

Hunting for Game and God

A personal reflection in response to [this article on hunting in the Washington Post](#). A decline in hunters. More people hunting with cameras. Less money to protect and defend wildlife and wild areas. How to maintain and manage the places and the people who “use” nature in different, often conflicting, ways. This brought back memories growing up with guns and gods, before outgrowing both.

Dad lowered the huge rifle from the wall rack and handed it to me, his ten-year-old son. It was so heavy I almost dropped it. “This is my elephant gun,” he said with a grin. No, he’d never fired at an elephant, but he did shoot a few deer and a pheasant in the field above our home. He shook his head, “There was nothing left of it.” He put the gun back up and handed me the .22. Much more my size; the wood and steel was pleasing to the touch; good for target practice, and maybe sneaking a shot at a rabbit or neighbor cat.

A few years later, dad bought me a pump-action pellet gun. Really felt good in my hands and I learned to be a pretty good shot. One day in the woods behind the shed I hit a red-wing blackbird on a low branch. Got it, first shot! Silently, it fell, or rather, swung upside down, hanging on the branch with the death-grip of its feet.

I never shot another living thing.

In my teens I was hired as a counselor at an evangelical bible camp. We all had to teach scripture to the kids morning and evening. In-between times, we supervised hikes, swimming and crafts as well as taught some “outdoor skill.” I was the Rifle instructor. The greatest challenge was to make sure the kids didn’t shoot each other (safety ON!). The intent was to “load” responsibility into their young minds—and to aim well. Bibles and guns seemed to naturally go together. After all, God gave us animals to kill and eat, right? Or, just for “sport,” we could kill a few “varmints.” Who needs them anyway?

Actually, I don’t think I was considering what God thought of target practice, owning guns or hunting. I certainly couldn’t imagine Jesus enjoying “open carry” through the streets of Jerusalem, or picking off coyotes in the Judean hills.

I outgrew guns and the need to shoot. But I’ve never been anti-gun. Once, while hiking, I heard loud blasts coming from around a curve on the trail. Cautiously, slowly, I walked ahead, calling out to the shooter who stopped and stared at me. He was holding an assault rifle. We spoke for a few minutes before he let me hold the gun and handle the largest bullets I’d ever seen. “Go ahead and fire a few rounds,” he urged. I took a few shots. A feeling of power—too much power. I walked on as the bam-bam-bam faded behind me.

I’ve also never really been anti-hunting either. There are people, families, who need the meat so they need to hunt. It’s always been clear to me that I can buy packaged meats in the store from animals someone else has killed for me. Yet, I’ve also known that most people these days don’t have to hunt and many who hunt for “sport” don’t

appear to know what “sport” even means. And usually they don’t seem to have any respect for the creatures they kill.

Do animals even have a “sporting chance” anymore? Camo, nightscopes, ATVs, drones, assault rifles. We’ve killed off most predators so we could be the top predator on the planet. Hunting is more like a no-contest war against Winnie the Pooh or Bambi. I see nothing “manly” or sporting about any of that. I’ve heard all the arguments for guns, for hunting, for sport. Some of them make sense. Most do not. Many of us were raised “playing war,” “playing army,” “cowboys and Indians” and killing (or pretending to kill) pretty much anything (and everyone) we considered a threat—the enemy. That could be the neighbor’s barking dog, or that hawk that might be circling to take our cat (the neighborhood bully was lucky). In other words, anything was “fair game.”

Game. That’s an odd word we use, isn’t it? Game animals; Fish and Game; Game Reserve. The game is on, and that means our instinctual, perhaps primal, desire to kill something. Yet, acknowledging something is innate doesn’t mean we don’t take responsibility for our choices to act, or not act, on those impulses. Living things are not “games,” including us.

This gaming mentality (as with popular video games) makes some people, even young kids, numb to killing. When something or someone is killed, even in fantasy games, Life itself is devalued and dishonored. I can’t support the mindless and heartless killing of anything.

Once again, I eat living things too. I’m aware of that, and try to eat less of them—at the very least I think about what I’m doing, and the living creatures that die so that I can live (crucifixions of nature on a mass scale).

Over the ten years I served as a jail chaplain, I came face to face with the consequences of gun violence. Drugs, guns and God—an unholy trinity of tragedy. In a predominantly white county, I saw a disproportionate number of black and latino faces every day—countless lives, families, communities, torn apart by senseless violence, usually involving guns.

When I was a street chaplain, now and then someone would show me a weapon—knife, gun, even a crossbow—to let me know they were both fearful and confident living outside. The weapon gave them confidence they could protect themselves. The fear never went away, but the illusion of safety was addictive.

One of the young guys in our art group didn’t show up one afternoon. Later we found out he got his hands on a gun, went out in the woods, and blew his brains out. Another time, an older man with a drinking problem asked to see me privately. I closed the door of my office and he pulled out a gun. “I don’t want this anymore. Please do something with it. I don’t want to harm anyone, or myself,” he pleaded. After he left, I wrapped it in many layers of plastic and paper and tossed it in a dumpster.

I read in that Washington Post article that some groups are trying to get more women into hunting. One group is called BOW (Becoming an Outdoors Woman). Clever, though it makes me wonder if learning to shoot something with a bow and arrow makes you an outdoors person?

I admit, I'm saturated in naturalists, poets and Native American thought. And honestly, I absorbed some foundational ethics from my study of Christian and Buddhist teaching: Practice compassion and lovingkindness; have a respect and reverence for all life. Or, in more secular terms ... pretty much the same.

In my native Pacific Northwest, hunters and anglers are meeting with lumber companies, tourism agencies, government representatives, tribes and environmentalists to find solutions to the salmon crisis. This seems the reasonable way forward for us. Include all voices ... maybe even the "voices" of the wild things we depend on.

My dad, along with his three brothers, served in WWII. They each carried guns, and used them. I think that's the main reason that those rifles on the wall, and the pistol he kept in his car, mostly collected dust. I can't recall ever seeing him shoot one of those guns, or kill anything. He'd seen enough killing.

Our "culture of guns" is making us more and more fearful, so we buy more guns and get more fearful. I wonder if there's a parallel to our "culture of gods." Are people hunting for God as they hunt for game? Kill God and consume Him, says one religion. A brutal death leads to a blessed Life, they say. A larger subject for another essay.

This morning, as I drove away from the house, a family of deer ran across the lawn. I stopped and waited as they cautiously crossed the roadway. As I watched them, appreciating their beauty and their vulnerability, I hoped other cars would see them—and then remembered it was hunting season.

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