

Fit to be Tied, or Fit to be Free?

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

The rhythm of my mare's feet and the feel of her swinging back are details so familiar to me that I am no longer conscious of them as separate. It is more like a symphony of feeling and acknowledging. Not only every physical movement, but also many thoughts and movements of our attention are shared between us. And to the extent possible between species, we are held by the same world. We make our way among the tall trees, the warm stretches where we glide along sunlit portions of trail. We share the spring scents: a glade of flowers, then a swampy spot of skunk cabbage. I marvel at her red ears, outlined in black, each one a poetic, inverted "V", rotating to scan the environment and also in communication with me.

There are so many miracles to our friendship, this horse and I. This year marks the 20th anniversary of our partnership. I think back on our early years together, and can so clearly remember all the powerful forces that converged in my life then, setting the stage for the arrival of this graceful and athletic horse. I lived on a ranch in Issaquah, WA, owned by John and Violet Kelly, where I was a part time manager and also provided lessons and training. Violet's vision of her ranch as a haven for people who loved horses was palpable in the day-to-day activities of her equestrian center. My colleague Barb Johnson was my first mentor in the practice of dressage, and I credit her with my love of dressage as art. Many good friendships were forged in this community of horse-loving souls, relationships that would sustain me through the difficult times to come.

It was in 1987, when an attractive, green two year old was brought to me for training. Lacking talent for the track, she'd been traded around, and the then-current owner called her Freeda simply because she had gotten her for free. She made a profit when I decided to buy the horse, and I changed the spelling to Frieda, frequently shortened to the affectionate nickname, "Free". And this word speaks to her original energy. Her aura of autonomy and strong self-sufficiency is unmistakable. As one client who worked with her in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy remarked, "She is her own person."

Frieda's insistence on freedom challenged me over the years, in the most profound ways. She called me to a reliance on my own inner judgment, rather than the expectations or methods of others. This played out at a variety of practical levels in our active partnership of living and working together, but most clearly of all in her rather pronounced fear of being tied. In the long time that it took me to learn to stand by her in her fear, she also stood by me as I learned to face some of my deepest fears.

It was during our first year together, when Frieda developed a fear of being tied, that events revealed how tied I was to old patterns and behaviors that were not serving me well at all! First, I lost my voice and consulted a therapist who quickly identified the anger at my family of origin that I could not voice. Secondly, a single ride on the wrong horse resulted in a broken pelvis, and as I reflected (during my lengthy recuperation) I could see that the "accident" was presaged by the pair of blinders I was wearing, one called ego and another called ambition. And just as I began walking

again, with a cane, I lost my mother to suicide. My mother – proud and independent, unwilling to be vulnerable even with those closest to her. And I was, in so many ways, just like her.

It took me a little while to see that Frieda had an actual problem with being tied. It started on a particular day when my blue heeler Jake jumped in her face and nipped at her nose, while she was tied, and she pulled back and broke the rope. For months after that, she tied fine. But one day similar constellation of triggers activated her alarm system and she pulled again. This time the rope did not break immediately, and she pulled back violently and with fierce determination until she broke free. When it happened a third time, I began to see it as a problem.

Conditioned as I was in many ways to “cowgirl up”, facing my own fears was not easy. I was afraid of Frieda’s pulling back, not for my own safety but for her and for others in the environment. And along with that, I was afraid of how others would judge me – since Frieda and I traveled to other barns for clinics, social rides and lessons. After all, as a professional trainer, shouldn’t I be able to teach my own horse to tie?

I consulted with Barb on the problem, and her advice was to tie Frieda with an inner tube link, as we sometimes do with young horses. Frieda would not pull on this, but would sometimes become frozen with fear (the set up for an explosive pull), in which case I would unclip her from the tie. And when I tied her in other places, there was always a risk that something would panic her and she would break free.

As years passed, I tried many different approaches endorsed by trainers I respected to try to help Frieda become more comfortable with standing tied. There are setups you can use to make sure the horse will not break free, and I regretted when I tried this method with Frieda. Although she pulled hard enough that I later learned she had injured her neck, her spirit would not be broken. Instead she became wild with fear and her eyes pleaded with me for help. I could not proceed with this approach, and spent a good amount of time afterwards pleading with her for forgiveness. Other approaches too only increased her fear, and it was all too clear that this would only lead to damaging effects both physically and emotionally.

Later I learned a variety of techniques designed to teach Frieda a more reasoned response to rope pressure, which were very helpful in all kinds of situations. But when she was tied fast and truly panicked the old pull response would kick in, and as always she would pull until something broke. The feeling of the rope being fast became a trigger itself; I could often see her test the feel of the rope when I looped it over a tie post, to reassure herself that she was still essentially free.

It is often said that the horse is the most forgiving animal, and this is true. Day by day Frieda forgave me, not just for the tying “lessons”, but for any transgressions that were a result of my notion that I could force solutions to any problem with her. And one day, I got the message about the tying thing, the perfect solution. *Don’t tie her*, a voice inside me said. Well, duh!

I thought back on another mentor, a wise old cowboy named Ralph Heitmann that I had worked for in his pack outfitting business years before. He had one horse named Diamond that “couldn’t be tied” – and Diamond nearly pulled my thumb off with

the rope on the one occasion when I forgot and tied him fast. Seeing my huge, bandaged thumb, Ralph could only bellow, "I told you NOT to tie him!!!" I thought Ralph was just cold-hearted toward people; he was a great horse trainer and could surely teach any horse not to pull, for the sake of wranglers who couldn't remember quirks like that when saddling 35 horses before dawn. Well, on this day I suddenly recognized Ralph's wisdom. Don't tie her, I repeated to myself.

I told Frieda that day that I would never tie her again unless she was entirely comfortable. The funny part was, it took me so long to come to this promise, that along the way we had developed tools that allowed us to adapt to virtually any environment without having to tie her. She ground ties well, she understands that a rope looped around a hitching post means "please stand here", and she stops anytime (well, almost) that I call out "whoa". The same day I made this promise to her, I realize that together we had already embodied the solutions.

I finally learned to stand by her as I would want someone to stand by me when I am afraid. To seek solutions that increase trust and confidence in each other, even if those solutions look unconventional to others. And in this, I also learned how to accompany myself through fears big and small. Fear gives us some hard lessons. But it is in listening to fear, and understanding its messages in ourselves and others, that we find freedom. This morning, as I tacked up Frieda, I noticed the deep trust in her eyes and tears of gratitude sprang to my own eyes. It's as if she's saying, "Put that saddle on today. I still have a couple of things to teach you." Usually, these are lessons about learning to go with and not oppose her energy. Lessons in freedom.

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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