

When is a Branch a Snake?  
Roger Fritts  
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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church  
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I grew up in Arizona, and when I was a small child, adults taught me to watch out for rattlesnakes. They taught me that a bite from a rattlesnake could kill. Adults told me that if I saw a snake, I should get away from it as fast as I could.

Here at the church harmless black snakes sometimes find their way into the church building. Once, a year or two ago, a black snake came into our worship service on a Sunday morning, over there by the door to the kitchen. Someone from the church staff put a trash can over it and took it outside after the service. They did not tell me about this until after the service was over.

This is a rare event. Black snakes do not come into the church unless it has been warm outside for a few days and then it turns cold. They come in to get warm. [Friday, April 16, 2010, it was 85°F; Sunday, April 17, it was 58°F.]

Because of my upbringing, even when I know they are harmless, I still feel afraid of snakes. If I am with other people who are also afraid, my fear increases in intensity. If another person thinks he or she has seen a snake and starts to shout, the adrenaline rushes through my body and I want to shout too. If many people around me join in shouting “snake,” my anxiety goes off the charts. I want to run away or beat that snake into little pieces, to kill it, to destroy it.

Simultaneously the rational part of my brain is saying “Calm down, don’t overreact, maybe it’s just a stick, or maybe the snake is harmless.” However, my emotion, my fear, tends to overwhelm the rational part of me, especially if the people around me are also afraid.

We humans behave this way not only with snakes, but also with many other things that we fear. For example, 219 years ago in Birmingham, England, a crowd of people became convinced that a Unitarian minister seriously threatened their way of life. For this crowd the minister was like a deadly snake.

A mob formed around eight on the evening of July 14, 1791. The perceived dangerous snake, Rev. Joseph Priestley, was at home. In those days before television, he was preparing to play a game of backgammon with his wife, Mary, by candlelight after supper. The couple heard a loud knocking on their door. Some young men from Rev. Priestley’s Unitarian congregation, out of breath from running, told their minister and his wife that a great mob had assembled in Birmingham. The mob had burned down the Unitarian chapel and then had started marching to the Priestleys’ home, two miles out of the city. The young men had run ahead to warn their minister.

Joseph and Mary Priestley thought it was unlikely that a mob would attack them. They had lived just outside Birmingham for 11 years without any serious difficulty. Still, the young men from

the church insisted that they were in danger, so the couple hid a few valuables, and taking nothing with them but the clothing they were wearing, went to the home of a friend who lived about a mile away.

By midnight, the mob was demolishing their home. They burned Dr. Priestley's laboratory, his library and his manuscripts in which he had recorded not only his religious views but also his scientific experiments. Priestley was not only a Unitarian minister, but also one of the greatest scientists of his time.

A few years earlier Dr. Priestley had conducted an experiment of placing a candle under a glass jar and watching as the candle burned out after a few minutes. Then he took a rat and put it under the glass jar with the lit candle. Soon after the candle went out, the rat died. Next he put a plant in the glass jar with the lit candle. Unlike the rat, the plant did not die.

Dr. Priestley built a special water table in his laboratory. It was set up so that he could put a glass jar upside down onto pieces of wood that he had submerged in water. The wood had an open space under water at the bottom of the glass jar. He could take things in and out of the glass jar, placing them on the flat wood, without letting air from the outside into the jar. He put a plant and a lit candle on the wood and then put the glass jar on top. Eventually the candle went out and then he waited several days. Not moving the jar, he moved a rat quickly under the water so he would not break the seal, and he put the rat in the glass jar with the plant, where the candle had burned out two weeks before. The rat did not die.

Dr. Priestley had discovered oxygen, something in the air that we need to live or something that fire needs to burn. However, he found that plants do not need oxygen to live. In fact plants created this thing that mammals needed in order to live.

The night of the riot, a clear moonlit night in July, Priestley walked across a field. We can only imagine his thoughts as in the distance he could hear the shouts of the mob destroying his home, destroying his laboratory where he had conducted experiments. He could hear them destroying his library, his manuscripts, the records of his experiments, the records of his life's work.

He went back to his friend's house and at about 4:00 a.m. he and Mary prepared to go to bed. However, word came that the mob was advancing towards the house. Therefore, they got up and fled five miles further to the home of their daughter and son-in-law, arriving before breakfast. For about 12 hours, they appeared to be safe. Nevertheless, by evening the mob had gotten word of where Joseph Priestley was hiding. They marched towards the home of his daughter. His wife Mary remained with her daughter, who was about to give birth to a child. The family guessed correctly that the mob wanted Dr. Priestley but would not harm his wife or his pregnant daughter. Dr Priestley and a servant mounted horses and started for London. In London, they took refuge in the home of Rev. Lindsay, minister of the Unitarian chapel in London. Eventually, with the help of friends such as Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestley and his family moved to the United States. Here he founded the first Unitarian church in Philadelphia, one of the first Unitarian churches in America.

The mob was afraid of Priestley because he was both a Unitarian and a scientist. Like a deadly snake, the people saw him as a threat to the established religion of the Anglican church. That mob 219 years ago sincerely believed that this Unitarian minister, this scientist was dangerous, was a threat to their way of life. Joseph Priestley was as harmless as a stick, but people feared that he was a deadly snake.

Today, we humans continue to have difficulty distinguishing between what is a real threat and what is not. Some of us have been in gatherings of people who are afraid, gatherings of people who feel that something is endangering them and their children, just as Joseph Priestley frightened the people in Birmingham because of his rejection of traditional religion and his strange experiments in his laboratory.

When we fear for our survival and especially for the survival of our children, our feelings can be very intense, very strong. The adrenaline rushes into our blood as we prepare to fight or to flee. When we are in such situations what should we do? How should we respond? How do we determine if this time it really is a poisonous snake and we need to act to protect our families and ourselves? Evolution has programmed us to survive, and fear helps us survive, but what is really dangerous?

At such moments, the rational part of me thinks I should say to the crowd, "Slow down. Let's make sure this really is a dangerous snake." Of course, to try to speak against the flow of fear is difficult. It takes time for us to calm down.

Studies of married couples have concluded that when they get into an intense verbal argument, the adrenaline gets flowing and it becomes impossible for either member of the couple to talk reasonably to each other. The researchers have discovered that it takes about 20 minutes for these chemicals to disappear from our bloodstream. So rather than tell the couples to calm down, the marriage researchers say to the couples, separate, get away from each other for about 20 minutes. Take a walk. At the end of the 20 minutes get back together and resume the conversation.

So, confronted with a crowd of people who are afraid of what they think is a poisonous snake, I could say "Go for a walk for 20 minutes to calm down and then we'll come back and look at this thing and see if it's really a poisonous snake."

Of course, if they do listen, they are likely to dismiss me as a nutty snake worshipper. Or they might reply that we do not have 20 minutes. If it is a poisonous snake, in 20 minutes it could attack several of us while we are trying to calm down.

Other researchers who have studied prayer and meditation say that sometimes we can calm ourselves quickly by taking three deep breaths, in through the nose and out through the mouth. Then, they suggest, think of the word "love" for a few moments. This, they say, settles down our flight or fight response enough to allow us to think clearly and calmly.

In keeping with this research, I could confront a crowd of people who are afraid, saying to them "Let's all take three deep breaths and think of the word 'love,' then we will look at this thing and

see if it's really a poisonous snake.” Because it is quick, this has more chance of being considered, but it is somewhat “new-agey.” It might only work with people hiking on trails in California.

It is difficult to influence a mob. Even if I could be heard, it is unlikely that I would be the one to whom most people would listen. People are more united by fear than they are by efforts to be calm and to use reason. People want to protect themselves and their children. They might think, "This guy could be right, it's possible that it's not a dangerous, poisonous snake, but he could be wrong! And if he is wrong, my children will die! I might die! It is better to be safe than sorry. Kill the snake."

In life, we must pick our battles. Therefore, I might say, “You know, I think that’s just a stick, but if it makes you feel better to smash it to pieces go ahead.” Then, after the stick has been thoroughly smashed, there might be a moment when I can say, “Here, let us look closer at this. See, it is just a piece of wood. It is not dangerous. We don’t need to be afraid.” Of course, it is possible that they were right and they have killed a poisonous snake. I need to be open to that possibility.

On the other hand, they might have killed a harmless black snake. Or they might have burned down the home and laboratory of a great scientist. Most of the time we are afraid of things of which we do not need to be afraid.

I love to walk in the woods. I like the feel of a breeze against my skin. I like the feel of the ground beneath my feet. I like the smell of the vegetation, especially the smell after it has rained. I like to get away from automobiles to a place where I can only hear the sounds of birds and insects. I like to look at the colors and patterns of the plants, the flowers and the rocks.

In my journey through the woods of life, in my experience there are many sticks, but only a few poisonous snakes. If I see all these sticks as dangerous snakes, if I live in chronic fear and anxiety, I cannot be spiritually or physically happy. To have a sense of well-being, to feel the peace of the world as I walk along the path of life, I try to develop awareness of the world around me so I can better distinguish between a stick and a snake. I try to develop as an individual so that I can think for myself, so that I can separate myself from the crowd. Then I am less likely to be afraid every time others around me become anxious and afraid.

Walking in the woods, I see something on the ground. I am not sure. Is it a dangerous snake? Or is it an old branch fallen from a tree? I take three deep breaths. In my mind, I say “Love. Love. Love.” And I look and see what is before me.