

Balance: It's Rarely Perfect, Always Fluid

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

One of horse wisdom's most important lessons is the dance of staying in balance – staying balanced within ourselves and also maintaining balance in our shared relationships (with horses or people). Trying to stay in balance so pervades every aspect of the horse-human relationship, physical, emotional and spiritual – that it could fill five lifetimes of study! One of the first salient lessons is: balance is almost never perfect – but an ideal that we move closer and closer toward, experiencing relatively fleeting moments of perfection.

Working toward our ideal of balance requires that we stay in the flow. By developing awareness and responsiveness to the signals that tell us we are out of balance, over time we stay closer to a zone of optimum balance. Jayne, a relative beginner in riding, would often freeze and become self-critical when she found herself off balance in the saddle. One day she commented after watching me ride, "I'll be glad when I achieve such perfect balance." Jayne was genuinely surprised when I explained to her that I had been completely absorbed in a flow of *balancing responses* within myself and in relation to the horse, precisely because the balance was never perfect but always fluid and complex. Although I am a more experienced rider than Jayne, our essential *process* (feeling a loss of balance, then regaining it) was the same. From that day on, Jayne began to honor her unbalanced moments as instructive inputs into the process of finding and maintaining balance with her horse in the face of a myriad of factors. She began to develop her inner compass.

The inner compass is an internal, felt sense based on a subjective impression of an ideal state. This leads to my second salient point: you have to be in touch with your inner compass in order to work with the dynamics of balance. Your body must become educated in the variety of feels that are associated with balance in yourself and in the horse, in order that you can fine-tune the balance through your responses. Until one experiences the feeling state of balance and the range of tolerable "error" on both sides, she does not have the template that allows balancing responses to guide the quest for optimum balance. Balance is its own reward; there is an exact moment that is felt in the body as an energetic tipping point, and at the peak of having tipped, there is a moment of effortlessness which the body of human and horse can relax into. A moment of freedom from effort. Good riders guide themselves and the horse to find these effortless moments more and more frequently, eventually staying within a zone of optimum balance.

While the most obvious and concrete manifestations of balance between human and horse are evident in riding (where loss of balance entails the actual risk of falling), balance is not just in the physical plane. Balance has important foundations in the mental and emotional plane as well. Paying attention to the dynamics of balance in the invisible realm of thought, emotion and energy yields rich learning about one's self – the horses reliably reward us with more cooperative behavior when we pay attention to invisible axes of balance. In fact, paying attention to balance within the relationship, lies at the heart of Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy, since the internal compass that is developed can also apply to human relationships and to life decisions.

Just like the physical sensors in our inner ear alert us if our physical balance is disrupted, our emotional body has sensors that will alert us when we are out of

emotional balance, or when a relationship with another person or a horse is out of balance. Correcting the course always involves attending to our own balance first. When we change, others must change and adapt. This is just as true of human relationships as it is with our horses, but with the horses we get to examine our patterns in a simplified and very honest and direct form. No wonder we can feel so natural with the horses – they invite us to be sensitive and empowered in the very same moment. Now there is an act of balance!

I recently taught the Epona method of self-awareness to an advanced rider who was concerned about her horse's unpredictable and dangerous explosions under saddle. In an unstructured "reflective round pen" session, Annette had difficulty relaxing into a state of "just being" with her young mare, Grace. Annette felt plagued by performance anxiety, in spite of my stated assurances that there was no specific agenda, no expectation of an outcome at all in that particular activity (reflective session). She was unable to shake the thought that there was some "right way" to do the session, some way that it was "supposed" to look, and this new awareness of an old and unconscious thought pattern was a revelation to her.

As we progressed into some ground training exercises she was routinely practicing with Grace, Annette was for the first time conscious of how much performance pressure she carried even into routine training sessions. The self-imposed (and largely unconscious) push to "get it right" created a sense of energetic imbalance for Grace, who had trouble relating what she saw as play to the sense of urgency conveyed when Annette was in the grip of performance anxiety. As Annette learned not to let herself be pushed by some false ideal of how it was supposed to look, she found that Grace became more cooperative and generous in her responses. By the end of our day together, Annette learned to contain and self-soothe her anxieties so that they exerted no push on Grace, and Grace rewarded Annette with more focus and enthusiasm for their work – even ridden work – and most importantly, no explosions!

Sometimes we improve balance in the relationship with a horse by containing and soothing our feelings, as Annette did, but other situations call for more dramatic expression of our feelings in order to establish a good balance in the relationship with the horse. One of my clients, Sherry, purchased an easy-going horse named Clyde. Although she rode as a young woman, Sherry had not ridden in many years and found that age and lack of fitness had eroded her skills and confidence. Sherry saw Clyde as a big teddy bear of a horse – a horse that would be "easy" given her aging body and modest riding skills. At first, things went well and Sherry felt that she had achieved a good working relationship with Clyde. She felt that Clyde "took good care of her" on their rides.

One day, Clyde became frightened of an unfamiliar object on the trail. At a loss as to how to proceed, and wanting to preserve their good relationship by avoiding conflict, Sherry simply took a different trail. Soon, Clyde sprouted a few more fears. He was afraid to work down at the far end of the arena. He became reluctant to stand still for her at the mounting block. More and more often, Sherry found herself backing down. As time passed, Sherry felt intimidated and disappointed in the balance of their relationship, where she was clearly not validated as a leader. No doubt Clyde felt disappointed too – how could he be a loyal follower, if Sherry was unwilling to stand firm as a leader? Clyde's actions could even be viewed as his own attempt to reestablish balance within the relationship.

With my assistance, Sherry identified many of the feelings and unconscious attitudes that kept her in avoidance of constructive conflict with Clyde, and she realized that these same factors contributed to her lack of satisfaction in her family and professional relationships as well. In order to reclaim her position of authority, Sherry needed to take emphatic and decisive action. Within a repertoire of safe ground exercises, Sherry gave herself permission to be expressive and dramatic with Clyde. Sherry was able to show Clyde that she was a force to be reckoned with, and without punishment or pain she was able to tip the balance and establish herself as a leader to be trusted and respected.

Practicing dynamic balance in the mental, emotional and energetic realms of relationship are one of horsemanship's healing gifts. Learning the very essence of artful partnering with horses.

At HEAL, Human-Equine Alliances for Learning, people learn to artfully use their mental and emotional energy to communicate effectively with horses – becoming aware of the many ways their internal compass can guide themselves and a horse into a more graceful and effortless balance in partnership. Learning to feel for and trust in their own felt sense of balance and rightness in each moment, and learning that the horse appreciates and responds to such guidance, provides what is called in psychological terms an “emotionally corrective experience”.

An example of this is the join up tendency that horses readily demonstrate at liberty, when the question of “who is leading whom?” has been resolved to the satisfaction of both horse and human. It is always a magical moment when a horse decides to join up with a person. How often, in the human world, do we find that others join in with our goals, deciding wholeheartedly to follow and support us in spite of the imperfections of the balancing process? By practicing balance with horses, we gain trust in our own inner guidance.

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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