



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The Gospel of Snakes”

© by The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen

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### Centering Thoughts

*They must often change, who would be constant in happiness or wisdom.* Confucius

*The snake which cannot cast its skin has to die. As well the minds which are prevented from changing their opinions; they cease to be mind.* Friedrich Nietzsche

“Snakes. Why did it have to be snakes?”

Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones, in ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’

### Sermon

I hope you experienced a little awe and wonder earlier with the live snake. I’m sorry if some of you might have experienced a little fear or horror. Although I do like to challenge your comfort zone a bit, this is actually not the first time a scaly friend has visited us. We had an *uninvited* black snake slither through the back emergency door one Sunday when it had been opened to allow in some cool outside air. It is also not the first time snakes and religious practices have come together.

If you’re a fan of the series *Snake Salvation* on television or heard the news last fall, you’ll know two Appalachian preachers died after being bitten by poisonous snakes during worship services in two unrelated incidents. Both preachers refused treatment. In faint imitation, we handled a harmless snake. Preacher I may be, but I don’t have the kind of faith these mountain folk have in an idea of God who would keep me safe while handling rattlesnakes and copperheads.

Some Pentecostal Holiness church preachers, like the late Jamie Coots of Middlesboro, Kentucky, believe the Lord protects them from getting bitten. If you get bit, the Lord protects you from dying. If you die, then the Lord’s choosing to call you home. Whatever your outcome, it’s all good.

The idea of snake handling is based on this passage in the Christian gospel of Mark:

[Jesus] said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.

True believers, those with adequate faith, engage in snake handling to prove their faith in God / to God / and to fellow adherents.

I’m all for freedom of religion, but this practice seems like taunting God. They expect God will perform a saving miracle whenever they face danger. I think this illustrates the preacher’s hubris – that God thinks so highly of them, God will either save them from their own actions, or will let them die to bring them nearer to God’s self. This theology defies my understanding.

In his book *Salvation on Sand Mountain* which focuses on a group of southern Appalachian snake handlers, Dennis Covington claims the practice began as a reaction to a lack of spiritedness in worship. Certain Christians saw mainline Protestant worship as lacking emotion and being too formal. Perhaps they longed for the ecstatic tent revivals of circuit-riding preachers from days gone past. Covington writes,

Snake handling didn’t originate back in the hills somewhere. It started when people came down from the hills to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture. ... they recoiled [from this]. They threw up defenses. When their own resources failed, they called down the Holy Ghost. They put their hands through fire. They drank poison. They took up serpents. They still do. [Dennis Covington, *Salvation on Sand Mountain* 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, page xvii-xviii]

Some states outlaw this practice. Though rarely enforced, its practitioners retreated to the hills and hollers, stepping away from modern, public scrutiny.

Let *us* take several steps away, moving from modern to prehistoric times.

Archaeologists believe the oldest evidence of a religious ritual lies in the image of a snake found in a Kalahari Desert cave in Botswana, in 2006. The head of a python was carved in rock, measuring about 20-feet long and as tall as a person. Believed to be roughly 70,000 years old, it pushed back by 30,000 years the known use of group rituals in prehistoric human society.

Below the carving and buried in the dirt were found ritually-burned, red-tipped spearheads. These (and non-red painted stone spearheads that had not been burned) came from a rock location hundreds of miles away. Archaeologist Sheila Coulson of the University of Oslo described her team’s discovery:

You could see the mouth and eyes of the snake. It looked like a real python. The play of sunlight over the indentations gave them the appearance of snake skin. At night, the firelight gave one the feeling that the snake was actually moving.

Behind this remarkable image, the group found a hidden chamber. Coulson believes a shaman could have spoken to the gathered from this chamber, making it appear as if the snake itself was speaking. The shaman is still an important person to the Bushman of the Kalahari who live there today. They tell legends of humans descending from the python, and / that ancient, arid streambeds were created by the python as it circled the hills in search of water. Paintings in the cave support this mythology.

Because of their discovery, Coulson concludes "...that humans were more organized and had the capacity for abstract thinking at a much earlier point in history than we have previously assumed. All of the indications suggest that [this area] Tsodilo has been known to mankind for almost 100,000 years as a very special place in the prehistoric landscape."

[From Sheila Coulson, Sigrid Staurset, and Nick Walker in their 2011 Paleo Anthropology [article](#), "Ritualized Behavior in the Middle Stone Age: Evidence from Rhino Cave, Tsodilo Hills, Botswana". Also, [www.foxnews.com/story/2006/11/30/african-carved-python-head-may-be-oldest-religious-object/](http://www.foxnews.com/story/2006/11/30/african-carved-python-head-may-be-oldest-religious-object/) and [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/11/061130081347.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/11/061130081347.htm)]

Snakes occur in other surviving religious traditions. Australian aboriginals say during the Dreamtime, a rainbow serpent or snake wandered the land forming the rivers and mountains, valleys and deserts of Australia.

In ancient Mesopotamia and elsewhere in the cradle of civilization, the snake was revered for its perceived ability to heal. The image on the cover of your order of service shows what may have been a precursor to the caduceus emblem used by medical organizations today. The snake's ability to transform itself by shedding its skin also seemed miraculous.

Not until the arrival of Christianity did the snake truly become a symbol of evil and Satan. Jewish and Islamic traditions hold a less evil view of the snake and of sin. For orthodox Christians, sin appeared when Eve disobeyed God, causing God to evict Adam and Eve from Paradise. Women and the snake have been blamed for human trouble ever since.

Most of us can't tell one snake from another, poisonous or not. As a survival instinct, we can see how easy it is to revile all snakes. But we *should* revere it more. If we affirm our Seventh Principle, we should respect the snake for its role in our interdependent web of existence. We benefit from the snake. Snakes keep rodent populations under control and many animals prey on snakes for their food.

Another reason we should admire snakes is their ability to change. Snakes illustrate that if we stop growing, learning, or being otherwise willing to change, we will die.

I often say we participate in religious community to be changed. Our mission says we will transform lives. You might think you come here to make friends, gain wisdom, make greater meaning out of your life, or find some order to the chaos of your life. Maybe that doesn't sound like change to you, but it sounds like spiritual growth and change to me.

When you make new friends, you will be changed by their entry into your life. You may simply be happier to have a friend, but that's change. When you gain some new insight or do something that helps another, you can't help but be changed. Simply living requires growth and change.

A snake's growth is obvious. When its scaly skin feels tight, snakes rub against something rough to remove it. Spiritual growth for us is less obvious. We often resist rough change in ourselves and in our lives. We're comfortable in old skins.

But change presents opportunities, good and bad. It is up to us to decide whether to resist or accept it, and then manage it as best we can.

You've made at least one change today. You came to worship at a new time. Perhaps you improved your view of snakes. Perhaps not. I risked your discomfort because it's part of my job to help you grow in a safe environment. Remember, I brought no rattlesnakes or copperheads into the sanctuary today.

May we continue to learn from one another and challenge each other to grow, even when it makes us uncomfortable.

May it be so.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Have you ever resisted a change in yourself or your life? What fed the resistance? Share.
2. How has either resistance or readiness to change affected the outcome of that change?
3. As we experience life we gain or grow new understandings, feelings, skills, spirit, and personal qualities. How have you grown recently?
4. Do you attend UUFA to be changed, and if so, in what ways? Is this spiritual growth? Share.