

HUGE

beating heart



DURGA BERNHARD *THE SHARED BOUNTY*
gouache painting on birch bark/1998

THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF HUNTERS

Traditionally, among the Inuit in Greenland, sustenance hunting has not only been a necessity, it has shaped the entire culture. Social convention was (and still is to some extent) based on a relationship with prey. For instance, if a group of hunters felt that the tribal women had somehow offended the bears, they might arrange to trade wives for an evening so that during the next hunt the bears would be confused and no longer punish the men associated with specific women. Intricate and deeply held cultural beliefs grew out of a profound vulnerability to the harshest environment on earth. In a life compressed into extremes of arctic cold, months of darkness, and frequent hunger, hunting and spirituality were inextricable from one another and from daily life.

You could say that the hunters around here have nothing in common with traditional hunters, other than being human. But that “being human” part is actually something to look into. Hunters often get a bad rap from non-hunters and have been called “knuckle-draggers” because of what is perceived as a thirst for outright violence and macho aggression. Likewise, hunters aren’t always fond of so-called “bunny-huggers” who claim to be pro-environment but who some hunters believe are actually destroying the wild with their Walt Disney fantasies and denial of basic natural laws.

In the Hudson Valley, hunting spans from mid-October through mid-December and extends into winter and spring for some game species. About 700,000 hunting licenses are issued across New York State each year, with a fifth to a third going to hunters in the Catskill and Mid-Hudson Valley regions. But why hunt when you don’t have to? Does it still make sense with the food options available today, including non-factory farming for people with ethical issues about the treatment of animals (though this type of meat is often unaffordable)? Is hunting a “blood sport” or a spiritual activity? Or is there something going on here, like for the Inuit hunters, that makes the difference between the two difficult to trace?

Harry Feines is a third-generation hunter and trapper, born in Dutchess County. For him, hunting is a passion. He wears a necklace of bear claws, all from bears he killed. His home in the woods of Delaware County is filled with pelts and stuffed kills. Neither Feines nor his friend Elias Stamas (locally known as Louie the Greek) hunts out of necessity for food. Harry hunts out of necessity of expression of his predator nature and believes he loves the animals more than any “stream-licker” ever could. Not only are his entire life and bank account devoted to conservationist efforts, he says “I am one with the animal I kill, and I am going to harvest that animal, and I am going to consume that animal.” By hunting he is actualizing his understanding

BY BETHANY SALTMAN

of what it means to be human on top of the food chain, in the rawest sense. But, as Louie adds, "Getting a hunting license doesn't make you a hunter." According to Louie, there is more to hunting than just killing wild animals.

Harry also has a love for the woods, which helps him feel more deeply connected to his life. "You know, you're getting older all the time, and the mountains are the same height, but it takes me longer to get up there. If I don't go in the woods every day, it's, Jesus Christ, another day wasted." So, yes, Harry loves the land. But he is probably not the guy you want to go for a hike with unless you are interested in discussing the benefits of NRA membership and other radically conservative views. Politics aside, Harry is getting something that many of us miss.

Durga Bernhard is a single mom, artist, and hunter who lives in Shandaken and agrees with Harry about one thing: hunting takes her into the cycle of life and death that most women only access through things like gardening, hiking, or motherhood. She is petite, pretty, and very "normal" as she manages her three kids' lives, driving them here and there or nursing her two-

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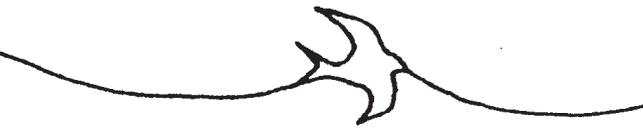
year-old to a Wizard of Oz video. She doesn't want to eat the meat of animals who have suffered terribly and been injected with all kinds of harmful chemicals, or feed it to her children. She was a vegetarian for many years until "my lifelong interest in using wild plants for both food and medicine made wild meat seem a logical next step." So she began to hunt.

Durga considers herself "a very primal person" and believes hunting is an honor because "when you kill an animal you join the destiny of a wild animal's life. You consume the animal. We are in direct communication." She looks delighted as she describes the process of butchering a deer in her kitchen, how "everything has to be put aside." Her kids are used to their mother's hunting, although her 13-year-old daughter has lost her taste for red meat completely. Her teenage son thinks it's cool that his mom hunts. Durga wishes she had as much time to hunt as men do; these days she finds it difficult to find any time at all. She is sadly resolute, for now, to get by on organic ostrich meat from the local farm, gifted meat from other hunters, and an occasional roadkill.

Around 700 CE, Saint Hubert of Lambert, the Patron Saint of hunters, saw a crucifix between the antlers of a stag one Good Friday while hunting, and heard a voice calling him to God. Father Chris Berean of Saint Francis Catholic Church in Phoenicia is a hunter, though not for such visions or overt spiritual gain. He "puts the priest thing aside" and hunts to enjoy the outdoors, eat delicious healthy meat, give it to others, and deepen his appreciation of life. "You realize you're just part of things, part of nature designed by God." He believes that "almost everything we do is morally neutral," including hunting, but we bring to our actions a good or an evil intent. And so, if one were to hunt merely "for fun," without eating the meat, "that would be just killing," and thus irresponsible. Does killing "a regal animal" (as Harry calls wild game) make Father Chris sad? Absolutely not. "I don't love the deer," he says. "I don't feel a loss, because there is no attachment...but I felt awful when my dog died."

The discussion about our role as human beings in controlling, protecting, and identifying with the environment will most likely continue as long as we are lucky enough to hang on to our lives here on earth. We can't deny that in order to sustain life, there is death—whether we witness the killing or not. Animals strive to continue their lives, whether by simple instinct or what we term in ourselves the enigmatic "will to live." The Inuit have a saying: "Bears are so constructed that they do not like to have a spear in them."

Gary Snyder, the poet and naturalist, writes, "If we do eat meat, it is the life, the bounce, the swish, of a great alert being with keen ears and lovely eyes, with foursquare feet and a huge beating heart that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves." It is good advice: let us not deceive ourselves. Whether we are a hunter or a shopper buying prepackaged meat, the taking of life is sustaining us, and we can eat it up with our eyes closed, or bow our heads and give thanks. ●

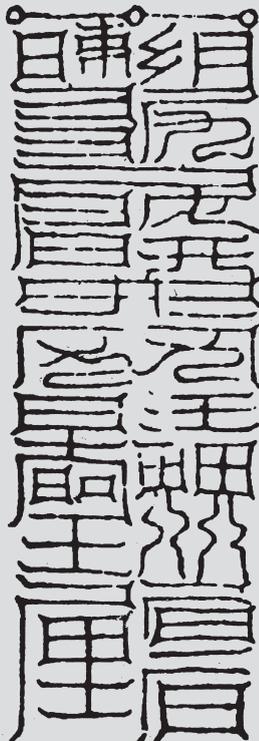


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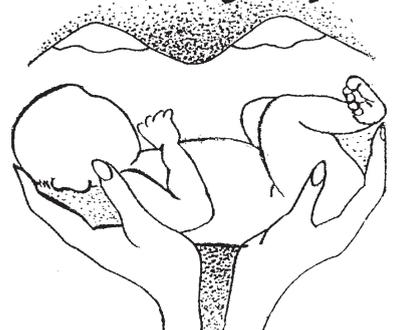


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