting, fishing and shooting, such as the “Outdoor Celebrity Hall of Fame,” which honors and inducts leading outdoors men and women. As part of a National Outdoor Hall of fame, there could be two divisions: outdoor celebrities; outdoor leaders and conservationists. I envision celebrities promoting the outdoors to kids and parents alike; the celebrity division could include extremely high profile individuals like Morgan Freeman, Kurt Russell, Shaq O’neill, pro athletes, country singers, Nascar drivers and so on, who already are acceptable role models. To get these same people to advertise the outdoors would cost megamillions annually, but by honoring them they will come for an airticket and lodging, and what they say in their acceptance speech is perfect copy for publicity at the time but also later in PSA campaigns on radio/TV across the continent. "Build it and they will come."

Why not an annual contest for best screen play with an outdoor theme – remember what “A River Runs Through It” did for trout fishing?

Reforms that base k12 education on hunting, fishing, shooting/archery, wilderness awareness, nature study and tracking: an entire curriculum can be delivered in the outdoors which would be infinitely more effective, attractive and fun for students of all ages.

We need a short booklet on, “Should Your Child Hunt?” which explains to parents all the ways that hunting can develop children into better, healthier, happier and responsible adults who take care of the environment.

We are planning a professional e-journal on the *Human Carnivore* which will include topics on the future of hunting, and serve as a critically important source for resource agencies, academic programs in wildlife, fisheries and natural resource management/conservation, conservation organizations and the outdoor industry. Very few hunter educators, wildlife biologists, hunter-conservation groups or agency administrators can tell you

why people hunt or what hunting/fishing/shooting do to enhance human development. We have assembled a world-class editorial board including authorities from several disciplines whom the world's press/media will take seriously.

Mentoring is a buzzword in the hunting community today, but as a hunting mentor of adults and youth in North America and Europe, there is no doubt in my mind that the masters of mentoring are the wilderness/tracking educators whose "tool box" is derived from the indigenous hunting cultures of the world. They are expert at getting kids and adults connected to nature, and the rest of the outdoor community has a lot to learn from them.

It is imperative that larger hunter/shooting sports organizations begin to utilize creative communications and the assistance of world class publicists to cover newsworthy speakers and events. Publicity properly planned and placed can reach the choir and beyond and elevate the image of hunting as well as promote youth recruitment.

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