

Swallowing one's fears

By Ruth Ostrow

"AAAAAAH," my husband screamed, his voice bellowing from the bathroom, as tingles of horror shot up my spine. "Aaaaaahhhhhhh!" "What's happening?" I screamed back. It was like a scene from a bad movie.

Since moving to the country our family has had to deal with one of the most confronting of all country realities: spiders.

Big spiders, big as a woman's hand, with huge, hairy, meaty legs fat as fingers, creeping over ceilings, hiding in the clothes cupboard, running across the dashboard of your car while you are hurtling along the freeway. Not poisonous, but ugly enough to make your blood curdle.

It has been an exercise in dealing with fear. My husband and I are what therapists might call arachnophobic. In the city we would flee at the sight of the smallest, itsy-bitsiest spider.

I was once told by a psychologist friend to come in for some counselling. Apparently, the best way to immunise against phobias is to have a therapist expose you to your fear little by little over a period of time. A photo is brought into the room. Next the object of terror - mouse, spider or mother-in-law - is put in a corner, and then gradually brought closer. Mouse-a-phobics, arachnophobics and commit-a-phobics suddenly find that they haven't died of fright despite the dreaded thing sitting in front of them.

Therapy sounded good but we moved to the tropical north instead, which has been one giant therapy session, as we've been exposed, bit by bit, to the creeping, crawling majesty of spiders. Rainy nights have been the worst - when the hairy hordes come in from the cold and dangle from the ceiling above your head.

"Please do something," I begged my husband on this particular night as we watched one grotesque leg after another climbing out of a crack above our bed. As the spider crawled towards us, my husband dived out of bed, hit the floor in some military manoeuvre, and ran to get my daughter's bug catcher.

He stood on the bed with his hand in the air but the catcher - at least the size of a baby's head - was too small to fit around those massive legs. Wincing, shuddering, he decided to get a broom.

"I'll push it outside," he said, opening the door to the balcony and trying to prod the spider without hurting or needlessly killing it.

The spider ran the other way. My husband chased it with the broom into the bathroom, which is when the blood-curdling scream emanated.

"What is it?" I yelled as my ashen-faced partner fell into my arms. "It dropped on to my ... head," he said, trembling. "I prodded it with the broom and it fell right on my ... head! I had to flick it off with my own ... hand."

My heart pounded as I tried to fathom the horror of a dive-bombing spider on the loose.

An hour later it was found cowering in some corner of the bathroom. We both stood in frozen shock but suddenly my husband made a joke. "You know, this spider would have had a pretty bad day itself, looking down and seeing a monster with a broom coming towards it.

"I guess it didn't mean to be born ugly or scary. If it had butterfly wings we'd be celebrating it." He laughed.

My mouth fell open. The spider falling on his head had knocked courage and sense into him. I almost felt a twinge of compassion for the spider myself until it moved. "Get it out of here!" I yelled as my husband finally raced it out the door.

But my breakthrough was about to come. For I believe we always draw to ourselves the things we most fear in life, so we can deal with them as part of our personal development.

And so here is the last shocking chapter in our therapeutic process.

The other day a friend came over. He put water in the electric kettle to make himself a cup of tea. Because I only ever fill the kettle via the spout, I walked over to see how he'd managed to get the lid up. And there inside the kettle, floating belly up, was a seriously huge huntsman spider, with decomposing legs. I gagged while my friend fished out spider bits and took the thing outside. When he returned I was still spluttering. "Yummy, boiled spider," he joked.

"Don't be stupid! We didn't drink it," I said.

"Dear Ruth, it's been there for weeks, given the state of its body. You've been drinking spider essence by the gallon."

So there it is. My horrible, horrible tale. Having teased friends through school - "What would you rather: be boiled in oil or eat a tarantula spider?" - the universe finally decided my fate.

I don't know what the phobia therapists would make of our methodology - giant spider on head, plus spider broth drunk down with tea - to cure fear. But they should take note. Since our close encounters of the phobic kind, we've found having spiders "merely" crawling all over the walls and ceilings is a piece of cake.

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