

Warming Up for Riding – Naturally

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

The beauty of combining our emotional clearing and intuitive work with an active riding partnership with a horse was brought home to me this week. It has been a tremendously difficult week in which I learned that my aging father, who has a life-threatening illness, has entered an acute phase. Although I remained at home and monitored the situation from a distance, continuing my daily work with the horses and clients, many difficult and intense emotions competed to disrupt my emotional balance.

This week I have daily been walking the line between healthy and authentic emotional expression and a mature containment so that my grief, fear and anger did not disrupt the sessions with horses and people. At HEAL, students explore the subtle dynamics of energetic communication and intuitive sensitivity; it is not possible or productive to hide or rigidly suppress emotional energies in this environment. This would only skew the sessions and confuse both clients and horses. And so I do my best to walk through such emotional life stages with authenticity and grace. Horses offer us the experience of being natural with our feelings. We learn to balance times for expression with times of appropriate containment. We learn how to understand our own contribution to the emotional ambience shared by person and horse.

Of course, it is always the horses who seem to see deeply into me instantly, they often know me even before I know myself. Each in their own way, they will show their support, compassion or will model or reflect something I need to see. My dear buddy Ameer, an Arabian gelding, helped me find my naturalness with my feelings this time around. I often call Ameer my brother, for his clear intellect and sober good judgment (although, we do not always agree! But he always has reasons for his actions). He would be an elder brother, the smart one, always courageous and attentive.

On this particular afternoon, my father had left a phone message and then I called him back; I could tell by his voice that it was not good news. After learning of his worsened condition, when we said good bye I hung up the phone and sobbed. After the wave of emotion subsided, I finished up the work at my desk and then went out to be with the horses. I spent awhile doing chores, interacting a bit with the horses as I pushed the wheelbarrow through the pasture and as they entered the barn to see what I was up to. My body settled into these natural routines, and I sort of forgot about my sadness, though I was aware of a heaviness that was more visceral than conscious. Ameer was particularly attentive and interactive, his way of asking for some play time. Ameer loves ridden work, and I had put on riding breeches before coming out to the paddocks. My spirits lifted a little more, the small current of joy like a breeze against my heaviness of spirit. Say yes to him, the muse whispered to me.

But once we were in structured interaction, Ameer's demeanor seemed to shift. He no longer tried to engage me, and he did not have the soft and gentlemanly compliance that usually characterizes our work together. Instead, he seemed to hold his head stiffly up, staring away with a fixed gaze. This did not change, even when I danced with him through a few "connecting" ground exercises (even with this stiff demeanor he performed the exercises flawlessly). I felt myself getting a little frustrated. Why wasn't my good friend connecting with me?

It is moments like this that can be pivotal in relationships, and this is when emotional fitness skills are truly helpful. It would have been easy to do more, trying harder and harder to *make* Ameer connect. Instead, I did less. I took a moment to tune into my body, and noticed a tightly wound tension. A package tied up with string also appeared in my mind. Then I studied Ameer. His body seemed to mirror my brittle tension. When my gaze arrived at his face, I noticed that his eyes went off into the distance, but he was not looking *at* anything as much as he was looking *away* from me. His lips were pursed tightly – most unusual for Ameer – and the lower lip was quivering. As I took all this in, my own hot tears welled up and spilled again.

Once the tears came, Ameer was all softness and deferential attentiveness, wrapping his neck around me as I cried into it. Even as I wept, I marveled at this wonderful equine friend who noticed me in such a deep way, and mirrored me so adeptly until I noticed what he was reflecting back to me. The depth of my grief was balanced at the wonder of what sustains and supports us through such pain-filled times, and I felt the gratitude for a deeper willingness in horses' hearts than I ever thought possible, a willingness that goes far beyond simple obedience to our cues and commands.

After I was through crying, connecting exercises were not necessary at all, and I noticed with irony that if I had taken the route of doing more to *make* him soft, I would still be at it. Instead, I was now being clearly invited to "Mount up – let's go!" which I happily did. Our simple dressage exercises that day were supple, engaged and full of the velvet softness of subtle communication. Crying into your horse's neck may not be a "normal" warm-up exercise, but there are days when it is the most natural way to clear the path for a more vibrant connection.

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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