

Snakes in the grass

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [August 22, 2012](#) issue



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I am not squeamish about most animals or insects. I have no inordinate fears of dogs or cats. Bats are not too scary, though I would rather not have one stuck in my hair. Spiders have my respect and are not regarded as cuddly. But snakes are different. Here is where I come closest to an animal phobia.

Snakes strike me as inherently ugly: all whip-body with beady, soulless eyes. They move by slithering, which seems an innately sinister motion. It is also a given that they are under foot, easily hidden in the grass ahead of our tread. For the most part they are quiet, which adds to their menace; when they do make noise it is a hateful hissing.

I am, of course, talking about my subjective response to the creatures. They are, after all, God's creatures, and I am well aware that not everyone finds them sinister or ugly. Here is where the church's diversity of membership rightly and happily comes into play. Let those who appreciate snakes appreciate them (and even keep them as pets if they like). And let those of us who can only warily respect snakes respectfully keep our distance.

For me, one of the advantages of living in the suburban Chicago area is that one does not often encounter snakes. There are surely snakes native to the area, but in over 30 years of living here I have seen nary a one. I can walk in my backyard with perfect serenity, at least so far as the potentiality of snakes obtains.

It was not so where I grew up. On the farm in northwestern Oklahoma we routinely came across snakes, often very close to our houses. One of my earliest memories is of playing outside Grandma Clapp's house on the front porch. Suddenly I saw a rattlesnake, coiled right by the front door. At that moment, Grandma came out of the house, pushing the door open in the snake's face and stepping onto the porch. I anxiously informed her of the snake's presence—relieved it had not struck her—and she soon dispatched it with a garden hoe.

The number-one horror story about snakes in a house involved the Miles family, whose home was built on top of an old prairie dog town bearing the moniker Snake Hill (rattlesnakes love to occupy abandoned prairie dog holes). According to the stories we heard, the Miles place was infested with rattlers, hanging from trees and sometimes even from rafters inside the house. Mrs. Miles prowled the outside grounds with a shotgun, blowing up snakes by the dozen.

It was understood in that region that if you found a rattler, especially near a home, you would kill it. My mother once while mowing came across a writhing mass of two mating rattlers. She said that, intertwined, they seemed like one especially large and angry serpent. Snake extermination was a male business, and a cowboy on site gingerly and very carefully got rid of these two.

My brother and I often came across rattlesnakes as we rode motorcycles through pastures. Sometimes we lifted our legs high as we rode over the crawlers and went on. At other times we stopped and threw rocks at them until they were dead. Rattlesnakes do not die easily—sometimes there was a pile of stones beside the snake corpse.

Once a friend and I were gathering hay bundles when we found a rattlesnake beneath a teepee-shaped shock of hay. We pounded on it vigorously with pitchforks, thinking it dead, and decided that our high school biology teacher, Mr. Jones, would probably appreciate the snake as a specimen. We procured a gallon coffee can, coiled the snake into it and taped the lid shut. Then we proudly took it by Mr. Jones's house.

Only later did we learn that when he took the can to the science lab and opened it, the snake jumped out at him. Rather phobic himself, he climbed atop a lab table and yelled out the window for help, which he soon enough received from a passing student. My friend and I got no bonus points for our donation to scientific study.

The other sort of snake common to northwestern Oklahoma was the bullsnake, so named for its stubby nose. Bullsnakes ate all kinds of rodents and were also said to kill rattlesnakes. Thus we treated bullsnakes with a deference not afforded rattlers. Though my phobia prevented me from readily handling bullsnakes, I have many memories of my grandfather picking them up and carrying them with aplomb, if not exactly affection.

My dad grew to be on especially close terms with a bullsnake he christened Alvin. Alvin dwelled in the barn and often came out when Dad was milking the cow. Then Alvin would crawl close and rear his head, and Dad would squirt milk from the cow's teat directly into the bullsnake's mouth. It plays like something out of an Edward Hicks painting, a sweet reminder to all that snakes and humans (and cows) can dwell in peace.