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FYS Learning Knowing Being

Workshop 2

We were finally on our way, my brother Timmy, my dad and I. Headed up for one of the most exciting adventures I could imagine, bow-hunting grizzlies in Alaska. My name is Cody, and I had just graduated from high school, always the avid outdoorsman my graduation present from my parents had been this hunting trip. Excited didn’t even begin to explain how I felt, I was elated! Sure I had bow hunted before, but never after grizzlies! Several months had gone into the planning of this trip; finally we had decided to go unguided into the Deadman Bay area. And now after all of the planning and research we were beginning our descent into the small airport on Kodiak Island.

As we unloaded the gear into a pile on the tarmac of the airport I could feel the nervous excitement start to seep into me again and I felt almost giddy because of it. Timmy who was going to be starting his junior year that fall was almost as full of excitement as me. Our dad, a tall broad shoulder man in his early forties was there to help me fulfill this life long dream. He was acting all calm and reserved, but don’t let him fool you, he was brimming with just as much as anticipation as we were.

A truck we had hired to take us to our camp pulled up and we loaded our supplies which consisted of a tent, food, bows and arrows, a pistol, some pepper spray, other hunting supplies like axes and saws, and finally Timmy’s huge Bowie knife. The knife had been a Christmas present last year and it must have been as long as his entire forearm! He was very proud of the knife and sported it with pride on his hip as soon as he unpacked it from the rest of the supplies.

As we drove along the highway, and then eventually along a dirt road to the area where we would set up camp, I observed the beautiful Alaskan landscape. The towering pines and ragged rock faces of mountains sloping down into the crashing surf of the ocean certainly let you feel of the rugged beauty that surrounded you. Off to one side of the road we saw a small herd of caribou lift their heads as we passed them. The excitement that had ebbed on the car ride returned with the sight of the wild animals and I couldn’t help but smile with the sense of it.

The campsite we had decided upon was about a mile from the coast and we could hear the surf crashing into the shore. A local named Jake who we had hired had put out bear bait for us several weeks ago, and he was there at the camp site waiting for us. His weather beaten face and turned up collar of his coat gave you a definitive explanation that he knew, and had lived in this untamed country for his entire life. He smiled as we exited the truck and shook all of our hands warmly.

“Its good to see you boys, glad you made the trip safe.” Jake said, sticking his thumbs in his pockets.

“Good to be here, out in Gods country.” Dad replied. Timmy and I just smiled our fool heads off and nodded.

“Well, you boys should have a pretty good hunt, there has been a couple bears on the bait, two or three blacks and a old sow grizzly.” Jake drawled to us. My ears perked up at that. Alaska only has around a 30% success rate with their grizzly hunts, and the fact that there was a bear picking up on our bait was a really good sign for our hunt.

After talking with Jake a little longer, we each retired to our own tents for the night. Jake had decided to drive out the next morning after he had showed us where we should wait and set for the best chance at getting a bear. Somehow I managed to drift off to sleep even with the thoughts of that sow grizzly running around in my mind.

Morning came early and I got dressed almost quaking with anticipation, despite my nerves I managed to eat some eggs, bacon and hash browns that Jake and Dad had scraped together. All dressed in the camo that we would have for the day and spraying ourselves with odorless sprays to mask our scent, we made our way with Jake to a small secluded tree stand only 25 yards from the bait. Jake explained the layout of how the bears usually approached and left us to our hunt.

The scent of pine needles and of salt from the nearby ocean was what filled me nose, and the small noise of our breathing and rustle of the trees was all I heard. Then a snuffling noise and brush movement came through the air. My breath caught and I felt my stomach jump ten inches up into my throat. A bear! The meandering bear cleared the brush surrounding the bait and snuffled his way up to it. It wasn’t the grizzly Jake had mentioned, but one of the black bears. This one truly lived up to his name and was black as coal, only transitioning to a brown around his nose. He was a magnificent animal as he walked up to the bait and sniffed around, snacking lightly on some of the assorted fruits that helped to make up the bait. We just watched him, as he seemed in no particular hurry to be anywhere, but just enjoyed himself and some easily earned food. Soon he seemed to lose interest however and wandered off into the trees.

We continued to wait silently, none of us that willing to risk any excess noise in case a bear should turn up. After about an hour and no real change in the scenario my mind began to wander and my eyes were no longer as fixed on the bait. Then we heard it, that same snuffling and rustling from the bushes. My heart rate immediately increased as we watched something make its way into the small clearing. It was bigger for sure judging by the rustling, and then she entered the clearing. The sow grizzly, she was a beautiful brown, with the telltale hump of the grizzly appearing on her shoulder.

My breath caught, and my heart started pumping even harder, she began her slow walk towards the bait as Timmy whispered in my ear. “Its her! It’s the sow! Grab an arrow!”

With my shaking fingers I managed to nock an arrow to my bowstring. I tried to steady my breathing taking deep measured breaths as I pulled the string back to my cheek. Easy, breathe, just like the practice dummy you’ve shot a hundred times I thought to myself. I eyed the length of the shaft and waited for the opportune moment. The bear was moving around the bait, just inspecting it and nibbling on little bits here and there. Then she moved, set herself broadside to me, the perfect shot. I eased out half of a breath and held it, as I allowed my fingers to slip off of the string. The hiss and snap of the arrow leaving my bow was followed almost immediately by the deep surprised grunt from the grizzly as my broad head tipped arrow sunk deep into her side. She bellowed with pain and turned in a sharp circle trying to see what had stuck her in the side. With nothing visible to fight, her flight instinct kicked in and she began to run.

Now I’m not sure what entered my head at this point, maybe it was the adrenaline of the hunt or my 18-year-old stupidity, but the thought was.

“She’s going to get away! My prize grizzly bear is never going to be found!” And as simple as that I started to run after her, trying to run her down. Timmy hollered and followed, as did my Dad who had been filming the hunt and kept the camera rolling now. I pulled out another arrow from the rack of 5 remaining on my bow and chased after my bear. I could see her now, slowing as the arrow continued to work its deadly design to her insides. I stopped planted my feet and let loose. Missed! Darn it, another arrow down. I continued to chase her and let arrows fly after her, as Timmy and my Dad raced behind me hollering words of encouragement.

As I released an arrow that flew true and stuck the sow in her rump she bellowed with indignation and turned. I froze as she turned and reared to her full height of near nine feet. She bellowed again as she lowered herself down to all fours and came charging towards me. My feet became magically unglued from the spot they had held me and I began running away from her looking back at the huge charging force of anger that was behind me. As I looked back to see how close she was getting I tripped on a root and fell into a mess of tree roots. Looking up I saw one of my misfired arrows stuck in a root. I turned and looked at the bear closing in on me. I pulled at the arrow, but it remained stuck into the root. With all my might I yanked at the shaft and finally it pulled free. I nocked it to the string of my bow and sighted down the shaft only to see that the arrowhead had remained stuck in the root! I was shooting nothing but the shaft! And the bear was closing in on me, my mouth went dry and my palms beaded with sweat as the thundering power of the she-bear approached. As she opened her mouth to roar I closed my eyes and fired.

The roar of anger turned into a roar of pain and I opened my eyes to see her on her hind legs swatting at an arrow shaft buried in her left eye. The sow shook her mighty head and caught sight of me in the one remaining eye she had. Me, the object that had caused all of this pain she felt, a snarl escaped her as she brought her enormous body in front of mine. Then a savage scream came echoed across the area as Timmy came hurtling towards the bear. His Bowie knife in his hand and a face filled with anger, bravery and plenty of crazy.

Sow grizzlies are known for how aggressive they are in defending their cubs, often time most bear attacks occur as someone accidently separates her from her cubs. Let me just say, that momma grizzlies don’t have anything on a crazy younger brother who sees his older brother knocking on deaths door though.

Timmy hurtled towards the bear with his knife in hand and sunk that 10-inch blade up to the hilt in her ribs, just under her right front leg. The sow grunted in surprise and pain and turned to see this new contributor to her pain, as she turned towards Timmy though her hind legs staggered and she fell, face forward into the six-foot gap between Timmy and I. My eyes drifted up towards Timmy, the still slightly crazed expression lingered on his face and then I began to laugh, the hysterical laughter of someone who has just stared death in the face and made him blink. Timmy began to chuckle and soon we were both just shaking from the hysterical giddy laughter that enveloped us.

Dad had struggled into the clearing where the drama was unfolding just as I loosed the shaft into the bears face, to far away to do anything or be of any help he had watched as Timmy charged into the fray and plunged a knife into a full grown grizzly bear. Somehow he had kept the camera rolling and actually even kept it focused on the most climatic ending to a hunt one could possibly imagine. He walked down to us as Timmy and I still struggled to control our hysterics.

“Well you two, I don’t reckon I’ve ever seen anything quite like that!” He said and even began to chuckle, whether at the situation or because of our laughter, I’m still not sure. He walked over to the bear and knelt to touch her massive head. “Well Cody, could you have ever imagined a hunt like this?” He asked

“Never, not in a million years! Timmy you should have seen your face, holy cow I thought you’d gone straight crazy!” I said

“My face!?” he retorted, “You were the one that looked like you had pee running down both legs!”

“Boys, boys, lets just get one thing out of the way right now shall we?” Dad asked. “We are never, ever going to show your mother this video! We’d never be allowed out for another hunt as long as we lived if she saw this!”

Timmy and I guffawed at the thought of our sweet little mother seeing her two precious boys in a life and death struggle with a grizzly bear. We swore to our dad we would never show her the video, as we began to walk back to the camp for the 4-wheeler that we would use to haul the bear, my bear, back to camp.

The pride of that moment has never left me, the knowledge that I, or more appropriately we, had conquered natures most formidable foe. As man has done through the ages with nothing more than a bow and arrow, I had brought down the most powerful and formidable animal in North America. The huge pelt of the grizzly graces the floor of my study, as I walk over it almost daily. My mind still drifts to a young boy, scared to death, and his half crazed brother coming to his rescue in the wilds of the Alaskan wilderness, and without fail a small smile still slides onto my lips.