

Naming Your Spider

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A cold gust of wind blew in from the Pacific Ocean, rustling the hair around my face, as I peered out of our second story townhouse window. My gaze was focused on a tree limb nearby where a tiny hummingbird was sitting on her nest. I had been watching this exquisite little bird for days now. Yet, along with the wonder I felt as I looked at this diminutive creature, I experienced a vague sense of anxiety ... and, for the life of me, could not understand why I felt this way.

It was 1992 and I was living in Huntington Beach, California. I was attending graduate school in Los Angeles, studying to become a Clinical Health Psychologist. I was newly married to a man I loved tremendously. Life, like Southern California back then, was sunny and good. However, clouds from an approaching storm periodically disrupted the sunshine. These ominous, rumbling thunderheads kept appearing, threatening me, just outside my line of vision like a “floater.” Back home in Miami, I was losing my beloved mother, a piece at a time, to Alzheimer’s disease. Sometimes, this anticipatory grief felt as if it would overtake the sun and engulf me completely.

It was now 3:00 AM on a windy night. I suddenly awoke, afraid. Was there an earthquake? A bad guy lingering outside? I felt disoriented and heavy with sleep as I stood and walked to the window. Outside, a streetlight glimmered, casting a tendril of light onto the limb of the tree. Mama “hummer” had recently hatched her eggs. In the daylight, I had marveled at the lilliputian heads, with their scrawny wisp of feathers on top, barely visible above the rim of the nest. I was overjoyed by seeing these precious, fragile babies. But tonight, I saw a large cat in the tree instead, eyes glowing in the light. The wind blew and the light on the tree darkened and cast the limb in shadows. My heart thumped in my throat. I frantically scanned the opacity for a glimpse of the babies. I needed to know they were okay... I NEEDED TO KNOW THAT THEY WERE OKAY. I stayed up all night, pacing the bedroom floor. My husband was understandably concerned and kept gently coaxing me to get some sleep, but I could not. I intuitively knew I was overreacting but could not seem to control this avalanche of emotions roiling within.

Finally, the sun rose, and, through the early morning haze, I desperately searched the tree. No babies. No Mama. I began to sob uncontrollably. I knew I needed to speak to someone, as I was a bit frightened by the intensity of my reaction. I reached out to one of my attendings. Even though it was early, Dr J asked me to come into her office. Words rushing out in a torrent, I described my fear that the cat had killed all the hummingbirds. I cried throughout and hung my head in shame—what if Dr J thought I couldn’t be a competent therapist because of my uncontrollable display? When I was finished, exhausted, I looked up to see her sitting quietly and calmly, fixing me with a steady, warm gaze. Silence, apart from my hiccups and sniffles, followed. I waited, feeling embarrassed.

Then, Dr J’s head nodded almost imperceptibly, and she said, “Heidi, how is your mother doing?”

Floodgates opened and I cried again, even harder. When I came up for air and the tears stopped once more, Dr J shared something with me that I have never forgotten. She said, “You know how spiders sit at the center of their web? If you touch the outside corner of the web, the spider in the middle will shake. No matter where you touch the web, the spider will shake.” She leaned forward and I felt the intentness of her gaze on my tear-streaked face. “Right now, at the center of your web, is not a spider; it is a giant ball of loss. In essence, the spider’s name is ‘loss.’ A huge ball of loss. Worrying about losing those little birds was like touching the outside of that web ... and it shook the middle, which is the gradual, tremendous, and extremely painful loss of your mother.”

The years have rolled by since I sat in Dr J’s office, speaking of hummingbirds and spiders. My mother has long completed her descent into the misty, tangled forests of dementia. Although losing her was my greatest fear, I have survived. The raw pain has subsided, but it’s been replaced by a feeling I cannot quite describe: Melancholy? Acceptance? Resignation? None of these seem to fit. Perhaps there is a nameless emotion like no other that one experiences when a beloved parent dies.

How did I get to be this old? Time is like a freight train, forever rumbling forward, briefly pausing at stations, which are the milestones in our lives. It lingers a little longer at some stations and flies by others, but it is always steaming forward.

Dr J's powerful description of the silvery gossamer thread connecting all losses continues to comfort me through the subsequent losses I have experienced.

Today, surprisingly, I am grateful for this pendulum of emotions, both light and dark. These emotions have spilled onto the web of my life as the sun and shade dapple a spider's web. Would I be as effective with the residents and fellows whom I counsel and teach had I not gone through my own suffering? I think not. Indeed, loss *is* all connected ("no matter where the web is touched, the spider will shake") and, without the periods of pain and uncertainty, I would not appreciate the exquisite

moments of joy quite as much. In those moments of turmoil, I must "name" the spider to identify the core source of my unease.

So, I ask you: Is there a spider sitting at the center of your web right now and, if so, what is its name?



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