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What Are You Afraid Of?

Lions and tigers and bears...and foreigners...oh, my!

By Kat Avila | Web Published 2.12.2004

"HEALTH WARNING: Do not continue reading if talking about fear makes your heart skip a beat, makes breathing difficult, and causes all the blood to drain from your face."



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I scared her, I thought to myself. Yep, I scared her real good. Then I looked around, out the train windows, at the ceiling, thinking about what she would tell her fellow Tokyoite friends that evening: "So, this strange lady turns to me and starts speaking to me IN ENGLISH! Can you believe it?! Like, I was trying to study y'know."

Well, she was reading this intermediate-level textbook that had a short passage in English on the left page and its Japanese translation on the right. She might have been a university student. Though I asked her slowly in both English and Japanese what school she went to, she never said a word.

"'Deer caught in the headlights' look, right?" commented another English teacher after I related the story before the start of a Business English class. Yeah, I replied. That was it exactly. She just STARED at me - eyes popped out of their sockets - the entire time I spoke to her.

What are you afraid of? Do "foreigners," "illegal" immigrants, people who DON'T speak English scare you? Terrorists? Maybe your weird next door neighbor?

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What crawls and flies and slithers through your worst nightmare? "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!" for the Wizard of Oz crew.

I wondered what would make me react the same way that girl did. Which makes me think of another story. It goes something like this.

Once upon a time, in the suburbs of Los Angeles, there was a city swimming pool. A girl was about to jump in when her father sternly said, "No, there's a shark in there."

"A shark?" The girl searched the murky waters from the edge.

"Yes, actually there are several sharks," replied her father who normally was a fearful and angry man.

"But I only see one," said the perplexed girl.

"You are young and inexperienced. That's why you can only see one."

A crowd gathered around the pool. People excitedly shouted and pointed as they spotted what looked like sharks.

"I don't see ANY sharks! It's hot, and I'm going for a swim!" yelled a foolish boy. He jumped in.

The crowd gasped and waited for the stupid boy to be torn to pieces and eaten.

Nothing happened.

As the sun started to set, the crowd was still standing around.

Would you have jumped in? Of our fears, which are hard and real, and which are nebulous wavering shadows? How many of them prevent us from fully participating and broadly experiencing the world in its infinite creative form?

The symptoms of fear are real. They are part of a "parental" protective mechanism to help us stay alive.

What happens when you see a ghost? You freeze. You can't move, except for your eyes, stuck on the ghost as it sputteringly floats by. Or maybe you laugh, heartily declaiming there are scarier things in the world than ghosts. For starters, there is public speaking. Then there's flying, high places, enclosed places, spiders, bats, rattlesnakes, conservative right-wing politicians. Ha, ha, ha...AAAUGH!

Kat's dad Alfred Avila wrote the book "Mexican Ghost Tales of the Southwest." Her web site is www.geocities.com/buscandocalifornia.

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