

# **The Trail Less Traveled: Horse as Guide for the Inner Journey**

**By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC**

The journey of horsemanship often starts with a longing – lodged in the deepest parts of our soul – for a magical partner with strength, gentleness and grace, and the willingness to lift us above a limited existence. Experiences with real, live horses challenge us to embark on the “hero’s journey”, a journey from the known into the unknown parts of our own souls. In order to access the magic that our equine partners do indeed possess, we must meet certain challenges. Above all, they challenge us to find the magic within ourselves.

In 1994, I renamed my horse training and instruction business “Equestrian Mind-Body Awareness Training”, based on my increasing understanding of the psychological dynamics of the horse-human bond. At the time, I did not know that my horse journey would lead me to become a mental health therapist, collaborating with horses to help people grow emotionally and spiritually. A new role for horses was just springing into the collective mind – a revisioning of the knowledge (known by our ancestors but forgotten in modern times) that horses can help us in our individual and collective evolution to a more conscious way of being and acting in harmony with each other.

A new wave of training techniques is 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 often 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). The invisible magic – what I have come to call Invisible Horsemanship™ – depends on a state of being, an inner awareness, and an energetic presence that permeates both conscious and unconscious actions. This state of awareness has much to teach us about life and human relationships even as it illuminates our relationships with the horses we know.

Invisible Horsemanship is a capacity we all have for artful partnering – with each other, ourselves and the natural world. When we exercise this capacity in riding or groundwork with horses, we feel vibrantly alive and fully present. We become able to navigate the invisible realm with an honest and responsive partner (a horse!), and this is where the magic begins.

**...A horse that is fractious and undisciplined for one handler instantly becomes compliant and leads quietly on a loose line for another. The rider of an advanced dressage horse must be careful not to think of a flying lead change if she does not want her horse to produce one at that moment. In a therapy session, a horse lays her forehead against the client’s chest, whose tears flow as the horse stands perfectly still...**

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 gain dexterity in the invisible realm, we experience directly that subtle thoughts, emotions, intentions and intuitions hold as

much importance as our conscious signals to the horse. The simple act of leading a horse requires clarity of invisible boundaries, which are nonetheless very real to both horse and human. Such obvious expressions of invisible agreements between horses and humans are only the tip of the iceberg.

The "style" and personality of both human and horse form a large portion of their shared dynamic. Horses intuit the invisible values and core beliefs that humans are not fully conscious of in themselves. On the journey of horsemanship – artful partnering – we learn authenticity, self-awareness, creativity and energetic clarity in thought and action. As we master this invisible world, we recognize the horse as the magician and guide for the hero's inner journey.

The challenge, but also the opportunity – is that the thoughts, emotions and energies that horses perceive in us are complex and not wholly conscious. Conditioned beliefs, often from childhood, are heard more clearly than the signals we believe we are sending. One woman thought she was clearly sending the signal to "go forward", but what her horse said "yes" to was her childhood conditioning that "no one ever listens to me". Horses' responsiveness to *all* of the beliefs we hold makes them powerful mirrors if we possess the honesty to see clearly. We can each forge an alliance with the horse that is based on understanding *our own* invisible realm – the realm of thought, feeling, intuition and intention.

The compass that we all possess for the hero's journey is our very own highly sensitive instrument – the body. Operating from an internal "felt sense" – what author Eleanor Rosche calls "primary knowing" – allows us to tease apart the subtle dynamics of relationship and co-creation – the deep structure of our invisible universe. Even beginners can work magic with horses by understanding their own field of invisible dynamics. Each of us can be an artful partner with a horse, though traditional equestrian instruction provides only a partial guide to the process. Skills and techniques must be used at the service of our own deeply personal, pre-verbal "felt sense". Much as the horses do, we make use of our own bodies as "sensing devices", in the words of Kathleen Barry Ingram, MA, a therapist associated with Epona Equestrian Services in Tucson, AZ.

Clearly, this "trail less traveled" requires willingness, and the desire to honestly know ourselves at a deep level. The very nature of the horse human interaction helps us to avoid the pitfalls of projection and anthropomorphism. I once heard dressage master Charles DeKunffy insist, "... the horse *is* nature." The physical nature of the relationship and *the horses themselves* signal us to remain "reality based". Horses cause us to experience in almost every moment both the mundane and self-evident face of reality, *and* the pervasive light and shadow of the invisible realm. Inside the grounded and practical reality of the arena, miracles are a common occurrence, when we do the work of relationship and allow our minds to be open.

Your horse can read much of your energetic field, or the energetic body as it is sometimes called. To a greater extent than the signals we intentionally send, the horse reads our core beliefs, our private internal schemas of "reality", our emotions and thoughts. Invisible attitudes and beliefs can render our energy field confusing and difficult for the horse to understand. When we bring these limiting beliefs to

consciousness, we experience greater harmony and communication with the horse, and we experience ourselves differently.

When we say yes to our horse's invitation to do our inner work, we begin moving toward a more vibrant and responsive present moment awareness. We experience moments of grace (as almost all who experience this call it). Spontaneous right action (a term from Buddhism) becomes the norm. This spontaneous right action embodies a vast amount of knowledge, even in those possessing little experience with horses. It includes sound and compassionate judgment, a balance of assertion and sensitivity, creativity, and a tremendous sense of open-heartedness. Invisible Horsemanship™ transforms 'working' the horse into *dancing* and *playing with* your horse.

In training/riding situations and in therapeutic sessions, it is evident that *unburdening* the energetic field results in a more positive reception on the part of the horse. We become able to inhabit our physical bodies fully in the present moment – with all of our energy and attention responsive (not reactive) to that moment with the horse. Humans with all levels of horse experience become capable of spontaneous right action to create a safe and respectful relationship with the horse, a relationship in which horse and human energy become complementary, harmonious and synergistic. Throughout human history, the practice of horsemanship has been recognized as the training ground for mastery of one's personal power – one reason it is "the sport of kings".

In artful partnering, horse and human *balance* each other to *enhance* their *shared* power. The horse holds the wide, sensitive awareness of an animal that is preyed upon in nature; the human must be a collaborative leader, *tactfully persuading* the horse to sacrifice portions of the wide view in order to enter a goal focus. The horse and human borrow from and enhance each other's capacities at appropriate moments. The human gains a capacity for heightened awareness that is fully embodied and capable of action. When the human and horse share their psychic energies, healing occurs – a psychological "peak state".

There is a natural rhythm and feel to this process of artful partnering with horses. The method begins with an attunement to our reflective, inner sense, and then dips into action and moves toward focus, while staying attuned to the reflective inner sense, which encompasses our innate empathy and perception of the horse and his actions. Within a horse/human system, the manifesting flow of energy – inspired, idea driven, or goal oriented behavior – can be felt as a downward flow through the energetic field; awareness and feedback enter the field via an opening and enhancing of all the senses, including emotional empathy and other non-local senses.

When we move into the action realm with our equine partners they always invite us to explore the internal and invisible dynamics of willfulness vs. empathy – what are typically described as 'male' or 'female' energies. Regardless of biological gender, for optimum harmony there must be a fine balance of assertion with understanding. Horse and human both play along the spectrum of yin (receptive) and yang (assertive) energies. These must be balanced, complimentary and flexible to find an optimal balance appropriate for each moment and activity.

No wonder that horses are now guiding humans along this path of transformation! When we allow horses to become our guides in the hero's journey, they reward each small step with increased generosity, cooperation and willingness to join with us in our goals. Understanding and embracing the innate wisdom of our own felt sense empowers each of us to begin the journey. Facing unspoken fears, releasing limiting beliefs held since childhood, and balancing the opposites inherent in our nature are the challenges of the journey. The fulfillment of the quest is not only that we stand next to the strong and noble partner of our dreams, but the magical and transformative powers that we discover inside ourselves.

**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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