

“Needless to kill that trying to survive”

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One evening last month I was hiking near my house with my son who was visiting from Texas. Strolling on a semi-private road by a pile of logs we heard—soon saw—a rattler raise itself in “strike” position.

“Whoa,” said Walter, who was closer to the snake than I. “Let’s back off.”

We did. We turned the other direction.

My house is eighteen months old. When Walter and family moved to Texas and I was relieved of grandparent duty, I sold my house in Cheyenne to settle on acreage fifty miles north. A share-cropping farmer used to raise hard-winter wheat there, but climate change has put an end to that. The acreage is reverting to an earlier state. Prairie dogs build, bakers draw near, grassland birds make a living. In back of my house goldfinches and doves harvest seeds from wild sunflowers. When my cousin was here from Germany, we watched a pair of eagles swoop into the draw and up the mesa, alighting on a nearby utility pole.

“We are going to have to kill that rattler,” said Walter as we turned to head back.

I frowned. Every living thing seeks safety—safety from the elements, safety from predators. Only sometimes, what’s safe for one constitutes a threat for another. My neighbors the cattle ranchers hate rattlers, having lost a cow to snakebite, but I built my home knowing I would encounter wild creatures. Fox, coyote, antelope, mule deer take off when they catch movement from me or my dog. Snakes, too, prefer to make themselves scarce but if surprised, they’ll hold their ground, particularly when they are curled in a warm spot. This can work to their detriment. Snakes like to sun themselves on asphalt where they may get crushed by a car.

“Can’t we just let the snake be?”

“This rattler is big, and it’s too close to the house. You have grandkids arriving, remember?”

He was right. His younger brother from California was due to join us with children ages five and eight. So was Walter’s spouse and daughter.

“Can’t we move the snake? Take it someplace where it’ll leave us alone?”

“Well.” Walter was thinking. “I can try.”

He retrieved a rake and garbage can from the garage, then set off to where we'd seen the snake. I hung back, but once he got there, he motioned that it was still around. Pretty soon he was hiking down the road holding the garbage can. I knew then he'd been successful and went inside.

When he was back he said he'd taken the snake out into the field. "In Africa a game warden told me he removes venomous snakes when he finds them near a visitors' center. He says the move stresses them out, so they don't return to where they lived before."

It happens Walter was teaching a two-week veterinary course in South Africa, treating large wildlife, before taking his Wyoming vacation.

Grateful he had solved the problem, I welcomed family visits. Eventually everyone journeyed on.

Turns out, however, the snake problem was not solved. Not quite, anyway. A week later my dog was barking furiously in the basement. Her sleeping quarters are down there, and sometimes she goes for a midday nap.

Since Abby wouldn't quit her ruckus, I checked what was the matter. On the cement floor was a baby rattler, raising itself up and rattling its tiny appendage.

Once before, in the spring, I'd found a baby snake in the basement. I thought it a garden snake, got a square bucket and a stick, scooped up the wriggling thing and took it outside.

Now I repeated the operation but carried the baby rattler away to the field, as Walter had done with the adult snake. Soon after I was back, Abby was barking again downstairs. This time I saw a tiny snake head among the rafters. No way was I going to reach it there; besides, Walter had mentioned that a baby snake can be more lethal than an adult—something to do with discharging all the venom it has, unable to save some for a later attack. A few days later the second baby rattler had ventured to the floor and I gathered and took it away like its sibling.

There may be a regular snake-family reunion down in that field. The adult rattler Walter removed must have been a mama rattler, which means a daddy rattler isn't far off. I'm hoping the raptors will get done what I was hesitant to do myself, but that may be wishful thinking.

Besides safety, every living thing seeks food. Food is survival. We know this, of course, though usually we don't think about it. (Personally, I prefer not to remember the time in my childhood when my family and I were close to starvation.) Rarely do we give thought to the animals for whom gathering food consumes the livelong day or night. Out here, one readily notes that safety and

food are everything. Animals and birds spend all their time seeking. So does every insect, down to the praying mantis that likes to hide among the leaves of my tomato plants.

Humans constitute threats to safety for snakes. What would my son say about baby rattlers in my basement? Keep your eyes peeled? Pray they don't grow into mama and daddy? Oh yeah.