



BIRD BRAIN

Lisa van de Geyn *had been conditioned from childhood to fear every feathered creature she saw. Finally, she decided to try to conquer it—on a wing and a prayer.*

SOMETIME DURING THE EARLY 1960s, a blue budgie flew out of its cage at my grandmother's house and into the face of my then four-year-old mother, its wings frantically flapping around her pageboy haircut. She has suffered from ornithophobia—a fear of birds—ever since. She also unintentionally (but unapologetically) saddled me with the same affliction in childhood. At the age of 34, it's still with me. Fortunately for my daughters, who are five and three, I'm determined not to pass it on to them.

When I explain my situation to Windsor, Ont., psychologist Andrea Dinardo, co-author of *Essentials of Understanding Psychology*, she assures me that my kids are the motivation I need to conquer my problem. The fact that I'm both mentally and physically exhausted from being on avian alert 24/7 is an added incentive. "You don't want three generations afraid of birds," she tells me. "You can do this."

I know Dinardo is at least partly right: The thought of my children running into traffic at one of Toronto's busiest intersections just to avoid a swooping pigeon (something I may or may not have done once or twice) is distressing. But finally attempting to face up to something that has scared me throughout my entire life? *That is* as frightening as a flock of finches.

When I crack open the book *Face Your Fears: A Proven Plan to Beat Anxiety, Panic, Phobias and Obsessions*, by clinical psychologist David F. Tolin, I confirm that the root of my fear stems from my mother's stories of the budgie. As well, for years I've observed her erratic behaviour (darting, screaming, crying) around birds, and that alone can be traumatizing. Later, I decide to take an online questionnaire to determine the severity of my phobia. After two minutes, the result is there on my screen: "Ornithophobia is very seriously impacting your quality of life."

Since most experts agree that systematic desensitization to the scary stimulus—in my case, wilfully placing myself in the presence of birds—is the best way to get over a phobia, that's the route I resolve to take. (My editor suggested I visit a falconry, wear one of those raptor handling gloves and let a large bird land on my arm. Dinardo says it's the worst idea she's ever heard. Phew!) My plan of action is to create and follow a hierarchy of fear, where I'll rank situations involving birds from least to most terrifying, then climb the fear ladder.

First, I hit the jackpot when I find a *Sesame Street* colouring book in my three-year-old's room. Since Big Bird is probably the least offensive bird I can think of, I tear out three pages, and the kids and I take the crayons to the kitchen table. Next, I very mindfully colour →

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a picture of Bert; his pigeon, Bernice; and her scavenger friends. I gag a bit, and am careful not to touch the illustrated pigeon with my hands as I put crayon to paper. But I finish the piece.

My next task is to draw pictures of birds. Since I'm no artist, the birds I draw on a sheet of blue paper look like dozens of lowercase letter "m"s.

Step three is to read about a specific bird. "Find out everything you can," says Dinardo. "Become fascinated by what you're reading and learn what they represent." I select a most unpleasant specimen: the crow. As I click through pages of information about these Hitchcockian creatures, I discover they're continuous flappers, not gliders; they're social and prefer to roost in large flocks of anywhere from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands of birds; and they can make tools to help them trap food. I note that nowhere does it say crows are prone to attacking humans, or that they like to nest in big, curly coifs (like mine).

After I look at various photos of real birds (step four), I'm ready to watch videos (step five). Among other things, YouTube calls up some old clips of ornithophobics getting hypnotized on Maury Povich's talk show. I later watch three minutes of a British man being wrapped in cellophane and placed on the ground, then lying helpless as his mates toss breadcrumbs onto him, causing pigeons to circle and land. "Too soon," I mutter, closing my laptop.

Numbers six and seven on the list—looking at birds from the comfort of my couch, then looking at them through an open door—along with the first five tasks are what Dinardo calls the "innocuous steps" that will prepare me for the final two on my list.

Step eight: I'm to get closer to birds than I normally would. I take the opportunity to schlep the family to one of those drive-through safari parks and, for the first time, I agree to watch the parrot show. We sit in the front row and I close my eyes a half-dozen times. But I try to find the birds interesting and even beautiful. We then go to the birds-of-prey demonstration, where I ask two staff members for the safest spot to sit.

I manage to stay calm as eagles and vultures fly out, and I sit through until the end—no small feat for a chicken (pardon the pun) like me.

The last thing on my hierarchy is to make deliberate contact with birds without vamoosing, roadrunner-style. A month after

going to the bird shows, I decide that the pool at a resort where I'm staying in Arizona is the perfect spot to test myself: There are hummingbirds flittering around the bushes and great-tailed grackles scrounging for bits of fallen tortilla chips near the sunbathers. When too many grackles land nearby, I message Dinardo. "My radar's going off and I'm finding it hard to relax. Suggestions?" She tells me to set an outdoor time limit and a reward. "Twenty minutes of bird time equals 20 minutes of spa time," she writes. "Tomorrow, try two 20-minute sessions, or four 10-minute sessions. You're on the right track!" I take her advice and book a 50-minute massage. And I buy a new Kate Spade bag at the outlet mall.

My most successful moment happens during checkout at the resort. Perched in their cage in the lobby are two cockatiels. I'd noticed them upon check-in (obviously) and

glanced at them every time I walked by to make sure they were still in there, not flying amok. Before heading to the airport, I pull out my camera and stand next to the pair of squawkers. My husband snaps our picture. It's epic.

While I'm still not completely cured of my phobia, I'm moving in the right direction. It'll take time to unlearn my fear and train myself to coexist happily and freely with the plumed population. The good news? I'm not losing my cool when I'm out with the girls and a feathered friend lands nearby. I'm proud as a peacock. ®

WORDS OF WISDOM

"Tracking your progress is a powerful way to sustain your motivation to keep working [toward overcoming your fears]. When you're facing your fears, you might find that the time and effort involved, not to mention the considerable feelings of anxiety you'll experience, can put your motivation to the test. To keep that motivation level high, you need to remind yourself visually of the progress you're making. As you watch that fear severity line go down, you'll know that your efforts are paying off, and you'll feel more motivated to stick with it."

— From *Face Your Fears: A Proven Plan to Beat Anxiety, Panic, Phobias and Obsessions*, by David F. Tolin (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.)