

“Food, Values, and Stories for the Future”

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Good morning.

It is an honor to be here with you all.

My experiences with hunting and conservation, and much of my knowledge, are limited to North America. So here I offer something of an outsider’s view: a perspective that I hope will be helpful to you all.

If we had met 20 years ago, when I had my hair tied back in a braid, down to the middle of my back, you would have very quickly learned that I was a strict vegetarian and that I saw hunters as misguided if not barbaric. At the time, I cared deeply about the natural world that we all inhabit and the creatures with whom we share it.

And I still do. But now, back home in Vermont, I have a bolt-action rifle chambered in 6.5 Swedish and a freezer that, most winters, is filled with venison. I’m sorry to say this was not one of those winters.

So I stand here with one foot in each of these two worlds: the world of non-hunter vegetarians, environmentalists, and animal-welfare advocates and the world of hunter conservationists. And I appreciate that the two worlds are not always on the best of terms.

I would like to introduce you to a young woman named Robyn. If you had met her some years ago, you would have learned that she, too, was a strict vegetarian. At the time, she cared deeply about the natural world we inhabit and the creatures with whom we share it. And she still does. But now she has a bolt-action rifle chambered in .25-06 and a freezer often stocked with venison.

Robyn’s story, like mine, represents many others I have heard in recent years, mostly in North America, some here in Europe and elsewhere around the world: the stories of thousands upon thousands of non-hunters, including some ex-vegetarians, some ex-anti-hunters, who have chosen to become hunters.

What do we make of these choices, of these stories, of these people’s journeys?

In my experience, lifelong hunters often hear these as stories of conversion and revelation: *Robyn saw the light and became one of us. Tovar left the enemy camp and joined our camp.*

Other people, of course, hear these as stories of degeneration and betrayal: *Robyn went over to the dark side and became one of them. Tovar left our camp and joined the enemy camp.*

And there are grains of truth in both of these interpretations. But I think they miss the essential and much larger story.

The larger story is that these are *not* stories of transformation. The larger story is that Robyn and I and others like us have *not* fundamentally changed. Our values remain essentially the same.

Like mine, Robyn's decision to become a vegetarian and then a vegan was, in part, a response to the meat industry. It was a decision rooted in her concerns about ecological degradation and animal welfare. It was a decision rooted in her commitment to doing right by the earth and by our fellow creatures.

Like mine, her decision years later to become a hunter was a response both to the human body's needs and to the meat industry. It was a decision that satisfied a nutritional imperative, while honoring an ethical imperative. A decision rooted in her continued commitment to doing right by the earth and by our fellow creatures.

Both decisions—to become a vegetarian and to become a hunter—were rooted in respect: respect for the natural world, for animal welfare, and for the sacredness of life.

Robyn did change in certain ways, as did I. She became more observant and alert in the outdoors. She developed a different and more nuanced commitment to the land. She discovered a new way of experiencing her own membership in the natural world.

But she remains essentially the same person, with the same values and the same respect for nature and animals.

So the larger story is not that she and I came over from the enemy camp to your camp, but rather that the two camps share certain core values.

The theme for our gathering is "Facts or Fables?"

Like myths, we often think of fables, and talk about fables, as falsehoods. Traditionally, though, fables are stories featuring animals that illustrate particular values and teachings.

Like myths, fables are powerful stories that convey deep truth. So, in this sense, I think telling fables is not only inevitable but necessary. Perhaps more than anything else, what hunting needs today are powerful stories that convey deep truth.

If we find and tell those stories, we can ensure the future of hunting. If we do not, hunting is in trouble.

To ensure the future of hunting, we must, of course, ensure its sustainability in terms of wildlife populations and habitat. Yet it is equally important—and, in much of the world, even more urgent—to ensure its sustainability in terms of social and cultural habitat, in terms of systems of value and meaning in which hunters and hunting are understood not merely as acceptable but as worthy.

One of the overarching stories that I often hear from hunters is that we are under attack and increasingly isolated. And there is truth in that story.

But I think we need to ask questions that strike closer to home: What are we doing—or not doing—that contributes to this state of affairs? What roles do our stories and our mindsets play in perpetuating this pattern, in blinding us to the shared values that we may have, in shaping others' perceptions of us, and in sometimes polarizing and oversimplifying the debate?

If we are accustomed to thinking that our values and our critics' values are fundamentally opposed, and to defending ourselves against them, seeing them as enemies who must be defeated, it is difficult to imagine other possibilities. It is difficult to see, for example, that our values and our critics' values are often rooted in the same core ideas, including respect for the land, for animal welfare, and for the sacredness of life.

Robyn and I are useful examples because we illustrate values that are shared across these apparent extremes. But the stories we tell as hunters need not be aimed narrowly at vegetarians, of course, or at recruiting new hunters.

More important are the millions upon millions—the billions—of people who will never hunt. More important are the millions upon millions who remind us that there are not, in fact, two camps—pro-hunting and anti-hunting—but rather a broad spectrum of views. More important are the millions upon millions who may not care all that strongly about hunting one way or the other but who are supportive when they see it as respectful of nature, animal welfare, and the sacredness of life. More important are the millions upon millions who, in their overwhelming majority, hold the fate of hunting in their hands.

One of our great opportunities to speak to those millions, and to learn from them, can be found in growing concerns about the meat industry. Some of those concerns are rooted in ecological impacts. Others are rooted in animal suffering and in the way the industry reduces living beings to commodities devoid of individuality or spirit.

There is a powerful story to be told here. It is a story that illustrates our *conservation ethic* through our commitment to protecting wildlife habitat and our desire to participate in nature rather than exercise dominion over it. A story that illustrates our *animal-welfare ethic* through the value we place both on animals' freedom and on making a careful, clean kill. A story that

illustrates our reverence for life, our honoring of the individual animal, and what I call our *ethic of utilization*—our commitment to respectfully using the animal, especially as food.

There are also powerful lessons to be learned here. People who are disturbed by the meat industry, and who choose not to close their eyes to it, respond in a variety of ways. In the United States at least, one response is to adopt a vegetarian diet. Another is to purchase meat from responsible local producers. A third is to start raising chickens or other animals. A fourth is to start hunting. I know many people who, like Robyn and me, have taken more than one of these paths.

And these paths look quite different on the surface, but are often underpinned by the same values. Back home in the States, these values are literally on display in every food co-op and many grocery stores. The signs read “humanely raised,” “free range,” “sustainably harvested,” “wild caught.”

For people who want to eat healthy meat that matches their values—and want to reconnect to the land and the sources of their sustenance—it is not that great a leap from shopping to hunting.

If we tell this story and learn these lessons, we can ensure the future of hunting. If we do not, hunting is in trouble.

There are also powerful stories to be told about conservation, rooted in shared love and respect for the land.

Back home in the States and in Canada, there’s an organization called Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. At 20,000 members, BHA is still small. But they already have a voice in conservation policy. And their membership—half of which is under the age of 40—is almost doubling every year.

If you listen to their leaders, you will hear a story about an inclusive conservation legacy that has been reignited, about a movement not only of hunters and anglers but also of hikers and birdwatchers, skiers and mushroom hunters. A story about shared love and respect for wild things and wild places. A story that celebrates adventure, connection, and healthy wild food. You will hear a story rooted in widely and deeply shared values. A story that speaks to the human heart.

If more of us tell this kind of story, we can ensure the future of hunting. If we do not, hunting is in trouble.

So what consequences, intended or unintended, do our stories have? How do they shape our perceptions and others’ perceptions? What possibilities do they open or close? How do they enable or constrain relationships and conversations?

We often argue for hunting on a technical basis: economics, wildlife management. I don't think many of us hunt for technical reasons, because it's just a wildlife management tool or because it pays for conservation.

How many of us hunt here, and care about hunting, for deeper reasons than just "it's a wildlife management tool" or "it pays for conservation"?

Technical arguments may suffice if we are content with hunting being tolerated as a necessary evil. But that is not what I want. I doubt that is what any of us want.

I want us to create and protect the social and cultural habitat in which hunting can thrive. I want us to create and protect a world, as the CIC Vision Statement puts it, "that values and supports sustainable hunting for the benefit of people and nature."

To do that, we need to tell much more powerful stories: Stories that convey our respect for animals and the larger natural world, and that illustrate how deeply relevant and connected hunting, and we as hunters, remain to the changing world we inhabit.

Thank you.

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