

## **Forgiveness Starts Inside: Message from a Soul Friend**

**By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC**

One of the often-cited attributes of horses is their uncanny ability to know a lot about a person almost instantly, and many stories get swapped about the instant spark of soul recognition that occurs sooner or later for everyone with a particular horse, a horse that will not touch any one else in quite the same way. There is a Celtic term for this: Anam Cara, or "soul friend". Could it be that this soul friend is carrying a message that goes far beyond the traditional horse-human relationship?

In my equine-facilitated therapy and personal growth practice, I encourage participants to follow the thread of connection offered by the spontaneous resonance of a particular horse with a particular person. In an amazing and therapeutic way, such alliances can guide the person to access higher levels of awareness. Then horses reward this heightened awareness with gentle bonding responses. Such experiences are even more astonishing when we are working with the horse in ways that have nothing to do with traditional riding or horsemanship.

To give a concrete example, "Erin" (not her real name) came to a session at HEAL in hopes of shifting the grip of depression on her psyche. Erin was burdened with feelings of regret over her divorce and its effects on her teenage child, and also felt at a loss for finding new directions in her life. She was at a very low point that made it impossible for her to recognize her many positive qualities. After an orientation session that included awareness exercises to practice with the horses, Erin went out to meet the herd.

A tall bay mare named Frieda strode forward to meet Erin, who was immediately struck by the regal horse's aura of self-possession. Later Erin was surprised to learn that she shared similarities with Frieda: both are the mothers of almost-grown children, both are independent females to whom personal space is important, and both had reached out to greet each other with an eagerness beyond their characteristic reserve. Erin felt that Frieda might be the horse that held an important message for her today.

Before entering the pen with Frieda, Erin felt a poignant desire to have Frieda give her a sign, a physical action signifying for Erin 'forgiveness' and affirmation of her innate worth in spite of her recent experiences. She entered the pen full of hope for this healing connection. But Frieda ignored Erin, and moved away whenever Erin made attempts to approach her. Painful minutes passed. This was not what Erin expected from the horse who had approached her in such a knowing way just a short while earlier. What was Frieda trying to say?

Very gently I suggested that Erin contemplate what it would feel like to forgive herself. In that moment, Frieda looked toward Erin as if for the first time, and promptly walked over to her, made a small circle around her, and stood by her side! Erin practiced for another half hour. Whenever Erin wanted Frieda to bestow forgiveness, Frieda would move away from her again. Each time she could hold the thought of forgiving herself, Frieda would again join up close by Erin's side. Erin later reported that remembering to forgive herself first brought greater emotional well-being,

increasingly positive relationships with her daughter and ex-spouse, and better success in building new relationships to sustain her through a difficult life stage.

Erin returned to HEAL a month later. As she walked out into to the pasture on a sunny day with Khrista Roberts, the HEAL barn manager, they paused for awhile to watch Frieda and her pasture mate, Gem, grazing peacefully in the lower portion of the pasture. The horses soon noticed them, and began walking toward them. Khrista, unaware of what had transpired in the earlier session with Erin and Frieda, observed something unusual in Frieda's behavior.

"Frieda did something odd today," Khrista reported. "When Erin and I were watching the horses come up from the pasture, I said I would halter Frieda, since I was carrying her halter. And Frieda did come toward me, but brushed past me in order to greet Erin by burying her face in her chest!" Khrista and I both know that such an unabashed show of affirmation is unusual for the proud mare.

A few minutes later I greeted Erin, who was glowing. "She remembered me," Erin said simply. Tears moistened her eyes but didn't dim her smile. "And today she gave me what I wasn't ready to accept last time. How can others give me what I am not ready to give myself?" Frieda sighed with contentment as Erin went back to brushing her shiny coat.

### **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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