

Horse Behavior: Intelligent Mirroring?

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

The dynamics of the invisible universe permeate every interaction between horse and human, from merely approaching on foot, to the most complex ridden partnerships. The most obvious invisible agreements (or lack thereof!) between horse and rider have to do with boundaries and goals. As we spend time with horses, and learn how to be with them, we become more sensitive. We gain dexterity in the invisible realm and experience directly that subtle thoughts, emotions, intentions and intuitions hold as much importance as our conscious signals to the horse. The story of Sandra and Breeze illustrates how many layers of the invisible hide behind the visible.

Sandra was seeking my advice for training problems with her young mare, a ½ Andalusian warmblood who was only 4 years old. In fact, I had known Breeze since the day she was born. Raised to be trusting and attentive, Breeze found in Sandra the perfect owner to help her transition into adult horse life. Sandra had carefully constructed a solid natural horsemanship foundation with the mare, then progressed to riding with no significant difficulties. Breeze had been ridden at all 3 gaits on the trail and in the arena, and seemed to enjoy the attention and challenge of work under saddle with her human partner. Except for two not-so-small things... a persistent desire to lay down and roll with her saddle on, and gaits that were so quiet and lacking in impulsion that she often stumbled and at times Sandra was afraid that Breeze might fall, especially while cantering. Sandra was baffled by Breeze's constant desire to lay down with the saddle on, in spite of Sandra's capable and well-timed training responses to the behavior. As far as impulsion, Sandra said Breeze seemed unresponsive to her signals. I trusted Sandra's report as I knew her to be an experienced horsewoman with good skills on the ground and in the saddle.

When I arrived for our session, Sandra was already warming up, playing some games with Breeze on the longe line in the large outdoor arena. I could see that Breeze was responsive, but indeed seemed not to know where to put her feet. Trotting and cantering in a disorganized, strung out fashion, she indeed did have trouble balancing herself, and she frequently wanted to stop. While standing, she frequently made gestures to roll and had to be dissuaded. Sandra was questioning her readiness for even light work, wondering if another year of maturing was needed before Breeze would be able to move well.

Sometimes, the best information comes from the horse themselves, so I resolved to work with Breeze myself for a few minutes. I quickly tuned into my body, using a clearing process that helps me access a state where I can connect with the horse intuitively. When I turned to Breeze, I knew that she would let me know if she was ready for the work now being asked of her. Her alert eyes reflected eagerness, a demeanor that was at odds with her avoidant behavior.

Breeze's liquid brown eyes observed me as I took the longe line from Sandra. At my first crisp signal to move, she sprung into a trot from a standstill. She appeared to be a different horse! Full and animated, a small cluck pushed her up into a canter that was impulsive, round and well balanced. No balance or maturity problems here! I

stopped her and turned thoughtfully back to Sandra. An intuition was taking shape inside me.

I asked gently, "Sandra, is there some major area of your life that needs to move forward but isn't?" She nodded, looking pained. I knew she was thinking of her relationship with the man she had shared her life with for the last 10 years. Sandra had previously confided that they were having serious problems, and she knew that for her own health and well-being it needed to end so that she could move on. She said, "His neediness weighs on me like a saddle I just can't shake off," Sandra said with a nod in Breeze's direction. "I know I need to deal with it, but I've just felt I couldn't move forward." She prepared to mount Breeze, whispering "Thank you, girl." Breeze never stumbled that day. She trotted and cantered with newfound confidence and joy.

Is it true that horses intuit the invisible values and core beliefs that humans are not fully conscious of in themselves? Years ago I might have thought Breeze to be especially lazy, a characteristic that was assumed for most horses, and more force was the usual answer. Today, we are able to choose both a more enlightened view and more enlightened methods of relating. The power of a more enlightened view rests in our recognition of horses' intelligence and emotional sophistication.

New models of training based on the horses natural outlook and intelligence, are merging with the knowledge we've gained by observing horses as they literally step into new roles in therapeutic and personal growth venues. As a trainer and coach, I experience the power of thought and awareness to transform the horse's resistance into willingness. As a therapist, I see the wise and compassionate generosity of horses offering their support for human emotional healing (sometimes literally offering a neck to cry into).

Gaining dexterity (flexible, coordinated strength) in the invisible realm requires us to practice authenticity, self-awareness, creativity and energetic clarity in thought and action. The challenge, and the great opportunity – is that the thoughts, emotions and energies that horses perceive in us are complex and not wholly conscious.

Conditioned beliefs from our past, and the emotional effects of current issues, are as obvious to the horse as the signals we intentionally send. Sandra thought she was clearly sending the signals to "go forward", but what Breeze reflected was Sandra's energetic and emotional reality of feeling paralyzed in a difficult life decision. Horses' responsiveness to **all** of the beliefs we hold makes them powerful mirrors and friends, if we possess the honesty to see clearly.

Sandra's story also reveals the positive, but sometimes overwhelming array of resources facing horse owners today. In this new age of horsemanship, there are a wealth of training techniques, clinics and books and videos to teach us new skills, animal communicators, physical and nutritional therapies, custom made saddles... how are we to know which tool to pick up, which thread to follow? In order to empower ourselves with understanding of our equine friends, we must rely on our most internal and private senses – our intuition and self-awareness.

A few months after my session with Sandra, I ran into her and Breeze at a stable where I was conducting a session. They had just finished an exhilarating ride. Breeze looked fit and bright, and Sandra said she never stumbled any more. After exchanging

horse news, Sandra confided that she and her partner had amicably agreed to go separate ways. She had met someone that she liked a lot and was now dating. Her new beau supported her spiritual growth and values, as she was learning to support them in herself.

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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