

A Different Way of Seeing

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

I've heard people say that love is blind. But love is not blind! It's more like a kind of super-vision, an ability to discern that which is valuable and precious inside another. You can see right through some things, to see even more deeply into others. The organ we use for this vision is not the eyes, but the heart. Super-vision is about seeing with your heart.

The smallest horse in my herd, a stocky 13.3 hand mixed-breed mare named Gem, might be easy to overlook at first glance, when seeing only with the eyes. She is sturdy and plain looking, a low-totem-pole type of gal who often stays in the background. She's not a graceful mover, relying on clear direction and focus from a rider to help her. A scar across her mouth causes her tongue to chronically pooch out one side of her lips (in fact, the scar goes deeper than that – inside her mouth one discovers that the tongue is cut almost in half, although the circumstances of this injury are known only to Gem herself). These are the things I see through, which is not the same as being blind to them.

My dictionary says a Gem is: 1) A valuable stone cut or polished for ornamentation; or 2) something valued for beauty or perfection. I have known Gem now for almost 10 years; she has lived in my herd for the last five. Before she came to live with me she belonged to my friend Kris, a regular riding buddy before back surgery finally prevented her from riding at all. Kris would be the first to admit to her shortcomings as a rider, and as a team she and Gem were anything but polished! But this too I could notice and look through, and with my heart I could look more deeply into the equine Rock of Gibraltar, who kept Kris on top and mostly in the middle in spite of Kris's pronounced tendency toward un-centered riding. Gem's diligence in this task, her generosity in spite of discomfort to herself, spoke to me of her innate character, the value of the stuff she is made from.

When Kris could no longer ride, or even care for her horse due to her painful back, Gem came to live in my herd. Over time, she has earned respect and even a certain kind of esteem for her patience and her mild nature; and she has also been affirmed for her right to set boundaries and make her needs known, both with me and within the herd. My super-vision saw another side of Gem on the day she met Ameer, a gelding who was quite enamored of her. But she drove him back fiercely; teeth bared, mane flying back she charged at him! He could only admire her from a distance of about 40 feet. "You are *so beautiful* when you're mad," he nickered. Ameer must have super-vision too!

Gem was supported in showing her plucky side by Frieda, her best friend by virtue of being the only other mare, and of course by me, in my role of serving the social environment of the herd. I often think of my five horses as being like one body, noticing that with all of their differences and unique personalities they have a way of balancing and flowing with emotional energies, complementing each other as if they share one mind. If the herd is one body, Gem would almost certainly be the heart; that

is her character. At the same time, when the moment requires it, she can be fierce. Her soul doesn't seek perfection, it seeks balance.

There are certain moments I especially notice the generosity in her actions. Often, she will happily turn away from a pile of hay in order to accept the bridle to go for a ride. Once, in a workshop, this little horse with the big heart followed 5 different people through a labyrinth of poles on the ground – all without a halter or rope! Another time, when I was grieving the death of a cat who had lived for 20 years, it was Gem who stood beside me in the pasture for over an hour, snuffling my hair and licking my palm each time I held my hand out to her in appreciation. In that moment, I knew she was seeing me with her heart, just as surely as I had been viewing her character with my own heart.

There is great power in being seen with super-vision, even if it is only for a few moments. Years ago, my friend Michele stopped by to visit my farm. Michele was not familiar with horses, and a bit afraid of their size and power. She arrived just as I was about to let the horses come in for their evening feeding. My routine involved merely opening gates to the different pastures, as the horses each knew their own stall with its full grain bucket; some nights it was a leisurely stroll toward their dinner, other days it could be an exuberant romp which delighted us all.

On this particular night, a cool wind was blowing and the horses were full of its energy. The way that the two mares, Frieda and Gem, were pressed up against their pasture gate, I saw that tonight might look more like the Run for the Roses, or more precisely, for the feed buckets. They tossed their heads impatiently. I cautioned Michele to step well away from the gate, so she would not be in their path. I saw nervousness in her eyes as she asked, "Maybe I should just go in the house?" I reassured her that if she just stood off to the side, she would be perfectly safe, adding that the horses were beautiful when they galloped.

"OK," she said, backing up several feet, and then a couple more for good measure. "I'm ready." I opened the gate, and they were off! Of course the long-legged Frieda was in the lead, but short and stocky Gem was in hot pursuit – until she suddenly noticed Michele standing off to the side. I saw Gem do a double-take in mid-stride, looking at Michele, then back at the rapidly disappearing Frieda, then back to Michele again. And then she stopped. She turned toward Michele, apparently forgetting all about the half-quart of sweet feed waiting for her in the barn.

With the greatest possible gentleness, she approached Michele, greeting her with a low rumbling nicker, delighting Michele with her curiosity, respectfulness and undivided attention for several moments before turning again toward the barn, this time at a peaceful walk, licking her lips. Months later Michele said to me (and she still speaks of the incident to this day), "I will *never* forget that moment! That horse looked right into my eyes. Right into my soul!"

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.

Contact:

HEAL

PO Box 84

Chehalis, WA 98532

Tel: (360) 266-0778

Fax: (360) 748-4762

leigh@humanequinealliance.orgwww.humanequinealliance.org