

“Lessons from hunting season”
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For five days last October I housed and fed four pronghorn hunters who used my garage to butcher and vacuum-seal what they harvested. Son Walter had arrived from Texas with a truck full of equipment. Flying in from California were his brother and son, along with a friend the boys have known since high school. All were born and raised in California, but Walter and family lived in Wyoming for over twenty years before moving to Texas. While residing here, he learned to love the outdoor culture of our state: snow-skiing, ice-fishing, and hunting render bearable the long harsh winters.

On the recent October trip he lugged extra rifles for his brother and nephew, neither of whom had hunted before, while Robert brought his own hunting gear, having elk-hunted with Walter last year. A rancher neighbor who also hunts offered his walk-in cooler, where my crew hung the carcasses to cure, after which they brought them here, turning my garage into a meat-processing room. My workbench, outfitted with two of my cutting boards, became a butcher block. It was messy, but they cleaned up afterwards.

There is nothing like hunting to remind us of our predatory nature, which is easy to forget when we purchase our meat already cut and hygienically wrapped. I imagined that butchering their harvest must be a grim undertaking but to my surprise, whenever I stepped into the garage, I found them joking and laughing. To be sure, they consumed quantities of beer as they worked, but still. My sons hold that life is no joke, an attitude only partly attributable to inherited German doggedness--their dad was an American of German extraction, while I left Germany as a young woman to settle in California. Both Darold's and my childhoods were joyless, Darold's on account of a bout with polio at age six, which took him for long stretches of time into the isolation of a children's hospital; mine, because of the chaos and hunger of the war- and postwar years. So I was happy to hear my sons' banter. Eventually I saw that their friend Robert is someone with a light-hearted take on life. It proved catching.

Somewhere I read that humans tend to adopt the attitudes of their environment; in other words, the culture that surrounds us largely determines our psychological make-up. Anthropologists have found, the harsher our environment, the more fearful we become, mistrusting fellow humans as well as the gods we blame for our blight. This is true even for variables like smoking and obesity: if your family and friends are smokers, you'll become a smoker yourself; if they are obese, chances are good, you'll gain weight also. It's not just "monkey see, monkey do." Getting along in society mandates a certain amount of conformity. Perhaps this means that, to the extent possible, we should make rational decisions about whose company we keep.

I am happy to report, a sense of humor can be contagious as well, at least for the duration of the time you spend in company with a light-hearted person. My son's friend, although a regular Joe, seems such a person. He and his family live in a dusty town in California's Central Valley, a region is plagued with rising unemployment with attending rise in crime; still, he and his wife have managed to save toward their two daughters' college education, provided it includes attending a two-year college before moving on to university.

I had lost track of Robert until he showed up at my house but remember that, when they were fourteen and Robert was friends with our youngest, he got hold of a bottle of booze. The boys indulged to the point of staggering around a country road whence they were picked up by police. My husband, an attorney, was mortified. My son tells me Robert thought I must have forgotten the incident, else I would have harried him about it, but in truth, so much sad and tragic stuff happened in the interim, like Darold's descent into mental illness and death, I was glad for the laughter Robert brought with him.

The four hunters, having returned home with their harvest, left some antelope meat in my freezer. More importantly, they left behind a handful of congenial memories. It makes me hope they'll be back.