Facing What is Under the Bed

When I was a child, around eight o’clock at night my mom became a saint. She would climb the steps to my room and expel all the demons who were lurking just out of sight by saying our nighttime prayers with me and then kissing me goodnight. But her exorcism of my room did not last nearly as long as I would have wished. As soon as she descended down the steps, hidden entities emerged again. The branches rattling against the windowpane became gnarled and knotted fingers reaching ominously. The creaking of the rafters above my head became the talons of gargoyles. Water dripping from the gutters was obviously caustic slobber from the jowls of trolls. Mom would always say “Turn your nightlight on.” But she did not understand – the creatures could skirt their way around the small pocket of light that my nightlight cast upon my wall. My only option was to retreat into my monster-proof cave, which smelled like Downy and was made of cotton. While it is amusing to look back upon how terrifying bedtime was, most of us had fears that seemed very real at bedtime. Would we have found solace in the fact that we would fear bank accounts more than boogey-men when we grew up? Seeing how our fears are born and evolve is a very interesting concept.
I decided early on that the best way to get input on fears would be to have a survey. Asking people to reveal their childhood fears was an intimate affair because I became an audience member in their childhood homes. My survey, which I conducted on Facebook to take advantage of fast delivery, asked three basic questions: Did you have childhood fears? How did they come about? Have you outgrown these fears? I made sure to make it clear that if an individual felt uncomfortable answering, that they could opt out. Reading the responses made me feel like I was sitting tensely in stadium seating, viewing a game of tug of war between my friends and their invisible enemies. As predicted, most fears came paired with an event that caused it. Delving into the causes was the part that felt intrusive, mainly because these were the real-life nightmares that led to the imaginative ones.

As the surveys began filing into my Facebook inbox, I found myself being introduced to childhood enemies: angry, bellowing space heaters, devious and violent dolls from film reels, and cruel real-life individuals. These were the residents of the closets and corners of my friends’ rooms and, more accurately, their imaginations. I cannot remember what caused my fear of the dark. It was mainly the fear of the unknown – the possibility that somewhere in the inky absence there was something watching me. While I may have blocked the source of my fear from memory, eight of the eleven people said they could identify a definite cause for their phobias.

A common trend was being scared of fictional characters from horror films. “The doll from Chuckie”, “The tiki doll from Trilogy”, and even “clowns from the Pee Wee Herman show” are examples of these antagonists. This led me to ask how the children managed to see these
movies that were intended for an adult audience (with the obvious exclusion of the Pee Wee Herman show). One of my survey participants was shown “Are You Afraid of the Dark?” and “Tales of the Crypt” by her older brother at an age that she felt was too young. Her older brother’s decision, prompted by anger at having to babysit his younger sister, resulted in her extreme fear of the dark. I have heard parents say, “It doesn’t matter what is on the television – the kids aren’t really paying attention.” The results of this survey indicate otherwise. I think that if parents gave more attention to what their children are watching, they could spend less time groggily responding to calls of “There’s a monster under my bed!” at midnight.

When I started contemplating how fears could be defeated, I decided to get a professional’s input on the matter. Professor Cindy Shelton teaches my Health and Fitness class, which has a significant focus on psychological health. “There seems to be a pretty good success rate for overcoming phobias. One technique called desensitization gradually exposes the person to the cause of the phobia in a non-threatening way, ie: looking at pictures of spiders, seeing a spider in a jar, and maybe working up to touching a spider.” My teacher’s statement about there being a good success rate for overcoming is reflected in the findings of my survey. Over half of the individuals who responded indicated that they had gotten over their childhood fear.

The resolution of a fear is an amazing occurrence. I overcame my own fear of the dark when I was around eight years old. Eventually, I was able to discern that the things that go “bump” in the night are not vicious animals and residents of the underworld. Imps and demons that enjoyed traipsing around the roof of my house became neighborhood cats. I found out that
the werewolf in the back yard had a howl that was very similar to the family dog. Resolution happens when people “face their fears” or confront the phobia they experience. One individual was afraid of drowning so they learned how to swim. I recorded multiple accounts of parents forcing their child to sleep in their own room, separate from siblings, to fix the problem. Notably, two fears – abandonment and the dark – were overcome by belief in God. Statements such as “When I became a Christian, I imagined Jesus sitting at the foot of my bed putting a bubble of protection around me and my family” bring into question the role of divinity in the overcoming of fears. I want to emphasize the word “imagine” from the quote in the last sentence, because the imagination can defeat just as many demons as it creates. In my situation, I overcame the monsters in the dark because I pictured the spooky sounds coming from everyday objects (which, as it turns out, they were).

One response in particular illustrated the evolution of fears as time goes on. The survey taker experienced the most common fear from the collection of foes and phobias – a fear of the dark. He said he overcame more imaginative antagonists like Chuckie the doll, “But the dark is still scary because I can’t see. And I’m scared a mass murderer could be hiding in my house.” The complexity of the idea of a “mass murderer” shows rationality. I have come to see that, occasionally, if fears are not defeated, they can grow up with us. The boogey-man in the dark can change into a rapist or murderer as we become aware of the justifiably scary things in life.

There is even a market for products that allay our adult fears. I can pay a company called Brinks hundreds of dollars to keep whoever is hiding in the shadows safely outside my home. I can purchase a feature for my car that senses whether or not there is a
murderer or rapist enjoying my seat warmers while plotting to kill me when I get in. Do I blame people for purchasing these adult safety blankets? Just cue the scary “slasher” music and round up some innocent child actors and the company can produce a “dramatic reenactment” that will make me squirm to pick up the phone and buy their product.

Tonight as you climb in bed, listen to the sounds that used to leave you petrified between the sheets. The chances are that the leaves blowing in the wind will sound a lot like papers with an “F” or a “behind payment” notice on them. The creaking of the foundation might make you question if your house will still be worth your home loan in twenty years when it is paid off. The horn of a truck passing on the street, which was once the bellowing of an angry giant, may jog your memory about the car insurance you have to pay this month. Once you reach the point where you have broken into a cold sweat, take the time to realize that we never really defeat fear in its entirety. We simply have fears that we deem “rational.” You know – the ones we were not afraid of as children.
Works Cited

Shelton, Cindy. E-mail interview. 23 Sept. 2010.