

## Horses and the Power of Thought

By Leigh Shambo MSW, LMHC

It is sometimes said, and always true, that it is not WHAT we think but HOW we think that makes the difference. In this new age of horsemanship, where we can learn to work with the horse's mind instead of forcing their bodies, the value of this statement is proven time and again. The art of "horse whispering" is really the art of accurately perceiving and creatively thinking about a particular horse in a particular moment, letting intuition guide us in choosing actions and methods that gently guide the horse into a collaborative training experience. This art depends just as much on letting the horse teach us what he needs, as on communicating to him what our desires are.

Horses are so sensitive to and perceptive about our non-verbal thoughts, intentions and values, that in many moments it truly seems that they are reading our minds – often even better than we know our own! The following story illustrates simply and clearly the power of our thoughts to change the training equation.

My riding student Becky had been working with a quick, expressive and impetuous Arabian named Jazz. Becky had a bit of fearfulness about riding Jazz and liked to check out his compliance level by longeing him prior to riding. Becky is an experienced horsewoman and her longeing techniques were well-honed. On this particular day, Jazz was responding to all of Becky's signals with accuracy – changing gaits and making turns precisely on cue in response to Becky's well-practiced methods. However, his defiant head tossing and an occasional tail swish made Becky wonder if things would go smoothly once she mounted and began her ride.

I could see that Becky's technique was effective, so I began questioning her about what thoughts she was having as she longed Jazz. She reported, "I want him to do each thing I ask and to do it promptly when I ask. I want him to accept me as the leader." When I asked if there was anything else, she said, "Well, I want him to be... happy about it!"

I asked her to observe Jazz and tell me what he wanted from her. A long pause ensued as she watched him. Finally she said just one word – "Harmony." I suggested that Becky not change her actions or her method, just hold the word harmony foremost in her thoughts, just ahead of accuracy, timing and obedience. Almost instantly, Becky was rewarded by Jazz's relaxation and a softening in his eye and facial expression. On his now quiet head, she could observe his ear rotating toward her in eagerness for her next command. His tail no longer swished in irritation, it lifted a bit and swung gently in rhythm with his gaits. Within moments Becky said eagerly, "Now I know – *I feel* – his readiness for me to ride!" Even I was amazed at the power of one thought, held firmly in the rider's mind, to produce such a dramatic change in this horse's attitude and demeanor, instantly!

This experience took place several years ago, and since then I have pursued training and education about the mental, emotional and energetic aspects of our bond with horses. When we deepen the bond by affirming and attending to the horse's ability to know what is in our mind, we become aware that our own barely conscious

thoughts and values impact the relationship. When we learn to work creatively with this knowledge – magic happens. In fact, the magic is so palpable, so profound, that the effects extend well beyond the horse arena and into all of our relationships and even our dreams for ourselves. By attending specifically to the invisible reality of our thoughts, feelings and unconscious conditioning we create a bond of understanding that enhances and illuminates whatever actions, methods and techniques we choose.

**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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