

A Gallant Friend and Teacher

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

About four and a half years ago, I met a tall, elegant Thoroughbred gelding named Gallant. I meet many horses in my work as a teacher in the field of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning, but this meeting felt different. I experienced a visceral sense of awe and profound respect at Gallant's noble bearing, his courtly manner of greeting me, and I *heard* the phrase, "I am a teacher." I felt that I was in the presence of a truly exceptional being. In a moment of shared recognition, a friendship sprouted. How was I to know that eventually he would teach me some profound lessons?

Gallant belonged to a friend of mine, Catherine, a novice rider, and Gallant was her first horse. When I tried to explain to Catherine that I felt Gallant was telling me he was a teacher, she gave me a funny look and said, "Well, he's teaching me about riding!" I didn't think that was exactly what Gallant meant, but I could see the truth in what Catherine said. When she rode him he took good care of her and was forgiving of all she did not know. He was about 16 then, handsome and in good health. I thought Catherine was lucky to have such a fine horse.

It was two years later when I asked Catherine if Gallant could participate in a workshop called "Energy and Grace" which I teach with Kathleen Barry Ingram, being hosted that year at the stable where Gallant was boarded. Catherine said Gallant had been lame and confined to a stall; he was not sound enough to ride. When I explained that the workshop does not involve riding and that we could employ him in the quiet, "reflective" exercises that teach human self-awareness, she gave her permission. And it was a good thing that she did, as Gallant himself *insisted* on being part of the learning community of our workshop! He picked a participant, and engaged her in the reflective work in such a way that she later wrote to me, "My life has changed in so many ways [since the session with Gallant]. That day was truly a crossroads in my life, and I gained strength, wisdom and a true respect for what the horses can teach us if we only let them." This, I thought, was what Gallant meant when he referred to himself as Teacher!

Over the next few years, I had few opportunities to interact with Gallant, although I thought of him often. Catherine kept me informed of ongoing health and soundness issues. There were some accidents that required stitches, then white line disease in his feet, and then an unexplained but serious bout of laminitis. She was no longer able to ride him, and he required constant care and had incurred significant veterinary expenses. I was saddened to learn that this wise, gentle horse, this noble teacher with a huge heart, was increasingly experienced as a burden by Catherine. She was attached to him and cared for all of his medical needs, but she missed the riding and felt that much of the joy had gone out of horse ownership.

Meanwhile, my own life was not without a sense of struggle and hardship, even in the midst of very significant blessings. My passion for the work I do is fueled by frequent affirmations from participants of how inspiring, even life changing, equine assisted personal growth is. Still, it is difficult for many clients in my rural area to pay the full fee, and I see many clients for reduced fee and work tirelessly on fund-raising and grants for the non-profit fund in an effort to make services available. I love my

herd and my farm, but it demands hard, constant work, even with the help of a dedicated employee, Khrista Englehardt, who also volunteers many extra hours because she believes in the work and has seen for herself what it means for clients. The needs of the horses and the business itself often come before my own. Almost 6 years after starting HEAL and my own EFP/L practice, it is still often difficult to make ends meet, and there are times when I feel financially frightened and discouraged.

And so, I was *not* looking to add another horse to my herd, when Catherine told me she could no longer keep Gallant. She asked me if I would be willing to give him a home. I immediately remembered the first day I met Gallant, the power of his presence and my certainty that he was a teacher. I felt trepidation given Gallant's medical issues, but I also felt frightened for him – what might happen to a great horse who was not yet old, yet no longer sound enough for riding? I gave the matter a period of contemplation, in which several intuitive signs signaled me to say yes, including Gallant's own request (through an animal communicator that Catherine consulted) to come here.

The day I went to pick up Gallant, who I had not seen in person for almost two years, I was shocked at the serious deterioration of his physical condition. This noble giant, once so elegant looking, was a shadow of his former self. I took a deep breath and decided to trust all of the events that resulted in my custody of this wise soul, now in a very compromised body. Most troubling of all, Gallant seemed dissociative – emotionally “checked out”, and I wondered if he was in a great deal of pain, or even preparing to leave his body for good.

I confess that I felt a great deal of resistance to Gallant at first. My own fears that I could not be abundant enough to support him, financially and emotionally, felt overwhelming for the first month. My rational mind questioned the wisdom of taking on a horse with so many needs. That actually states it much too mildly: my “rational mind” (what we sometimes refer to at Epona as the ‘false self’) was frequently *going crazy* in that month, beating up my intuitive side for a foolhardy decision based on sentiment. Gallant seemed to sense my internal conflict, and he resisted my attempts to manage his health issues or even make him more comfortable, until finally I softened and resolved to let Gallant's own wisdom guide the process of what would, or would not, be done for him.

It is never a mistake to stand by a friend, and I am discovering that I have much to learn. I think back to the words I heard when I first met Gallant – “I am a teacher” – and I feel them very personally now: he is *my* teacher. Soon after his arrival at my farm, I found myself looking differently at people, especially elderly people. One day I saw an elderly man hobbling across the parking lot at Safeway. Something in the man's crooked gait reminded me of Gallant and I immediately thought, “There is a man with lots to teach.” I think previously I have viewed people in the aging process with sympathy, a sort of misguided tenderness verging on pity.

Gallant requires that I respect his dignity. He rejects my attempts to help when such gestures are born of my own discomfort with his infirmities; he is offended by attempts to “fix” him. I'm not the only one who has felt this. Gallant seems to have a built in “motive-meter”, and he opens up to help from anybody only when it is given in a true spirit of generosity, only when it is based on true discernment of what he needs and finds helpful.

I watch Gallant and the effect he has on people, and he is a model of grace in his vulnerability. He has needs without being needy, and he invites people to support and help him because they feel honored by him. For instance, one day he was injured by a kick from one of the other horses. I had witnessed the conflict, and looked him over carefully, but missed the injury because it happened to be right under his tail. A little while later, Gallant came into the barn where I was working, and he lay down directly in front of me, patiently watching me. The dignified vulnerability of his gesture touched me deeply, and he was obviously asking me to take another look; as soon as this message became clear he again stood, whereupon I investigated further and discovered the wound which needed treatment. Gallant's way of saying "thank you", when he has accepted kindness and care, is to lay his forehead against my heart. With such gestures, he touches people with his nobility and kindness, and people are inspired to support him, not from a misplaced pity, but from a true respect for this horse's noble heart. At least some of the extra services and expenses related to his health, which at first triggered my own fears, Gallant attracts to himself by simply being who he is – a horse with dignity, heart and wisdom.

Some of the physical issues that Gallant came with seem to be improving slowly, but it's hard to tell what the future will bring. He no longer dissociates, and I like to see that as a sign of improvement, and it's also true that *I am learning* how to be fully present to him in a deeper, more reverent way. He may not ever be ridden again, and it may be hard to keep him healthy, at least in the physical sense. Perhaps it is even possible, that in his compromised body, he is a more powerful teacher than ever. I don't think he really minds his body all that much, in spite of its obvious discomforts. Gallant seems to be all about the life of the soul, and all about authentic, loving relationship. He is a powerful and wise teacher, and I am honored to be his student

About the Author:

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