

## **Bottled up reserves of courage**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

THE bottle containing the offending creature sits in the middle of the table, as a group of us poke and stare at it. "Ooooh yuck, echhhh," can be heard erupting. "Not while we're eating, take it away!"

It's a simple gift a girlfriend has brought back from Vietnam for a mutual friend: a novelty item for us here, but apparently it's a common remedy sold on every street corner there.

Snake oil. Real snake oil. Bright yellow liquid in a beautifully shaped bottle. But in the centre of the bottle lies a small pickled cobra curled around and around, its neck and upper body propped up by a few herbs, its long forked tongue hanging limply from its mouth.

I am fascinated, compelled. I keep picking up the bottle, tipping it this way and that to see if the head moves, intrigued by the fan shape of the neck I have seen on deadly snakes in westerns. The fluid looks lethal. "What are you supposed to do with the stuff?" I ask, watching pieces of chilli float about like snow in those cute paperweights.

"You drink it," my girlfriend says.

"It apparently has great curative and aphrodisiac properties."

I can understand why certain people would believe it, why in Asia the shamanically inclined would want to ingest the great serpent spirit: poisonous, powerful, potent.

"Yuck, drink it? No way," someone says as the protests start up again. My daughter is the most vocal, not even wanting to hold the bottle. It continues to sit in the middle of the table as we eat sushi. Other people resume chatting but I can't help pondering the snake. We can eat one slithery, slippery thing, yet not another. It's all a matter of conditioning.

"Are you going to drink it?" someone asks the man it was given to. "Sure. I will one day when I'm feeling brave."

"I wonder what the effect would be?" I say. "Would you get stoned or drunk on the traces of venom, would you get high?"

I feel the snake spirit stirring inside me.

In India it is believed that energy is represented in the body as kundalini -- a symbolic serpent coiled at the base of the spine. Would the snake oil stimulate that sacred life force?

My heart starts racing. "Let's open it. Let's all do it together, take a swig," I dare, gallantly.

Everyone starts laughing. I am half joking but there is a side of me -- the side that wants to give it a go -- that isn't. It's the side that has pushed me all my life: on to the highest rides, even though I'm afraid of heights; into war zones; into

mischief. It suddenly rears itself up from behind a rock where it has been sleeping, curled and dormant.

My friend opens the bottle and hands it to me. "You first," he says. I take a sniff. It's revolting, salty, smelly, a bit like decay and a bit like rotten fish. The snake eyes, all white from death, stare at me. I heave, pushing the bottle back.

"No, you go first." There is stunned silence. He sniffs the potion, screws up his face and brings the bottle to his lips. Then down it goes. "Ooooooh, mmmm, interesting, hot, chilli, bit like fish, strange," he says, as the rest of us wince. The woman who gave him the gift becomes excited. "My go," she says and takes it bravely, sniffs, winces and puts it down the hatch. Another friend takes a swig and starts gagging, running over to the grass. "It's disgusting. Errrr, I think I swallowed its eye. No it's a chilli, errrrrr," she splutters as the bottle is passed to me.

I feel ill just looking at it. Therapists believe we only grow when we push ourselves out of familiar terrain, out of our comfort zone, when we take risks and move boundaries.

I tell myself that I have become too safe, too comfortable. Time for a new trial by fire. I eyeball the beast. With my friend still gagging, I bring the bottle to my lips. I can see the snake head moving. Now that the oil has gone down, the torso is a bit floppy. I don't want the head to touch my lips. Bile comes to my throat. I hear my favourite mantra in my head: "Feel the fear and do it anyway."

And there it is, a mouthful of snake oil -- warm, fishy, sickly, spicy and slithering down my throat. I wipe my mouth, put the bottle down and swallow again. "Yay!" a few people cheer. I take a swig of champagne and sit quietly for a while, contemplating my efforts and waiting for the effects of essence of cobra to kick in.

The effect is immediate. I feel powerful, alive and strong. Kundalini has awoken. I glare at my daughter with a you-better-get-to-bed-on-time-tonight sort of look. I feel the warrior snake unfurling within. My life force is surging through my veins. Because we become so potent and virile when we drink of the magic elixir: a sacred potion called courage.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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