



# When Snake Comes: Reflections on a Dream

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The idea of transformation and renewal by means of a serpent is a well-substantiated archetype.

—C. G. Jung (1968, par. 184)

When we meet the snake, it stops us dead.

—Neil Russack (2002, p. 57)

In my fourth year of training to become a Jungian analyst, I had a dream that shook me to my core:

*I am walking along a path. Suddenly a huge snake (serpent) moves near me along the ground. It is huge, bigger than any snake I might expect to see in real life, and I am only aware of a section of its thick dark body as it silently undulates past my own. I realize that its head is nowhere near me, and that it is already moving back down in to the deep ground (from where it had come?). I sense that I am safe, as it is not aware of my presence and is heading safely toward its own home. At one point, though, I catch sight of what must be a “tail” piece, sprouting up like a whale fin from the water. I am mesmerized by this small snake bit and find myself rooted to the spot in terror.*

I woke from this dream feeling much the same terror as in the dream. The experience was visceral—as if I had had a real life encounter with some huge, primeval force—and remained with me for some time. I know that there is no way to fully grasp what that encounter was about, just as there is no way to definitively “understand” what snake means as a dream image. Some fifteen years later I am still attempting to metabolize this dream and the energy it brought into my life.

Most mornings I walk along the path on which the dream snake appeared. It is my place of contemplation and solace. Lined with red twig dogwood, shagbark hickory, pawpaw, and flowering raspberry, the path runs alongside Cascadilla Creek—a body of



*Knotted Dragon Pendant*, Artist unknown (China), 3rd century B.C.  
Jade (nephrite), H. 3 1/8 in. (7.9 cm); W. 2 1/16 in. (5.2 cm). Courtesy of  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Ernest Erickson Foundation, 1985.  
Accession Number: 1985.214.99.

water that begins in a swampy wetland not far from my house and flows through the Cornell campus, emerging as a gorge before it flows through downtown Ithaca. At the point where it runs alongside the walking path, it burbles over stones and through shaded areas.

Walking on this path is a form of meditation for me, as well as exercise. Living in Ithaca, New York means that the weather is not always conducive to walking outdoors. Even in the coldest weather, however, a few of us will bundle up and walk (or run) the path. Over the years I have been fortunate to glimpse a red fox scurrying across the path ahead of me or a blue heron alighting on the creek. The path is my daily opportunity to connect with my body and with nature before beginning the routine of work and life.

Into this setting the dream places an enormous snake. At the moment that the dream opens, the snake has already moved far along the path. I become aware that the creature has been silently gliding past me. It is on my right side, and the breadth of its body is something between the height of my knee and my thigh. I cannot see its head; the snake is so long that the head is way off in the distance. I am aware that it is moving back into the earth. And somehow I witness its tail just before it disappears.

There are seventeen species of snakes identified in New York State. None of them is the size of the serpent in my dream. The closest I have ever found to anything resembling that snake were in photographs from the Amazon—home to earth-based shamanic cultures—where snakes of a similar color and length seem to reside. All of which suggests to me that something foreign—something much older and more familiar with the dark depths—made its way into my dream.

And while this snake did not actually bite me in the dream—it merely slithered close to my leg without making physical contact—it profoundly impacted my psyche and my life. In fact, this dream foreshadowed a major change in direction—perfectly imaged by an encounter with an enormous serpent as I traveled “my path.” Within several months following the dream, I fell ill. I was barely able to function (let alone work as a therapist) for roughly three months. And although it was later determined that the depression and other symptoms I experienced were linked to a sleeping medication I had been taking, nonetheless I descended deep into the underworld.

During that time, my usual mode of functioning (which admittedly is fairly rational and often cerebral) was wiped out. On some level the experience was frightening, but the force pulling me under was so strong that I barely was able to register the fear. I only knew that I was in the grip of something far more powerful than my ego mind and that it had a will of its own. By the time I was successfully able to clear the chemical from my system, I felt as though I had undergone an initiation. And when I emerged, reassembled back to myself, something profound had shifted within me.

Illness, descent, and renewal are all archetypal themes linked to healing and transformation. So too is the imagery of the snake. After the dream but before I fell ill, two analysts offered interpretations of my dream. The first, a man, suggested that it was a good thing that the snake had returned to the earth. In his view, snake energy was too powerful for the conscious mind and needed to be safely contained within the ground. I felt a certain amount of relief in hearing his words. I certainly was relieved that the snake had passed safely by me on the path and was headed back into what seemed to be its natural realm. The snake’s energy was terrifying and I was thankful to have it go back to from where it had come—someplace deep enough and vast enough to hold its force.

The second interpretation, from a woman, suggested that the snake was a symbol of the Self and needed to be honored as such. From this perspective, she encouraged me to put a dish of milk out for the serpent (following traditions practiced in India). In

her view, it was better to have the snake stay above ground, and the milk offering was a way to invite it to move toward me. At that point in time, the thought of offering a little dish of milk to that enormous creature caused me to shake in terror. I simply could not conceive of doing such a thing, even in my imagination.

From the vantage point of fifteen years or so, I can appreciate how both views are worthwhile. I also greatly value the dual perspectives as reflecting the multiple facets of the image and the ambiguity and paradox of dreaming itself. Snake, as an imaged experience, is varied and multilayered. As Hillman says, “But what remains after all the symbolic understanding is *what the snake is doing*, this crawling huge black snake that is sliding into your life” (Hillman & McLean, 1997, p. 26). And it is this question, “What is the snake doing in my life?,” which remains a central mystery for me and one that I continue to ponder and explore.

I should mention at this point that the greatest outward change to occur in my life after the dream, and after my illness, was that I stopped training as an analyst. I had just completed exams and passed to the stage of being an advanced candidate when the dream and subsequent experience of descent took place. Once I felt restored to myself, I simply could not continue my training. The energy was no longer there. Just at the point when I made this decision, I happened on a cartoon in *The New Yorker*. In it, a man sits in a large armchair tossing away a book over his shoulder. The caption reads, “The man who knew enough.” I knew in my bones that some part of me did, indeed, “know enough” and that the emphasis now needed to be on something other than intellectual understanding. Snake energy is not about head knowledge, but rather something much more ancient and instinctual. In Thomas Singer’s words, “I think of the snake as offering a bottom-up, non-rational center of consciousness rather than a top-down rational view in which the mind orders everything” (Singer, 2013, p. 46).

Leaving aside the issue of whether I shall one day resume formal analytic training, I feel strongly that the snake is related to my inner training as a healer and to my transition from a head-based to more instinct-based mode of being. As Singer acknowledges, recounting his own relationship with snake (and snake dreams):

I find myself inhabiting the world just a bit differently—in a way that is more receptive to and animated by the serpentine energies of life. The Earth Mother and her consort, the snake, have initiated me into a more natural embrace of life and its blessings. Living with snake as a partner/guide results in a heightened sensitivity to the vibrations of both inner and outer reality. The snake’s sway can be slow and rhythmic when in tune with the flow of life or sudden and violent in striking out when threatened. (Singer, 2013, p. 46)

I resonate deeply with Singer’s experience. Snake energy is both ancient and earth based. Snakes have been associated with the goddess, with body and instinct, the non-rational, and deep healing and renewal for thousands of years. Over the course of the last fifteen years I can sense my own slow metamorphosis from a more rational head-based way of living to a more embodied, feminine, intuitive mode. Nature and the earth are very much a part of this process.

I am keenly aware that my own meanderings on my walking path allow me to touch more deeply into the natural cycles within myself. Occasionally I have encountered an eastern ribbon snake—a type of small garter snake—and the moment always causes me to experience a jolt of surprise. My dream of the serpent on the path continues to carry an enormous amount of energy.

On several recent walks I have found myself imagining what it must have been like to travel to one of the sanctuaries of Asklepios, the Greek god of healing, so many centuries ago. The sound of the running water from the nearby creek reminded me that Asklepiian temples were always situated by streams, and often built upon underground water sources that flowed throughout the sanctuary and the surrounding land. The sanctuary setting—what we might call a *temenos* or protected grove—was considered sacred and featured the restorative powers of nature as part of its healing energy. As C. A. Meier points out in his work on dream incubation and the cult of Asklepios, “Asclepius’ chthonic nature meant he was always worshipped near spring and groves” (Meier, 1989, p. 21).

For nearly a thousand years the healing temples of Asklepios were present throughout the Mediterranean. Some research suggests that nearly 450 such sites existed throughout that period. I can only imagine the power that these healing sites must have held. Of his visit to Epidauros—the original and most well-known Asklepia—Henry Miller wrote, “There was a stillness so intense that ... I heard the great heart of the world beat” (cited in Tick, 2001, p. 3).

The central mystery practiced at the Asklepia was a journey into the underworld in which, if the supplicant was fortunate, the god in the form of a serpent would initiate his or her healing. Many rituals surrounded the preparation for healing, but the deepest experience took place while dreaming. Those seeking relief from their illness would sleep in a special spot within the temple—the *abaton*—a space created to facilitate the healing dream. As Kimberely Patton suggests, “The dream was the consulting room in which one encountered the god-physician. It was itself the theater of healing” (Patton, 2011, p. 18). And, as Meier points out, the person does not “*have* the dream”; the dream “*visits* the person,” who “sees the god” in that dream (Meier, 1989, p. 118).

For the ancients as well as for many modern-day Jungians, the dream is a living experience. The Asklepiian tradition sought to provide the conditions in which the supplicant could undergo an experience of the unconscious that would facilitate healing. A modern, fictionalized account cited by Edward Tick offers a glimpse into the Asklepiian practice in Athens during the Peloponnesian wars.

“I went to the little shrine in the cave, in the rocks of the High City, just below walls. ... A fading sunlight fell upon the pillars of the porch, but it was dark inside; the dripping of the holy spring sounded solemn and loud. The priest took the honeycake I had brought, and gave it to the sacred snake in his little pit. He uncoiled and accepted it; and the priest asked why I had come. ...”

The priest of Asklepios interviewed and examined the man, then [the man continued his account]:

“He brought me a cup and said, ‘Drink this and sleep; and when you wake, remember what dream the god has sent you.’ I took the draught, which was bitter, and lay down on a pallet in the porch. There was a man sleeping on another pallet. ...” (Tick, 2001, pp. 5–6)

To be visited by the snake form of Asklepios while dreaming was considered a sacred and healing encounter with the god. Snakes were an integral part of the Asklepiian tradition. During a visit to an Asklepia on the island of Kos, Robert Bosnak saw a tunnel running beneath the *abaton* space for dreaming. He encountered ...

a stairway leading five steps into the earth to a triangular opening. I imagine it to reach down to the cave of snakes who often lived in Greek sanctuaries long

before man-made structures were erected, like the great serpent Python of Delphi. The serpent must be the Ancestor of the healing god himself, since one curls up around the staff he carries that still adorns our pharmacies. I shudder and draw back from these stairs to the Underworld. (Bosnak, 2011, p. xx)

Snakes were so primary to the healing cult of Asklepios that whenever another sanctuary was to be established, one of Asklepios' sacred serpents was brought from the original temple at Epidauris to the new grounds in order to transfer the healing energy of the god. A story recounted by Meier reminded me of the imagery of my dream. Here he is citing Pausanias, who wrote of the founding of Epidaurus Limera at the end of the fourth century B.C.E.

The inhabitants say they are ... Epidaurians from the Argolid. They had been sent by the city ... to consult Asclepius, and they landed at this point in Laconia. Here a dream was sent to them. They also say that they brought a serpent with them from their home in Epidaurus. It escaped from the ship and disappeared into the earth on the shore. Therefore, in view of the visions in their dreams and the omen of the serpent, they decided to settle down and live there. Where the serpent disappeared into the earth, there are the altars to Asclepius, with olive trees growing around them. (Meier, 1989, p. 11)

The first time I came across this description of the snake disappearing into the earth, I was mesmerized. The image felt so much like my dream. The notion that the snake chooses the location in which to enter the ground and further, that the spot is marked as sacred, moved me deeply. I had never considered this perspective, and yet I recognized the image as both ancient and true.

It occurred to me that the spot upon which the serpent in my dream descended into the ground was also holy. Perhaps in some sense, I, too, might need to create an altar to the god of dream healing or plant olive trees to mark the spot of such a powerful visitation. Following the image, there is a hint that the coming of the serpent indicates a place in the psyche—the ground—where healing and transformation can occur. A process is underway, marked by the location that the snake selects for its home.

Hillman has referred to the snake as “the most ancient and universal carrier of the genius spirit, the figure of a protective guardian, the ‘genius’ itself” (Hillman, 1996, p. 59). Serpent energy is related to our destiny—to the unfolding of the life we are meant to live, rather than the one we think we should live. Thomas Lavin, student and biographer of Meier, recounts a lovely illustration of the appearance of snake as marker of destiny. He describes a meeting between Meier and Jung at Jung's summer home on Lake Zurich in 1949. The two men met to discuss Jung's resignation as chair of psychology. As they were discussing possible candidates for Jung's replacement, a water snake came out of the lake and crawled between Meier's legs. Jung said to Meier, “Well it looks as though the psyche has made our decision for us.” Meier then became Jung's successor (cited in Tick, 2001, pp. 224–225).

That my experience of snake energy effectively derailed me from my analytic training (at least for the time being) remains mysterious. After all, it would be easy to make all sorts of conceptual links between a dream seemingly having an archetypal link to the Asklepiian healing tradition and my own journey to become an analyst. And yet, on an outer level at least, that seems not to be the case.

Rather, I feel myself more in line with the sentiment expressed by Vivienne MacKrell as she speaks about a woman's dream of a snake:

The dream illustrates that one has to work on one's reality and find out what one's instincts really are, rather than what one has been taught they were. One has to step out of the framework of collective precepts, go with the snake and become aware of its needs in order to find one's own wisdom, born of the eternal wisdom of nature—[the dreamer] has to introvert, to go into her own earth. She has to follow her dreams and fantasies and thereby allow the fertile wisdom of Nature to express itself. (Abt, Bosch, & MacKrell, 2000, p. 178)

From time to time, I still find myself wondering about training. Occasionally a dream will occur in which I am aware that the training is still going on. One of the most noteworthy of these dreams featured the name of an actual person. My research revealed her to be director of training at another institute. And although we had numerous positive discussions—I had left the institute where I had been training in good standing, and it is not unusual for candidates to train at more than one institute (my own analyst trained at three)—ultimately, the energy was not there.

Most recently, I decided to do an active imagination with Jung in order to consult him on the matter. I found him in his study (much like the iconic photo of him sitting at his desk in front of three stained-glass windows). He was smoking a pipe. I told Jung that I was once again struggling with the issue of training. He stood silently—pipe in hand—and led me outside to the water's edge. Not uttering a word, he used a stick to make channels in the dirt near the water. As I watched, I noticed the way that the water ran through the channels downhill toward the lake. I understood that psychic energy was not subject to my ideas or will. It would run its course—it would take the path of least resistance. I saw clearly—without having to be “told,” that I needed to follow where my energy was leading me.

Fifteen years ago a giant snake interrupted the path I was on and moved me in a new direction. Since that time my interest in a more feminine, embodied approach to healing has grown. I recognize the snake as linked to the shamanic tradition as well as the ancient goddess religions. In my active imagination no words were uttered, but rather Jung led me to nature, to observe the ways of earth and water. Indeed, he left his study—note-worthy as a place of study and reflection—and brought me outdoors to the living waters.

I do not know whether I will one day resume training as an analyst. I only know that, until this point, the timing has not been right. As the years have passed, I have become less terrified of the serpent and more aware of its role as guide and protector. To follow the wisdom of the snake is to trust the unknown and allow myself to be moved and transformed by energies beyond my consciousness. As Jung put it:

What Nature wants us to do is to move with a snake-like motion. ... The snake is the symbol of the great wisdom of Nature, for the too direct way is not the best way; the crooked way, the detour, is the shorter way. (Jung, 1976, pp. 84–85)

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