

# Skunk Encounter!

Catherine Nelson, Ph.D.

## A Lesson Learned...

*Yes, my friends,  
this is a true story...*

A friend recently shared an event that happened to her. Beth is in her fifties. Her husband died in a car accident a few years ago. Beth has worked in a professional position at a local business for many years, and now she is the manager. She is good at solving problems—she enjoys people and wants to help others any way she can. Her five-day-a-week job sometimes requires extra hours. Several nights a week, she is a volunteer at the local library. By all accounts, she is a successful, caring person leading a busy life. Beth is also well organized and has good skills in planning ahead with all of her activities.

Two weeks ago, she decided to take several vacation days to work on some personal projects at home—her garden needed repair, her bedroom needed painting, and she wanted to get rid of some items in her garage. Already two vacation days had

passed, and she was making progress with her to-do list.

On Friday, Beth decided she had some time to go on a bike ride at a nearby park, along the trails in the woods and then around the lake. She had not ridden her bike for several years, so on Friday night, she made a



list of items she wanted to be sure to bring on her ride. The list included her helmet, water bottle, cell phone, gloves, tire pump, tool kit, wind breaker, etc. She felt prepared, and off she went on Saturday at 6:30 am.

It was barely daylight as she bicycled into the woods. The sky was a deep blue, and there was a cool wind blowing. Beth

proceeded slowly on the trail and kept looking ahead in case someone was walking their dog. She was surprised at the many plants and bushes encroaching on the trail, making it unexpectedly narrow.

Beth came around a tight bend on the trail and suddenly, she saw a young skunk jump out of the bushes in front of her. Both Beth and the skunk were surprised to see each other. The skunk turned and ran back into the bushes. Beth kept moving and cycled past the skunk. She was relieved that she had not hit the skunk. She thought she had moved quickly enough and had not been sprayed.

Well, Beth was wrong. She HAD been sprayed! Beth continued to bicycle around the lake. She noticed a slight smell of skunk in the air. She thought maybe there had been another skunk in the area. Beth rode home and was pleased with her bike ride, but when she stopped, she soon realized that the skunk had sprayed her bike, her bike tires, her sneakers, and her legs.

Beth had planned to do more things that day. She was going to the Farmer's Market, the post office, and then the hardware store. However, she couldn't go

anywhere because of the skunk smell! She had to stay home and work on cleaning her bike, washing her sneakers, and cleaning herself from the smell. Beth worked hard that morning doing her best to get rid of the smell. It took several washings to clean the smell off her body. That afternoon, she sat outside near her garden, eating her lunch.

This was not what she had planned for her Saturday or Sunday. Her weekend had been turned upside down. She had to go to work on Monday and did not want any skunk smell on her body. Beth stayed home the rest of Saturday and all of Sunday, working by herself.

Over the weekend, Beth thought about the unexpected event and slowly realized how much she was enjoying staying home with no schedule and no responsibilities to anyone else. A sense of peace and feelings of freedom started to creep into her being. She actually read a magazine, cooked two of her favorite vegetable recipes, took a nap, and watched a favorite movie on Saturday night.



On Sunday morning, Beth sat outside and listened to the birds chirping in the trees. She wondered if there was a bigger message for her. Usually she was too busy to enjoy the peace and solitude of being home, being alone, and doing things to restore herself. There was little time for self-reflection in her life, but maybe she could begin to do it differently. She realized she had unresolved feelings about her husband's death. She had not taken any time to attend to her needs for self-growth and self-regeneration. Some of her ongoing skills at "planning" and "doing" and always being busy were perhaps

a pattern of avoidance of her own deeper feelings.

When Beth called me and shared all that happened from the skunk spraying her, she laughed and said, "There is no way you can prepare for an unexpected event that comes along." She said the unexpected event had interrupted her usual way of living. She is going to make some changes in her life to help her find time for herself and for her own self-care.

Together we laughed, as she said she could never imagine getting sprayed by a skunk, and she could never imagine it would lead to several personal insights. ■

**Catherine Nelson, Ph.D.**, has a counseling practice in Bozeman with many years of experience working with individuals and groups. She has taught at the Barbara Brennan School of

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