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MINDFUL CARNIVORE

interview with a vegan-turned-hunter

BY SARAH SWENTY, MANAGING EDITOR

Now and again a book enters the collective and shifts the national conversation from black and white to the shades of gray in which the world truly exists. *The Mindful Carnivore* is a book that we at *Cooking Wild* hope will do just that in 2012. Managing Editor Sarah Swenty recently had a conversation with author Tovar Cerulli regarding his journey from angler to vegetarian and vegan and then to hunter.

COOKING WILD: The road from angler to vegan to hunter is one that you document in your book. Why did you write it?

TOVAR CERULLI: I wrote the book because I had a sense that my perspective, having gone from veganism to hunting, might be both interesting and helpful to people. My main goals are to raise questions about our relationships with food and animals in particular, and hopefully to spark conversations that are different, perhaps a little more nuanced than those

that have been going on for a long time.

Many others have written on these topics, and they have been invaluable resources for me in my thinking, writing and living.

On the surface, the viewpoints and values of vegetarians and hunters are extremely different. Below that apparent clash, though, I've found that many of us have a fair amount in common. I think there's potential for a voice like mine, and others, to bridge a cultural gap that looks extreme to the outsider.

CW: What inspired you to become a vegan and then to become a hunter? Were there parallels?

TC: My initial impulse to become a vegetarian, then a vegan, was threefold: health, concern for animals and concern about planetary health. The rigidity of my views was softened when I realized that both animals and ecology are impacted by agriculture. Even if I was buying and

growing local organic produce, there was still harm being done, especially to animals like deer and woodchucks. That recognition didn't convince me to abandon my vegan diet but it knocked me off my ethical high horse.

The shift back to being a vegetarian and then an omnivore was motivated by health concerns. I wasn't severely ill but I lacked energy, and both my doctor and my wife, who was studying nutrition, had concerns about my health.

Like my decision to become a vegan, my shift toward hunting was rooted in my feelings about animals and ecology and nature. If I was going to be eating animals, I wanted to take some first-hand responsibility for that. I wanted to be directly involved, rather than having all the killing done by proxy. If I succeeded in killing a deer, that food would come at virtually no ecological cost, from an animal who lived a truly free-range life and who, ideally, died instantly, without suffering.

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I also saw hunting as a potential way to have a more interactive, participatory relationship with the hills and valleys that I live in, to pay attention to different things in different ways.

CW: How do you feel about the transition and being a hunter now?

TC: I feel comfortable with being a hunter, although I remain ambivalent about the act of killing. I find it very intense and powerful. But it feels somehow appropriate, given my diet. It also feels appropriate given the uncomfortable reality of the many impacts I have simply by being alive and part of modern society. In hunting I've come face to face with one of those impacts. It's a very real reminder to me that I have impacts as a living creature. I'm never going to be able to take responsibility for all my impacts, but for me hunting is one way to confront some of that discomfort.

And when I'm successful, it's really high-quality food. Eating it, I'm never forgetful of where it came from. I can't pull a package of venison out of the freezer without thinking about precisely how it got there. That's a big piece of what the hunt is for me. So much of what we eat, we don't know where it came from, or we just don't think about it.

There are also things I really enjoy about hunting and appreciate for themselves. Simply sitting quietly watching the woods, or having the chance to hunt with someone else I really enjoy as a person and hunter, or being able to share stories from the field, these are pleasures all their own.

CW: You discuss the contradictions conjured by the use of the word hunter — reverent vs. redneck — and go on to detail the “complicated place in the American psyche” that hunters have had from the beginning. Where did you get your information, and could you share some insights you learned from your research?

TC: Partially I drew on my own mixed experiences, feelings and ideas about hunting and hunters. I also drew on the kinds of historical, sociological and cultural perspectives offered by books like Daniel Herman's *Hunting and the American Imagination*, Jan Dizard's *Mortal Stakes*,

and Ted Kerasote's *Bloodties*. I was also influenced by Kerasote's essay, “Restoring the Older Knowledge.” In that essay, he calls for a more mindful and reverent practice of hunting.

One thing I learned is that it's tricky and dangerous to draw strict lines between the good hunter and the bad hunter, the meat hunter and the sport hunter, the reverent hunter and the careless hunter. Those lines only exist in our minds and in our language. When you meet real people, you find that things are a lot more complicated than black and white, good and bad.

CW: You quote Canadian wildlife biologist Valerius Geist who phrased a shared mentality: “I no more hunt to kill deer than I garden to kill cabbages.” As you state, it's not simply a matter of procuring food. Could you talk more about that statement?

TC: I think Geist is pointing out that — like gardening — the process of hunting, the practice of hunting, is complex. Just as gardening has many more dimensions than just harvesting the cabbage, hunting has many more dimensions than just the act of killing the deer for food. Both gardeners and hunters will tell you that what they do has many layers of meaning. The relationship with the soil or the forest, the attention that goes into the entire process, the people you share it with: all these things matter.

CW: At the end of the book you state that hunting would not put you on the high road to moral certainty but instead bring you face to face with ambiguity every time. How do reconcile yourself to that ambiguity?

TC: I'm not sure that I really have reconciled myself to the moral ambiguity of hunting. That's part of why I hunt. I no longer trust any simplistic moral framework when it comes to food and human interactions with animals. I don't think there's any simplistic framework that holds much water.

In the book, I use a quote from Barry Lopez's book *Arctic Dreams*. Lopez says that humans face a basic dilemma: As conscious creatures, we want to live a moral and compassionate existence yet we are also aware of the violence inherent in the natural world and in our own interac-



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tions with that world. Lopez contends that no culture has ever fully resolved that dilemma.

I don't think it's any accident that, for most of human existence, hunting has been surrounded by ritual and ceremony. Ritual and ceremonial practices frequently occur in places where people are uncomfortable, where things are mysterious or ambiguous. I think that the harming and killing of animals, especially large mammals, has almost always been a place of moral ambiguity for humans.

CW: Do you think that our lack of ritual is one of the challenges we face in America?

TC: Yes, I think our lack of ritual is one of the challenges we face as modern hunters. In North America today, some hunters do have deeply meaningful rituals. I have a friend up in Canada who is Dakota. He has a ritual tradition with deep cultural roots, a tradition that surrounds many things, including hunting. Many of us in modern America don't have that kind of tradition. Our ancestors almost certainly had it, but it's not a living tradition for most of us.

As modern hunters, I think most of us either tend to suppress the moral questions that arise in killing or we just try to live with them. Either we make a decision that the killing is OK and move forward from there, or we try to live with it, without a meaningful ritual process.

I don't personally have any grand ceremony or practice. I make a few simple gestures, but I don't do anything elaborate. If I tried to make up some kind of fancy ceremony, for me that would feel phony. It would lack a deeply rooted cultural context.

If I get lucky in November and kill a deer, I know to expect that there's going to be a period of time, maybe a couple of days, where I am in a kind of altered state mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

CW: Your book is not merely the story of your journey and relationship with food. There is so much in here about family and friends, love and loss, historical facts interspersed with the drama of the hunt. With all that and more, what do you hope readers will take away as they turn the final page?

TC: I hope that readers will recognize that there are ways for them to deepen their relationships with food and with the natural world, wherever they live and whatever they eat.

And it's true that it's not just an individual relationship. It's not me as a single human involved with my food and nature alone. I think that's a very American idea — that focus on individualism. In reality, we are always relating to our food as a family, as a group of friends, as a culture. Those contexts are helpful to be aware of, too — whether it helps us to join in more consciously or to buck a trend.

I also hope to influence public conversations about hunting. I'm not a hunting evangelist trying to convince others to go hunting. But I would like to bring greater nuance to our discussions and attitudes about hunters and hunting, nuance that I completely lacked some years ago. 