

## Nine Lives: Learning to Live Again

The innocence of childhood gave me the freedom to explore my world without inhibition or fear. I played in the dirt, ate off of the floor, and had to be reminded often not to go beyond the fence after dark. Childhood was a place where the local creeks were my oceans and my rusty bicycle had the speed of an SR-71 Blackbird jet. The neighborhood kids and I would be enemies in battle today and best friends by daybreak tomorrow. Just as my childhood friendships were difficult to classify as friends or foes, my relationship with the animal kingdom would prove equally questionable.

My beautiful life of liberty and clocklessness was about to come to an abrupt end. A temperamental feline would chase my innocence into the Yadkin River where it would fall to the ocean floor for 20 years waiting for truth and revelation to bring it back to the surface. From an unassuming conversation with my younger sister Tish, I was about to travel 20 years back in time on a journey that would lead to the most surprising lesson of my life.

"I just bought a new CD. Would you like to listen to a few songs before we go upstairs? O how I love this new India Arie song." I remarked, while buying myself time.

"But Grace is expecting us now, she has dinner waiting. Come on, let's go up." said Tish, rather impatiently.

"We can go up in just a few minutes. Why don't we wait for some of these stray cats to scatter first." I beseeched.

"This is rude. Grace has dinner waiting, and what do these stray cats have to do with our visiting Grace anyway?" asked Tish.

As a kid, Tish and I followed a strict ritual of fraternization. We would get off of the school bus, hurry to complete the day's homework and chores, and then ride our bikes a few blocks to my cousin Justin's house. We were eager for an afternoon of exploration. The main attraction to Justin's house was that he happened to live in front of the coveted neighborhood creek, and as luck would have it, there was no shortage of video games at Justin's place either.

When I was 10 years old, we were chatting on Justin's front porch. He had a small, unassuming gray cat named Lester. During this particular afternoon visit, Lester did something that was completely out of character, he attacked me. I merely looked at him, and he glared into my eyes, lunged off of the banister, and clawed me before scurrying off. Although physically my chest ached from my wounds, emotionally I would be bruised for the next 20 years. From that moment on, I was terribly afraid of cats. In adulthood, I observed a zero-tolerance policy for felines. I refused to enter a home where a cat resided and roamed freely. I even boycotted cat-related terminology. My victimized lips would not so much as utter terms and expressions such as *cat's got your tongue*, *it's raining cats and dogs*, *when the cat's away, the mice will play*, and certainly not *scaredy-cat*, that one was entirely too close for comfort.

"Krishauna, I asked you a question, what do these cats have to do with our visiting Grace?"

"Tish, do you remember when we were kids and Justin's cat attacked me simply for looking at him? From that time forward I have been extremely afraid of cats. I fear that they are so erratic that they will attack at any moment." I explained.

“Are you serious? That’s what you’ve believed for 20 years?” Tish asked, accompanied by hysterical laughter. “That’s not what happened. Lester didn’t attack you unprovoked, I yanked his tail, and you just happened to be in front of him. By reflex he leapt forward and reacted.”

I sat in silence as I contemplated the revelation.

“Are you hearing me? Cats don’t attack at will, they attack when idiots like me pull their tails.” Tish clarified.

For 20 years I had allowed my perception of one ugly moment to forever cloud my judgment against an entire species. When I got married, I even forbade my husband to move his cat into our new home. To this day his poor cat is still being shuffled around to relatives.

How many of us have cradled a moment in time, and allowed it to hold us back? How many of us have imported our negative experiences into new relationships? How many of us have prejudged and discriminated against others, based on the wounds of the past? I had to wrestle with many of these questions. Although I continue to heal from my 20-year restraining order against felines, I am growing more tolerant each day. I understand that the source of my fear is irrational, and today, I am facing my fears head on. What about you?

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