

Yes, I'm a Hunter — Here's Why

Like Father, Like Son, It's in My Blood

By FREDRICK KUNKLE

There is nothing like the feeling you get while gazing at an animal you intend to kill.

Your heart pounds. Your hands tremble. Your guts churn with a mixture of exhilaration and fear. The animal might be moving slowly through the forest, unaware of your presence, or it may be standing still looking at you. Time speeds up.

Afterward, you wonder: Was this jittery wave of emotion about ensuring that the first shot be accurate, that every care must be taken before the trigger is pulled to avoid missing or wounding an animal? Or is it because every hunter, down to his bones, recognizes something elemental and primal in himself as he prepares to engage in a deliberate act of violence, to purposely cross a well-established psychological boundary?

I have hunted ever since I first followed my father into the woods in western Pennsylvania when I was 8 years old, and I still love it. I hunt even though my love of hunting puts me at odds with the world that I inhabit today in Washington's suburbs.

Friends and colleagues express surprise, and often disgust. So I seldom talk about hunting, at least in this part of the country. I don't usually admit that I even own guns. But last week, after the news reports about 8-year-old Sierra Stiles killing a bear on the first day of the season in Western Maryland, I couldn't avoid the subject. It was the talk of the office and local talk radio, with some people suggesting that allowing such a young child to participate in the hunt was a form of child abuse. When I heard about young Sierra's feat, my first reaction ran toward skepticism. A third-grader killing a bear? Two shots to the chest? Well, hats off to her: I know how hard it is to hunt such large prey, how easy it is to do everything right and yet fail to make the kill. I didn't bag my first buck until I was 16.

Whenever I do tell people that I hunt, they often want to put me on the spot. They want to know how it's possible for a person who has attended college and lived in New York City and Washington, who plays violin and attends the symphony, who is raising three smart and sensitive girls — all of whom, like their mother, are opposed to hunting — can engage in something so primitive. They want to know how anyone can participate in a sport whose central aim is killing. Hardest of

I Shoot and I Kill, but Most of All, I Love the Hunt

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all is to explain why a blood sport should bring such pleasure, and even a kind of spiritual rebirth.

And the truth is, no matter how much excitement there is during a hunt, at the moment of the kill, I have always felt remorse. I have walked up to a buck as he lay dying, horrified at the blood, the gaping wounds, the terrible reflexive gasps. I have felt that strange sensation of mercy and disgust that comes with administering a coup de grace.

And then I go out again.

This is not easy to explain. Although I eat what I kill, that is not why I hunt. The truth is, almost nobody in this country can truthfully say he needs to hunt to eat. Partly, I hunt because of tradition, having accompanied my father, my grandfather, my uncles and now my brothers. But that is not the only reason. I have abandoned other family traditions. As for my father, he no longer hunts. He just does not like it anymore. (When I go out, my girls tell me that they're rooting for the deer.)

No, the reasons why I hunt go deeper than tradition, much deeper. For me, hunting is nothing less than a ritual, connecting me to a past that stretches from my father to his father and to countless generations before him. There is no other reason to hunt today, except as ritual. And like all rituals, it is grounded in customs as regular as the phases of the moon, and observed in practices that invite solitude and fellowship.

Every hunt places me in a specific time, and against the timelessness of nature. And although killing is essential to the ritual, it isn't the most important element. If it were only about the kill, then I wouldn't hunt. If the prey didn't have a chance, if the killing were easy, then it wouldn't be hunting. It would just be ritualized death.

True, for too many people who call themselves hunters, the first day of deer season is merely an excuse to run amok in the woods. For me, when autumn comes around, the very air seems to smell of hunting. A blade of sunlight slanting low across



KIMBLE FAMILY/PHOTO

All in the family: The author, kneeling with a deer he killed in Pennsylvania 13 years ago, and his father, who no longer likes to hunt.

a newly harvested field on an October afternoon is enough to rekindle memories of other fields and hunts.

I think of my grandfather's electric skillet heaped with potatoes and rabbit meat, or the elaborate pancake breakfasts served up at a hunting camp for two dozen people. I think of the endless hands of pinocchio or cribbage, the bad jokes, the shared rites. Though I have never seen this, I have heard of hunters whose faces were marked with blood after their first kill. At our camp, when a hunter missed a shot at a buck, wise guys would cut a piece of fabric from his shirttail.

I can still remember the goofy stuff, such as the time my uncle and one of my brothers laid bets about who could shoot a hunting cap tossed into the air. My uncle was dead-on. My brother cheated, blasting my uncle's hat after it landed in the weeds.

But I remember the more solemn moments, too. I think of the time my father spent teaching me one of the best ways to hunt, the way I still prefer to hunt, the supreme art of the hunt. He called it Indian hunting, and it meant moving stealthily through the woods in search of animals, in-

stead of just waiting for them to come to you. To do it, you immerse yourself in the woods.

You take a few steps at a time, perhaps 10, and then stop. You move tree to tree. You move into the wind, so that animals cannot detect your scent. You glance at the ground, note where sticks lie, and plant each footstep carefully to avoid snapping twigs. You become aware of the softest noise, the faintest sign of movement. Hours pass while you cover little ground. You pray for rain, knowing the wet ground and the sound of the water on the leaves can conceal your footsteps. Your heart jumps when you see a deer, a flick of an ear or a moving shadow. You focus on moving every part of your body with deliberate care, even resisting the urge to swivel your head quickly in the direction of a noise. You focus your mind on focusing. You learn the limits of your control.

As ritual, hunting summons a part of us that is unconscious and instinctual, and within a context that reaffirms a reverence for nature, and reminds us of our place there. Instead of burying these impulses, hunting revives and engages aspects of hu-

man existence that modernity would like to wash away or anesthetize. It reawakens us to nature's truth: To live is to be a part of the cycle of life that demands that other living creatures must die. Native Americans recognized this when they sprinkled corn pollen on a slain deer's snout in a blessing that demonstrated their awareness of life's circle. Hunting is a way not merely of acknowledging death, but engaging it.

Last year, one of my brothers and I spent several days hunting together. On the first morning, we awoke before dawn, fried eggs, brewed coffee and then walked in darkness along a 50-year-old strip mine into a stand of trees. Powerful winds snapped branches as we shivered and watched. But the wind was so fierce, we saw nothing. When it was light, we began to Indian hunt, and still we saw nothing.

As we walked the spine of a windswept ridge, however, a bright white object caught our eye on the brow of a hill more than 500 yards across a valley. I thought it was the bleached limb of a dead tree. But my brother saw something different. He saw bone.

We were looking at the antlers of a huge buck. All we could see was the animal's head because it was bedded down in what we call a slashing — a place that had been clear-cut by loggers years earlier and then had grown back as an impenetrable tangle of brambles, grapevines and dead logs. His enormous silver-tipped ears looked like satellite dishes as he turned his head from side to side. The buck had chosen a spot on the point of the hill that gave him a panoramic view of the valley. We realized he had been watching us as we walked along the open ridge.

I sat down and peered through the powerful scope on my 7mm magnum rifle, realizing the deer was virtually out of range. It was possible to make a shot, but I was much more likely to miss or merely wound the animal. So we agreed that my brother, who was carrying a .44-caliber carbine without a scope, would try to get closer so he could make a clean kill. I would stay and watch and signal him from across the valley

if the animal escaped before my brother could get close.

Snowflakes came curving out of the sky as we split up. The distance was so great that it took my brother about 15 minutes to walk briskly from the ridge to a gas that ran 50 yards behind the thicket where the buck lay. Then my brother began to move very, very slowly, as my father taught us, through a thicket of brush. His advantage, he would be moving in a strong wind, which would prevent the deer from detecting his scent and help cover sound of his footsteps.

My eyes watered as I squinted into blowing snow, and my fingertips ached with cold, as I followed his painstaking progress. Nearly an hour passed as my brother moved through the thicket step by step, and the deer swept his massive rack antlers from side to side looking over the valley. At last, I could see that my brother had closed to fewer than 25 yards from the buck.

Kill him, I kept thinking. Then, suddenly, I saw the buck's those huge radar-dish ears toward my brother. Somehow, the deer had become aware of the threat, and he appeared to be focusing all his senses in my brother's direction. Seconds ticked by. And then the deer suddenly jerked out of sight, gone, like that, as if he had dropped down a hole. I signaled my brother that the game was up. After we rejoined, we marveled at the fortress-like bed that the deer had made. We wondered how he escaped so quickly and quietly that my brother did not even know at first that he had fled, how he managed to penetrate the thicket with those huge antlers.

My brother said he had come so close that he could see the animal's rump through a small opening in the brambles. But he could not see all of him, and could not see the antlers. That's why he didn't shoot.

So the buck got away. Yet, to us, it was one of the most memorable hunts we have ever had. And we are already preparing to hunt that buck again.

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