

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: “Do Something Constructive!”

IT WAS JANUARY 16, 2004. The bow-hunting season had successfully come to an end and I found myself in the woods for no other reason than to simply be there. It was the first time in months that I took to the timber while not sleep-deprived and without strained eyes from an overtaxed concentration or a slight headache from forced mental hyper-alertness. I was totally rested. I was delightfully refreshed. It was a long-forgotten joy to simply stroll through the woods with no fear of the consequences of spooking game or starting off that chain reaction of wildlife intruder alert.

With every leaf that crunched under my now carefree heavy footsteps, I felt a growing sense of rejuvenation. As I watched the steam of my breath mingle and disappear into the crisp winter air, I decided to sit down on the stump of a freshly cut oak. I couldn't remember the last time that I felt so filled with peace. As I became mesmerized by the melodically repetitious sounds of the Missouri songbirds, I began to wonder if the stillness could stop time. It was then that the realization of what I was experiencing hit me. It had come full circle. I had finally recaptured the purity and blessedness with which I experienced God through nature as a child.

As I continued to rest upon the remains of the fallen giant of a tree, I had the initial inspiration to write this book. And so I

began to ask myself, “Where do I begin? How does one start to write a book about so many experiences and so many lessons learned? What is the purpose of such a book? Why should I even attempt to write it? After all, I’m not a noted author, and in regards to the outdoors, I’ve never caught a world-record fish or taken a record-book animal. What do I have to offer the reader? There have been lots of books written about hunting and fishing techniques and stories of remarkable outdoor adventures. There are volumes written on humorous mishaps and philosophical insights in regards to hunting and fishing. Where will I fit in?”

Those were just some of the questions that plagued me as I began to consider this project. Most of all, I was initially a bit nervous about what people may think about me writing such a book. I didn’t want to come off as some sort of egomaniac who’s written a book in praise of himself, glorifying all the things he’s done, or as a priest who has his priorities terribly confused.

As these matters continued to trouble me, I thought back to my first year of college. On one occasion I attended an open mike night where students and some faculty read their short stories and poems to the curious folks in attendance. I remember watching how the presenters would rather pompously stroll up to the microphone and deliver their “art,” which was usually filth-ridden stories about their devious sexual exploits or a poem reflecting some nonsensical drug induced banter. After dumping their intellectual garbage into the ears of the listeners, they’d defiantly strut back to their places, filled with arrogance as if their work had unlocked the very mysteries of life and death.

Needless to say, that’s not me. This book is not an exercise in egoism or a pathetic act of self-glorification. If anything, it’s about being humbled. This book is not a pat on the back for significant outdoor achievements; in fact, the heart and true purpose of this book really have nothing to do with the outdoors at all. As the

reader will soon discover, the pursuits of fishing and hunting have been a sacred catalyst which has revealed and guided me to something profoundly more significant than merely catching fish and harvesting game. This book is about the realization of the divine, about self discovery, and about spiritual and personal growth. It is a vehicle for the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. It is an opportunity to pass on and share some unique insights and experiences of God working in and through the great outdoors. These experiences have taught me many valuable life lessons, have built character, and have helped me to develop virtue. They’ve taught me to appreciate many things that I’ve taken for granted. Most of all, they’ve renewed my soul and healed me in times when I’ve felt utterly broken.

Of course the next big question is, “Hey, you’re a priest, when do you have time to do all this hunting and fishing, much less write a book?” To answer that, I’d like to quote my mother who always said, “Do something constructive!” As a kid, if ever my mom caught my brother and me being lazy bums and just sitting around watching TV for long periods of time, she’d turn off the TV and tell us to do something more constructive. That usually meant going outside to play or doing an activity that actually involved the use of the brain.

Her motto has always stuck with me. Throughout the years I’ve found that I am really not much of a TV guy. I watch a few shows here and there and a movie now and again, but because of that parental directive to do something more “constructive,” I have always preferred to spend free time doing something that involved a good measure of creativity. And so to answer the question: Like anyone, I do have some down time, days off, and vacation time. When I have a free hour here or there, I use that time doing something like praying, playing guitar, exercising, reading, writing, tying flies, practicing archery, et cetera. Most of my seemingly big,

non-parish related activities (like writing a book) are the result of work being done in very small bits and pieces. It's time that most people would have spent sitting (rotting) in front of the TV.

As far as having time to hunt and fish, I have one day off a week and a few weeks of vacation each year. And you can bet that during that time I'll be in the woods or on the water. It's not necessarily the quantity of time that produces success in the ways of fishing and hunting. It's well-planned, skillfully prepared, and carefully executed *quality* of time that counts. And, of course, the main ingredient is always to offer that time to the Lord. When you go fishing or hunting with God, you'll always catch something big — though maybe not a fish — and you'll always harvest something of trophy quality — though maybe not an animal.

Throughout this book the reader will discover, time and time again, that fishing is not just about catching a fish and hunting is not just about harvesting game. In much the same way, gardening is not just about growing things and working on cars is not just about changing your oil or putting on new brakes. There's something else far more important going on.

Let me explain this phenomenon. I once was in an art class where the instructor had us spend an hour drawing a piece of popcorn. But before we began, he asked us to be aware of what we were thinking about while drawing. Before class was over, we spent some time discussing what we'd each thought about while doing this seemingly mundane task of drawing popcorn. It was amazing to hear what everyone was thinking about. Some people were engaged in thoughts of problem solving. Others were thinking about friends and family. Each person was thinking about something different, but all of us were in fact *thinking* about something. We were aware of our awareness, which is one of the things that makes us uniquely human.

So many things in our present culture are devoid of any real thought or reflection. The sedentary lifestyle many of us can end

up living at times sucks dry the true potential we all have as human beings. We watch the events of someone else’s life on TV, someone who isn’t even real. We spend hours watching someone else play a game — we even consider ourselves part of the team — and yet we never get off the couch to get some exercise for ourselves. Popular music that we may (or may not) listen to is filled with lyrics about basically nothing. By means of mass-media advertising, we’re told what to wear, what to eat, what to drive, where to live, how to be “politically correct,” what moral beliefs to adhere to, and what new gadgets we must have to make our busy lives more manageable. Our possessions come to possess us. Our culture thinks for us, feels for us, and manipulates us in ways we hardly give much thought. And that’s because we hardly have a chance to give it much thought. Our culture can turn us into thoughtless, spineless fools if we give it the chance.

Thus, the vital importance of constructive activities emerges. We have to give ourselves a chance to think. And just like drawing that piece of popcorn, when we engage in activities that gently occupy the body and the senses, the soul is free to be refreshed and nourished. Our intellect is set free to think on its own. Our will is able to be strengthened. And what better place to do that than the great outdoors! (Besides coming to Church of course!)

Having a fishing rod, a walking stick, or a gun/bow in hand is simply a doorway to the true refreshment that comes from being immersed in the beauty of God’s creation. While catching a nice fish or harvesting that big ol’ buck is the icing on the cake, there are still many lessons one learns while trying to eat that cake.