

and finally I was truly free to be the man God wanted me to be.

It is no space odyssey that the year 2001 marked the 32nd anniversary of my marriage to Sharleen. Our marriage was restored and rebuilt from the ground up by God's amazing grace. I am secure at last in the unconditional love of the ultimate Father.

For whatever reason you might have put God off all these years, now is the time to come to Him. Tell Him you've fallen short in your life, and ask His forgiveness. Accept Jesus as your Savior, the only One who can forgive your sins and bring you to God. You can pray:

Dear God, I know I am a sinner and I need Your forgiveness. I believe Your Son, Jesus, died on the cross and rose again on my behalf. I accept Him now as my Savior—the complete provider of my forgiveness and new life with You. Amen.



Contact the **Christian Deer Hunters Association**, P.O. Box 432, Silver Lake MN, 55381 for a free copy of "Devotions for Deer Hunters" or on the web at christiandeerhunters.org.

If you just accepted Jesus as Your Savior and would like to learn more about your ultimate Father, contact ATS at the address below.

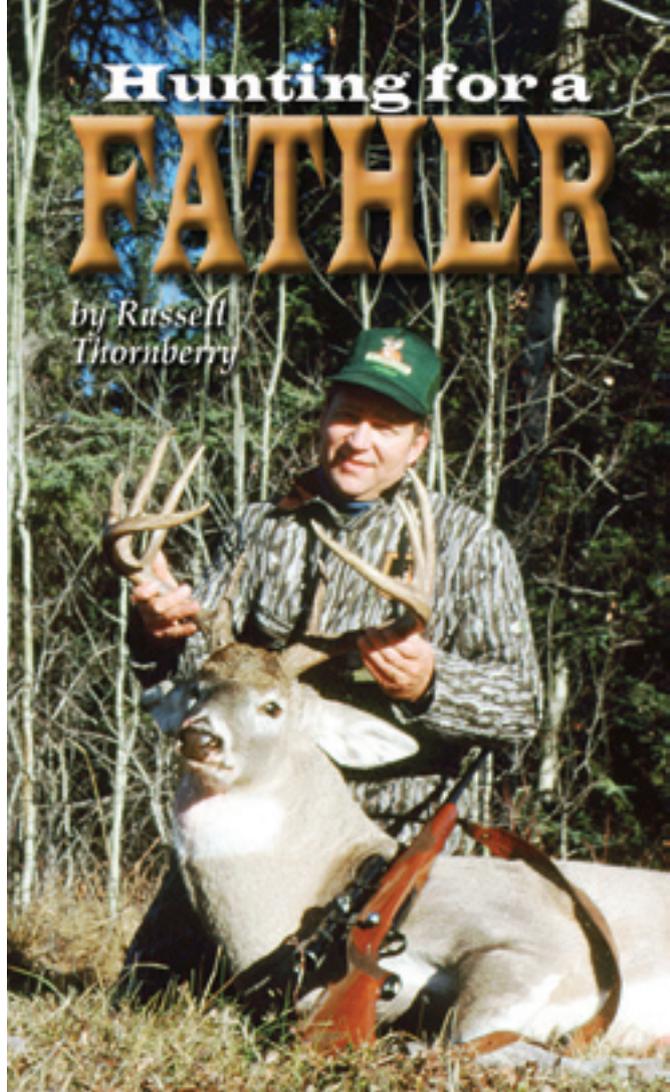
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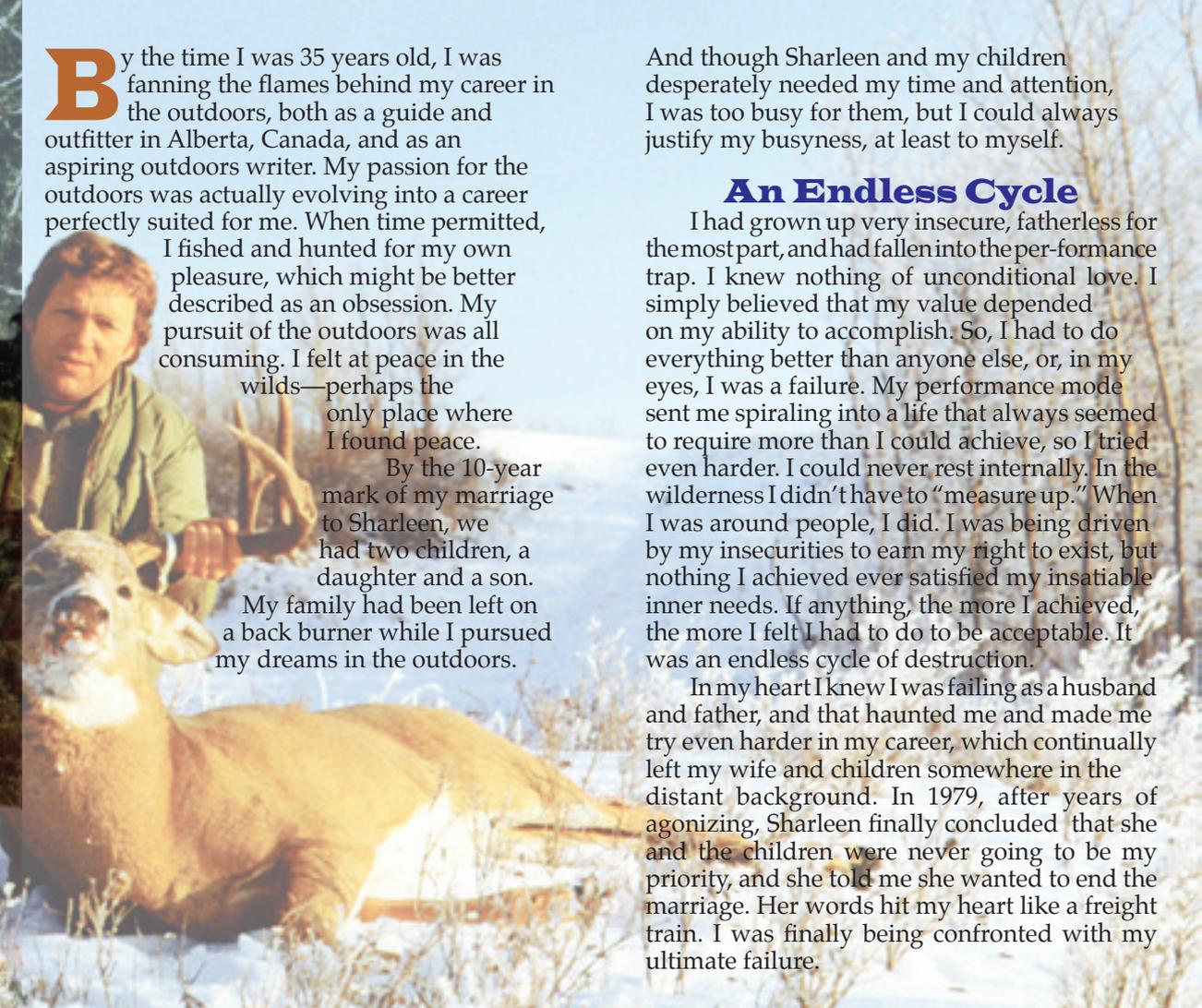
Hunting for a FATHER

by Russell
Thornberry



By the time I was 35 years old, I was fanning the flames behind my career in the outdoors, both as a guide and outfitter in Alberta, Canada, and as an aspiring outdoors writer. My passion for the outdoors was actually evolving into a career perfectly suited for me. When time permitted, I fished and hunted for my own pleasure, which might be better described as an obsession. My pursuit of the outdoors was all consuming. I felt at peace in the wilds—perhaps the only place where I found peace.

By the 10-year mark of my marriage to Sharleen, we had two children, a daughter and a son. My family had been left on a back burner while I pursued my dreams in the outdoors.



And though Sharleen and my children desperately needed my time and attention, I was too busy for them, but I could always justify my busyness, at least to myself.

An Endless Cycle

I had grown up very insecure, fatherless for the most part, and had fallen into the performance trap. I knew nothing of unconditional love. I simply believed that my value depended on my ability to accomplish. So, I had to do everything better than anyone else, or, in my eyes, I was a failure. My performance mode sent me spiraling into a life that always seemed to require more than I could achieve, so I tried even harder. I could never rest internally. In the wilderness I didn't have to "measure up." When I was around people, I did. I was being driven by my insecurities to earn my right to exist, but nothing I achieved ever satisfied my insatiable inner needs. If anything, the more I achieved, the more I felt I had to do to be acceptable. It was an endless cycle of destruction.

In my heart I knew I was failing as a husband and father, and that haunted me and made me try even harder in my career, which continually left my wife and children somewhere in the distant background. In 1979, after years of agonizing, Sharleen finally concluded that she and the children were never going to be my priority, and she told me she wanted to end the marriage. Her words hit my heart like a freight train. I was finally being confronted with my ultimate failure.

My life was shattered, and I felt like a giant puzzle with some key pieces missing. I had to admit to myself that I really didn't know how to be a husband or father. I also realized that my relentless pursuit of the outdoors had been an escape mechanism cloaked as a career.

I had given my life to Christ as a 10-year-old boy, but in my troubled teens without a father, my heart wandered away from God. I viewed God as I viewed my father—somewhere far away. I doubted if either one of them ever thought or really cared about me. Eventually I took a strong personal stand against God. I viewed him as a crutch for the weak, but I was determined to be strong—strong enough not to need the paternal father who had abandoned me or the heavenly father who seemed so distant and indifferent. It was a defense mechanism I devised to mask the broken heart of a child. That broken heart became all too clear when my sobbing response to Sharleen's announcement that she was leaving me was simply, "Why did my father have to leave me?" My statement surprised us both. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was actually verbalizing the essence of my problem.

Seeking God

I began to look for answers to this great puzzle of life, to see if I could find my missing pieces. I began seeing a counselor, and while I didn't get many answers, it felt good to express my deepest feelings, longings and fears for the first time in my life.

Sharleen found some hope in the fact that I was honestly searching and at least admitting that I needed help. For the time being, she decided not to leave, but to wait and see if restoration was possible. In 1980, in a last ditch effort to salvage our marriage, we moved from Edmonton, the capitol city of Alberta, out into the rural foothills of the Alberta Rockies where we didn't know a soul. Our hope was that, by leaving the city and all the distractions behind, we might be able to focus on restoring and healing our relationship. It was during this time that God came to our rescue. It seemed that our relationship was starting to improve. I asked Sharleen if she saw improvement. She admitted that she did. I knew instantly it could only be God intervening on our behalf because my best efforts had brought only pain and sorrow. I told Sharleen that I thought we needed to seek God. She agreed. We began attending a little church in our community. God poured his love down on us, and the process of emotional healing began. I was broken by the unconditional love of my heavenly Father, who loved me in spite of all that I had done wrong. Sharleen and I devoted ourselves wholly to following God's leading for our lives, and we began to grow spiritually. Finally, there was an



anchor in life, something absolute that we could cling to, and a holy, loving mediator for our relationship.

One day at a Bible teaching Sharleen and I were attending, the teacher explained God's law of sowing and reaping from Galatians 6:7, which promises we will reap what we sow in life. Matthew 7:1 explained another aspect of sowing and reaping: If we judge others, we will be judged by the same measure. Yet another aspect of God's law was explained in Hebrews

12:15: *See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.* (NIV)

Forgiveness

Suddenly the lights came on in my understanding. I had been haunted by the fact that I was doing the same thing to my wife and children

that I hated my father for doing to me. I understood the wounds of abandonment in my own life, and yet I was repeating the same cycle of destruction. For the first time in my life I saw the connection — the missing pieces of the puzzle. I was trapped in God's immutable law of sowing and reaping. I had sown judgment and bitterness toward my father for what he had done, and now I was reaping what I'd sown and doing the very same thing to others. I was

being judged exactly as I'd judged him. It was as if the Bible teacher was reading my life history right before my eyes. I went to him privately after the teaching and explained that for the first time I was seeing a reason for my actions, and I asked him how to break the cycle of destruction. "Unconditional forgiveness," he replied.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"Forgive your father unconditionally for his actions and ask God's forgiveness for having judged him."

I knew he was right. It wasn't a matter of denying what my father had done. But my judgments and unforgiveness had guaranteed that I would repeat my father's sin. We knelt together, and before God I forgave my father unconditionally. I asked God's forgiveness for having judged my father with bitterness, and I asked God to forgive me for believing that my worth was wrapped up in what I could accomplish, rather than in the blood of Christ that reconciled me to God for all eternity. I also asked God to lead me in my role as a husband and as a father and to forgive me for the damage I had done to the hearts of my family. In this simple prayer of forgiveness and repentance, I was transformed instantly into a new being. When I returned home, my family was shocked by the changes in me. For the first time, I could actually connect with the hearts of my wife and children. It was as if I had been freed from prison. In fact, I had. I was finally free from my violation of God's law of sowing and reaping. My freedom was purchased with forgiveness,