

QUIET TIME

Every year, for the last 15 years, a group of us—dressed in old clothes, carrying shotguns, rifles and sleeping bags—have gathered in a little hunting cabin deep in the swamps of South Florida. We come from different towns and states. Each year we add or subtract someone, but the core group has remained the same. The four days are spent in the woods southwest of Lake Okeechobee on the edge of the Florida Everglades—30 miles from the nearest phone.

Early mornings and late evenings, we wait in deer stands in trees or walk through the woods with our guns. Nights, we gather in the little cabin with its tin roof, nestled deep in a hammock—a thick stand of oak, cypress and palm trees surrounded by a slough.

This year was different from all the other years. Several months earlier, when news spread that I might be dying of cancer, the men had prayed for me. When I arrived, there were genuine tears of thanksgiving. My old friends, you see, had wondered if my cot might be the one left vacant.

Something else was different. The thrill of the hunt was still there; but rather than taking life, my purpose had changed. I had come to get quiet—and talk to God.

Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, once described God as “wholly other.” I used to think of Him that way. Distant. Apart. A Creator removed from His creation.

Last summer, though, I discovered Him as *Abba*. He’s my Daddy, and He loves me far more than I loved my sons who accompanied me on the trip.

The last morning of the hunt, the alarm went off at 4 a.m. Rather than going out, I opted to stay in camp alone. I snuggled into my sleeping bag and listened as the men dressed, checked their weapons and quietly made their way outside. I heard someone start the big swamp buggy. Minutes later, all men aboard, it rumbled out into the darkness, its oversized airplane tires squishing across the swamp, taking the men to their tree stands.

Just before dawn, I got up, dressed and walked outside. The brilliant stars provided light as I found a huge oak that formed a natural chapel. I sat on a low branch, my back against the rough bark of the trunk, watching as the sun resurrected the world.

Few things on earth match the beauty of a Florida sunrise over the Everglades. Slowly the sky

turned from blue-velvet to a brilliant rose. The forest shook off its sleep, waking its inhabitants. A squirrel barked. Birds chirped. In the pond to my left, herons stretched and strutted. A hawk swept through the sky, screeching his warning. A mother raccoon, followed by three little ones, ambled by—pausing now and then to scratch at the earth. Somewhere behind me a bull gator bellowed his hunger. An armadillo rustled in the high grass, and squirrels chased each other up and down the rafters of my oaken chapel. Across the glade, veiled in the early morning mist, I knew my sons—high in their tree stands—were sharing what I was experiencing.

It was then I realized I had been talking to God. Nothing profound. Just “thanks talk” for all the little things around me—spider webs and inchworms. It had been going on for almost an hour. Now it was time to leave. I had agreed to fix the coffee and have breakfast ready when the hunters returned.

“Father, I have to go.”

For the first time that morning, He spoke back. His plaintive words were those of my 93-year-old mother, who always says the same thing when I leave after visiting her in the nursing home.

“Don’t go yet. I miss you so!”

Before me was the picture of a Father who is lonely. His children seldom stop by to see Him—and if they do, it’s always to complain or beg.

I felt tears forming and sat back down on my rough pew. The words of an old song came to mind.

*My God and I go through the fields
together.*

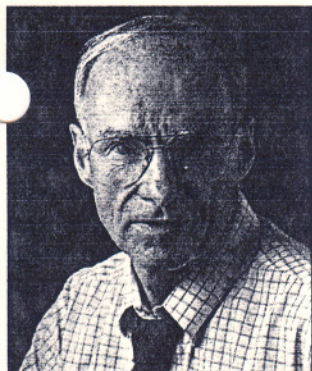
*We walk and talk as good friends should
and do.*

*We clasp our hands, our voices ring with
laughter.*

*My God and I walk through the meadow’s
hue.*

My life, it seems, is filled with “kitchen things”—fixing food for others. That morning, however, I understood what Jesus meant when He said to Martha, “Mary has chosen what is better.” Nothing is as important as wasting time with God. ■

Jamie Buckingham and his wife, Jackie, reside in Palm Bay, Florida. His healing testimony is featured in this issue of Charisma (see page 85).



BY
JAMIE
BUCKINGHAM