

## The Great Mushroom Call

I figured out very early in life that I was one of those people who had a special “gift”. I had the ability to know and do things other people couldn’t, even grown-ups.

My gift really took hold about the same time I stopped wetting the bed, although I think the timing was mere coincidence. Anyway, I thought I had the gift even before that but when I lead my forces (several other neighborhood kids) in repelling an alien invasion (they tried to setup operations in the large culvert under the road at the bottom of the hill) I knew I had the gift. I don’t know why the aliens picked Eureka, Illinois (population: a good sized handful mixed with quite a few animals) but they did and that... well, the point is that I had the gift.

Having a gift isn’t always as wonderful as it seems though. As my gift became better known more and more people expected more and more from me. They *expected* to see the unbelievable. The pressure was on.

It soon became apparent that I couldn’t do enough unbelievable stuff to keep everyone in the neighborhood amazed and astonished all the time so I began to concentrate on a select group of family and friends. They would be my true believers and my younger brother was the best material I had, so he became my prime target.

He was a cute little bugger, with a round head, big ears, and just the right combination of naiveté and innocence. Great material to work with! In fact, I had taken it upon myself to not only impress him with my gift but also to impart to him some of my great wealth of lore and knowledge concerning the great outdoors, such as – mushroom hunting.

Spring is always a very exciting time for my family. March was the transition from winter to spring for us and by sometime in April you knew that spring had really made it to stay. Now towards the end of April the mushroom season started, carrying on into the first half of May, and that was a big deal. To me, mushroom season was my own personal celebration of spring that I looked forward to with great anticipation every year.

One particular year my younger brother decided to go mushrooming hunting with us for the first time. So we all piled into the pick-up truck and off we went to one of our favorite “early hotspots” on a wooded corner of my uncle’s farm.

You may have heard stories about mushroom hunters, may have even been one yourself, but to keep things on the up and up we were spring Morel mushroom hunters. In fact, the Morel mushroom can only be found for a few weeks in the spring. It is the most famous and easiest to identify of all the edible mushrooms. Commonly called the sponge mushroom, the morel is brown, with a hollow stem that is usually lighter in color to the head, which looks like, if you haven't already guessed, a sponge.

These mushrooms can be as little as less than one inch tall to over six inches in height, though most are between one and four inches tall. They like areas with lots of leaves and tree bark which makes them very difficult to spot at times as they grow up from under this ground cover, at times barely peeking out from underneath.

I'm not sure what time we actually started hunting but I remember it was a warm sunny day and the woods felt so alive, with all the new bright growth of trees, shrubs, grass, and other plants. It was a day when time didn't matter nor did it matter that the mushrooms weren't to be found either, not one. We just keep wandering lazily across the rolling ground soaking in the wonderful day.

After we had wandered about for at least an hour, we remembered that this was the first time my brother had ever been mushroom hunting. We had been staying spread out to cover more ground and he was a little behind us at the time. Well it dawned on us that we weren't sure if he knew what a mushroom was. So I waited for him to get closer then I asked.

"I know this is you first time mushroom hunting. You do know what a mushroom looks like don't you?"

"Uh-huh", he said looking all bright eyed and innocent.

"Ok", I said, "what does a mushroom look like?"

And he said, (quite seriously I might add) "They're little furry animals with bushy tails and they're really hard to catch."

I'm very glad that he didn't "catch" a mushroom that day because even though ground squirrels are really cute I imagine that they can land a good bite when pressed.

Having discovered this flaw in his outdoor education, I took it upon myself to make sure that he knew what a mushroom looked like and where they might be found. By the end of the season he was a bona fide mushroom hunter, having found quite a few all by himself.

The year that followed was a traumatic one for me. It was the year when I learned my first true “adult behavior”. I wasn’t sure I liked this behavior but I know I took to it like a duck to water, despite my misgivings. I learned that all is not as it seems and that an adult can, technically without lying, foster belief in an untruth.

When you take into account the added complication of my audience (for expressions of my gift) were getting older and more difficult to impress I found this adult behavior to be like a lifeline to a drowning man. It was just what I needed.

We neared mushroom season again. My brother, now an avid mushroom hunter, could hardly wait. And for me, a plan a sprouted, aided by my newfound adult understanding. I began to lay the groundwork.

“So you think you’ll find lots of mushrooms this year?” I asked.

“Yep, I’m gonna’ get ‘em!” my brother replied excitedly.

“I just hope there’s lots of ‘em to find. You know some years there aren’t many mushrooms. Why sometimes there’s non at all!”

My brother was aghast, excitement caving in to impending doom.

“What will do if there aren’t any mushrooms?” he peeped. “Isn’t there something we can do? There has to be something we can do, isn’t there?”

Hook, line and sinker! Now all I had to do was reel him in. I basked in the unexpected degree of success my plan was having.

“Well, there is one thing. You know I have the gift, right?”

He nodded, hanging on my words of salvation.

“Have a told you about the Mushroom Call?”

There was my brother, eyes wide, unable to speak, wrapped up like a cocoon in my spell.

“With the gift, you know, I can do things and well” I paused, savoring the moment. I leaned closer, lowering my voice.

“You can’t tell anyone, ok?”

“I won’t tell” he whispered.

One more pause for affect then I said, “I can call mushrooms right up out of the ground. Now it has to be the right place, ‘cause even with the gift you can’t call mushrooms out where they don’t want to be. But if the place is right, and the time is right, I can call them right up out of the ground! Now if you behave, like letting me use you for a dart gun target and stuff like that, I’ll give the mushroom call when we go hunting together.”

He was overjoyed! I had saved the mushroom season, saved him from the pit of doom! How lucky he was to have a brother with the gift! We talked on about it awhile and, of course, I finally relented and gave an example of the Mushroom Call (funny how it sounded like a poor Tarzan imitation).

I had some of the best dart gun practice I’ve had in a long time that week. Then the day came. Dad said it was time. Time to head to the woods for mushrooms. We were so excited. But I was not just excited; I was also a bit worried. My reputation, the reputation of the gift, was on the line! I didn’t know if my plan would work, it wasn’t completely in my control. Fortunately I had recently learned a new adult behavior that lessened my concern. It was called Ad Lib and it meant that if things didn’t work the way you planned you blamed the whole mess on something else. If you were questioned about it you just cited

your adult insight and wisdom as the source of all knowledge then ignored the conversation as if it didn't exist.

The three of us moved through the newly awakened woodland, ambling back and forth, eyes casting about the ground. We hadn't gone far, mushroomless of course, when my brother sidled up behind and said.

"The mushroom call, do the mushroom call." Then he waited with eager anticipation.

But I had planned for this. I was ready. "Ok," I said, "this looks like a good spot. Now remember, sometimes the call doesn't pop 'em up right away and I can't tell exactly where there going to come at." Then I gave the Great Mushroom Call.

My dad, stalwart individual that he is, nonchalantly continued to probe and poke into leaves and bark with a stick as if he wasn't aware of my brother, the mushroom call, or me.

We didn't find anything. I gave the call several more times, using Ad Lib to justify the lack of results. But I knew I was running out of time, or more appropriately attention span, my brother was still pretty little you know.

Then salvation! I saw mushrooms, a good-sized patch, tucked around the base of a tree to my right. But we were close, a little to close. Dropping into covert operation mode, I deftly redirected our path to my left until we were far enough away then I stopped, throwing up my hand in the process.

"I feel it. Yes, mushrooms. We're close. Stay right there, I'm going to really give a big call!" and I gave a louder, longer imitation Tarzan yell than I had before.

Now it was time to show the gift in full force. I stood for a minute, turning this way and that, sniffing the air. "Oh yea, there's mushrooms here now." I said, "Follow me."

My lead brought my brother right into the mushrooms. I thought for a moment he was going to stomp all over them without seeing them.

“Look! Mushrooms! Mushrooooooms!” he squealed, “You did it! It worked, the Great Mushroom Call worked!”

So it had, and so it did. The Great Mushroom Call worked for several years with amazing results. And my brother never questioned the gift - he was a true believer. Of course as he got older, closer to understanding adult behavior, I think he grew his own suspicions but by then the gift was showing itself in Big Bass Busting. And that is a another story for another time.