

An Eerie and Grand Difference
May & June 2023

Spring is coming! It might be in its most ragged attire and fatigued from battling the vestiges of winter. Yet, it comes, bringing forth a rainbow of petal colors, the smell of warm earth, and the dazzling comfort of sun-sautéed breezes.

With that palette come the creatures. First in our neighborhood are the intrepid robins, munching the winter-dried berries and entertaining us with their multi-note chortles. Up in the mountains, bears yawn and stretch and stumble to sunlight from their dens, like sleepy-headed toddlers. Year after year, we are not disappointed in this stunning seasonal performance that sweeps over the land. This time of re-birth, however, always coincides with the question I shoot at my husband, “The snakes aren’t out yet, are they?”

I need not be concerned. Laramie has no snakes but for the benevolent garter snakes who enjoy slithering in the mud on the banks of Spring Creek. They’re harmless, and from a distance, cute. However, when I think of the snakes that live in the vast west, I manage to picture them three times their regular size and out for vengeance. My grandmother used to say, “Most animals won’t hurt you unless you show that you want to hurt them.” What my grandmother didn’t know was that I have believed for a very long time that, regardless of the circumstances, snakes are out to get me. Without any explanation, in Act II, scene ii of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, my beloved Shakespeare has the sentinel fairies, to protect their beloved Fairy Queen, sing the directive, “You spotted snakes with double tongue ... Come not near our Fair Queen.”

Why is it that the mere mention of a snake puts us on our guard? Why do snakes make us shudder or flee in terror? They more than often mind their own business, and of course who wouldn’t get upset with the constant threat that someone might step on his or her head? I’ve thought about this tendency toward terror for quite some time. I believe the reason is that snakes do not in any way resemble us humans. They are eerily different. Yes, they have eyes, jaw mechanisms, and a nose, just as we do. However, their noses do not do what our noses do; snakes smell with their forked tongues. They lack the limbs that we humans use to interact with others, thus they cannot be called animated. They do not have fur, which kicks them out of the category of “fuzzy and cute.” They are silent, as are the monsters of Sci-Fi. Silent movements tend to give us the creeps.

As I said, snakes are “eerily” different, and humans have a hard time with the very different, don’t we? We grow nervous around living beings that bear little resemblance to us, in manner, action, ability, or appearance. Perhaps it would help if we got to know snakes better. But for their own safety, though, they don’t seem to like the idea of being around us.

However, this Christmas, we received a card from a dear family, the youngest member a fascinating young woman who cares for our planet and helps to keep monarch butterflies in our skies by raising them—such a delicate and caring process. In one of the Christmas card pictures, my young friend holds what I thought to be a very, very long rope. Ah, dear reader, you are ahead of me. Yes, it was a big Bull Snake. Obviously, from the careful cradling that my young friend exhibits in her pose for the picture, the snake was well-loved and well-cared-for.

Somewhat intrigued by my friend's derring-do, I did a brief Google search, avoiding direct eye contact with the specimens featured on the sites. I learned that some snakes like to be petted, especially older snakes. Some don't. Pythons, for example, don't like to be touched on the head and will even become aggressive at a gentle noggin-tap. Snakes can get used to being handled and will grow to appreciate the nearness of a kind, understanding, and familiar human. They too may show fear of strangers, and they too get grouchy when they are hungry.

Although I hope to never see one up close, I must say that the rattlesnake offers a courtesy that can be appreciated and respected. Years ago, when we owned a canoe and lived in northeast Wyoming, we sometimes visited Lake DeSmet. On one occasion, my husband and our sons launched the canoe into the lake, while my plan was to stay ashore and take a hike with our Labrador, Lizzie. I had to keep her on a leash because she badly wanted to be with the boys. We strolled a ways down a trail and past a high sand dune. I thought it would be fun to climb the dune, but Lizzie jumped in front of me and started barking. I tried numerous times to step around her, but she was persistent in preventing me from taking us up the hill. She had heard the rattle well before I finally did. The snake's warning prevented an ugly confrontation.

Who doesn't have a snake story? Bring a group of friends together, and if the guests stay long enough for stories to grow eerie, the tales turn to snakes. I am reminded of a late afternoon horse ride with my husband. As we saddled the horses for a trail ride up into the desert hills, Noel, a worker at the ranch where we boarded our horses, chatted with us, he in semi-English and I in scant Spanish. At some point, he dropped his voice, pointed to the hills, slowly stretched out his arms, and stage-whispered, "¡Cuidado! ¡Vipre Grande!" I understood perfectly. On our later return to the ranch, the short story is that we dismounted to go safely over some wire, the horses spooked, and they ran off. John went one way to find them, and I headed down the hill. As the dusk settled around me, every branch, every limb became a "vipre grande." Nearing the ranch, I saw a needled pine tree, and it was shaking. I knew that all the snakes of the county, perhaps the state, had congregated in that tree, twisting in the branches, with one purpose: They were out to get me. I sprinted, dead set on getting past the tree before they could lunge. I was even with the trunk when it happened. The ball of snakes, in the shape of a brown calf, exploded from under the tree, bawling for its mother. I howled, and in high gear tore down the trail, dismissing detail.

They have been made both loathsome and likeable in movies. Who doesn't fondly remember Sir Hiss of *Robin Hood* and Kaa of *The Jungle Book*? We humans have re-created them in our own fashion, and too often, we don't take the time to think that snakes have their own place and do their own good. They are no lesser nor higher than us in their being. I admit that they will always give me the creepies, and I had to cover the Wyoming Wildlife Calendar's photo of the month with a sheet of paper when a snake was featured. But it is not right for me to judge, to show hate, to engage in violence, to injure or kill just because the creature to the left or right, beneath or above, doesn't look or act just like I do. Just because we fear them.

I remember hiking with my youngest son on a trail that ran along the creek where my husband was fishing. My son and I came upon what appeared to be a flattened garter snake. Poor squished snake, we both thought, and as we knelt to touch it, disarming ourselves, it shot away. It had been that frightened. Fear is an awful thing to have to live with.