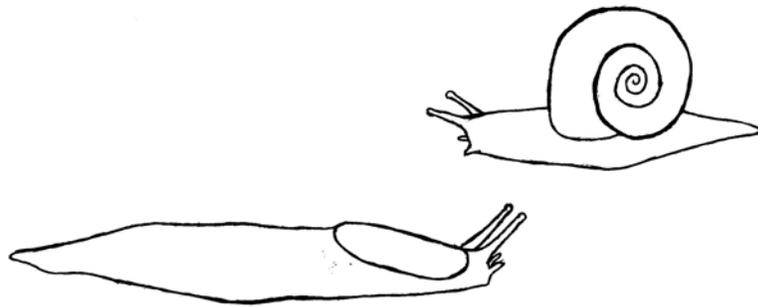


## SHELLS

I like snails. Next to the squirrel, the snail is the animal I like most. And, while I take great pleasure at looking at squirrels (or even thinking of them), I identify more with snails.

I like slugs too. They too slide by making waves with their bottom muscle, and can fold their feelers and curl themselves into a spiral. But they don't have shells. They are much more vulnerable than snails. They can't protect themselves from the environment, so they must be careful to go only where the conditions are right for them. They are usually active at night, when the air is damp and the ground is wet from the dew. If by dawn they don't make it back to their shelter under a rock or a pile of rotten leaves, then they might dry out and die.

Snails have a lot in common with slugs. In fact, they have the same makeup. Their skin can not protect them from the environment. When the conditions become unfavorable for them, they must withdraw into a shell.



But snails do have shells, which slugs don't. This makes all the difference. They can live in places where slugs can't, because they carry their safe haven with them. When needed, they can stay inside their shell until the conditions change for there to be safe enough to come out. Some snails can spend years inside their shells, with very few short breaks outside. They can seal the entrance with a thick layer that prevents them from drying. They keep activity to a minimum. Even their lungs are folded. This is how they survive.

I have a shell. It is very useful. My shell enables me to survive where the surroundings might be too overwhelming for my being. I can seal it, and be protected from too much commotion, and stickiness of social interactions, and toxic effects of implicit communication and subtexts and power games. I can keep myself intact.

But a shell has some drawbacks. It might create the illusion of safety, when danger lurks. After so many years of staying sealed, one loses the sense of freedom, and mistakes surviving for living. With the ability to survive tough conditions, one might lose the desire and the impulse to seek for better living conditions. Only after I met shell-less people, I learned about my real needs, and how much I had put up with what was unacceptable for me. I began to realize the danger I was in.

There is a difference between me and a snail. A snail does not have to be active while being confined. But the circumstances that drive me into my shell are just those that require that I remain active: It is when I must invest energy, when I have to do things which are unnatural for me, things that demand my best performance skills – and at the same time, when I can't breathe or restore lost resources. Apparently, I survive. But even a snail must eventually be able to come out for a while and live, or xe dies inside xyr shell. And the environment that enables coming out, for a snail, is the same environment that enables a slug to survive at all. This is an important thing to know.

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