



Esther... Have You Seen Her Recently?

Laura Dorsey, D.Min.

The question arises frequently when people come to my farm house—"Uh, have you seen her recently, what's her name?" they ask.

"You mean Esther" I say. Usually, the question comes from those who have encountered Esther at one point or another, but not always.

The story begins long before Esther's arrival and naming. Back in the seventies, we moved an old house to the farm property of my family and placed it back in the woods to enjoy it with children and friends. It was a piece of work to be sure. It cost me \$75 to buy the structure and substantially more to have it moved. The house dated back to the mid eighteenth hundreds. It had been a home on Main street in a small rural

town. We had it moved in three sections, and then set on a new foundation with a new roof. We had the fireplace boarded up for the foreseeable future.

At the time, my husband and I lived in midtown Atlanta and enjoyed weekend outings to the farm with our two girls. My schedule with our girls, the birth of our son and the economy all influenced our priorities. So, the house sat empty for years. The house was truly a shell—no need to shut the front door or draw the curtains. The native wildlife had its way with the old place for a long time. On occasion, we'd wander through, cookout or churn some ice cream together, nothing too disruptive.

During the eighties, we made the decision to fix the old place up and move to the farm. Now this was a major shift for each of us. We had some initial plans for renovation that we'd had drawn up earlier. We dusted them off and set to work to at least make it livable, like having water and electricity. The crews of workmen who helped us were indeed dubious at best. Finely, after months of effort and negotiations, we moved to the country. It was the mid nineteen eighties. The children were horrified. The only saving grace, as far as they were concerned, was the number of movie theaters within a short distance. It was an unusual move fraught with adjustments and life style changes. Although we were accustomed to the farm as a retreat, it was now home sweet home.

Our teenage daughters had trouble adapting, but were soon off to college and private school. Our six year old son acclimated to the farm with less difficulty. One Sunday afternoon, however, he came into the kitchen, speechless. He kept pointing to the front hall. There, resting on the chest in the front hall, was a large snake. I grabbed the broom from the kitchen and swept the invader out the front door. My heart was racing. Then, before I knew it, I heard a shot and the snake's life ended. A picture of my husband holding the snake up for viewing is somewhere in the scrapbooks. At the time, I was jolted by this visitor and saddened by the killing. The snake was nonpoisonous and would not have hurt anyone. I knew from my mother that this type was harmless.

Years passed and we moved away. However, when my son left for college, I moved back to the farm by myself. He would come to visit and relax during those years. On one of those weekends, when he entered the house, there, on the chair, was a guest. He ran to my brother, who was elsewhere on the farm, to ask what he should do about this.

"Get back to the house before your Mother returns!" his uncle exclaimed. When he returned, the snake was gone. We laughed and discussed the shock and drama of the snake's entrance into our lives, a descendent perhaps of our earlier visitor. I decided to name her Esther. She had the courage and the audacity to show herself in our home, when it could have meant death. On another occasion, my son spotted her on the living room hearth. She didn't stay long—she was just visiting, acting as though she knew he was here.

As the years passed, I would see Esther periodically. Sometimes, I would look out my bedroom window and see Esther sunning by the pond or traveling across the yard. On occasion, I would find her skin shed neatly near a branch or corner of the house. The heating and air conditioning man knew her by name. One time, he spotted her in the yard, and said, "She's getting ready to shed her skin."

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“How can you tell?” I asked in surprise.

“Her eyes are glazed over” he replied. And sure enough, I found her skin not too long after. I have a beautiful glass container on my closet shelf filled with her skins. My daughter, who is less than impressed with Esther, once called and asked if my grandson could borrow one of the snake skins for show-and-tell at school. I was so flattered. I picked the best one. He loves learning about nature. I have since given him a magnifying glass and a spider for his birthday.

But let me get back to Esther—It was Mother’s Day about two years ago. Family was here from all over the southeast. The youngsters wanted to play baseball. I mentioned that my son had a bat and glove upstairs in his room at the house. Well, before I could get there, the girls were across the field and up the stairs to his closet. They swung the door open and there, much to their surprise, was Esther, tucked in an opening in the wall. Esther was curled up around one of the rafters, sound asleep. One child was horrified, but the other, younger one was

enthralled. This story traveled rapidly. No one is anxious to stay with me anymore. The story has been told and told and elaborated to everyone’s delight. I cleaned out the closet and had the inside wall finished correctly. Then I planted mint around the base of the house. I remember my mother recommended this to keep snakes out of the tool house. Esther could stay outside now. This is a new century.

So when the workman came recently to check the farm well, my source of water, they asked, “Have you seen her recently? Uh, what’s her name?” I had to admit that I had not.

“I hope she’s OK,” I said. When I thought about it, I realized that Esther kept me company, quietly and continuously, during years of transition and change. She didn’t bother me. I didn’t bother her. She’s one of the many inhabitants I have learned to live with and admire. She’ll be around ■