

Porch spiders and the power of language

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OTHER VOICES



It's summertime, and my porch step is covered with cobwebs. I had paid only passing attention to this, mentally putting it on the long list of things to clean, clip or paint.

One day as I approached the front door, I was taken aback by a creature scurrying through the web and disappearing under the porch. This critter, which turned out to be a spider, was so large that I initially thought it was a mouse.

I'm a fairly centered woman, but put me in the proximity of a mouse, and before you know it I am in the next county. Me, the nature lover. I was not happy to learn that those webs belonged to this big, ugly spider.

I am fortunate to have come from a family in which the men take care of big, ugly spiders. My partner, Max, and I discussed how to get rid of the porch spider and, in the end, he blasted the web away with water from the hose. We were web-free – and spider-free – for a while.

After a week or two, the web reappeared. Then one day when I

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least expected it, I was scared out of my wits again by the big, ugly porch spider. Predictably, another discussion ensued, this time in more depth.

Neither of us believes in killing things, though I am more willing to make the exception when it comes to ants, wasps and big, ugly spiders. We brainstormed options. Max could move the porch spider. (Note, *he* could move it.) We could continue removing the web until the porch spider decided she should pack up her tent, like an arachnid gypsy, and move on.

German is Max's first language, and one of the features of that language is that all nouns have a gender. The word "spider" in German is feminine. So, rather than

referring to the spider as "it" as we would do in English, he refers to the spider as "she." The result of this piece of grammatical minutia is that I followed his lead and began referring to the big, ugly porch spider as "she" – as in, "She has to go now!"

An interesting thing happened in the course of discussing what to do about her and how she was likely to respond. I don't know if it was gradual or sudden, but somewhere in the transition from "it" to "she," the porch spider became an important member of the web of life (pardon the pun).

I found myself concerned about her well-being. If Max moved her to the middle of the yard, she might wander and be flattened by a car. If we kept removing her web, what would she eat? I found myself sneaking out at twilight to see whether I could catch a glimpse of our new friend.

Amazingly, when I do see her now, she doesn't seem so scary anymore. The porch spider has become interesting.

I believe this change occurred because of the life-honoring word "she" in place of the lifeless "it." Language is clearly a powerful thing. And this has implications far beyond my porch.

What other small changes can I make that might open up more of the world to me?

Oceana del Fuego is a counselor and massage therapist. She lives and works in Bellevue.