

Little Deer and Hunting

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According to the old ones, there was a time long ago when animals and humans lived together on the Earth in peace, harmony and friendship. Then the human people began to increase so rapidly that their settlements threatened to crowd the poor animals out. What was worse, as humans invented bows, blowguns and other weapons; they began to slaughter the animals in an indiscriminate and disrespectful manner. So each tribe of animals came together to decide upon measures for their common safety.

The Deer held a council under their chief, Little Deer. After some talk, they decided to send rheumatism to every hunter who should kill one of them without asking their pardon. The Deer sent notice of their decision to the human people and told them what to do when they should have need to kill one of the Deer tribe.

Now, whenever a hunter shoots a deer, Little Deer, who is swift as the wind, runs quickly up to the spot. Tenderly bending over the blood stains, he asks the spirit of the deer if he or she has heard the hunter ask for pardon. If the reply be "Yes," all is well, and Little Deer goes on his way. If the reply be "No," Little Deer follows the trail of the hunter, guided by the drops of blood on the ground, until he arrives at his cabin. Then Little Deer enters invisibly, striking the hunter with rheumatism, so he becomes, at once, a helpless cripple. This is what the old ones say.

Deer hunting.... early morning sun shining through cold, bare limbed trees.... watching.... listening.... waiting.... my oldest son sitting just down the creek.... deep feeling of oneness.... just being.... thoughts of days and hunts gone by....

"In the old days, the people told the deer they were sorry."

"What, Grandma?"

"In the old days, a hunter told the deer he was sorry."

"Why, Grandma?"

"I don't know. It was just the way."

The first time a deer gave himself to me, I remembered these words of my grandma. As I approached the deer's bleeding body, his eye focused on me before glazing over in death. "Thank you," I said. "Thank you for giving yourself to feed my family, to give us life. Please forgive me. I am poor and ignorant and haven't the right words to say." Turning my gaze to the blue sky I said, "Thank you, Father-of-us-all, for the gift of this one who shed his blood, gave his life that we might live. May I treat this and all your gracious gifts with respect."

Back to the present, I turn slowly to catch a glimpse of my son's orange vest through the underbrush. Will he understand? "Father-of-us-all, help my son to understand that he's not here for sport or for conquest, but to receive a gift. May we all learn to receive your gifts with thanksgiving and respect."