

HUNTING AND THE ART OF HUMAN EXISTENCE

At some point, humans ceased to simply hunt for survival and began to understand nature in a more vital and conscious way.

Over long and now misted millennia, the rhythm of our human existence was the same. Pursuing our sacred and relentless desire to survive, we hunted and gathered the living things that suited our physical needs for food and warmth. Across endless wild environments we perfected the one great arc of our existence, the first great act of global-

ization. We marched slowly out of Africa and encircled our world, driven by need and curiosity and fuelled by the death of wild others. Perfecting the weapons, we fashioned the stone, honed bone and wood, and hunted our way into modernity. Against nearly impossible odds, we developed a pathway to existence that was

to become the hallmark of our species and the most enduring portal to our natural selves.

Humans became the greatest hunters the natural world had ever seen. No other species could match the range of our capacity or the limitlessness of our inventions. Small, slow, and fragile, our children rose to strength and stature on the flesh and bone of wild brethren. Upon our campfires roasted the great and fierce giants of the animal world. Along ocean margins and ice field skirts, and from endless steppe to brooding mountain peak, the hunter excelled—our very existence testimony to the most eloquent equation ever derived: energy and matter are interchangeable. The flesh we consumed

became the flesh we were; the blood we drained became the river of our lives. Human and animal became inseparable; life and death were but a circle.

A long way down this road, a man would eventually write this equation down. When he did, we would revere him and call him the greatest physicist of all time. In reality, he was just a wild-eyed hunter, running down the truth. Both his mind and his pen were surely the inventions of his hunting past.

Thus we see the inseparable tie between our history and our future, the seamless flow of our existence. Complicated and enduring, hunters were, however, gathering far more than the flesh of fruit and the blood of animals as they hunted the landscapes around them. The hunters were also endlessly discovering the secrets of the natural world. Through patient study, they were coming to understand our place in the unending cycle of death and resurrection. Evening fires illuminated the deep impressions of this experience.

They had witnessed the cunning of the great carnivores and the vigilance of the prey; and the intense but pitiless death that lay in between. They knew that each animal lived a different life and was to be found in a dif-

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An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

ferent place. The hunters exploited these frailties. Through butchering, the hunter knew what they ate and something of how their bodies worked. Hunters recognized the craving for fat and were aware of the best season to secure it. They came to know when the rivers were full, when the rookeries were alive, and when the plains would squirm with new life. Consciously suspended in the wondrous web of life, human hunters would become the first ecologists.

Along this miraculous way, the hunter also came to understand the profound implications of procreation. Observing the wondrous bond between wild mother and offspring, they watched as tiny new life was birthed and the female turned to consume the sack from which it writhed. Enthralled by the ferocious passions of males in rut, passions that allowed hunters to approach and kill them, hunters came to understand the function of display and ornamentation in mating—the flash of antlers, the costumes and colors of the strutting male, the dancing of cranes.

Slowly, but certainly, hunters began to understand the need for all this complexity, and why it was required to ensure both animal existence and their own future. Lush grasses became fat deer from which the wolf pup was spawned. Like their animal counterparts, tribes well nourished on the abundance of animals prospered and bore many strong children to strong mothers and fathers. This knowledge bore witness to the indivisibility of life and that the miracle of transubstantiation was no rare thing. Indeed, did not the flowers grow in abundance where the mammoths were butchered? Further, should not their own dead be given back to the earth, interred to commence their decomposition to another form?

In coming to understand this great cycle of life, death, and rebirth, the human animal explored the boundaries of reality, the horizons of

existence. Finally, humans would acknowledge the wondrous parallels between the lives of animals and their own needs and emotions. Animals would become our brothers, just as native cultures everywhere would remind us. Somewhere along this road, philosophy was born.

So it was surely inevitable that art and spirituality would rise in the human species. Faced with a world of startling fullness, yet with existence a struggle for all, humans were led to question their own origins and the purpose of existence. They saw the wondrous complexities around them, but where in all of this magic and mayhem did they fit?

An expanding brain, fuelled by animal protein and an increasing emphasis on tool use and manufacture, carried with it the increased capacity to reason, and reflect. Falling sometimes to the great predators that made humans their prey, and at others elated by killing great beasts where weakness would mean failure, the hunting human prevailed and saw the world through a primate's eyes but with a predator's vision.

Thus it was that hunting cultures around the world developed rich mythologies centered upon the natural world. They saw the kill as an inevitable act and a gift from some power whose identity they might only imagine. As the magnificent cave art suggests, humans thus ceased to instinctively participate in the kill and began an intellectual and spiritual journey that tied both the hunting lifestyle and the magnificent creatures upon which they depended for survival. Those theriomorphic figures displayed on cave walls and ceilings—the half-human, half-animal shape-shifters—attest to the recognition of the inseparableness of life and a shamanistic journey to other dimensions and realities.

Thus was the hunting human transformed, no longer a brute creature who killed with indifference but

one who could worship the beauty and grace of the wild others and who could be convinced that hunting was not only something that was, but something that always had to be. The wild others were now essential companions of the hunter—more than just meat and marrow.

It was through the hunt that we came to an understanding of the very nature of existence. At a crucial point in our journey, we stepped away from the path of others and re-entered nature in a more vital and conscious way. Our metamorphosis from brute to intellectual carried these notions of art and beauty, the imaginings of parallel universes, the concepts of resurrection and transubstantiation, the logic of empirical observation and the miraculous preoccupation with trying to find a purpose for it all.

Biologically as constrained as ever, humanity was set free in the truest sense of the word.

These deepest parts of our humanity are not the constructs of modernity, of Newtonian science, or Judeo-Christian beliefs. These concepts were already fully formed when the hand-held spear was still being thrust through the mammoth's ribs.



DIANA RUPP

Cave art found all over the world suggests that early humans felt an intellectual and spiritual connection to the creatures upon which they depended for survival.



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