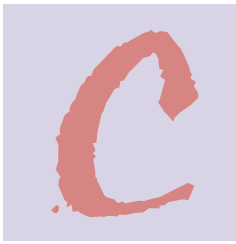


Snakes: The Stuff of Nightmaressssssss



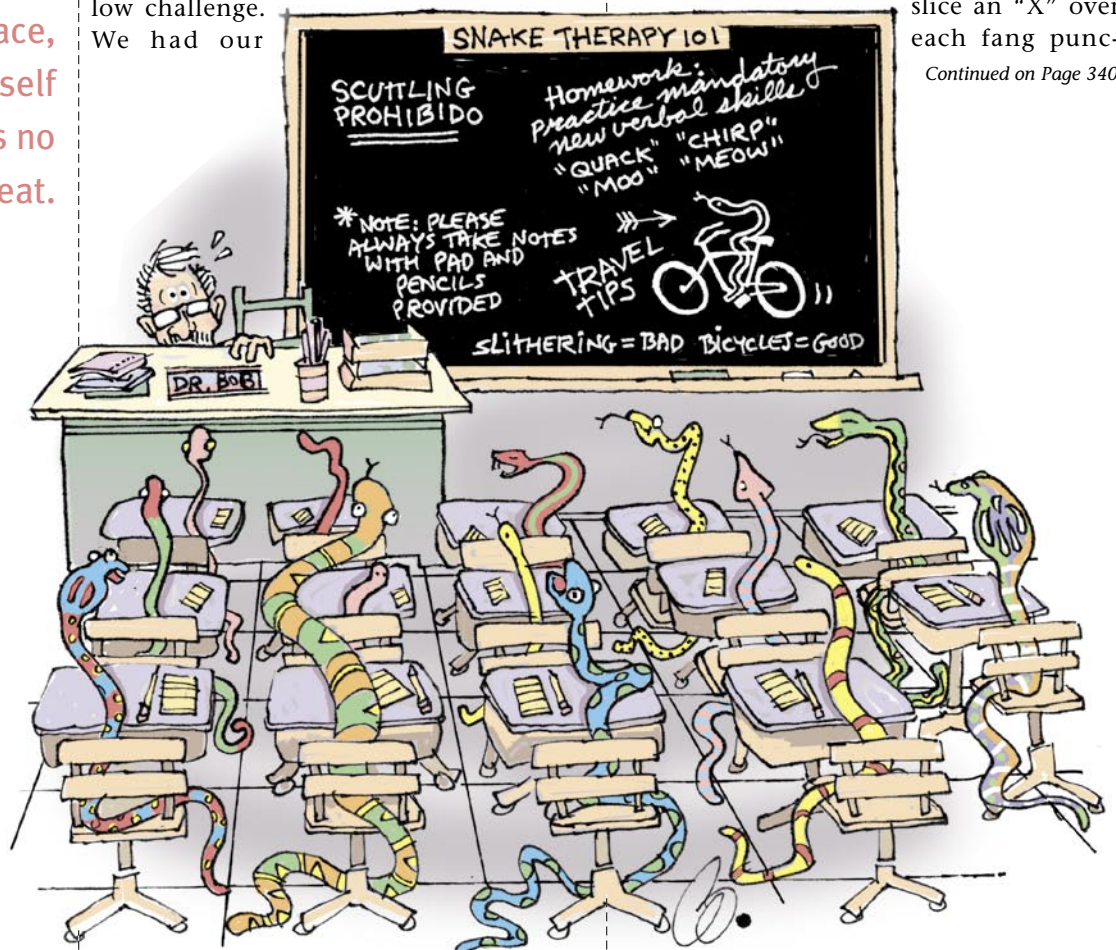
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all me prejudiced. Call me paranoid, biased and ignorant if you like, especially if you are larger than I am, but the fact of the matter is, *I don't like snakes*. This reptilian anathema goes back to the early days of my Boy Scout career. Prior to my induction into the BSA, I considered snakes to be just overachieving worms, just as a rat was a buff mouse. But as every Boy Scout worthy of his Tenderfoot badge soon learns, snakes present such a life-threatening hazard that an entire section in the BSA Handbook is devoted to coping with anticipated encounters with them.

Our motto "Be Prepared" was not a hollow challenge. We had our

tourniquet (neckerchief) and our Boy Scout knife (precursor of the Swiss Army knife) with its leatherpunch for punching leather and its main blade, so dull from playing mumblypeg and carving trees that it couldn't slice margarine. Armed with this snakebite armamentarium, our instructions were clear: The moment one of the 42 million species of snakes bites you or a friend, apply the tourniquet between the bite and the victim's heart. The handbook assumes the snake has had the decency to not go for a midsection or butt bite. Tighten until the extremity turns indigo, then grasping the Scout knife firmly, slice an "X" over each fang punc-

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ture until the area hemorrhages freely.

Sometimes a sock stuffed into the victim's mouth helps reduce distractions. The rescuer, assuming there is one and the bitten person is experiencing syncope by this time, places his mouth over the puncture/slice wounds and sucks out the snake's venom, being careful not to swallow it. It is then discreetly expectorated in a downwind fashion as approved by the EPA. By this time, the snake, not being of a poisonous variety in the first place, has laughed itself to death and is no longer a threat.

I understand this technique is no longer in common use. Even 12-year-old

boys not subject to the civilizing influences of society found this procedure disquieting, so it has been supplanted with a more modern treatment wherein the offending snake is counseled and given a severe reprimand. The victim may or may not be covered by his HMO at the discretion of his primary care provider.

Too late for me, however. My antipathy toward snakes is too deeply rooted to be influenced by herpetologists' unconvincing explanations of their gentleness and general benefit to the ecology.

In my view, *every* snake is a flexible, protein-based tube of neurotoxins. Its one purpose in life is to propel itself

straight for my jugular where the tourniquet/Scout knife technique is not applicable. The fact that I have not seen a snake for upward of 30 years is no excuse to relax my vigilance.

All of which explains why I was visibly shaken when my granddaughter announced that if we expected her to emerge from her high school biology class with anything more than a C-, it would be expedient to purchase a snake for her and a receptacle to contain it. What role the snake would play in the furtherance of her education was not clear, but its procurement was not to be denied.

There are actually reptile stores, up-

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scale boutiques where exotic vertebrates are offered to reptilian aficionados at equally exotic prices. My granddaughter and I peered gingerly at a colorful variety of snakes, lizards, chameleons, and turtles. The captive denizens stared back, transfixed as if fashioned of stone.

"Here's a nice corn snake," said the pony-tailed, eyebrow-pierced youth serving us. The snake is about 18 inches long, banded orange and white. I conceded that it might be considered as attractive as a four-alarm fire silhouetted against an evening sky enthralling an arsonist. Another snake of the opposite gender might even offer a judgment of "Hubba, Hubba!" The snake and I maintained our distance and regarded each other with mutual loathing.

My dislike for snakes is scientifically based on these factors: No. 1: Locomotion. The verb "slither" had to be coined for snakes. Should it ever become necessary for you to inspect the underside of a snake, even though common sense dictates otherwise, you'll notice it has no legs or feet. If it were human, it would be a quadriplegic and could park in restricted zones. In spite of this handicap, a really fast snake on Full Red Alert has been clocked at 8 mph. I realize this doesn't seem too impressive compared to the human he was chasing who was hitting 52 mph on the straightaways.

The slithering is accomplished by one of four methods: The Undulating Crawl or Serpentine, the Caterpillar or Rectilinear, the Sidewinder, and the Concertina. All four methods of locomotion are unnatural, if not actually obscene, and I don't want to talk about them any more.

Reason No. 2 why snakes and I are not pals is that they are inarticulate. They do not bark, moo, meow, chirp, or quack. Compared to a snake, a mime is a regular chatterbox. You can't call,

"Here, boy! C'mon let's go for a slither." No. They hiss. They stare at you with those slit eyes, flick that forked tongue and they hiss. I cannot be simpatico with anything that hisses and slithers. Or scuttles. A forthright animal worthy of trust does not scuttle.

Assuming that the snake, in order to survive even one semester of biology, must eat *something*, I questioned the Snake Man about the dietary requirements of our purchase. I figure a corn snake eats corn, right? Wrong. "Mice. He eats mice," he said.

"Well, that's unfortunate, we don't have any mice. Let's go," I whispered to my granddaughter.

"Not a problem," interrupted the Snake Man. "We have plenty of mice right here." He indicated a cage where dozens of tiny mice, hairless, sightless and unsuspecting, stumbled around in sweet rodent innocence.

Out of respect for your sensibilities, I will spare you the gruesome details, but take my word, there is no sight more hurtful to the human psyche than witnessing a snake devouring a live mouse. Forever vivid in my memory is the vision of the unhinged jaw, the slow, peristaltic bulge moving tailward, the mouse's tail still signaling fruitlessly as it disappears.

It's the stuff of nightmares and the orgy repeats every week as long as the snake is our responsibility. We are petitioning the guidance counselor for a transfer to Early American Folk Dancing.

FREE TO GOOD HOME: Corn snake, like new. Lo miles; ideal pet; loves children and mice. Easily trained to slither and hiss on command. Complete with cage and subscription to "Rodent Raising for Fun and Profit." Call anytime, day or night — will deliver; 555-1212. **CDA**