

Embracing the Capacity for “Feel”

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMCH

Is intuition reliable? In fact, my own intuition is the most faithful and reliable guide to what I can do in each present moment, both to keep myself safe and to optimize my sense of connection and harmony with my environment. Intuition can be seen as one aspect of what psychologist Peter Levine calls an internal “felt sense” of reality. Levine describes it as, “the experience of being in a living body that understands the nuances of its environment by way of its response to that environment”.¹ Needless to say, we all operate from this very private, internal felt sense most of the time, though we may be barely conscious of it. Horses can help us immensely in bringing our felt sense to consciousness and fine-tuning it through interaction. When great horse trainers discuss the importance of “feel”, they are talking about the value of staying close to your own felt sense in each moment with your horse.

As I educate people about the healing aspects of the horse-human bond, I help people reconnect to the bodily experience of knowing and the freedom to act upon that knowing. A client recently wrote to me after a session, “The image/feeling of being with Dakota in the arena came back to me and it felt soooo good and so right and so fun and so authentic (real). Hard to describe the experience but it felt like the power/fullness of the horse got injected into and carried by my body for a couple of days at least. Some kind of ally? I could also feel the theme of ‘do I belong?’ I want to belong!”

Living close to your felt sense is not as easy as it sounds. Along with the healthy and positive aspects of the authentic self dwelling inside you, you will also encounter fears and defenses, misperceptions of others, vulnerable places, and strong emotional sensations. It is an experience of radical intimacy with oneself, and it requires us to grow once we start listening carefully to our own guts and heart. The story of Pat illustrates how challenging it can be to reawaken the felt sense, to literally connect with our feelings.

Several years ago, I coached a dressage rider named Pat. Both Pat and her horse April were tall and statuesque, and together they made an elegant team. A very experienced rider with good form who had ridden since childhood, Pat had drifted away from horses while establishing her career as a social worker in a government agency charged with investigating child abuse cases. After several years working on the front lines of this difficult profession, she was finally earning enough money to once again take up riding. She took lessons regularly and attended small shows and events, getting better with each passing year.

Along the way Pat bought April, who was a challenge even for Pat’s solid skills. Other trainers had disparaged April, but Pat was devoted to her. April was difficult to ride due to her violent and unexpected shying, and her general tendency to be nervous and high-headed. Discipline for such a fearful horse was out of the question – the best strategy was for Pat to develop her skills as a sympathetic, intuitive leader of the riding

¹ Levine, Peter Waking the Tiger, 1997 North Atlantic Books p. 69

dance. Dressage, when taught gently and correctly, was soothing to April, who had previously competed as a jumper. But dressage proved difficult for Pat to learn... especially the elusive quality known as "feel".

The always challenging task of the riding instructor is to translate the infinite nuances of feel – which may include physical sensations, timing, split second judgments and the always varied conversation between rider and horse – into words, useable pictures and manageable chunks. She communicates these as she is best able to the rider's brain and nervous system. Then the rider must go through the process of matching this "map" with her own felt sense and the responses from the horse. For Pat, this process was frustratingly slow because Pat seemed unable to access her own felt sense.

Each time I saw April relax and stretch her back in response to changes in Pat's riding, I would call out "There! Did you feel those strides in the corner?" Almost every time I asked her if she had felt a certain change in her horse, the answer came back, "No... no, I can't feel that". Time and time again Pat said to me while riding, "I can't feel what you're talking about." No matter how well April responded, Pat always missed the moment and then would report to me "I didn't feel anything." For many months, it seemed that there was very little change.

At the time, I didn't understand that this limited capacity to *experience the input of our own senses* is not only common to varying degrees, but even culturally encouraged. I'm sure Pat's colleagues in the state agency felt that her ability to suppress her emotions in order to do her job was *desirable*. In some cases, the word "professional" is a synonym for being inauthentic about one's real feelings.

But little by little, over time, Pat's ability to sense April's nuances and moods with her own body began to develop. Tentatively at first, Pat began to really feel April, and respond to her subtle nuances with measured whispers of her own. And then suddenly, real change occurred! Pat's capacity to feel the nuances of April's movements beneath her greatly expanded – *when she moved to a different job!*

Pat's innate sensitivity, which had led her to become a social worker, had long ago shut down, protecting her from feeling the pain of the abused and neglected children she witnessed daily in her job at the child abuse bureau. That sensitivity now emerged as a healing and comforting force for the highly strung April. Their performance together blossomed. In schooling and at shows, observers would often comment on the subtle finesse of Pat's riding. Quite often their exact words were: "She rides with such *feel!*" The real victory was Pat's satisfaction with her new job, where she worked with adults on social issues in which she could see the positive outcomes.

The highly sensitive instrument that we all possess for really knowing ourselves and our horses is our very own body. The felt sense includes infinite nuances with more detail, imagery and meaning than we could ever translate completely to another. Ponder that for a moment. With horses, we share our felt sense very deeply: we share awareness of our bodies in all kinds of activities, we venture out into all kinds of environments with that close body to body contact, and we engage in acts of willful communication about our lives and our goals. All of this and more, with no words.

Every finely tuned detail of both bodies forms the language. In our highly socialized, verbal world, such experiences for intimate contact, with our felt sense largely shared by another, are rare indeed.

To fully embrace the felt sense and trust in its guidance requires some work. As Pat discovered, even waking your body up enough to feel your horse is likely to awaken other, more challenging feelings about your life as well! Witnessing the powerful effect that tuning in to her own body-based wisdom had on Pat's life fueled my interest in understanding how horses help us find these pathways to a more authentic and self-fulfilled life.

To embrace one's capacity for feel requires willingness, and the desire to honestly know ourselves at a deep level. In a society (not to mention families, schools and religions) where we are literally trained to be inauthentic, our ability to trust the felt sense can be damaged, or simply wither from lack of use. We become protective of our deepest selves in environments where feelings and intrinsic knowing are not honored. But the horses love for us to dwell in the felt sense. In the grounded and practical reality of the arena, we can recontact our overshadowed authentic self, and use it to make meaningful contact with horses. When we have the courage to embrace our felt sense, it works and feels like magic. And yet, it's the most natural thing in the world.

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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