The Killing

What better way to spend a winter evening than with an anthropologist who has been in the field and is eager to tell stories?

Just a few weeks ago my wife, Barbara and I spent just such an evening with anthropologist Edith Turner at our home in Madison. Professor Turner, who teaches at the University of Virginia, worked for many years with her husband, the late Victor Turner, in Africa, but has more recently turned her attention to the Inupiat people of northern Alaska.

The Inupiat are a hunting people and, in addition to studies of their methods of healing, Professor Turner has published extensive research on their methods of whaling. What she had to say about this contributed greatly to my own thinking about the task that takes up so much of a restorationist's time on many projects—the task of killing things, whether plant or animal.

What impressed me about her account was the crucial role ritual—and women—play in this dramatic event. An Inupiat does not merely go out and capture a whale at a certain time of the year. Rather the capturing of a whale is contained, as it were, within a complex ritual in which the women play not only crucial but central roles, first identifying with the whale and carrying out ritual acts held to draw it close to shore, then taking charge of the socially tricky business of apportioning the kill, and finally carrying out rituals to ensure the survival of the whale's spirit.

At every stage the ritual is essential. Indeed, the Inupiat regard the taking of whales outside the ritual context as murder. But through ritual the problematic and shameful act of killing a creature with which the Inupiat feel a close relationship is transmuted from an act of mere violence to an act of communion.

Thinking about this, I found myself wondering whether the Inupiat might have something important to teach us about the business of killing—whether of deer or donkeys or honeysuckle bushes—carried out in behalf of ecological restoration.

Killing, as any sensitive person knows, is a shameful, deeply troubling act, even when carried out for the best of reasons—so that we can live, for example, or so that an ecosystem can flourish. (For a thoughtful account of this experience, see John Rodman's article on tamarisk bashing in the proceedings of the first SER conference.) And this being the case, our instinct is always to hide the act, carrying it out efficiently and out of sight where it won't anger or trouble others or provoke unfavorable publicity.

But the practices of the Inupiat suggest that this is a mistake—in fact, a form of violence.

Perhaps this is what the animal-rights folks really mean when they object to "animal-control" programs carried out in behalf of restoration efforts. They are wrong, of course, to object to the killing itself if it is necessary to ensure the well-being of the ecosystem. But there is more than ecology at stake here. And perhaps they would be right if they would say, with the Inupiat (who are, after all, professional hunters, and who ought to know something about this), that we must not kill clinically and exclusively, without sharing the experience with others, and without the ritual needed to redeem the killing from mere violence.

I've talked to a lot of people about this issue over the years, and I can't recall anyone ever putting it this way. But it's worth considering—if only because the slaying of animals and plants is often a crucial part of the restoration process, and because it is often thwarted by public opinion.

Perhaps we should try ritualizing the killing. If the wisdom of the Inupiat applies, we might find that public resistance to this aspect of restoration and anxiety about it might decline, and might even be replaced by something positive.

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I would like to invite everyone with access to the Internet to visit the R&MN homepage. Our address is http://www.wisc.edu/arboretum/rmn/homepage.html. In addition to information about R&MN, we have included a page with links to other restoration-related sites. Your comments are welcome.

William R. Jordan III