

## Empathy on the Fly

© Copyright 2010 David K. Shute All Rights Reserved

"Oh, hey, Joey, I brought you something from the ashram," said Mr. Young to his son as he was getting out of the car to go to school. "Hang on a sec." Joey stood next to the open car door as his Dad unzipped a backpack pocket and opened it to reach in. Out flew a fly which immediately began buzzing loudly around the inside of the car. Mr. Young waved a hand at it, trying to push it out the door. Mr. Young pulled out an ornamented box and handed it to Joey. Then he waved at the fly as it buzzed by him again.

"Wow," said Joey, taking a stab at the fly too. "Thanks, Dad. A place to keep all my good wishes in."

"Yes," said Mr. Young. "Good intentions for school. And now I wish this fly would find a better place to be." As if on cue, the fly flew out the open car door and into the crisp air of September in New England.

"Oh, hey, by the way, Dad, did that fly come all the way from India in your backpack?" asked Joey, noticing that the fly had landed on the top of the car, as if it didn't really want to get out.

"Come to think of it, I believe it did!" exclaimed Mr. Young. "Wonder what will happen when it gets together with the locals."

"Yeah, we sure got a lot of them here, thanks to the horse farm." Joey pointed a thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the stables that abutted the school property. "We don't really need another fly." Father and son both laughed at that and Joey closed the car door, turned and went into the school. Mr. Young drove off, forcing the fly to take to the air.

It didn't take more than a few minutes for the fly to detect that there were horses nearby. This fly from India might not know anything about New England and winter, but it knew plenty about horses and warm stables since it came from the stables kept by the ashram in India. The fly made a beeline for the horses.

A few minutes later, Emily and her Mom pulled up in front of the school. The only sound in the car was that of a buzzing fly. A loud buzzing fly that both Emily and her Mom tried their best to

kill. The fly, like most flies, was just too fast for humans.

"Oh, this darn fly," complained Yvonne, Emily's mother. "Ever since I got back from Los Angeles this fly has been in here. I wish someone would make it go away. Just make it go away."

"It came out of your suitcase when you opened at the airport it to get your jacket," said Emily, equally irritated by the fly and equally wishing it would go away. "Maybe it is a California fly."

"From those smelly stables that agent took me to see," said Yvonne, "yes. Who cares if that was where they used to keep Mr. Ed and my friend Flicka." The fly buzzed by again, faster this time.

"Who's Mr. Ed," asked Emily.

"A talking horse," said her mother. She didn't explain further.

Emily knew there was no such thing as a talking horse. She figured it must be some kind of movie thing. Emily opened the door to get out. Yvonne picked up the folded magazine on the car seat and tried to whack the fly. Emily and the fly left the car together.

"Bye, Mom," said Emily, not looking back. Yvonne said bye and cursed the fly as she drove away.

The fly from the stables in southern California that once housed the horse that people on TV pretended could talk flew around the school building. It didn't take long for this fly to discover the horses in the fields behind the school and it too made a beeline for the nearby stables.

Within two weeks the offspring of the fly from India met up with the offspring of the fly from California that then produced offspring with the local flies from the stables. This generation of super flies followed the horses back to the school.

"Ouch!" cried Emily, slapping at an insect that had landed on her bare shoulder. "Ouch that really hurts," she cried. Her friends Chandra and Fiona came over right away to help her.

"Oh yes you really do have a bite," said Chandra, touching the spot ever so lightly. "But I thought the mosquitoes were all dead by now."

"Don't touch, it really hurts," complained Emily, glad that her friends were there to offer sympathy.

“Hey, cut it out,” shouted Joey, spinning fast to try and kill whatever it was that just jabbed him in the neck. He rubbed his neck.

“Not me, dude,” said Aidan, holding his hands up. “I think it’s the flies.”

Just then the horses over at the fence closest to the school started whinnying and neighing loudly.

“What, who said that,” called out Joey. He looked around the play area at all the kids and none of them looked they had said anything to him. Then he looked over at all the noisy horses and he had the distinct feeling that one of them said ‘yes it was me.’ But that was just not possible.

Emily had exactly the same feeling when she looked at the horses. One of them even started nodding its head up and down. So Emily went over and got as close as she could. Her two friends followed behind her cautiously.

Joey saw the horse nod at Emily and noticed that two other horses were nodding as well so he, too, walked over as close as he could to the horses lined up at their back fence. Joey had the unmistakable feeling that one of the horses could feel everything he was feeling and that he somehow knew exactly how it felt to be a horse. A 500 pound, strong, healthy, fast horse with a nasty, itchy bite right on its butt. A horse that was just as surprised as he was that it could understand how it felt to be a human.

All of that was pretty surprising to Emily too, but what really amazed her was that she could think a feeling and the horse would send one back to her!

Fiona and Chandra noticed that something unusual was going on with Emily and the horses.

“Emily, it looks like you can talk to that horse,” said Fiona.

“Don’t be silly,” said Emily quickly. She turned away from the horses and found herself staring right at Joey, who was staring right back. He knew. And she knew he could talk to the horses too.

Joey looked at Emily and he knew she knew. Ever so slightly, he nodded his head yes. The secret was shared.

I can't believe I can feel what it is like to be a horse, thought Joey, looking at Emily. This is really wild and crazy, he thought. He was amazed, he was astounded, he was a little bit afraid. He couldn't say these words out loud or the other kids would just laugh at him.

Emily was kind of amazed, kind of pleased, and a little bit afraid of the fact that she could now feel what those horses could feel, she just knew she could. When she looked at Joey, she could just feel that he was feeling almost exactly the same way.

Joey's eyes got very big. He almost whispered to Emily. "You can feel what I'm feeling, can't you." This was the most astounding and scariest part of all to both of them.

"Oh wow," is all she could say. Then she turned away and went back into the schoolroom, followed by her two friends who were as sure as they could be that something just happened but they weren't sure what it was. They tried to get Emily to talk to them but she wouldn't. Emily was completely sure her friends could not understand what she felt.

As for the horses, well, they had no idea human beings could have so many different feelings all at once, and they changed so fast. It was just plain too confusing to be a human. Horses made a lot more sense. Horses only felt one thing at a time, and they didn't jump around all over the place.

Back in school, Joey could not keep his mind focused on his work. He could always feel what his horse felt whenever he thought about it. He could always feel what Emily felt whenever he thought about it. Emily was a little scared and that bothered him. The horses were always so solid and sure about what they felt. Hunger. That was it. Happy. That was it. The horse was easy. He wasn't sure how he felt about any of it. At least when he didn't think about Emily or the horse, he couldn't feel them. Still, he couldn't stop thinking about them. He wanted to know what was going on.

Emily thought maybe she would cry because she could not get the feelings of Joey or the horses out of her own feelings. The horses were simple and easy but so strong, like a very sweet cake or very sour candy. Joey was all full of wanting – want that, want that, want that, want to go somewhere else. She just wanted to be left alone. She did her best to think only about math. Eighty-one divided by nine, an easy one, the answer is nine. There, there, the horses and Joey were gone. Emily breathed a little easier.

Finally it was time to go home. Both Joey and Emily were relieved and happy to be going home, and both Emily and Joey were glad that they knew that they were not the only ones who could now feel what horses felt.

The usual procession of cars crawled around the parking lot, stopping to pick up kids. Here and there, a fly got in a car too. Pretty soon children in towns all over the area could feel what their pets felt, and they started telling their parents about it. One of these flies rode home with Joey and his Dad. By dinnertime, Joey's little sister Angela was talking about how sad she felt for their cat, because the cat was lonely and had nobody to play with all day while everyone else was away. She insisted the family had to get two more cats, or even a dog.

Joey heard what his sister said and stared at her for so long she told him to stop it. "Angie," Joey said, "did something bite you today? You know, like a fly or something?" He couldn't feel her emotions the way he could feel the horses but he was pretty sure she could feel Uncle Fester the cat the way he felt the horses.

"Yes, and it still hurts a lot," said Angela, sort of starting to cry and looking to see if her Mom or Dad would soothe her hurt. Mom rose to the occasion, taking Angie to get some cream for the ugly bite mark.

Joey started thinking about that fly in the car. That fly got out when they got home. Where was that fly now? Making more flies? Joey's Dad was looking at him.

"What's up, buddy?" he said, "you're pretty deep there." Something was definitely up and as far as Mr. Young could see, it had something to do with biting flies.

"Oh, I don't know, it's just something silly," said Joey, dismissing the whole idea of magic fly bites. "I have to do my homework."

"Momma," said Angela from the bathroom, "Uncle Fester really does want somebody to play with. Can we get him a playdate tomorrow?"

The next day, as soon as the car got within sight of the horse farm, Joey could feel his horse again. The horse was glad he was back. Joey kind of liked the company of the horse, too. About ten minutes after he got to school, he could feel Emily again too, only she wasn't glad he was back. He wasn't so sure about it either. At least they both knew now that by concentrating on

something else, they couldn't feel anybody else.

By the time lunch and recess were over at one o'clock, at least two other kids in Upper EI were looking at the horses very strangely and looking a little confused. Emily noticed that three more kids in Lower EI were acting strangely, and one of them, Dante Edwards, was telling the teacher that he knew what the gray horse over there was thinking. The teacher, Mrs. Ferrari, was just smiling at first, but when Dante kept saying that the horse was really unhappy and needed help, she stopped smiling so much. She was going to send Dante to the nurse if he didn't stop.

"Hey Dante," said Emily, "look at that gray horse over there, isn't it limping? Your Mom rides horses, right?"

Mrs. Ferrari looked almost relieved and went back inside to get ready for the afternoon lessons. Emily took Dante aside. "You really can tell what that horse is feeling, can't you?" she said.

Dante was surprised, and very cautious. Usually all Emily did was ignore him, except when they worked on a project together. At the same time, Dante really needed somebody to understand what he was feeling and it seemed like Emily did. "Well, yes," he said. "And that horse is hurt."

"Come on," she said. "We aren't the only ones." Emily led Dante over to the other two children who were looking at the horses and rubbing a bite on their arms. Soon all four of them knew, even if it didn't make sense. "But I don't think we can tell the teachers," said Emily. Neither Mrs. Ferrari or Mrs. Goodrich would understand.

"But I want to help my horse," insisted Dante. "What can we do?" He was visibly upset.

Just then a group of Upper EI kids came walking up to Emily, Dante and the others. Joey was leading them over.

"Hey, do you guys see that gray horse over there, the one with the white mane?" said Joey. He could feel the gratitude coming from Emily. He had felt her distress and now he was helping.

"That's my horse!" blurted Dante. The other kids didn't laugh.

"Yeah, well, that horse needs help. We think it stepped on a bee or a nail or something. We're going to go ask Mr. Ryan to call the horse farm and ask them to come and look at that horse."

“Please!” said Dante and Emily at the same time. Emily could feel how good Joey felt about helping out that she started to change her mind about him. Maybe she could trust him..

“But before we go,” said Joey, “I want to talk about our secret. We all know how a horse feels, don't we?”

The younger kids were a little afraid of admitting it, but they nodded yes. Even the older kids were relieved that they weren't alone and they weren't crazy.

“Well, we can't tell anybody because they won't really believe you.” Joey was not happy to say so, because he really wanted to tell his Dad. Yeah, me too, felt Emily.

“OK, let's go help that horse. Dante, make sure you let your horse know that help is coming. Emily, you and the other kids tell your horses to help out if they can. You guys, let's go talk to Mr. Ryan.” Joey led the Upper EI students back into the building. The Emily, Dante and the other Lower EI kids had to go back in their classrooms, but they could all see the horses out their windows.

A little while later a woman rode out to the pastures closest to the school and went over to the gray mare. Several of the other horses in the pasture came over to watch. Dante and Emily and the other kids had been watching, and when the woman came, they stopped what they were doing to go and stare out the window. Sure enough, the woman picked up the injured hoof and patted the gray horse on the nose. Then she led the horse slowly back toward the stables. The other horses were nodding heads. Dante and Emily and the other kids couldn't stop themselves from clapping and almost crying. They could feel the horses were happy too. Then they had to explain to Mrs. Ferrari and Mrs. Goodrich how they had seen the horse limping. Mrs. Ferrari thought the whole thing was more than a little unusual. That horse had not been limping much at all.

Thank you so much, felt Emily. You are welcome, felt Joey.

Emily was now determined to find out about flies. Her teachers were very glad when she and Dante and two other students went and looked up everything they could find about flies. It wasn't in the plan for the day, but the teachers let Emily and Dante lead the class on a spontaneous exercise in capturing and classifying as many flies as they could. The class sent out collection

teams to every room in the school, even Mr. Stetson's office, the Head of School. Much to their surprise, they collected at least two very different kinds of flies, and a third kind that wasn't in the book.

Mrs. Ferrari remembered some of the kids getting bitten earlier that day. According to what the kids were discovering, house flies, like about six of the flies collected by the class, didn't bite. Horse flies, like three of the flies the class captured, did bite. One of the flies captured by the class was not like anything in the insect book or anything on the Internet. All Mrs. Ferrari could do when the children pointed out this strange fly was tell them to take pictures and get it ready to send to the university for further study. This was a big hit with the kids. They had dreams of discovering a new fly. Emily and Dante now knew what bit them. Mrs. Ferrari now knew what bit them too.

Joey and his friends in Upper EI were already looking up flies when the two kids from Lower EI came in to capture flies. Their teacher, Ms. Nguyen, helped by pointing out several books on insects and suggested they design a project to answer a question about flies. Ms. Nguyen also dialed up the Lower EI room to find out what was going on, because it didn't seem like a coincidence that the Lower EI children were interested in flies all of a sudden at the same time some of her students were suddenly asking about flies out of the blue. "It seems we are now a house of flies," she said into the phone, and laughed.

Joey was just as determined as Emily to find out what bit them – and his sister back at home. He too decided it was no house fly but some kind of horse fly that bit him, and probably bit the horses too. But what kind of fly bite could make you feel what the horse felt? Or what another human felt. He guessed that the same fly who bit him must have bitten young Emily Howard as well. How long was this going to last? Forever? This was not his idea of a fun project.

Joey read more about flies. A typical horse fly lived about five months and then died. A typical house fly lived about six weeks and then died. How long would flies from India live? While he was wondering about this, he suddenly felt a wave of happiness and pleasure coming from his horse. His horse was having a blast. It made Joey want to get up and run around and jump as high as he could. What could this be? Maybe somebody was riding the horse.

Joey got up and looked out the window. He couldn't see his horse or any horses. A flock of birds descended on the play yard behind the school, near the fences of the horse farm. The birds were very active, diving and darting about everywhere, then perching on tree branches, waiting. Joey

always wondered how the birds could fly around together like that, as if they were connected the same way he was connected to the horse, or Emily. Suddenly a red winged blackbird swooped down out of a tree and snatched something out of the air.

Just like that, Joey could no longer feel the horse. He could no longer feel Emily's feelings either. Now he felt something more like flying, a great and free joyfulness. He felt like he could go anywhere and do anything. He felt like what? He felt like ... a bird! The bird must have eaten the fly that bit him.

Now he could not take his eyes off that red winged blackbird. The bird flew to a nearby tree and perched on a branch. The bird looked right back at Joey. The bird looked a little confused and then just flew away.

Joey turned his attention to Emily and the other kids. He had to tell them. Once the fly that bit them dies, the strange feelings go away. So if you like it, enjoy it now. And if you don't, it will end pretty soon. He wasn't going to have any trouble telling the other kids in Upper EI. He wasn't so sure about Emily.

Emily knew immediately when the connection to Joey was broken. She felt like her cousin had left the room and closed the door, leaving her alone forever. This made her afraid again. She also couldn't feel her horse any more, and this made her feel sad. The more she thought about Joey, the more she realized that she could still tell that Joey was close by, and that Joey felt some of the same things she did. The feeling just wasn't as strong.

She turned to Dante and said, "It stopped. I can't feel my horse any more."

"Really?" said Dante, half relieved and half sad. Emily just nodded her head. The more Emily looked at Dante, the more she paid all of her attention to Dante, the more she could feel how Dante was feeling. They both decided that it would just stop for Dante and the other kids too. This did not stop them from working on the fly project

"I really miss my horse," said Emily.

"I'm just glad I could help my horse," said Dante, trying not to show how he really felt. Emily could tell he really liked his horse.

As always, the day came to an end and Emily's Mom came to pick her up from school. Emily's Mom asked, as always, what Emily worked on in school. "Flies," said Emily.

Emily's Mom was surprised. Emily explained how the class had caught three different kinds of flies in the school that day and they learned the difference between a house fly and a horse fly. "House flies don't bite. Horse flies do," concluded Emily. That's when she noticed that her mother was both very sad and very angry about something. She never noticed before how much her mother was angry and sad. Emily was afraid her Mom was mad about flies.

"Why are you mad, Mommy," asked Emily timidly.

"What?" exclaimed Yvonne. "No, I'm not mad, I'm just thinking about the economy, and house prices, and jobs and how." She stopped in the middle of her sentence. She looked up at Emily through the rear view mirror and saw that Emily was getting more tense with each word she said. Just as if she knew that her Mom was worried and angry about the possibility that her husband could lose his job. "I tell you what, when we get home we'll get some cocoa and I will try to explain. OK?"

This made Emily feel much relieved. "OK. Can we listen to Top 40 radio?"

"Hey Dad," said Joey, when his Dad got home that night for dinner. He had been watching Angie play with the cat.

"What's up, Joe," said his Dad. Mr. Young turned his full attention to his son. Whatever it was, it was the thing that had been bothering the boy the last few days.

"I think we need to get rid of all the flies around the house. They might bite Angie again." Joey returned his Dad's clear, steady gaze with one of his own. "Or some of the other kids in the neighborhood."

"I think we can manage that. Shall we start now? I think dinner can wait."