

The Covenant with All Our Relations

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Growing up in the Catskill's included a fish and game diet. If we didn't harvest deer, we had little meat for a year. Grouse and rabbit were plentiful. We feasted on trout, bullheads, bass and pickerel. Duck, pheasant, woodcock and squirrel rounded out the wild fare. Hunting was a way of life. It was money in the bank.



I never liked the term “game” as it is applied to wild animals. Hunting was part of the business of life and anything but game. Hunting provided many memorable male rituals. I first learned to shoot at home. Next, I passed a firearms handling test conducted by a sportsman's club. Then I got my first hunting license. This could be equated to a teenager getting a first car.

The first kill is an ancient ritual remnant of one entering into manhood. My day finally arrived. Into the car with guns, beagle, and other hunting necessities and up the Gilbert Lake road we drove. We stopped at a pine-tree stand with brambles on its edge.

Once we were dressed for the hunt, we loaded our shotguns, put them on safe and released the dog. It wasn't long before the beagle hit rabbit scent. The cottontail came bounding by. My father waited for me to shoot. I did. Amazingly, the rabbit was dead. And, I didn't shoot my dog. That was a real fear. I was trembling with excitement. The daydreams about being allowed to hunt were now realized. The ritual of butchering the rabbit and rewarding the beagle were as important as the killing.

I honor the hunt tradition. I'm a good steward of wild creatures. I hunted as an adult even after I moved to the city. Yet that was to change following two particular hunting incidents. I would quit hunting, give away my guns and turn to the camera.

The first incident occurred while I was hunting deer with a father-in-law at his family homestead. After a morning of pushing hard through large wooded areas, we decided to drive a small wedge of woods on our way to lunch at the farmhouse. I was in sweep position, the last hunter to come through the woods. The others were already in the open field deciding what to have for lunch when they were startled by my shooting.

They said they couldn't imagine why I was shooting. It was a small patch of trees and several men had just walked through it. When they came to me, they saw a large seven-point whitetail buck lying dead. Excitement reigned and a truck was brought across the field to move the deer.

I didn't explain why I was the least excited. The deer had jumped up at such close range that I saw the full impact of the bullets and his complete dying process. As he lay there, I asked myself a rhetorical question, "Why did I kill you? Why did you die today?"



In the past, I'd shot from a long distance away. When I reached an animal, it was a carcass ready to butcher. Now, I was hunting for ego, not food. I killed this deer at maybe twenty feet. I saw his dying. I paid attention to my feelings and uneasy emotions.

The buck had been illegally wounded with birdshot. His crippled condition was one reason he lay still while others passed. I was glad that his pain had ended. Perhaps he gave his life to me so that I could learn and he could leave. I honor and bless this animal for my lesson. I am reminded of "all our relations."

The next year I was invited to a group hunt. This was a first. I hunted solo or with family. I was uneasy because of the alcohol consumption at camp so I searched for a deer stand. I found such a good place that I took another person with me. Ten

minutes after the season opened we had killed our two deer.

I was asked to go back and kill deer for those not as skilled as I. This went beyond my ethics, not to mention the law. I put my gun away and with whistle and pocket knife, returned to drive for the others. I slipped on a steep, snowy hillside and was sent tumbling over a rock outcrop into a deep depression.

I dusted myself off. Then the snow in front of me began to bulge. I had company. I had fallen into a bear den. The bear seemed as surprised as I. However, the bear was only agitated. I was fearful. I folded my arms and sat surrendered.

Avoiding direct eye contact, I sat listening to the other drivers getting closer. The bear also heard them and its agitation grew. Finally, one man came so near that the bear burst forth brushing past me. Two young bears, hidden in the rocks behind her, quickly followed as I lay flat on the ground grateful for my escape.

After I caught my breath, I shouted not to shoot them. Bears eat entrails left in the woods after hunters hog dress their deer. The bear go into hibernation later in the year.

I had just been eyeball to eyeball with wild bear. I had often thought about killing a bear. It wasn't lost on me that the bear had an opportunity to kill me. It didn't. That ended my hunting days. I blessed the three bears and went home for porridge.

I was profoundly moved by the combination of closely watching the death of one wild animal at my hands, while escaping death at the hands of another wild animal with opportunity to kill me. I could get food from other sources. Now I go to the woods to observe, taking nothing but pictures and leaving nothing but footprints.

The animals and I renewed a sacred covenant. I didn't need their life for my life. They needed my life as a messenger for their continued well being in the face of unreasonable pressures on their environment. A friend recently killed a bear with her car. I drove to that place and offered sacred ceremony to honor Bear.

