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A Look at Life *from a* Deer Stand

Steve Chapman



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My dedication and thanks for giving me a reason to write this book go to the following folks in my life:

- To P.J. and Lillian Chapman, my parents, for trusting me in my younger years with an activity that has its dangers.
- To Kenneth Bledsoe for taking me on my first hunt in 1964.
- To Annie, my wife, for “making me” go to the woods from time to precious time.
- And to my arrows, Nathan and Heidi, for keeping me straight.



Contents

Foreword

Introduction

1. First to Last
2. The Ultimate Sacrifice
3. The Arrow and the Bow
4. The Doing of This Thing
5. He's Comin', Daddy
6. The Vapor
7. The Chase
8. Limitations
9. Open to Suggestions
10. A Still Small Sound
11. Sunrise
12. Blood Bond
13. The Appearance
14. Lost and Found
15. Things Aren't Always As They Seem
16. God Will Repay
17. Scars of Love
18. The Great Surprise
19. The Cry
20. The Line on the Wall

Notes

Discography / Contact the Author

A Look at Life from a Deer Stand Study Guide

About the Author

Foreword

In many ways I knew Steve Chapman before I ever met him. In 1985 I became acquainted with his music. I'll never forget the first time I heard Steve and Annie sing their popular song "Turn Your Heart Toward Home". Its message to the families of America is powerful, and to this day I find myself humming the song and thinking about its words. I've since become a big fan of Steve and Annie Chapman's music.

Though our careers are much different, Steve and I have several common bonds that draw us together. Certainly our love for the family and the joy we share in knowing Jesus Christ as our Savior are paramount. However, the thing that caused us to finally meet and become friends was our mutual love and respect for the white-tailed deer. Not long ago we spent an afternoon kicking around on our farm, looking at whitetails and talking about deer hunting. Steve's made a name for himself with his music, but I don't know if I've ever met a more avid whitetail hunter. The mere mention of whitetail puts a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye.

So when Steve asked me to write the foreword for this book, I was more than curious (and excited) about what the book would be like. His title intrigued me and, knowing his gift for writing, I was anxious to see the manuscript. Suffice it to say, I couldn't put it down. I was struck by Steve's unique and wonderful way of communicating his deer-hunting experiences and his outlook on life. At times I found myself roaring with laughter. Other times I sat thinking about the serious side of his words. His words that vividly illustrate how I can become a better person, a better father, a better husband... the things that matter most in life. He makes me think. The man is a breath of fresh air, a living and breathing gift from God. Blending "down-home" (or should I say "backwoods"?) humor and candor, Steve has masterfully written down many of the things we as hunters think about while sitting on a deer stand.

You're in for a real treat. But be forewarned: This is not your typical deer-hunting book. No, it will not tell you how to kill the biggest buck in the woods. But it might change your life. It is a powerful work from one of the country's top songwriters. When I finished the last page of the manuscript, I gazed out the window and pondered what I had just read. Over and over one thought kept coming back to me: *A Look at Life from a Deer Stand* should be mandatory reading for every deer hunter in America. It's that good!

Charles J. Alsheimer
Field Editor, *Deer and Deer Hunting*



Introduction

The dry, fallen leaves lightly crunched on the ground behind the tree I was perched in, and my heart started to race. I knew that sound. It was not a squirrel or a busy chipmunk stirring about there. The sound was unique. I had heard it before. I didn't move a muscle, even though everything within me wanted to shift my body to take a look. I fought my instincts and sat motionless, gripping my compound bow in my nervous hand and rehearsing the steps to pull to a full draw.

It seemed like an hour before I heard the next step, though I knew that less than a minute had passed. These situations always make life seem longer. I turned my eyes in their sockets as far right as I could and hoped for movement. Sure enough, I saw a form move and then stop. As slowly as a shadow on a sundial, I rotated my head and looked down. Eighteen feet below my treestand stood the creature I had been waiting for. It was an eight-point white-tailed buck deer. What a rush!

My wait to spot such a magnificent creature had not begun that morning 30 minutes before daylight. Instead, my vigil started the day hunting season had ended the year before. I was, to put it honestly, addicted to the rush of excitement I felt in that moment. Getting close enough to hear the cautious footsteps of one of the smartest animals on the earth is absolutely intoxicating. Add to that ingredient an attempt to inflict the animal with a fatal wound using a primitive weapon like a bow and arrow, and you have the makings of adrenaline pie. I was loving it!

That morning, the unsuspecting buck moved about five more yards ahead and was then beyond my tree. His body language told me that he was not unusually cautious. He was being his normal careful self. That signified to me that he didn't know I was there. He intermittently looked on down the ridge and then dropped his head to search the forest floor for acorns.

I had done some thorough preseason scouting and figured he would pass on my left where the trail was. I am a right-handed shooter, so I set up to accommodate my type of shot. However, years of experience had taught me one sure thing: It's impossible to consistently predict a deer's movements, and you can never be totally certain about his habits. This buck was proving me right. Because of my position, I had to make some adjustments before I could shoot my bow. I had to stand and shift my entire body slightly to the right, which involved the risk of being detected. I knew that anything could happen—from my treestand squeaking to my hat falling off. I had no choice, however. I had to stand up.

With every ounce of control I could summon, I tightened my already-tense leg muscles and slowly, yet quietly, began to stand up. I moved only when the deer's head was behind a tree, concealing his eyes. My legs trembled some as I stood, but it didn't surprise me. I had dealt with that before. I knew the challenge of "buck fever." This level of excitement has been known to cause heart attacks in some hunters. Why should a little trembling of the body not be expected? Finally, I was standing. So far, so good!

The buck had not seen me, and I watched him take a few more casual steps. He was about six feet right of my 20-yard yellow ribbon marker that I had hung from the branch of a sapling. It was an ideal distance for my ability. I quietly connected my mechanical release to the string and waited for the right moment to raise my bow to a drawing position. I also reminded myself that white was the color of the 20-yard pin mounted to my sights.

With my stance finally in position, my upper body was about to be put to the test. My arms and back muscles had to pull the string back, which was set at 63 pounds pull weight. As pumped as I was

one would think it would feel like 63 ounces. Not so! In that scenario, it felt as if I were pulling back on a tightly wound piano string. I couldn't believe how my arms shook as I attempted full draw. It had been much easier back on the practice range. I felt embarrassed at how hard it was.

As if being instructed by an outdoor-magazine photographer, the eight-point turned broadside as I searched for him in my peep sight. *This is too easy*, I thought. I lined up the white pin on his vital area and began the slight finger pressure on the trigger of the release. *Stop!* The target moved. He took three large steps and suddenly was standing behind a large oak. All I could see was his head and his rear. His vitals were protected by a ton of the hardest timber in the woods. I held at full draw another 20 to 30 seconds and finally succumbed to the loss of strength.

As I let the bow limbs relax, something awful happened. The aluminum arrow that was sliding across the vinyl-coated prongs of the rest somehow jumped out and banged against the riser of the bow. The metal-on-metal "click" sound that it made would hardly have been noticeable on the practice range, but in the woods it sounded like the crack of a baseball bat at Wrigley Field. The buck immediately detected the source of the noise, and the white warning flag went up. The dirt flew as he dug into the soft ground under the leaves, and as quickly as he had come, he was gone. Also missing were some valuable possessions of mine like pride, ego, happiness, and confidence. I was hurt!

Though the buck ran off and left me frustrated and disappointed, he didn't take with him my ability to learn. As a result of that morning, I now have mounted on the riser of my bow a patch of soft, self-adhesive moleskin material—the type one uses to doctor their feet. I at least was able to add one more important lesson to the long list of dos and don'ts required to be successful in taking whitetail. Experience is indeed the best teacher.

Such is deer hunting. Every time I walk into the woods, I learn something new. It really is one of the joys of the activity. While some people would be absolutely bored out of their minds sitting for hours hoping to get close to a deer, I find that it is full of fathomless fun. Unlike the pilot that said "Flying is hours and hours of boredom interrupted by moments of stark fear," deer hunting is hours and hours of sweet anticipation graced with moments of incredible excitement.

Though it may be difficult at times to justify an activity not necessary for most of us in the modern age, there are some practical benefits that can be enjoyed from hunting the whitetail. For example, venison is a wonderful food source. I readily admit that meat for the table is much cheaper (and more easily obtained) at the local market. My wife, Annie, has calculated that the cost of venison can range from 5 dollars a pound for a local deer in Tennessee to 13 dollars per pound for a western deer. Of course, my response—and I'm sure you've used this argument at one time or another—is that the meat is lean and good for the heart.

Another helpful contribution to many of us is the needed break from our busy lifestyles that hunting provides. The mental medicine is very effective and comes much less expensively than what one can get on the psychiatrist's couch.

Besides the healthy meat and the healing therapy of simply being in the wild, there is one other benefit I have gleaned from deer hunting. I call it the "harvest of truths." While it's a fact that each time I go out I learn something new about a hunting tactic or a technical improvement to my equipment, there are greater lessons about life that I have "bagged" that are now mounted on the walls of my heart. These trophies are a result of the "think time" that hunting yields. Those hours of waiting were never wasted as I sat and observed the nature that surrounded me and studied the process of hunting. Some amazing parallels between what happens in the woods and what takes place in life have been discovered during those hours of silence. For example, on the morning described above, I found that my equipment needed certain adjustments to function more effectively. In the same way, I have

come upon needed changes in my life that have made me better equipped to accomplish other tasks. Areas like being a husband and father, or a laborer and a friend have needed slight “tuning” from time to time. The pages that follow are a collection of these discoveries, as well as some modifications to my life that came about because of the valuable lessons I learned from being a hunter.

I have a feeling that if you are a hunter too, some of the “truths” I have found while hunting deer will be familiar. Perhaps there are some life-altering lessons you have drawn from being in the woods that I am yet to apply. (Just give me time!) If you’re not a woodsman or woodsperson, this writing may still interest you because there is so much to learn “out there.” So, come along. Let’s go hunting and we’ll take a look at life from a deer stand.



First to Last

Have you ever noticed that there is something about “firsts” that intrigues us all? We find ourselves spellbound by them, and for some reason we focus on them and often refer to firsts as the highlights of our lives. Consider the importance we place on the following:

Firstborn
First step
First word ever spoken
First grade
First date
First kiss
“First time ever I saw your face”
First car I ever owned
First man on the moon
First cup of coffee
First impression

On and on the list could go. As I pondered our affection for firsts, I began to realize that we are drawn to these initial events because they seem to have a unique ability to set the course for the journeys we take, whether good or bad.

In my 30-plus years of avid hunting, I still look back at my first morning in the woods as my most favorite outdoor experience. To this day I truly believe it put me on a path which I hope to travel as long as I’m able to get around. Maybe you have a fond memory of a similar experience that set you on the same course.

For me, the journey began when I was 14 years old. My dad was pastor of a church in the rolling hills of West Virginia, and among the members of his congregation was a gentleman named Kenneth Bledsoe. One Sunday after the service, he invited me to join him on a squirrel hunt the following Saturday. I could hardly wait for the end of the week to come. Finally, Friday came and my folks took me to his home. It sat along a rural highway on top of a ridge surrounded by gently rolling hills. His land was graced with large patches of woods and beautiful meadows. It was the middle of October and all the leaves on the trees were ablaze with incredible autumn colors. The red, brown, orange, and yellow hues seemed to glow in the bright sun with an invitation to simply stand in awe of God’s ability to paint a scene. The view that spread out before us was like a huge canvas, and we were fortunate to be living creatures on it.

I went to bed that night and quickly drifted off into a deep slumber. Little did I know that from that evening on, I would never go to sleep so easily on the night before a hunt. For the rest of my life the anticipation of a repeat of the morning to follow would always make me anxious for the alarm sound.

At 5:30 A.M. we were sitting down and having breakfast. It hadn’t happened often that I was up at that hour. Perhaps Easter sunrise service or leaving early to drive with my folks to Grandma’s house

were the only reasons you would find me up before daylight. But there I was, wide-awake with anticipation and already dressed for the day.

In the dim light of the carport, Kenneth handed me the gun he had shown me how to use the night before. It was a .22/20 gauge over and under masterpiece. He put a half dozen 20-gauge shells in my hand, and we walked across the paved road at the end of his driveway and headed down a hillside into the darkness of the woods. My friend knew his way very well through the forest. Nearly every step of the way, he gave me instructions that would ensure our safety. When we came to the first fence, he held out his hand to take my gun. He said, "Never cross a fence while holding your gun. Too many guys have died that way." Also, he warned me about choosing my steps carefully in the dark. He said, "Falling with a gun is no fun, especially for those around you!"

I was getting my first safety course that day, and I felt secure with such a veteran hunter as Kenneth. I couldn't have chosen a better teacher. Many times throughout my hunting life, I have applied the lessons I learned that morning. Years later, when I finally did take an official hunter safety course here in Tennessee with my son, I was amazed at how much ground had already been covered by my friend who had never seen the textbook. Someone had taught him well, and I was grateful that the heritage was handed down to me.

About 20 minutes before daylight, we stopped by a large oak. Kenneth took his foot and with his big boot he scraped away the dry leaves on the forest floor to reveal an area of dark, soft ground about three feet wide and three feet long. He said softly, "You'll need a quiet place to sit. You don't want to be making a lot of noise while you hunt. You're in the critters' territory. They know sounds. Unfamiliar noises are a sign of danger to them. Now, have a seat here and try to move only when it's time to take a shot." Then, as if I were being left on a deserted island, he walked up the hill behind me and out of sight. Just before he left, he whispered, "I'll be around the hill. Stay here till I come back and get you."

It was the next 30 to 40 minutes that forever sealed the joy of hunting in my heart. There I sat outside, under a tree as the world came to life. Creatures began to respond to the rays of the sun that crept over the top of the ridge. With each passing minute, an excitement started to build inside me. I heard all kinds of sounds I had never heard before. Crows were cawing in the distance, speaking an unknown language. Leaves were mysteriously rustling on the ground somewhere nearby, a hoot owl made its call, and an amazing variety of birds began to sing their tunes. Like a city going to work, the animals that didn't work the night shift (like raccoons and possums) began their foraging for food. It was absolutely amazing to me that such a kingdom existed and that I was sitting in the middle of it.

All my five senses seemed heightened that first morning. The wonderful taste of an early breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and jam that Evelyn Bledsoe had prepared still lingered on my tongue. The crisp cool October air felt refreshing on my skin. The scene of the growing light made me grateful for my eyesight, and my hearing was experiencing a virtual orchestra of new sounds. For a young city slicker like me, I found the experience brought a sense of great joy. For some odd reason, however, the fifth of the senses that was blessed seemed to be the one I remember the most. It was the incredible smell of the autumn woods. There is no other aroma like it in the world. There's no way to explain it. To this day, the smell of the forest floor triggers more memories and a stronger desire to head to the woods than any of the other senses.

An hour must have passed as I sat there. I never did see a squirrel. Perhaps I shifted around more than I should have and scared them off. Also, it's possible that a dozen squirrels may have scurried right above me in the canopy of branches and I just didn't see them. I was still sitting in my quiet spot that Kenneth had prepared for me at the base of the tree when suddenly I got a tap on the shoulder.

made a shiver race up my spine that took years to go away. It's a wonder I didn't fire the gun I was holding across my lap. I quickly turned around to see the bear before it ate me and felt greatly relieved to see it was Kenneth standing there. He saw what he had done to me and chuckled as he softly said, "The hunt is over."

"How did you do that? I never heard you coming!" I said in much too loud a voice for the great hunter.

He simply whispered, "I can teach you to do that." And so he did. On the way back to the house, he began to teach me the art of stalking through the woods. He showed me how to pick a place void of fallen twigs, put the toe down first, and then set the rest of the foot down gently. He instructed me not to forget to stop often and keep the eyes moving like radar across the woods. The techniques gleaned from his seasoned wisdom that morning have yielded some impressive mounts that hang on my walls today.

That first morning in the woods opened a door to a whole new world and left pleasant and permanent tracks in my memory. When you think about your initial hunt, there's a lot more to it than one has time to share. Yet, all who hunt will cherish the "first," and it will always hold its rightful place in your thoughts. I know this is true, because there is a head mount hanging over our son's fireplace. It's a white-tailed deer. The six-point rack is not large, but the plaque beneath it makes it look like a huge deer. It reads, "Nathan's First Deer."

My first deer had even a smaller rack, but was nonetheless important. I had it mounted, and it still brings just as much joy as the six-by-six elk rack I brought home from Montana. The memory is so sweet. I'll never forget that day. Not only did I enjoy taking my first whitetail, but there were other firsts that I treasure.

For example, my very first ride in a four-wheel-drive vehicle took place the morning of my first deer hunt. It was frightening, but I survived it. The driver was an elderly gentleman whose flame was fueled by the fear in his passengers. He seemed to be intoxicated by the challenge of getting the olive-green used Army-issue jeep up that steep West Virginia mountain. I repented of every sin I could think of, and even started in on the sins of my friends as we bounced up "death road."

Another first I experienced that day is what is known as a "drive." It's a hunting tactic used most often in the later part of the season to push the deer out of the dense brush into the open woods by driving them with a line of hunters walking through the thickets. A deer usually heads for the low gap in the ridgeline called a "saddle," and that's where I was standing when I took my first shot at a buck. What an incredible moment it was. It's as exciting to think about it now as it was when it happened. It's a memory you share, you understand the rush of feelings I can still remember years later.

Also, with the help of my host, Max Groves, I gutted a deer for the first time. (I should say "field dressed" the deer for those who are squeamish.) It's a disgusting but necessary process.

That wonderful day ended with another first. Mrs. Groves prepared the evening meal using venison that I had "harvested." It was a gastronomical jubilee! She panfried the backstrap and then made gravy to pour over it. She graced the tender meat with mashed potatoes, green beans, corn, hot yeast rolls, and a steaming pot of fresh-brewed coffee. (If you can, please try not to drool on these pages.)

It is true that we humans are enamored with firsts. However, as wonderful as they are, I do have one problem with them. The fact that there are firsts indicates that there will come a last. A beginning represents an ending that must follow. It would be hard to number how many mid-morning departures from a deer stand I have dreaded to make. With a reluctance that tempts me to forsake all other responsibilities, many times I have stood up, gathered my gear, and headed to the truck. I often whisper to myself as I'm walking away, "All good things must end!" As much as I would like to b

able to, I can't keep the curtain from falling on a great day afield.

~~Life is a lot like a day in the woods. It has a beginning and an end. We take the alpha with the omega. The firstborn will leave home. Someday there'll be a final step. There'll be a last kiss, a last word, a graduation, a good-bye, a sunset, and—brace yourself—there'll even be a last hunt. When will it be? Who knows?~~

What we do with all that is between the crib and the casket is an awesome opportunity and an incredible responsibility. Maybe some of us have deviated from the course that had a great and worthwhile beginning. Maybe we have forgotten our “first love.” Perhaps some of us have given so much attention to other interests that we have forgotten how much we would enjoy an autumn sunrise or a quiet November deer stand. How easy it is to get caught up in the cares of this life and forget to go “outside.”

For some of us, there are other things besides hunting that had a wonderful and true beginning but because of various distractions, we have forgotten how to enjoy them. For example, how long has it been since we enjoyed a date with a spouse that resembles the first date? What about those first hours with a new baby? Have we hugged our children like that since? Perhaps a friendship needs to be rekindled. For some of us, maybe it's been a long time since we communed with our Father in heaven the way we did when we first gave our lives to Him.

May I suggest that you stop for a moment and take in a deep breath? In the way that the smell of an autumn morning brings back the precious memory of a first hunt, perhaps you could catch the aroma of another part of life that had a wonderful beginning. I pray that if you do, you will once again enjoy it. May you do so before time slips up behind you, taps you on the shoulder, and says, “The hunt is over.”



22 15

The Ultimate Sacrifice

If you are a serious hunter like me, I know you have come to understand the word *sacrifice*. The list of things one must give up in order to fill the big game tag attached to a hunting license is significant. Yet, because of the thrill of a challenge, deer hunters press on and willingly pay the price. It's a form of rigid self-discipline that has its rewards. However, a problem can arise when other people are pulled into the river of our sacrifices.

I vividly recall one hunt when I was a teenager that two gentlemen had a right to regret. It involved the father and a brother of the girl I would eventually marry. I met Annie in 1963 in junior high school. I was 13 years old and she was 12. (It was love at first sight—for Annie!) Later on, at 16 and 15 years of age, we were in different grades, but we did share one class together: the school choir.

One November day in the chorus room, Annie began telling me about the deer her brother had taken on her dad's farm. When I perked up, she was delighted. Little did I know that she had a "crush" on me, and that my immediate interest in the deer story was possibly a key that could unlock love's door. She hinted that I might be welcome to hunt on the farm, so I seized the moment and asked her if her brother might be willing to put me in the stand where he had experienced success. Annie responded with a cautious yes. Not wanting to miss a golden opportunity, I set a time to be there and spent the rest of the week dreaming about the upcoming hunt.

Sleep is definitely high on the list of things that hunters sacrifice. When the next Saturday finally came, the alarm roused me from my warm bed at 2:30 A.M., and I was out the door and on my way to the Williamson farm by 3:30. The real reason for my early departure was I was afraid I wouldn't be able to find their farm in the predawn darkness. And it would have been tragic to have missed such a grand hunting opportunity. Therefore, giving up my sleep in order to arrive there at the right time seemed the safe thing to do. As it turned out, I drove up their lane around 3:45 A.M. Not wanting to disturb anyone that early, I sat in the car for a few moments trying to decide whether or not to go to the front door. Everything seemed so calm. I hated to be a bother. I was hoping a light would come on and signal me that they were aware of my presence. Still, no one stirred.

Being driven, however, by the prospects of a large buck passing under that treestand, I cast aside my politeness, exited the car, and walked up to the porch and approached the door. I gave it an old-fashioned knuckle knock. Nothing happened. I waited a few cold minutes, then tried again. No response. I rapped one more time with vigor and—aha!—the lights snapped on. About a minute later I heard the locks turn from the inside. The door slowly opened to reveal an older man who I assumed was Annie's father. He looked a little bewildered and rather concerned.

Feeling pretty awkward, I quickly introduced myself and felt relieved to see him put the pieces together and realize that I was Annie's guest. I said, "Annie told me that your son has agreed to take me to his favorite treestand this morning. I sure do appreciate it, and I'm ready to go." He gave me a "Do-you-know-how-early-it-is?" look and then said, "Have a seat and I'll get my son up."

In a few minutes a younger man came into the living room. He seemed like the quiet type, and was rubbing his eyes. He simply said, "Let's go." Justifiably so, Annie's brother was not too pleased to partake in my sacrifices and, regretfully, in all my excitement to "bag" a big one, I was unable to detect his suffering.

Comfort is another item that hunters trade for the taste of venison. Annie's dad had briefly given up a warm bed to answer the door. However, his son and I were about to make a greater sacrifice. The temperature was around 15 degrees, and the windchill put it in a dangerously frigid range. Any sweat we worked up as we trudged along in silence immediately froze on our clothing. Our lungs also paid a price as we climbed the hill toward the ridge. We had left the house around 4 A.M., and by 4:30 we were standing at the base of the tree looking up at the stand. After making sure that I had safely climbed the wooden steps that were nailed to the forks of the tree and was standing securely on the plywood platform, my host left me in the dark. As I watched the dancing beam of his flashlight disappear into the distance, I had no idea that I was about to face a near-death experience.

Being somewhat naive in my career as an outdoorsman, I had not yet learned the effectiveness of layering my clothes. When I had tumbled out of bed that morning, I had thrown on one of the thickest sweatshirts I could find, two pairs of pants, a coat, and a pair of my dad's thin work gloves.

In those days, blaze orange had not yet been introduced to the hunting community, so hunters wore reds and other bright colors. I knew that safety was a factor, so I did the best I could. I borrowed my dad's yellow rain suit, which fit loosely over my clothing, and at least I felt safer. However, I had not counted on one problem. The frigid air made the plastic brittle, and every time I moved I sounded like breaking glass, so I had to remain as motionless as possible. Consequently, the warming effect of moving around could not be enjoyed and I quickly became quite cold and miserable. The frightening thing was that it was around 5 A.M., nearly two hours before daylight.

Time had literally frozen too. It came to a standstill because the cheap watch I was wearing had stopped working around 4:40 A.M. It just couldn't operate in such cold weather. As a result, the encouragement that came from checking the time and anxiously awaiting the sun's first rays was sadly lost.

As the pain began to set in, I thought about abandoning my treestand and leaving. It was only 5:30 A.M. (I guessed.) However, I couldn't do it. I didn't dare take the risk of the Williamsons seeing me drive away and turning their sacrifices into a worthless effort. Also, I couldn't go back to the car, start it up, get warm, and then return to the stand. I knew I would never be able to find it again. I was stuck.

I wiggled my toes and fingers inside my boots and gloves. I tried flexing different muscles and then relaxing them to create some movement in order to warm myself. Nothing seemed to work. Very simply, I was freezing to death. All my burial would require would be to melt me and pour me into a jar. After all these years, I have never experienced a more painful battle with cold weather than I was having that morning.

I'm not sure how I survived to see it happen, but finally the sun began to peek over the ridge. It was a welcome sight. Around 6:45 (I guessed) I was standing in a spotlight of sun rays. Even though the light was slight, I could feel their warmth. It gave me enough hope to press on. By 7:30 (I guessed) I was able to think rationally once again, and I began to recall my purpose for being there. Suddenly, I heard a twig snap. I could feel the adrenaline start to flow, and a bead of perspiration formed on my brow. This was it!

Somehow I knew the twin brother to the buck Annie's brother had taken was coming up the ridgeline. Slowly, I felt for the hammer of the lever action 30-30 that I gripped in my hands. As I prepared for a shot, I mentally began to rehearse the speech I would give at the local hunting club since I would probably receive the award for the biggest rack. Suddenly, out of the mist came the source of the noise. Walking right up to my treestand, my "trophy" looked up at me and said, "See anything this morning? Sorry to bother ya!... Guess I'll be going now...."

What a brutal addition to the discomfort I had endured already! As the unwelcome intruder

crunched away in the frozen leaves, I honestly thought of firing a few angry rounds at his feet just to watch him dance. Instead, I exercised self-control and simply wished that the fleas of a thousand camels would infest his hunting coat.

My sacrifice of sleep and comfort yielded nothing that cold and miserable day in the way of table meat. What's worse, I had involved others in the losses. I will forever appreciate Annie's brother's willingness to guide me that cold morning to the treestand. But I will always regret appearing so selfish as to arrive at such an ungodly hour on a day so bitterly cold that even the watchdogs were not fools enough to leave their warm beds to bark at my car as I drove up the driveway.

The inconveniences and discomfort that I put my future in-laws through that morning years ago were significant. However, they are smallscale when compared to the sacrifices I have been known to require of those now closest to me. I speak of my wife and children. Through time and tears I have thankfully learned that it is unwise and dangerous to drag them into an unbridled and relentless pursuit of the whitetail. If I'm not careful to keep things in balance, I will drown out their appreciation and approval of my interest in hunting.

How many of us have knowingly left behind "deer widows and orphans" for the sake of a hunt? Have we, in our untamed enthusiasm for a close encounter with a whitetail, allowed our families to experience the loss of emotional rest, mental comfort, precious time with their husband and father (or wife and mother), and even the loss of limited financial resources? It is indeed a temptation that is hard to resist. Perhaps some of us, however, have felt the bitter-cold wind of the potential loneliness that would result and have awakened in time to the need to make that critical adjustment to our outdoor lifestyles. Those who have done so know that it is not, by any means, an easy change to make.

I have decided that my wife and children are much more important than any animal, or any fish, or a golf ball, a job, or any other pursuit that would require too much of their lives. By the grace of God, this hunter has come to grips with the fact that while getting close to a whitetail buck is an incredible challenge (which I enjoy with a passion), a much greater challenge is to see how far away from a deer I can get when I realize that pursuing it is costing my family too much. For a hunter, that is the ultimate sacrifice.



The Arrow and the Bow

I really didn't mind that by the time I reached the stand of trees and set up my portable treestand, I was in a drenching sweat. I was happy just to be on that wooded hillside in Cheatham County, Tennessee. At that time in my life, I was a novice bowhunter. I immediately was consumed by it. I knew very little but wanted to learn it all. So I spent days—even weeks—getting ready for the season. I loved every part of it—even the sweat. I had a pawnshop Bear Whitetail compound bow and some arrows I had found at a garage sale.

At the time our children were very young. In fact, one was “in the oven.” Heidi was due in a few months, and Nathan was not yet three years old. I'm not sure how many children it takes to fill the proverbial quiver, but ours was full with two. I am very grateful for them and love them both with all of my heart. Early on in my fatherhood, I had a strong desire to be the best dad I could be, but I couldn't see a mistake I was making. I was allowing my new interest in archery to threaten the time and attention that belonged to my children.

Sitting in that treestand, I waited from sunup till about 9:30 A.M. There was no movement, no noise—just dead silence. I was having a problem staying awake. I know I dozed off several times. In fact, during one snooze that probably lasted 30 seconds but seemed like an hour, I found myself dreaming. When I opened my eyes, all I could see was the ground about 20 feet below. I thought I was falling and it startled me to the point I gasped loudly. I immediately realized where I was and began to laugh.

I needed a way to stay awake, so I took the opportunity to check out my equipment. The compound bow cams, cables, grip, sights, silencers, and the broadhead tip all seemed to be in order. I then eyed the arrow for straightness, and that's when a phrase passed through my head. It sounded so good in my thoughts that I said it out loud: “the arrow and the bow.” Somehow it sounded melodic to me, more so than “bow and arrow.” As a songwriter, I'm always considering how words are metered together, and this phrase grabbed my attention. I thought to myself, “I'd like to use those words in a song someday.”

The woods continued to be totally silent, and the humidity made it feel like I was sitting in a steam room. Under my camo head net, the sweat poured off my forehead and into my eyes. Another annoying challenge to my concentration were the pesky little gnats and mosquitoes that made their high-pitched buzz around my ears and swarmed menacingly around my eyes. I hate that. Every time I deal with those disgusting pests, I have to say, “Thanks, Adam! These nasty creatures are a product of my sin!”

Wishing for more enjoyable thoughts, my attention went back to that phrase “the arrow and the bow.” I began to ponder the meaning, and a sobering analogy came to mind. *The bow is like the parent and the arrow is like the child.* A flood of thoughts followed. First, there will come a day when I'll have to let my children go. Just like I draw back the arrow and release it at the right moment, so should be that I release my children at the right time. I don't look forward to that day, but if things go normally, they'll eventually leave. The “drawing back” starts early in their lives. Second, at what target am I aiming my arrows? If I want their lives to be placed in the center of God's will, then that's where I must aim. What am I doing to help make it so?

Also, am I as the bow rightly tuned and in good working order? And in whose hands am I? Furthermore, am I really willing to let go? I once heard of some parents who learned that their son

desired to go to a foreign mission field. Out of fear for their own welfare and a selfish clinging to the child, they manipulated the situation and blocked the response to the call which God had placed on that young heart. The child eventually chose a vocation unrelated to the mission field. As his feelings of failure and resentment grew, his spiritual life took a dangerous turn. Only then did his parents realize what a terrible mistake they had made to discourage the child from entering the ministry. They were overwrought with regret. I don't want to be guilty of standing in the Lord's way when it comes to His desire for my children's lives. I must be willing to release them to His call. He knows what's best for their lives. Besides, who knows how many lives will be touched with the gospel through our children? There's a saying that states, "You can count the seeds in an apple, but you can't count the apples in a seed." So it is true that we can count the kids in our house, but we'll never know how many children of God will be added to His family as a result of our kids' devotion to Christ.

Also, will I do well at letting them go to another's love? I think of my sweet Heidi. It's going to be tough to let her go to some young twit. Excuse me. I mean some young man. I agree with whoever said, "Giving your daughter away in marriage is like giving a fine, priceless violin to a gorilla!" I don't look forward to the day when the question is asked, "Who gives this bride away?" I hope I am sensible in that moment.

But I must let go. It wouldn't be fair to my arrows to keep them protected in a quiver. To make that mistake would prevent them from fulfilling their purpose. The following is a lyric that was born that morning in my treestand.

The Arrow and the Bow

Here is wisdom for the moms and dads
That time has proven true
The day your children learn to walk
They start to walk away from you.

For at first you hold all of them
Cradled safely in your arms
Then one day their hand is all you'll hold
Then soon it's just their heart.

And there'll even come the time
If your love for them is true
You'll have to let their hearts go free
To let them love
Someone else not only you.

Can the sparrow ever learn to fly
If the nest is all it knows?
Can the arrow ever reach its mark
By remaining in the bow?
You have to let it go.

Here is wisdom for the moms and dads
That time has proven true

The day your children learn to walk
They start to walk away from you.¹

Now my children are older, and fortunately I did listen to better judgment. I backed off in the amount of time I was spending in the field, and instead of losing a closeness to my son, he has now become my hunting buddy. Whenever I buy new equipment, I have to purchase it in pairs, and I do so with pleasure. I also hunt with Heidi, by the way. Her game, however, is a little different. Let's put it this way: Nathan likes to wear hunting clothes; Heidi likes hunting for clothes. The "neat" part of Heidi's hunt is that the game is already hanging and cleaned when we shoot it.

To close, may I suggest a prayer for fathers who hunt:

Oh, Father in heaven

Make me to be a fine-tuned bow in Your hands.

Use my life to make the arrows You have given me
to fly accurately and confidently to the
destination You have chosen.

Help me to bend well under the tension of parenting.

And someday, should that incredible miracle happen,
and You turn my arrows into bows,
may they too understand the act of letting go.

In Jesus' name, amen.



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