

Shaking the Bushes

One summer when I was about twelve years old, I was sent to a Scout camp along the Delaware River in western New Jersey. It was a beautiful and remote area where the mountains came down to the edge of the water. As I recall the experience, it is not the natural beauty that sticks in my mind, rather, my experience with the snake.

The camp had more than its share of rattlesnakes and copperheads. There were so many that a prolonged battle between the campers and the snakes developed. There seemed to be a contest each year to see which cabin could kill the most. The nurse at the first aid station kept a jar for each cabin and by the end of the summer most of the jars were full. The total often reached to over fifty.

I remember one evening an alarm went out in the camp when a rattlesnake had been detected near our cabin. When I arrived at the scene, I discovered a plan had been developed. Someone had to go into the area where the snake had been noticed and “shake the bushes.” Needless to say, I was elected to go in and “shake the bushes.” I got down on all fours and began to crawl into the bush. I still remember the moment I encountered the snake. It acted like its very being was being threatened, and indeed it was. It was a combination of alarm, fear, anger, panic, all wrapped into one response. Its section of the world had been invaded. For the snake and I, it was indeed an encounter with death. The snake was killed, but not by me. After shaking the bushes and confronting the snake, the whole thing was no longer a game for me, and I ran for my life. As I fled, I sensed a warning went out to all the snakes that human beings are dangerous and a threat to many of the creatures of this earth.

Over the years as I have reflected on my experience, I realize that there have only been a few times since that I have “encountered the snake,” that is to say, the experience of facing a situation where someone, or something, has had its very being threatened by the confrontation

with death. When it happens, it is not easy to forget the intense alarm and fear that such an experience generates.

There was one lesson I have learned from the snake. It is not wise to go around “shaking the bushes.” When we threaten another’s existence, we run the risk of having to kill or be killed. Some people have a fascination with this kind of activity; they are attracted to danger and death. As for me, I say, you better be careful and know what you are doing when you go around “shaking the bushes.”