

By Dave Golowenski
For The Columbus Dispatch
Hunting for an improved society? Listen.

Among the possible deficiencies of an open, option-rich society is the lack of a singular, identifiable path to adulthood. Drawn in many directions that promise instant gratification and demand little in the way of discipline, youngsters are free to lose their way.

Dr. James F. Masterson, a pioneering psychiatrist who specializes in treating certain forms of mental illness, describes one of the central problems of modern times in his book, *The Search for the Real Self: Unmasking the Personality Disorders of Our Age*:

“It is not easy to become a teenager in our complex society ... Unlike youth in less complex cultures who walked a clearly defined path toward adult status — a path marked by unchanging rites of passage and rituals of acceptance — modern young people must make the transition through a series of loosely defined milestones spread over many years.”

Years of treading a “loosely defined” path can lead to confusion, disorientation, anxiety or fear. What’s more, a person stumbling along in a dark woods is prone to accept any campfire, no matter that crazies might be huddled around it.

That ours is an increasingly divided, dissolute and self-centered society is reflected in the increasingly extreme responses to it amid a general sense that something has seriously gone off-kilter.

That hunting might be a way back to civility, compassion and rationality is the daring case author Randall L. Eaton makes in his book, *From Boys to Men of Heart: Hunting as Rite of Passage*.

Eaton suggests that hunting societies had it right all along in terms of a boy’s leap from dependent childhood to his acceptance, including self-acceptance, as a finished man. The rituals most often melded the hunt with the spiritual quest, the completion of which served as the crossing of a threshold from one stage of life to another.

Among Native American societies, the crossing engendered the building of valuable character traits — courage, loyalty, wisdom, endurance, cooperation, to name a few — required of each male member of the tribe, whose survival depended on each person’s commitment to the whole.

As have done many others for various reasons, Eaton decries the apparently waning interest in the hunt.

But his is a different, if not unique, take.

The killing of a pursued animal, Eaton asserts based on survey evidence and anecdotes described in the book, is a sacred act that changes the killer. The man — or boy — who kills cannot help but confront the greatest mystery of existence: that living things die. A man is living; therefore, he must die.

Eaton, a doctorate-holding behavioral scientist with an international reputation in wildlife conservation, writes that the confrontation with the fragility and ephemeral nature of life moves most men toward humility and gratitude, and undermines grandiosity. The man who has looked at the life he has taken better comprehends than those missing that reality-altering experience where, in the natural state of things, his own life is leading.

The boy shown how to hunt by a mentor capable of putting the meaning of a life-and-death encounter into mature perspective has traveled farther toward compassionate manhood than the boy who lacks that experience, Eaton suggests.

Native American shamans and academic philosophers get a say in Eaton's book. He offers assertions that many readers might question: that the heart is an alternative source of intellect; that animals sometimes deliberately offer themselves up to hunters; that hunting is the only or best way to clarity for a boy.

A heavy incense of mysticism, even religiosity, permeates the book, and Eaton's attempt at bringing together far-ranging ideas and influences leaves the reader wondering whether they actually do fit as he contends.

It's one thing to say that hunting societies, more than the consumer culture, successfully produce people inclined toward camaraderie, less predisposed toward anxiety, more certain of their identity and less riddled with doubts about the meaning of life. Quite another is to suppose that such a transformation within modern society is possible.