

FROM THE CENTER

Sooner or Later You'll Be Asked The Question - Will You Be Able To Answer It



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I recently remarried some three years after my first wife's death, to a lovely lady with parents who represent the epitome of "family values." They are voracious readers. So, as might be expected for an old fashioned wildlife biologist, I gave my new mother-in-law a copy of Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac* for a first Christmas gift.

When a week or so later, I inquired as to her impressions of the book I was somewhat taken aback by her answer. She said, "That is some of the most lovely writing I have ever read, and Leopold obviously loved wildlife and wild things passionately. What I can't understand is how he could be a hunter and kill those same beautiful animals." That, I suppose, is a common question and one that every hunter is called upon to answer sooner or later.

The conversation was terminated by a great grandchild that required attention, which gave me time to ponder a response. After some consideration I decided that my answer would be to send her an entry from my journal that detailed just one hunt, in hopes that a detailing of such an experience might serve better than a scholarly discourse of what hunting means to me.

The quoted journal entry, dated 15 October 1994, begins as my hunting partner of some 22 years, Bill, and I are riding into our elk camp in the Eagle Cap Wilderness Area on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest in northeast Oregon after a 20-mile trip from the trail head with six good mountain horses to pack in horse feed.

"... Jim and Bob [the other two hunters in the party] have done their work well and an adequate wood pile is stacked outside the tent. The wood is a mixture of spruce and sub-alpine fir. The den-

sity of the growth rings indicates the harshness of the site and the short growing season. But, this produces very dense wood that burns hot and long in the shepherd's stove.

"As the snow continues to accumulate it seems more and more likely that we have gambled on hunting this high and lost. The elk will, most likely, have begun to move lower from these elevations as the energy required to dig through the crusted snow for forage exceeds that obtained from the effort. But, again, there is nearly always solitude this high in the Wallowa's in late October and we treasure that solitude above the maximization of hunting opportunity.

"Yet, there is always the chance that we will encounter a bunch of elk that have delayed moving down to better grazing. It has occurred to me that the elk, too, cherish the high lonesome and move down to the lower country with reluctance. For here, on the high ground, they are truly free and relatively safe. There are no fences here, no roads to cross, no livestock for competition, and few people to encounter. Down the mountain there is a better energy balance and, sooner or later, all but a very few must yield to necessity.

"But, there are always those who tarry along. Perhaps we will meet here, where the snow deepens over the next few days. And, on the other hand, maybe not. We will see.

"The last waking moments of days such as these are such a pleasure. My companions sleep. I can hear gentle snoring from the other tent. The fire in the shepherd's stove flickers out light through the damper hole that plays on the tent walls and ceiling. A candle provides just enough light for me to see to write. I can hear the wind in the spruce and firs that surround the tent. There is time to reflect on what has happened this day and what such means to me.

"The fire is dying. And, then, cold comes quickly through the tent walls and it is time to sleep. I feel truly alive...

"...This is the fourth day of hunting and we have not been successful in killing elk. Our first impression seems to have been correct — we gambled on the weather and lost. I saw a small bunch of elk on the first day— far above me and crossing the divide into the Minam River drainage.

"During the second night, the wind howled all through the night affording us little sleep as each surge of wind down the drainage threatened to flatten the tent or topple a tree on us or the horses. Occasionally, we could hear trees crashing to the ground.

"But, during these 'unsuccessful' days of hunting we, collectively, have seen: cougar, marten, deer, snowshoe hare, and black bear tracks; numerous deer; seen clouds entangle the granite walls in pale, soft light; and glorious sunrises and sunsets. We have dozed in the sun, huddled over small warming fires as the stored sunlight appeared in the flames, drank from cold clear streams, heard the wind roar — and sigh — in the trees, shared lunch with Camp Robbers, eaten well, told tales and jokes, remembered good days and good companions, ridden fine horses, laughed with friends, sipped good bourbon, heard coyotes howl, tramped miles through the snow and enjoyed being alone by day and with friends around the stove at night. And, in the process, we re-created ourselves anew.

"I fear that such days as these may be coming to an end for me. My 'old football knee' is swollen to twice normal size and hurts more than a little. By the third day of hunting there was difficulty in going just five miles in crusted snow conditions.

"But, that time is not yet. And, when that time does come, I

will travel here, and hundreds of other such places, in mind and spirit. I remember them all with clarity and in detail. Upon demand, as needed, I can remember and feel the experiences. They are my treasures. And, these memories are my most treasured trophies. These experiences I have valued over material things and over 'achievement.' Today, there is no regret for such choices...

"Last night, when I crawled reluctantly from my sleeping bag in the small hours and went outside the tent to answer nature's call. The moon was full, the air still, the sky clear and the stars close. I walked through crusted snow to the edge of the old avalanche chute. The clear open sky has sucked away the warmth from the earth and temperatures had fallen to well below zero. My breath left small temporary clouds of ice crystals hanging in the air.

"The world was awash in moon glow and the granite walls and peaks that surrounded me were swathed in that light that softened their ruggedness that was so obvious by day. Then, from the upper basin a coyote chorus began as several animals yipped and howled. They were answered by two other groups 'singing' as in antiphony. Then, for a brief magic moment in the moonlight, they all sang in chorus — and fell silent.

"I felt particularly blessed to be the sole human attendee at this most excellent of concerts in this most excellent of amphitheatres with the best in stage lighting. As the coyote chorus died away, I suddenly felt cold and came to consider my concert dress. My jacket was a worn sweatshirt with the hood pulled over a balaclava wool helmet with neatly contrasting trousers of baggy waffle-weave long johns that were stuffed — with stockingless feet — into unlaced insulated pacs. The final accessory was fingerless wool

gloves with holes worn in the palms.

"The incongruity of the lovely scene, my reverie, and my appearance struck me as funny — very funny — and I laughed out loud. The laughter echoed back to me from the granite cliff and I felt good. I felt intensely alive.

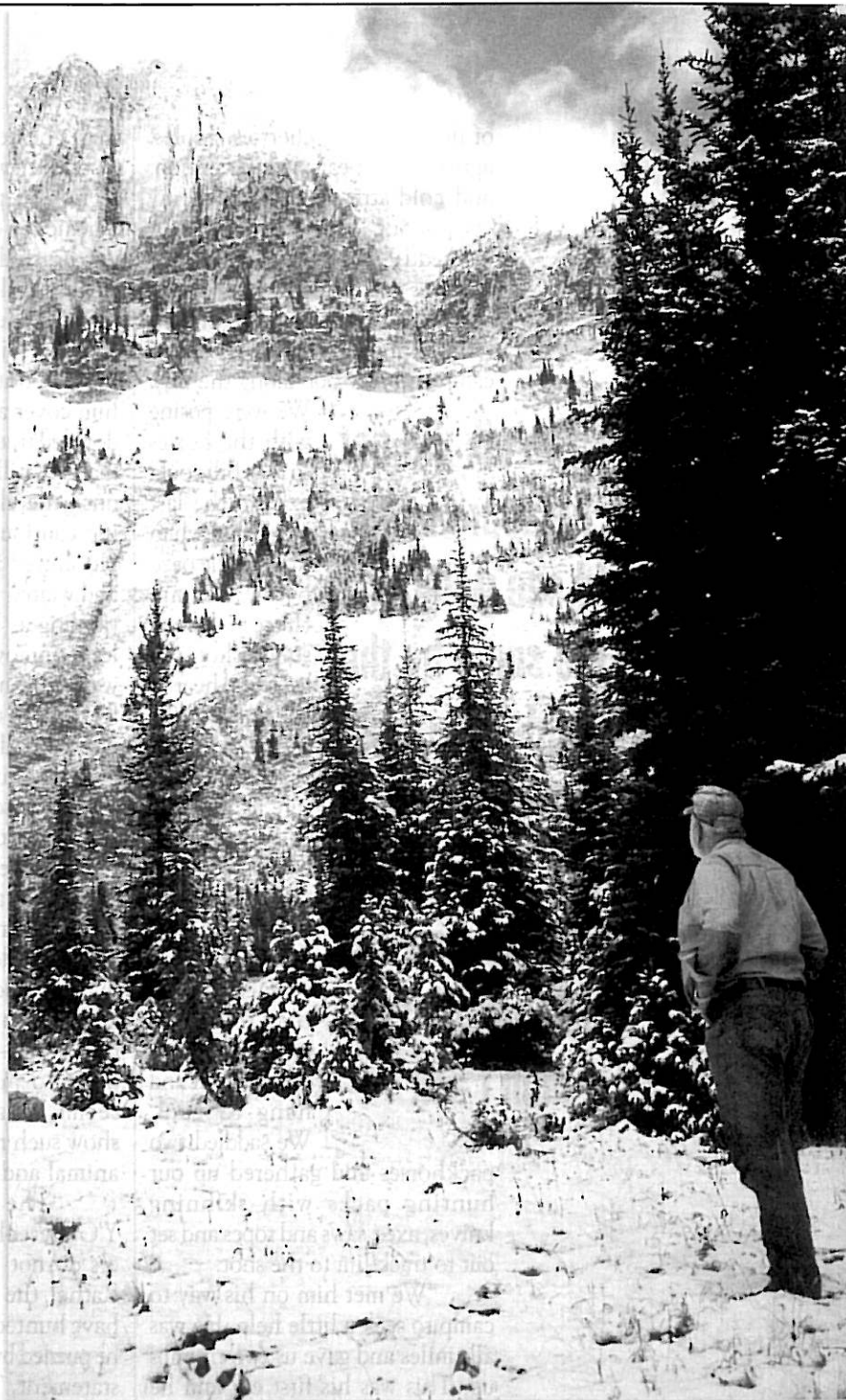
"As I returned to the tent breaking through the snow crust at every step I could hear snoring from my companions with their sleeping bags pulled tight around their faces with ice from their breath freezing on the edges of the opening. I was thoroughly chilled by the time I was in my cocoon of nylon and goose down and was awake shivering until it was time to rise and cook breakfast for the crew.

"...This is the last day of hunting and we were away from camp just at dawn. My knee was too swollen and tender to allow me to travel more than a couple of miles over the crusted snow. So I sought out a spot on the granite rocks above the valley where the rising sun would bathe me in warmth and from where I could see a significant area of meadow and old-growth forest.

"By mid-morning I had seen several mule deer when, warmed by the sun and small fire, I lay back with my head on my hunting pack and dozed in the bright mountain

sun and dreamed of pleasant things — of other hunts, of India and Pakistan and tigers and the foothills of the Hindu Kush, of good bird dogs, of big trout rising to perfectly presented flies that matched the hatch, of Texas prairies covered with blue bonnets and Indian paintbrush. With awakening there was a sense of warmth and peace as the hunting vigil resumed.

"At mid-day there was a feast



THE AUTHOR LOOKS AT THE GRANITE WALLS AND PEAKS AS THEY SHOW THEIR RUGGEDNESS IN THE LIGHT OF DAY.

of dried fruit — cherries, apples, apricots, and pears, jerked venison, and cold stream water from my “boy scout” aluminum canteen marked 1942. It seemed a banquet. Life was good.

“I cut off the hunt in mid-afternoon and moved slowly back to camp and met Bob along the way.

The elk did not move as he approached. I could see where he knelt in the snow by the animal's side. I suspect he reached out and touched the elk in respect, admiration, and appreciation. I didn't ask —

We were posing with the horses so that Bill could expend the last of his film when from a mile or so below camp, there was a single shot and we could hear to the bullet strike home. Bill snapped the picture as Bob and I simultaneously exclaimed, ‘Oh, d—!’ There was less than an hour of daylight and it seemed likely that there was an elk to dress, skin, quarter and hang to cool.

We saddled two packhorses and gathered up our hunting packs with skinning knives, axes, saws and ropes and set out to track Jim to the shot.

“We met him on his way to camp to seek a little help. He was all smiles and gave us two thumbs up. This was his first elk and he was ‘pumped’ with that old feeling that comes to the hunter with a hunt well-executed and a kill cleanly done.

“When we arrived at the scene we, as all hunters should, listened to the story telling of the successful hunter. Jim had located several old growth spruce that had come down in the high winds of two nights ago. The trees were heavily festooned with lichens known as ‘old

man's beard’. As a wildlife biologist he knew that these lichens are as rich in protein as alfalfa hay. The lichen did not lie two feet under crusted snow and, from the tracks, he knew the elk had discovered the ‘easy pickens’.

“He judged the wind and took a position that would afford him cover and a clear view of the downed trees. He settled in and remained still for nearly five hours until the elk could be seen moving cautiously through the trees. He shifted into shooting position and waited patiently, ignoring the tingling as blood flowed into too long unmoved legs, until the elk were in range. He clearly identified the target, cleared the background, and shifted again to brace the rifle against a tree.

“Jim squeezed the trigger and the elk dropped instantly, shot through the heart. The elk did not move as he approached. I could see where he knelt in the snow by the animal's side. I suspect he reached out and touched the elk in respect, admiration, and appreciation. I didn't ask — but I knew having done so many times myself. It seems an appropriate thing to show such respect — for both the animal and what has occurred.

“The philosopher Ortega Y'Gassett observed that true hunters do not hunt in order to kill. Rather, the hunter kills in order to have hunted. Some, I know, would be puzzled by or disbelieving of that statement. The four hunters here are not among them.



“We make short work of dressing the animal, wrapping the quarters in manta tarps, packing the quarters on the horses, and heading to camp as darkness deepens. The ritual is near completion lacking only the preparation and partaking of the meat. That ritual will be complete tonight with the traditional supper of liver and heart prepared in whatever manner the cook has inherited from a mentor from the past.

“I am the cook in this camp and follow the method taught to me by my grandfather and my father that evolved from many meals of heart and liver from whitetails and mule deer taken in Texas in my youth. Such a ritual feast required adequate amounts, evenly divided, of cubes of heart and liver rolled in flour and fried -- preferably in bacon grease — and then stewed in onions and marinated in butter. The dish is served when the meat is tender, the drinks run out, or the hunger that comes at the end of a long day prevails — whichever comes first.

“It is a happy camp. The ritual is done. The never ending circle of life and death and re-creation is complete for this time. We are content. We have hunted. Perhaps, these are circumstances and feelings that those who are not hunters can never feel nor even understand. But we four who crouch around a shepherd's stove in a tent pitched in a high mountain valley and having taken part in ritual feast, though we would not quickly recognize it for such, understand though we do not speak the words. For the moment, however fleeting, that seems enough.”

I have mailed the journal entry to my mother-in-law. Perhaps, as she reads the entry, she may understand how I can devote my life to wildlife conservation and be a hunter. Perhaps not. It is the best I can do.