

Facing your fears

"It might have been a 'possum."

Those were the words my husband calmed me down with when I told him I had seen an animal run by our front window in our mountain home.

"What's a 'possum look like? And do they bite?" I asked, and then cringed when I spotted that same look on his face that my father had once had when I begged him to kill a tiny spider on the bathroom wall over 40 years ago.

"I can't believe you've never seen a 'possum," my husband said incredulously.

By now, I was getting impatient, forgetting about the fear in my gut concerning the strange animal I had just seen. "Excuse me, but they just don't have 'possums on the streets of New York. Everything else perhaps, but certainly not possums!"

That was actually the second time I had seen what we think was an opossum. The first time was a few weeks ago when I thought I had seen a cat sitting with its back to me near one of our many trees. I was just about to open the front door to see if I could get a better look at it when it heard me, looked in my direction, and then crawled down the side of the mountain. No, it sure wasn't a cat, I thought, and quickly closed the front door. I think I even dead bolted it.

Getting ready for bed later on that night, I realized my husband had never answered my question about whether possums bite. Ah well, I sighed to myself as I rolled over; one more entry into the fear catalog of my life.

Fear of the unknown is a terrible thing that does a number on you until you make the decision to face it head on. Franklin said it best in 1933: "Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself."

Take spiders, for instance. There was a time when the sight of even the tiniest spider would send me over the edge. Going back to the incident mentioned earlier, I was about 12 years old and screamed so loud and so blood curdling when I spotted that tiny spider that one would have thought someone was attacking me with a machete. Racing upstairs and then shaking his head in



**As I
see it**

Peg DeMarco

disgust, my father calmly removed his shoe, slammed it down, and then walked back downstairs as I shook in the doorway.

Just the thought of all those legs crawling on me always sent

chills down my spine. Perhaps it was all due to the summer I spent at my grandparents' Catskill Mountains home. That summer there had been an unusual outbreak of Daddy Long Legs. They were everywhere, inside and outside the house, and for a day or so, I had refused to move from my bed until my grandmother assured me that they were gone. Then again, my fear might be due to my seeing the movie "Tarantula" too many times. In those days, we could sit through a movie for as many times as we wanted, and I always had a hankering for extra popcorn even if I had to shield my eyes from the huge black spider on the screen.

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When I joined the Peace Corps in 1969 and traveled to Nigeria, West Africa, spiders were the last thing on my mind until I saw an enormous one on the bathroom ceiling. It was 10 years later, but the fear was still there, only this time there was no one to help me — Dad was halfway around the world. I crept into the tub, quickly bathed, stood up, grabbed a towel and ran out, all the while with my eyes locked on the spider that seemed to be staring back at me with a smug grin on its face.

I soon learned that there were worse things in life than big scary spiders and, more importantly, that if you attack any fear head on, there's a chance you might be able to overcome it. Four years in West Africa was an awfully long time to dodge spiders, so I eventually had to figure out a way to make peace within myself or I would forever be afraid. It wasn't easy, but pretty soon I found myself ignoring anything on the ceiling, including spiders and the gecko lizards that constantly scurried up and down the walls. And soon, scorpions didn't even bother me and the cou-

ple of times that snakes slithered over my feet went unnoticed except for a shrug on my part.

Facing your greatest fear can also be exhilarating. A friend of mine begged me to take scuba diving lessons so that he'd have a partner on Cayman Island dives. This seemed preposterous to me since I had always feared the water and didn't even know how to swim. But once again, I decided it was time to face another fear, and I soon found myself signing up for swimming lessons at the Charlotte YMCA.

The first time across the pool will forever stick in my mind as one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do. I knew I had to give up the security of having my feet on the ground in order to swim, yet I dreaded taking that one big leap of faith in knowing that I could actually move safely above water if I kicked my feet and moved my arms fast enough.

I looked around at all the small children jumping and swimming in the pool — and here I was, a 50 year old woman afraid to let go of the side!

"What's the worst that could happen?" I thought to myself as my coach waited patiently. Surely the YMCA wouldn't want headlines that read, '50-year-old woman drowns in YMCA pool while group of 5 year olds watch.' I blessed myself, let go of the side of the pool and kicked as hard as I could as my coach cheered me on. Somehow I reached the other side without killing myself or anyone else around me that may have gotten in the way of progress and two flailing legs.

It's funny, but once you face your greatest fear, you want to go back for more — and as often as you can.

Although I wouldn't want one crawling next to me in bed, I tend to smile at spiders these days and gently shove them out the front door, and as far as scuba diving, my friend and I parted ways so all I really got out of the swimming lessons was the freedom of knowing I wouldn't sink to the bottom of the pool if someone decided to throw me in.

However, readers, as far as that would-be opossum is concerned ... well, I think I'll save that for another column.

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