

Stories FROM THE Deer Stand

Steve Chapman



HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
EUGENE, OREGON

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STORIES FROM THE DEER STAND

Formerly titled *A Hunter Sets His Sights*

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Published 2013 by Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97402

www.harvesthousepublishers.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chapman, Steve.

[A hunter sets his sights] Stories from the deer stand / Steve Chapman.

p. cm.

Originally published: A hunter sets his sights. Eugene, Or: Harvest House Publishers © 2000.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-7369-4829-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-7369-4830-2 (eBook)

1. Hunting—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Hunting—Anecdotes. I. Title.

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Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 /BP-CF/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To my sweet wife,
Annie,
who most appreciates what I bring
home from the hunter's woods.
I love her with all my heart.*

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Moment of Truth

If you say the words “the moment of truth” to a hunter, more than likely his or her eyes will immediately light up and sparkle with exuberance. Why? Because it describes the thrilling moment when *effort* and *opportunity* converge in the woods or in the field. The *effort* is the work, practice, planning, and strategy a hunter puts into pursuing and outsmarting an elusive creature such as a whitetail deer, bear, elk, or wild turkey. The *opportunity* is the sudden sighting of the game of choice and the nerve-testing realization that it has come close enough to be in range of a shot that might result in taking the trophy home.

One of my unforgettable moments of truth includes the mountains of Montana, two friends, three horses, and a .270 caliber rifle. It also includes one large black bear. In my four decades of hunting, I had never pursued a bear. In fact, I had never even seen one in the wild! For that reason I was especially pumped about heading west for a Spring-time hunt.

On day three of a planned five-day trip, my advance efforts met with opportunity. As my friend Eddy, our guide,

Randy, and I rode horseback into the lower side of a beautiful lush green meadow around midday, we got a fleeting glimpse of a portion of something coal-black in a ditch about 75 yards up the mountain. Randy quietly called us to a halt and quickly put his binoculars to his eyes. Suddenly I heard him say words that made my hands tremble and my breathing rapid.

“Steve, that’s a lone bear, and he’s a nice one. Get your gun and slip up to this tree!”

I hurriedly pulled the rifle out of the scabbard, handed my video camera to Eddy, and joined Randy next to a sizable pine. In the same instant, the bear came up out of the ditch and took a commanding stance facing downhill. As the huge beast stared in our direction, I very slowly raised my .270 and rested it against the solid trunk of the big pine. I placed the crosshairs of the scope just behind the right shoulder of the massive body.

Then, being careful not to allow the safety to make a metallic sound that might spook the animal, I gingerly pushed the lever forward into the firing position with my thumb. The bear stood motionless, still looking toward us. He was slightly quartered enough to reveal a perfect heart shot. As I slowly put pressure on the trigger, effort and opportunity collided.

Ready...Aim...*CLICK!*

Oh, no! I screamed inside my head. *I forgot to chamber a bullet! (And the film is rolling.)* When I had slipped the rifle out of the scabbard I had allowed myself to get so caught up in the excitement that I forgot to work the bolt and load the gun. *Duh!* I quickly loaded the gun.

I hoped the bear hadn’t disappeared. Amazingly, when I resighted, he hadn’t moved. To minimize the movement and

the noise, I chambered a bullet as slowly...and yet as quickly...as I could and once again took aim. I couldn't believe I was about to get a second chance. Within a few long seconds the mountainside roared with the report of my high-powered rifle. Seventy-five yards away the unbelievable result of my personal moment of truth awaited my inspection.

He was huge...as was the cost of the rug that now graces my home! In its now permanent reclined pose, the big black bear stares intently at whoever enters its territory. And his daunting, toothy expression reminds me of the thrilling moment when he and I met in the tall mountains.

The years have yielded miles of hunting yarns that I could spin about other awesome moments just like the one with my first bear. While many of them have ended with the satisfaction of taking home the evidence of success, there is a host of other tales that feature a different type of trophy. Waiting to be found right in the same woods where the animals I love to hunt choose to live are life-changing insights. The *opportunity* to discover these trophies of truth comes when the conscious *effort* is made to look for them. I sincerely enjoy the discovery of truth, and I'm not alone in this quest. Deep in the hearts of many hunters is the desire to find something "out there" that is more than just food for their freezers or impressive wall hangers.

I discovered one "truth trophy" while hunting with my son, Nathan, during his first Tennessee gobbler hunt. The morning was slow in terms of action. After sitting and "calling" in one place for about two hours with no results, we decided to group up with my son-in-law, Emmitt. The three of us would walk and "talk turkey" with my loud box-call. The game plan was to skirt the field edges and about every hundred yards stop and send out an inviting call of a

love-sick hen. Our hope was to connect with an amorous tom that might be hiding back in the timber.

Within 30 minutes, while the three of us slipped along single file at the edge of a narrow field, the connection was made. A mere 50 yards away, just over the crest of the hill and out of sight to our left, an old male turkey responded with a gobble that rattled the earth.

Emmitt had some previous experience with the sudden shock of a gobbling turkey so he knew what to do. He quickly hid himself in the brush, sat down to reduce his silhouette and rested his shotgun up on his knee, ready to shoot. Nathan, however, having never been close to a huge bird and having never been suddenly shaken by its boisterous call, froze at the sound of the bird's big voice. He was paralyzed by the unknown.

Realizing he had no idea what to do, I grabbed my stunned son by his belt and pulled him into the brush. I quickly pointed out a tree for him to lean against, instructed him to sit down and point his gun into the field with his finger on the safety button. A mere minute or so later the brilliant white head of the frisky gobbler appeared in the tall grass about 40 yards away. I quietly whispered (as I thankfully filmed the entire scene), "Whenever you have a shot, take him!" *Boom!* The deal was done.

Emmitt and I had a good chuckle at one of Nathan's comments as we drove home. He admitted, "Dad, I thought at first that this turkey hunting was sort of boring. Sitting for so long with no action, then walking around making weird sounds with a wooden box. It all seemed fruitless...until...until..." and he smiled big as he continued, "I heard that bird let go its gobble. I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest. He was so close, so loud, and so imposing when he came out of the woods at full strut." Then Nathan

said the words I hoped to hear. "Dad, I'm hooked. I definitely want to go again!"

While our turkey hunt had a wonderfully rewarding outcome in that I now add spring turkey season to the time I can spend with my son in the field, something else resulted that is just as great. The three of us saw an encouraging truth hidden in the hunt. There are times in a person's life when, just like the instant Nathan heard the gobbler's intimidating voice and froze, he or she will feel paralyzed by inexperience. A new position at a job, for example, that requires a person to stretch his skill level. Or perhaps buying a first house. Or, though never having faced such an audience, agreeing to teach the children's Sunday school class at church.

When we suddenly face the unknown, we need guidance. We need someone who's been there before to grab us by the belt, so to speak, and pull us into cover and show us the next move to make. And just as Nathan was willing to follow the instruction he was given at that narrow field edge, we would all do well to embrace the life-giving wisdom from those who have already "been down the road." Whether God speaks to us through the people in our lives or talks to us directly through His Word or the Holy Spirit, it is important that we heed His wisdom and put to use the insights He gives us.

I love an exciting moment of truth. And I deeply value the thrill of the moment when truth is discovered while hunting. This book is filled with stories of some of my favorite hunts and the important insights I've harvested while in the woods. It is my hope you will enjoy these tales and discover that each time you go into the great outdoors and set your sights on a wild critter, it is also an opportunity to encounter a life-changing moment of eternal truth. Happy hunting!



The Petrich Method

My son and I made our way to the incredible state of Montana to hunt the mighty elk. We had planned and anticipated the experience with such a high level of excitement that it made the weeks and days prior to our departure crawl by like a snail with a bad limp.

Even though we were scheduled for only five days of hunting, the hunt actually spanned several months. From the day I committed to the trip the previous year, those handful of October mornings and evenings that we were to spend in the Livingston area occupied my thoughts day and night. I was consumed with making the necessary plans to ensure a successful trip. Having never hunted in the type of territory we were going into and not really knowing exactly how to prepare, I filled several pages with notations of what to take, what to do to get ready, and what budget was necessary regarding needed purchases. While the pull of the trigger on our .270s would last only one

intensely exciting moment, getting to that point was a journey I managed to make long and enjoyable.

Having so much time to prepare, however, had an unexpected consequence. It didn't reveal itself until Nathan and I dismounted our horses, Dan and Spook, that first morning at the base of a towering Montana mountain. Within a few minutes after falling in behind our guide, Randy Petrich, I knew we were in trouble. Randy, founder of Rising Son Outfitters, was in his mid- to late-twenties at that time and was raised on the property we were hunting. He had an untold number of climbs under the belt that circled his very fit waist. His strong legs reached for each step with a vigor that was nothing less than frightening. About 100 yards up the trail, Nathan and I looked at each other in the pale, predawn darkness with a certain horror. It was the kind of look that says, "Repent—for soon you will die!"

The kind of effort that was suddenly required of our Tennessee flatland legs left us gasping for breath. Though we had made an attempt at getting in shape before October arrived, our lungs burned, our eyes watered, our calves pulsed, and a disconcerting sweat began to form under our stocking caps. We clutched our rifles and dug the toes of our boots into the dirt and fought to keep up with Randy. I whispered a prayer that our loved ones would not be too saddened when they heard how our hearts had exploded from over-exertion.

What's worse is that all those months of notes I had written regarding equipment needed for the hunt were translated from paper to our backpacks, pockets, and fanny packs. The weight of it all added to the burden of being half in-shape. Here's what we had:

Liquids. In addition to carrying enough water to irrigate the enormous wheat fields we had crossed earlier that morning on horseback, I threw in a couple cans of pop for each of us just for variety.

Food. Let the party begin!

Clothing. An extra set of dry uppers and lowers, as well as extra footwear in the packs. It looked like a Cabelas warehouse back there.

Ammo. Thirty rounds each. You never know when a war might break out!

Miscellaneous items. Cameras, rope, flashlights, knives, extra batteries, small radio, small alarm clock (Not kidding! Wouldn't want to nap through the evening hunt), tracking ribbon, the "Good Book" for midday breaks, rain gear, a space-age survival blanket, binoculars, and by all means...toilet paper.

Medical supplies. Everything from aspirin to emergency cold compresses for my aging and injured knees. Band-Aids, moleskin for the feet, salves, cleansing agents, and other items were tightly stored somewhere in the bottom of my sack. I was ready for any catastrophe. As my heart rate soared to uncharted regions for a man in midlife, the only other thing I was wishing I had packed was a wheelchair. I was sure I would need it.

Only 200 yards into a hike that would turn out to be well over 2.5 miles, I was seriously rethinking the strategy I

had followed in packing for the hunt. As a stream of sweat ran down my right temple and dripped onto my already aching shoulder, I was tempted to do something rash. I thought about dumping everything but my rifle and a couple of bullets. It was the same temptation faced by many of the Appalachian Trail (AT) "through hikers." As they head up that first mountain in the southern state of Georgia in early May to begin conquering the 2150-mile snake that runs to Maine, they do something really strange. They go through a shedding ritual. It's a nearly ceremonial exercise of casting off expensive gear. I've heard if a person wants to equip themselves at no cost with every conceivable piece of hiking and camping equipment known to mankind, just go to the trailhead of the AT in Georgia. There, as you ascend Springer Mountain, it is said that you will find everything from portable stoves to high-tech tents. These items are thrown away by those who realized within that first painful, uphill mile that if the long path ahead of them was to be defeated, they could not proceed under such heavy burdens. As a result, valuable items they thought they would definitely need quickly paled in comparison to their longing for lighter loads. Thus, Springer Mountain is the place to shop!

I began to mentally plunder my pack and consider what I could leave behind. I knew Nathan had to be feeling some level of resentment at his old dad's overdone plan. While I fought to put one foot in front of the other, I was shortening my list of needs. The fact that we weren't terribly far from the horses made the idea of leaving some stuff by the trail seem more attractive by the minute. *It would be easy to find*, I thought. *We couldn't possibly miss a five-foot-high pile of gear, even in the dark.*

As I was about to pull the cord and stop the human train that was puffing up the mountain, I suddenly ran headlong into Randy's back. I had been looking down and must've been praying for mercy when we collided. I apologized for plowing into our young guide, and he just sort of quietly laughed. He didn't say anything at all as he turned from looking at us and stared straight ahead. I thought at first he saw a grizzly or some other hungry monster up on the trail. As I stood there waiting for him to yell, "Run!" I noticed his breathing was normal. He wasn't even the least bit winded. "That's disgusting!" I muttered to myself. Nathan and I, on the other hand, sounded like a couple of handsaws cutting through oak. We just couldn't get enough of that clear, thin air into our lungs that were on fire.

After about 45 seconds of just standing conversationless on the trail, Randy took off again. There was a spring in his step that was disturbing.

Two hundred yards later, he did it again. He suddenly halted and stood with one foot further up the hill than the other. Nathan and I put on the brakes and thanked our Maker that we were still upright. We were grateful for the break.

A third time, after the same distance was covered, Randy stopped again. This time he turned to us and asked, "You guys O.K.?" We didn't respond with words. We just grunted an affirmative. Actually, by doing so, we both lied. *We were not O.K.!* But neither of us were about to admit it. No way! We didn't want our cautious host to think we might have to go back. Instead, we looked at each other with that "don't let Mr. Randy-the-gazelle-guide think we're pansies" look. Without saying anything to one another, my hurting son and I decided that we would keep up with him even if it

damaged our brains (and we were closer to that state than we wanted to admit).

Somehow 30 minutes passed and Nathan and I were still among the living. Also, we were well into our second mile. As the mountain began to receive the morning gift of light from the east, it suddenly dawned on me why we were able to get as far as we did without throwing our cargo overboard. It was a result of what Nathan and I came to call "the Petrich Method." If we were to draw a line from where we were at that moment back to the horses and put a mark at each place Randy Petrich had stopped us for a timely rest, the marks would be equidistant from each other at about 200-yard intervals. I could see the pattern. Climb, rest a minute, climb, rest a minute, and so on. That's how we had done it. Somehow those 45- to 60-second reprieves were all we needed. They allowed us to catch our breaths, recover, and ward off impending doom. They were "power breaks."

I was convinced, though I never did ask Randy if it was true, that his method of gingerly leading "soft" hunters up that mountainside came about as a result of years of listening to the noises made by hurting hunters. Coughing, gurgling, gasping, and vomiting are surefire signs that someone needs a break. Besides, none of that is good for an elk hunt. Foreign sounds and odors can really mess up an exciting pursuit of the highly sensitive elk.

By the time the first day had ended, we not only accomplished a healthy climb, we also put the stalk on a couple of potential "freezer fillers." Though our tags were not filled out when sunset came, we did have the trophy of confidence that when the end of day five rolled around we would be able to say we had conquered the mountains. We

both knew it could be done as long as Randy utilized his wise climbing technique designed for Easterners like us.

Back at the camp, after a great supper at Dena's table, we laid our sore bodies down in the "bunkhouse." And, believe it or not, both of us looked forward to the next morning's 4:30 wake-up call and the muscle massacre we would endure once again on the mountain. On the evening of day two, I met up with a nice 6x6, and Nathan did the same on the fourth day. It was an incredible experience for father and son—and we lived to tell about it. And it could not have been done had Randy not been so kind to our psyches by being gentle on our physiques.

When we returned home, whitetail season was in full swing and our hunting adventures continued. In the fine state of Tennessee, the peaks we must climb are mere bumps compared to the territory we had seen in the West. It was almost humorous to think how quickly we could ascend to the top of our little hills around our county. I even noticed a spring in my steps. It was gratifying.

Since the elk hunt, Nathan and I have had other occasions to practice the Randy Petrich (RP) Method. Some have involved the outdoors. For example, my daughter, Heidi, Nathan, and I went to the Appalachian Trail for a three-day traverse in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The RP method sure was a blessing. Heidi was especially grateful for the one-minute vacations on the steep climbs. She now loves Mr. Randy, too.

Not all opportunities to employ Randy's endurance technique have been on hillsides filled with forest and foliage. Some have been during grueling travel schedules as I hurriedly trotted through places such as O'Hare International Airport in Chicago burdened with my heavy guitar case and

dragging my overstuffed equipment bag. Just to step aside and stop for a brief moment and then continue has helped me arrive at a concert location in a much better frame of mind.

For Nathan and Heidi, it has been during Greek or math classes at college or while facing mountains of homework. It is then that they have enlisted Randy's wisdom. Just to stop, sigh, make a cup of coffee, and look out the window of the dorm can easily make the difference between conquering or conceding a task.

Even Annie, my nonhunting wife, has incorporated Randy's fine method into her life. It was especially important to her as she climbed the emotional mountain of saying farewell to her mother and as she and her five siblings cared for their widowed father until he went to be with the Lord two years later.

At this moment, life may be requiring you to endure a difficult ascent. Does the climb have you completely exhausted, wondering if you can go on? Whatever the mountain you face, remember Randy Petrich and the picture he gives us of the wisdom found in Psalm 37:7: "Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him."

Let God be your guide. He knows when to stop you. He hears when you're gasping for air. He'll know how long to pause, and He'll know when to lead you onward.