

Where are my glasses? Is this a raccoon in my kitchen!?

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

In an instant I was jolted, no, catapulted into another reality. Thirty minutes earlier I had pulled down the shades and blinds, and set the alarm system. I was in the bathroom getting ready for bed when a familiar dry cat food crunching and tinkling noise came from the kitchen. It reminded me I needed to feed Simon and Clara Belle wet food one last time to keep them content until 6 AM. I stepped out of the bathroom to see who was eating. Instead of a fuzzy black mass or an orange one, there was a huge tabby at the food station. My mind did a double take. Before I got my tuxedo girl and a butterscotch boy I had several tabbies. I ran for my glasses, completely bewildered as to how this stranger had made it inside. In a flash it all came together. It wasn't a tabby cat at all – it was a raccoon, in a more intense version of the Lens Crafter commercial. (A middle-aged woman in her nightgown tells her cat to “come with momma” as they both walk into her house from her patio. It is of course not her cat, but a raccoon. Punch line: “Need glasses?”) I yelled “out” in a commanding tone – it turned around – looked at me – evaluated the situation – then headed for the kitchen door which was ajar by 10 inches.

Both of my cats were; out somewhere in the evening darkness. I knew I could not show any signs of distress or anxiety to get them back inside, since such intense emotions would have added to their sense of prevailing danger and kept them away. I got a grip on my nerves and my emotions and centered myself.

Never has a Petz headlamp felt so handy. I put mine on and started to circle my house, calling my cats in a calm, reassuring voice. At this point, all I wanted was to find out

where they were on the property. I couldn't keep the kitchen door open for them to run back in because the raccoon hadn't retreated very far. It could and would seize another opportunity to go back for more food. Right about then, the nine o'clock fireworks at SeaWorld started to go off and added another layer of difficulty to getting the cats back. This was one crazy evening. Eventually, the fireworks stopped and Simon popped out of the darkness with a meow and ran to my legs. I picked him up. As I got close to the kitchen he wriggled and struggled, all amped up by the excitement of that location. I got him inside. Then it was Clara Belle's turn. I located her by noticing movements in some bushes, and then she let me see her. She looked exhilarated and scared all at once as she headed in the general direction of the closed kitchen door. I quietly caught up with her, then leaned down and got a hold of her. She growled, screamed, turned around, bit me, and ran off. (Now, to top it off, I had blood on my brand new summer p.j.'s.) At this point I sensed the raccoon was far enough away to leave the kitchen door wide open, since Simon was safely locked in the bathroom. My plan was to herd Clara Belle back inside. Suddenly, on her own, she made a wild dash towards the light and the door opening, like that's what she wanted all along. Whew! The cat round up took a total of only 10 minutes but felt like much longer. I made sure the kitchen door was securely locked and dead bolted and called it a day.

What a wild wake-up call! The raccoon, according to Ted Andrews in *Animal-Speak*, represents dexterity, disguise and transformation. It is a powerful animal totem. What did this event mean for us? The dexterous paws opened the door, and then what? Aside from pointing out that I was operating under a false sense of security that evening, I was stumped. Little did I know then how this troubling incident would turn into a blessing in disguise, and an opportunity for transformation for Clara Belle.

Things started to shift next morning. Clara Belle appeared

uneasy and kept looking towards the back door. She found that area unsafe. If she saw a cat from any window in the house, or through the glass panes of the French door where the raccoon had entered, she would become enraged and attack the glass. If Simon happened to be near and vocalized at the wandering cat, she would shift her aggression to him. I intervened. Good thing he has a mild temperament and didn't engage. Over the next week her unease and tension increased instead of calming down. She kept looking out, fixated on "what is out there?", reliving her fear over and over in a loop. I explained and demonstrated how the door was locked and no one could come in, but she ignored me. Why shouldn't she? The unthinkable had happened. When she came to me, she had serious personal space issues, and the events of that evening had violated her hard-earned confidence in the safety of her home. From her vantage point, it could happen again at any time. When I pulled down the back door shade to block the view, she would peek from either side or slip behind it and get all worked up. Finally, I pulled down the shade and used heavy objects to make a barrier in front of the door, so neither of them could slip behind the shade. And so it stayed for a week or more. She appeared to appreciate the barricaded door but it didn't stop her from regressing further. Her sense of play was gone. She wanted nothing to do with Simon and hissed at him all the time. She refused to return to the basket she was in when the raccoon entered. Her fear-based survival instincts predominated; my Clara Belle was going back to being primal. It finally dawned on me that she was regressing to her early days with me 5 years ago.

Clara Belle's Back Story ~

On October 25, 2009 she had appeared at that very same back door looking for a home. She was probably one or one and a half years old; extremely hungry. Later, I would remember having noticed her looking out from a window in an apartment complex close by, wearing a flea collar. I felt sorry for her.

From what I could gather, her people had moved out three months prior and left her behind. During that time, she had fended for herself more or less. Those three months of survival on her own brought out deep fears and insecurities. I don't believe she was ever an easy cat even as a kitten, but that time in the alley turned her into the dangerous cat that entered my home that day. Totally unaware and under the temporary charm she mustered to get adopted, I let her in. She lay down in the middle of the living room on a carpet and soon showed me two things. She wanted to stay, and she knew how to use a litter box. That was it. The agreement, according to her was: I was to feed her, clean her box, leave her alone. No touching, no emotional connection. We were to live quasi-separate lives under one roof.

Fortunately, there was another side of her that yearned for connection. But even that didn't go very well. She would jump on my lap while I watched TV, but then reach back and bite me hard if I stroked her one time too many. The first time it caught me completely by surprise. Never had a cat bitten me so hard without any warning. She didn't seem to think anything of it. It turned out, biting was the answer to all her problems. All she had wanted to do was make me stop, but instead of showing me by twitching, vocalizing or jumping off, she bit. With Clara Belle there was no warning. She was extremely self-protective and movement sensitive, so unless I was absolutely still when she was close I was open to biting. She had no idea how to lie on, or by, someone in bed. She so wanted to, but then would not position herself properly or be too close to my neck, threads of drool streaming from her mouth. She'd react strongly and bite if I moved a hand or a part of my body or worse, tried to reposition her. This was the cat from hell. One day she got out when that back door slipped open and I heard blood-curdling screams from the other side of the fence. There was Clara Belle attacking and cornering my neighbor's female cat. I managed to get her away from that poor cat with a water hose and lure her inside with food. Clara Belle was

unsuited to life inside a house or outside. She simply didn't know how to be a house cat, period. I had my work cut out for me. It felt like I had a lion in the house, not a green-eyed tuxedo cat. I detected a core of sweetness dying to get out and be appreciated; it is what kept me going and gave me hope for her. To introduce a sense of innocence and softness to the situation I decided to address her as "baby girl".

During that first year she had no peace. Everything was cause for concern. She was "on alert" all day, tensely looking out for any intruder in the vicinity of the house. At night she slept on my bed. Had I lived in a bunker it would have suited her better. My wood china cabinet and antique chest of drawers, which are located beneath windows, barely survived her enraged clawing if she spotted a cat nearby. One morning she did see a cat through the blind above the kitchen table. It was early and I was totally unprepared for what she did next, since I couldn't see the cat outside. When I reached for the rod to open the blind, she instantly caught the hand movement and displaced her rage to my right arm. She jumped on it, attacked it, and sunk her teeth deeply into my inner wrist. I had to pry her off with my other hand. The rage cursing through her body was palpable. I had never felt anything so intense and primal. This was a low point. Clearly, no shelter would take her and she was unsafe to let out or adopt out. I gave her a choice: She had six more months to improve or she would face euthanasia.

By putting my animal communication skills to work after she showed up, I had determined she had serious past life issues. She communicated she had been a caged lion in a roadside attraction; the type that you'd find by a gas station in a small town. She had no place to hide and take a break. She didn't have animal companionship. People threw things at her, teased her, and woke her when she slept to get a rise out of her. During our communication she brought up a lion cub, but I could not quite figure out if the cub was herself, or a cub

taken from her. In any event, there had been the wrenching time when men took the cub from its mother and that pain ran deep in her heart. Overall, ill and disrespectful treatment from humans had left her with cellular memory of intense anger against people; an anger that consumed her. Also, not to be underestimated, was the physical switch from being a big cat to becoming a small domestic one in this incarnation. The difference in size brought about its own set of issues. She had trouble adjusting to this small domestic cat body. The lack of bulk made her feel vulnerable. Her aggressive temperament came from a complete lack of confidence and know how. She was also hyper sensitive to noises, touch, energy, in short everything.

What would work to help Clara Belle?

Apparently, she found the right home because I was willing to understand her and work with her 24/7. I had to address the anger first. Unless she released it, we would not be able to move forward. It took a total of eighteen months from her arrival, several Bach flower remedies and one specific homeopathic remedy for deep rooted anger to get the job done. Gradually, Clara Belle learned the basic skills of a house cat. I taught her not to resort to biting as a response to everything, and if she did, to know her strength and do so lightly. She would hold her ground or move in on me anytime I needed to displace her out of the way. This is a normal "face forward and stand your ground" response of a predator. (A prey animal would turn around and run away.) I managed to show her that a house cat yields to a human; it does not stand its ground and take the human on. That is the correct, expected behavior. I also taught her not to choke me with her bulk and paws when she lay on my chest and drooled puddles. Still, if I dared reposition her she got all upset and irritated. She finally figured out I was just trying to help and make it better for her. All this took time and a lot of positive reinforcement. When she made a mistake and I knew it was an

honest one, I simply ignored it. Each time she looked back at me, grateful that I given her some slack. She suffered from being called a bad cat, when she was just a clueless cat. I refer to animals like her as "first timers". It is a life of learning, and most of the time not an easy one. I became her problem solver and teacher; always there to re-direct and help when I saw her hesitating or confused.

I made a point of talking about her in the most positive terms to anyone. She would look at me and glow when I praised her progress. And make more progress. Now, finally she had house cat training wheels on and someone to help her solve her daily problems. She loved to lay in my laundry basket on top of the washing machine, which is itself on a platform. Jumping up that high onto a slick surface for such a big boned, heavy cat wasn't easy. I waited for the proper moment and quickly picked her up and put her in the basket. All went well until I had to pull my arm away from her body, then her rapid movement instinct kicked in. I got my arm out just in time to avoid her sharp, long teeth. I repeated this with her until one day she sat below the basket and meowed and asked me to pick her up! Since then we've been diligently working on "being picked up", quickly or slowly, carefully or sloppily, and ending up in the basket. The idea is for her to adjust to all the variations and not get reactive or upset. I felt she could transfer those newly acquired skills to being picked up and put on an open screened windowsill to watch the trees and the birds outside. It took a little while, but she loves it now and shows me when she wants to be placed there. Tonight she jumped up there all on her own.

In five years we had come so far. Now, this security breach problem threatened to destroy it all. I wouldn't let her slip backwards. Her relationship with Simon was suffering as well. Again, I turned to Bach Flower essences to give her general emotional support, help her to be flexible and tolerant, diminish her anger, reduce the emotional hysteria and break

set patterns. Each time we went through a blended bottle I made a new assessment of where we were and modified the remedies accordingly. The essences balanced out her emotional body layer by layer. The final remedy put together with the help of my acupuncturist and homeopath friend got the job done. We addressed the loop of fear she maintained and the emotional over-reacting over everything. I am so relieved to see I have my Clara Belle back. Not only is she at the place she was before the raccoon incident seven weeks ago, but also, thanks to that last remedy, she has made a leap forward in her progress as a house cat. She has acquired a greater sense of confidence. Her basket, the kitchen door, the home in general feels safe to her. She is playing with Simon again, happily looking out the windows and holding her personal space without drama. Her body is relaxed; the sparkle is back in her eye. Clara Belle is still a work in progress, she might always be, but the situation in our home is transformed. Thank you, Raccoon, for pushing us to the next level.