

Reflective Work with Horses: Dropping the Agenda... and Finding the Treasure

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

To make use of the full intelligence and eloquence of our equine companions requires that we develop new ways of listening, and new ways of being with horses that are not agenda-driven. What do I mean by agenda-driven? When we methodically pursue grooming, riding and cooling out without taking time to be fully present to ourselves or our mount, we are following an agenda. Agendas are fine for conditioning muscles and for learning new physical skills. However, agendas are not very supportive of the healing and growth potential of interspecies friendship. When we allow the full spectrum of friendship to unfold, horses reveal themselves as masters of psychological support.

To partner with horses specifically in pursuit of emotional maturity and psychospiritual growth, it is essential to lay aside agendas and learn to attend to the feeling tone of each moment. In this attentiveness we learn to discern which emotional patterns are our own, which belong to our equine friend, and what patterns might be shared or reflected in specific ways. The horse's message to us might only be revealed when given unstructured time, and willingness on the human's part to listen with the heart instead of the rational mind.

The story of Judy shows how eloquently a horse can speak to us about our emotional and spiritual development. Judy is an athletic, outdoorsy woman in her mid to late 30's. She is a mother, a professional woman with practical approach to life and a background in the sciences. She also studied energetic healing. I first met Judy when she came to Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL) for a private intensive. She wanted to work on issues involving her family life. Judy did not feel very expressive emotionally and this created barriers between herself and loved ones. Judy's son had taken up riding, reopening Judy's childhood love of horses, and she was very open to what they might teach her.

At first, Judy's rational mind would not let go of her fear of what is unknown. With some practice she was able to practice a non-agenda state with the horses while cultivating a heightened self-awareness of her emotions and energy – what we at HEAL refer to as reflective work with horses. Reflective ground exercises are designed to invite the unknown, or at least to invite what we are presently ready to become conscious of.

In the sacred space of the round pen, Judy would learn to stay present with the process of her inner reality while she interacted with the horse without an agenda. Ameer is a wise, gentle 20 year old Arabian gelding that Judy chose to be her partner for a reflective round pen session. He is a handsome bight bay, and he watched Judy intently while she took a moment to check her self-awareness. But as she entered the pen, he turned his back toward her and walked to the other side. Judy firmly crossed her arms, cocked a leg, and stood looking at Ameer with curiosity. She had to admit that her first reaction was a sense of rejection that caused a bodily stiffening.

In the non-verbal ambiguity of the horse-human bond, Judy was quick to recognize ways in which she projected her inner reality onto the world. She noticed the uncomfortable moments where her own self-criticism drove Ameer away. She had to admit that the horses were speaking to her in ways that transcended our cultural views

and rational approach to life. She continued to monitor her sensations and emotional reactions. She was able to stay open. What could he be telling her?

As Judy pondered this question, her body softened almost imperceptibly. Her developing self-awareness allowed her to identify subtle feelings of rejection and wanting to control the situation without feeling compelled to act on these feelings. Instead she consciously stayed open to the magical thought that perhaps handsome Ameer had his own agenda for helping her to learn something about herself.

Ameer turned casually just as Judy's posture shifted somewhat. He ambled over to where Judy stood with her arms still crossed, and he started nuzzling her chest. Nuzzle, nuzzle across Judy's folded arms. He seemed gentle enough, so at first Judy just fixed her arms to withstand the nuzzling. In a moment though, she again relaxed a notch and allowed Ameer to separate her arms and expose her chest. Judy stood with her arms out before her, fists still in balls. Ameer nuzzled the area over her heart.

Next Ameer began nuzzling in earnest on Judy's hands. Using a rapid back and forth of just the upper lip as horses do when sifting grain morsels, Ameer went from hand to hand, determinedly nuzzling until both of Judy's hands were open, palms upward. Then he licked each palm soothingly, nodding contentedly with his eyes half closed. Judy's eyes became wet with tears.

"All Ameer wants is my openness," she said between sobs. "I have always feared not being good enough, and I shut others out before they reject me. I just felt the power of truly staying open to Ameer's love even when I was tempted to think he turned his back on me!" Judy later reported that this session had made a tremendous difference in her ability to open herself to the love and enjoyment of her family. She continues to share her love of horses and riding with her son. And she continues to make reflective time with her horse part of the spectrum of activities. "Having the horses helping me see some things about myself is very powerful. The body scan and energy awareness skills are ways for me to stay in authentic contact!"

About the Author:

Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC, a licensed therapist and educator, began her career as a horse trainer. Leigh is widely recognized for her articulation of the horse-human bond and its application in therapeutic and learning programs for a variety of ages and diagnostic groups. She is the founder and lead therapist for Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL), a non-profit charitable organization that supports equine assisted services and programs. Leigh is regularly invited to teach and to speak throughout the US, Canada and Europe.

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