

Life Within the Herd: New Perspectives

By Leigh Shambo MSW, LMHC

I enjoy traveling to equestrian facilities throughout the region to help people learn the skills of intuitive awareness and emotional fitness through work with the horses. It is interesting to feel the ambience of each herd, to notice the roles of individual horses, and how the herd as a whole achieves balance and adaptation to the environment. In the work we do together, helping humans learn, grow and heal – each horse is just as likely to display brilliance as any other horse. People will often tell me that one horse or another is the leader, but in my life with horses I have gained a deep appreciation for the wisdom of the herd: *it takes all of us*. Herd behavior is complex, and leadership is shared by cycle and by situation. The herd is not a fixed structure with one horse at the top, and others at the bottom, though it might appear that way at first glance, especially if that glance only comes at feeding time.

The concept of a *pecking order* within a herd is a hierarchical paradigm that is more human than horse. It implies competition for scarce resources, and a survival mentality. It's usually summed up as the horse who can hold the "gate position" at feeding time, or the horse that would prevail if all were hungry, and I put out just one pile of hay. But in their natural state, the horses would spread out and they would *all* get to eat.

In between trips, I spend a lot of time with the HEAL herd, a small and relatively cohesive band of five horses. I am grateful for the human community that supports HEAL and its herd. Some give time and labor to care for horses, some promote our mission with organizational help or board service, and some with monetary or in-kind donations. Within the herd itself, a pattern of healthy interdependence, relying on everyone's strengths and character, prevails more often than sheer dominance. Within this pattern, leadership is rotated and shared. At different moments throughout the day, each horse's unique energy will come forward to influence the others in sometimes surprising ways.

If I think of the herd as one integrated body, there would be a brain, and guess what? It's not me! Ameer, the 20 year-old Arabian gelding¹ who has been in the herd three years now, is the smartest, having a very human-like intelligence and communication style. For instance, when I am closing up the barn for the night and he wants his water topped off, he will let me know with a nicker and a gentle kick on the bucket. He wants the water *topped off*? This horse is thinking ahead!

Recently my barn manager, Khrista Englehardt, asked Ameer to come toward her, through a gate that she intended to shut behind him. Not only did he understand and come toward her voluntarily, he stopped to swing the gate shut behind him, using his nose! It is Ameer's intelligence and self-certainty that makes him the most dominant horse, but only at carefully chosen moments.

Ameer is mild most of the time – he doesn't insist on being first at the gate at feed time, and he routinely shares feed right from his bucket with Tankha, the two-year

¹ Ameer is owned by Dick and Kathy Vetter of Performance Equine Dentistry, who also help support the HEAL herd by assisting with horses' medical and dental needs.

old colt. But when Ameer has an idea in his head, he is emphatically communicative. Once, I watched Ameer discipline his young buddy for stealing hay from the horse stalled next to them, who was angry but helpless to prevent the theft. Ameer watched this for several minutes, then walked purposefully to Tankha and kicked him once – a mild but clear correction that had the desired effect of sending Tankha contritely back to his own pile of hay. Ameer leads by clear thinking, judgment, and communication.

When healing of the human heart is what's needed, as it frequently is at HEAL, the horse most likely to step forward is Gem². Once, I saw Gem stop when all of the other horses were galloping in for their dinner. She stopped in order to greet a visitor to the farm who was very timid of horses, especially galloping ones! I marveled at how Gem slowed to a walk, and carefully approached the woman with a low, maternal nicker. Months later, the woman told me how the experience remained with her over time. "She looked right into my eyes, into my soul," she reported. "I have never felt as honored as in that moment." In an ironic twist on the pecking order concept, it was so-called "top horse" Frieda, who had to leave her own dinner to come back looking for Gem. In that moment, Gem's heart energy and her equine "namaste" to my friend, held sway and the herd was drawn back.

The loving energy that Gem commonly exudes can be clearly sensed quite far from her body, an interesting exercise for HEAL students who learn to sense energy fields in both distance and feeling tone. Also noticeable are the scars that are reminders of Gem's past. Gem is a model for caring, responsibility toward others, and forgiveness.

I could not be more grateful for any friendship, horse or human, than for my horse Frieda, my most constant equine companion of the last 20 years. Frieda has raised two foals, and was my partner during many years of active riding and training, and she is a powerful teacher of the subtle aspects of equine communication and bonding. "She's her own person," more than one client has remarked upon meeting Frieda. Her independence is a distinct energetic ambience that is easy for people to sense and distinguish.

With her strong sense of self and tendency to pursue her own path, she is in many ways truly the lead mare by temperament, even though she is rarely aggressive. She calls the herd's attention to things, whether it is something to investigate or flee from. But here is another irony of the so-called pecking order, because Frieda really doesn't go far if the others don't share her interest or alarm. She is very sensitive to whether the herd is backing up her forays and initiatives. Frieda keeps tabs on each of the other herd members, and is more prone to fret when someone is gone, or to grieve when a member has been lost.

"You don't own me," as that old song said. I love Frieda most of all for insisting that I honor her strong and willful spirit. I had a whole lot to learn about authentic relationship and understanding a horse's soul while pursuing an active riding partnership with Frieda. Her true affection for and trust in me is one of the gifts of my

² Gem is owned by Kris Olsen, who provides sponsorship for her as a HEAL therapy and education horse.

lifetime. Frieda embodies the core tension that we all feel as members of a group or family – how do I go my own way, and still stay connected?

Tankha, being a two-year-old, is the leader in the play department. By far the junior member of the herd, he is low in seniority but high in energy and initiative. Powered by the spirit of play and the movement principle, he would be the legs on the body of this herd. His motto seems to be, why walk when one can canter? Tankha would not be described as a leader, that would be impossible for such a young snip! But, as I am out with my herd each day, I see that Tankha is very much the instigator of the play and interaction sequences that punctuate the day out in the pasture. His friendliness and desire to interact are innate – he came out of the womb this way! Tankha's dam, Frieda, was critically ill around the time of his birth and he was bottle supplemented as a young foal, which increased his eagerness for contact. I have carefully watched how the other horses set, and sometimes do not set, boundaries with Tankha.

Tankha is persistent, but never overly rough in his attempts to initiate play; in return, the older horses never punish his exuberance or his desire, and frequently allow themselves be led into play. But the older horses are not tolerant of impudence – when they are serious about making a request (in horse language, "Move outta' there!") – Tankha moves. And so in his training, we strive for similar patience with and affection for his basic character, even as we clarify and practice healthy boundaries. Within this bright boy's ever-changing field, people get to experience the natural flexibility of the emotional range and especially all of the nuances of the play spectrum. In initiating play, Tankha is clearly a leader!

The most recent newcomer to the HEAL herd is also the most physically vulnerable, being only age 21 but appearing more like 38 – gaunt, crooked and sore in both body and soul. I have always had an extremely strong intuitive connection with this fellow, and so it was not a big surprise to me that unexpected circumstances brought him to live at HEAL. I knew that he had suffered many physical ailments over the last two years, but I was hardly prepared for his appearance as a mere shadow of his former self. We call him Gallant³, which seems to suit his view of himself, somewhat like a grandfather recalling his more dashing days. Many people sense in Gallant a deep sadness, the presence of the shadow of suffering, although he is stoic and he always chooses to act with dignity and kindness.

Although we cannot yet turn him out in the hilly pastures with the healthier horses – and it's unclear whether this will ever be safe – Gallant has a pasture where the other horses surround him. When the other horses have drifted off to graze down in the valley, Gallant's plaintive calls draw them back, and they will take turns returning to comfort him. In an odd way, his very vulnerability makes him the leader at that moment. Each horse spends some time with him throughout the day. Gallant models grace, and trust in his herd, even in the face of vulnerability and suffering.

The wisdom of a herd allows unique strengths to come forward – each one at its own time, according to the need and the situation. I can feel the wholeness of the herd

³ Gallant's medical needs and extra care are partially sponsored by a HEAL donor who requested anonymity.

resonating within my individual being. There are moments when my brain should lead, other times my heart; there are times to assert my will and times to stay connected. I can trust that we will all be fed, and that there will still be time for play, exploration, and caring for each other.

Both horse herds and human communities are different when we embrace models of abundance – there is enough for everybody – instead of models based on scarcity and competition. Perhaps we should not place so much importance on who is first at the gate at feeding time, which is a fleeting and distorted view of the multiple intelligences embodied within the herd. When I understand the lessons of the herd – *it takes all of us* – I see human communities transformed.

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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