

The Gnôsis Associated with Snakes

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“You were born with a snake in both of your fists while a hurricane was blowing.”
— Bob Dylan, “Jokerman”

I was sent to find Grandpa Welby in his garden – a half-acre plot cordoned off from the yard by six-foot tall hedges. I ran across the grass as fast as my four-year-old body would go, my two blonde braids flying behind me. Opening a doorway through sunflower stalks, I found him sitting on a bench, still like a park statue. On one side, bean poles. On the other, trellises covered in orange blossoms. His legs were crossed and his trousers were dusty. Elbow on knee, he steadied his arm and the three-inch ash hanging from his Pall Mall.

As I stepped into a row of potatoes, a snake rippled across my path.

“Snake! Snake!” I screamed, frozen to the spot.

Grandpa swept me away from danger then carried me into the yard.

“Chrissy, garter snakes are good for the garden.” He sat me on the tire swing and gave it a push. The willow began to creak. I was one of the youngest of his twelve granddaughters; he’d spent many hours in this spot.

I looked up at him through tears. He seemed more massive than 6'4," blue eyes shining against his jet-black hair, a modern-day Dagda. “They eat bugs, bugs that eat the vegetables.” He spoke out one side of his mouth, cigarette dangling from his lips. “They won’t bite you.”

I knew snakes as serpents who tempted curious girls in gardens.

Garter snake, not serpent. Good, not bad.

I chewed on the end of my braid thinking as Grandpa

pushed me higher.

Holden, my four-year-old son, pointed to a Z scooting across our driveway. Teachable moment, I thought. I grasped his hand and urged him closer. He pulled back.

“Snakes can bite,” he said.

“True. But not this kind,” I replied. “Some people think snakes are villains, but I think they’re good. And powerful. They’re important for nature and —” I paused. Mid-length, something reddish pink seemed to bind the snake.

“What’s wrong with it?” Holden asked. I looked closer. Its insides were seeping out. Now what was I supposed to teach Holden? Life cycles?

“Oh. It’s injured. See? That’s not normal.” Holden squatted down to get a better look. The snake flicked its tongue. I explained the injury. “What do you think happened?” I asked.

Holden shrugged. “Maybe a cat ripped it open with its claw.” I imagined the neighbor’s outdoor menagerie of felines feeling self-satisfied. I nodded.

“It’s natural for animals to attack other animals, but I don’t think the housecat intended to eat him,” I said, pausing. “What should we do?” A question more for myself than for Holden. Would we hurt it more if we tried to move it? Would a vet know how to sew it up? After a few minutes of fretting, the snake stopped moving altogether.

“It’s dead, I think.” I picked it up near its head; it didn’t coil or respond. A look of surprise flashed on Holden’s face

before softening. He seemed to have some insight of his own. "Let's put it in a place the cats can't get at it," I said. Holden pointed to a pine tree on the other end of the yard, the furthest point from the neighbor with outdoor cats. I laid it on the pine needles, inhaling their scent a second before covering the snake with a handful. "Too bad it died. Snakes are really good for our garden."

Holden nodded slowly, twisting a pine needle with his hands.

When the boa constrictor slid across my neck, it tickled. A giggle rose, threading the terror that locked my body, arms in the air, palms up. The snake adjusted its length across my frame as the camp counselor said it would, a vibration pulsing along my skin. The reptile wasn't slimy as I'd expected but cool and soft and smooth.

Abby, a new friend, knew I'd need to be dared. The day before she'd persuaded me to go rappelling, and I sobbed the whole way down. And yet, as soon as my feet touched the ground, I turned to her and said, "Amazing! I'd do that again." So when the counselor asked, "Who wants to hold the snake?" she'd grabbed my wrist, I whispered in her ear, and both of our hands shot up together.

The constrictor settled when its head reached my right wrist, the other end draped around my left arm. I stilled under its heft and stood hypnotized by its brown patterning until Abby and I switched spots for her turn.

Abby knew how to be daring, and she also knew Jon, the boy I'd hoped would ask me to be his date for the camp bonfire. He wore a blue baseball cap, and when he caught me staring, he'd tuck his curly brown hair underneath it. We'd both blush. "Why don't you just ask him?" Abby prodded. I shrugged. I didn't know how; some piece of wisdom eluded me no matter how many books I read. But at the bonfire, when I sat down at the log Abby had found, I looked up to see she and Jon had swapped places. We sang songs as the stars began to emerge, and we inhaled the scents of pine and smoke. When the ghost stories started, Jon slid his hand next to mine, tickling my wrist. Each time I felt his skin move against mine, a tingling uncoiled from my core and shot through me.

On our way back to the cabins, Jon grasped my hand and I giggled. Fear-laced excitement slithered between us. This feeling, I thought, is good to know.

"Where's Holden?" I asked, glancing around the dining room.

"He was just here," someone said. In seconds, the adults in our party searched the restaurant for my three-year-old. He wasn't in the dining rooms, nor in the restrooms, nor the kitchen. A cold fear slid into my heart. We took our search outside, starting first in the garden area where we'd waited for our table.

"Holden!" My voice stretched across the coils of his name. "It's not funny. Where are you?" No answer. I

walked along the edge of cultivated soil and grass that bordered the parking lot. Not there. Panic rippled from my chest as we spread out and called out his name. One voice. Two voices. A chorus of Holden! Holden! Adrenaline electrified my fingers and toes. I wanted to split myself in two to cover more ground.

"He's not between any of the cars in the parking lot," someone said. A slow-moving river snaked alongside the restaurant's east side. I could see it peripherally, but I couldn't turn my head for a closer look. I couldn't confront that possibility. Trees forming the western boundary of the restaurant's land drew me toward them instead.

"Holden! Holden!" The staccato syllables were sharp with fear. Did one minute pass? Three? The silent response to his name constricted all reason.

Then Holden emerged from the bushes a few feet beyond me. He smiled and he turned away. I stretched out my arm and curled my hand around my child, pulling him toward me. I shook with dissipating emotions as I carried him back through the garden and into the lobby.

"Why did you wander away?" I looked him in the eyes, those deep resonant eyes, the eyes that met mine with profound recognition the day he was born, the eyes that held his love and excitement, his sadness and hope. They twinkled, and they stilled my focus. "And why didn't you answer when we called your name?" His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head. He seemed confused. And from somewhere I didn't quite recognize, gnôsis. The silence, the confusion, held meaning I couldn't name. I sensed change.

At the Herakleion Archeological Museum in Greece, I studied the Snake Goddess, a fourteen-inch figurine with a cone-shaped dress, narrow at the waist and open in the front to expose her breasts. Snakes decorated the apron over the dress, and the head of a snake coiled around her tall hat, peeking over at the top. She stood with her arms open, palms up. Starting at her wrists, snakes wound up both arms.

Some historians argued that the Snake Goddess was just some kind of fertility goddess. Others associated her with the domestic sphere or said she symbolized an underworld deity. I paced in front of the glass. On that February pilgrimage to Crete, no matter where I seemed to be – sitting on the ground at Phaistos, feet dangling over unearthed clay storage jars, or sitting in a cave above Matala Beach, eyes scanning the ceilings for hippy graffiti – I felt time thin and the energy of the past well up inside me. Standing in front of the Snake Goddess was no different. I'd read that Minoans had been egalitarian, women and men living in a more balanced partnership than any society we could point to today. That reading cracked open other ways of being and knowing, different frameworks for interpretation revealed.

The Snake Goddess meant beauty and power and balance. She was important enough to sculpt, important enough to save, important enough display. She didn't succumb to a snake's temptations; it didn't freeze her in fear. When I beheld

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the goddess and her set of snakes, it piqued a longing to know more and more and more.

“Snake at the door!” Holden yelled. I turned from wiping down the kitchen counter and looked at him, eyebrows raised. Outside, snow drifted waist-high, and despite the approaching spring, the weather showed no signs of thaw. He must be joking, I thought as I followed my five-year-old down the stairs to the walkout basement. Sure enough, a snake stretched between the ends of the vertical blinds and sliding glass door. Stunned, I blinked a few times. Then I crouched down to touch it. The snake responded sluggishly.

“How did it find its way in?” Had the warm interior attracted the reptile the day I’d shoveled a path for the meter reader? If so, how could I have not noticed? Holden remained silent. I opened the door a couple of inches, and cold wind rushed in and filled the room. I stared at the snake, hoping it would sense the change and head out, but nothing happened.

I grasped the snake on the spot where its head ended, unsure of my next move. It felt like a weighted ribbon hanging from my finger and thumb.

“What do snakes do in the winter? They must hibernate,” I wondered. Holden still didn’t offer an answer. I imagined rows of snakes in burrows, hollow trees, caves. None of that seemed right. I couldn’t imagine them eating enough to survive all winter like bears. Dumbfounded and standing there with a dangling reptile, I wondered about the life cycles and lifestyles of snakes. I contemplated the daily cares of the living, breathing snake I held, and yet all I knew for sure was that snakes symbolized life, death, evil and fertility – depending on when one lived, and that they were associated with water, healing, regeneration, and the spirit world – depending on where one lived. They’d been central to the stories of humans for millennia. Between books and biology, my knowledge gap expanded. I didn’t know where they lived in the winter, or where they were supposed to live. My basement didn’t seem wise.

“I think it eats insects,” I said to Holden. “And there

aren’t any in our house.” He nodded. With that I did the only thing that seemed reasonable. I placed it on a snowdrift and closed the sliding door shut.

After the snow melted and we experienced a proper summer, I prepared our house for sale. Holden’s father and I had divorced the previous year, and we’d stopped using the basement when he moved out – fewer rooms to keep clean. And Holden, recently diagnosed with epilepsy, needed more care and attention. As I inspected every nook and cranny, I found snake skeletons in the basement baseboard heater. Fragile. Tangled. Were they the remains of baby snakes? Relatives of the snake I’d cast out? Then I realized my stupidity. Near the heater because they needed warmth. Cold-blooded. I’d sentenced that snake at the door to death.

I couldn’t show Holden the knot of bones.

As I dissembled my garden to ready my house for sale, I thought of snakes. I’d enjoyed seeing them among the plants as I weeded that summer. The realtor thought that the garden’s central location and the ever-growing compost area might not appeal to potential buyers. I yielded, because what did I know about real estate? From my compost area, I yanked out a volunteer squash, its orange blossom yawning open. In my new place, there’d be no space for a garden, nor a big enough tree for a tire swing for Holden. And I’d started to see that Holden was having a hard time remembering and learning new things – even facts about snakes that we’d been reading about. I wondered if it had to do with his epilepsy or the medication he took for it.

I tackled the compost with a pitchfork. Each stab sank deep, and with each mound I tensed my muscles and pivoted to manage the heft of compacted yard clippings, food scraps, and leaves. When full, I picked up the wheelbarrow and maneuvered it into my neighbor’s backyard. My arms shook after a few trips. When I got to the bottom, where the soil was the most transformed, I displaced a snake. It slithered around the pile then turned, seeming to regard me a moment, then it disappeared into the grass.

This time, we’d both start over.