

Invisible Horsemanship: Practice in the Field of Consciousness

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

Since I teach courses in "Invisible Horsemanship", I am often asked what, exactly, it is. The most simple and elegant explanation would be "...the practice of consciousness functioning as cause, in our real relationships with horses". If this sounds esoteric, or a hopelessly difficult idea to work with, the horses make it really simple (although sometimes our past conditioning makes it difficult to "get"). It is a very practical way to directly experience and influence the ways in which mental and emotional energy really do play a huge role in creating our reality.

Certain attributes of consciousness, reliably create harmony in our relationships with horses. By attributes of consciousness, I mean traits like curiosity, persistence, honesty with self, or creativity. This month we can look at four cases of a common horsemanship "problem" – balking. I will give you four examples of how riders using tools of consciousness, or invisible horsemanship, influenced the balking situation with a horse in an almost magical way.

For those unfamiliar with balking (although most who have been in the horse world any length of time will have seen this behavior!) it means... "to stop short and refuse to go on."¹ Does this mean that the horse questions our leadership? Is something wrong (danger, or lameness)? Author Linda Kohanov characterizes "... misbehavior as a form of communication."² And so, we must operate first from a place of intuitive attunement that seeks to understand what the horse is saying and respond appropriately.

The consciousness of curiosity

Sometimes Invisible Horsemanship looks like the gut level discernment that the horse is saying something important. My friend and colleague Cat Ahman was out with her assistant trainer, riding some young horses on their first foray in the mountains. It was still early in the day, and the hills just beginning to grow steeper, when the young mare Cat was riding began to balk. Cat dismissed the urge to discipline her, instead remaining curious and interested in the behavior. When given her head, the mare turned back toward her companion horse, also young, a gelding, and touched his sweating haunches with her nose. It quickly became evident that this horse was in the early stages of exertional rhabdomyosis, or tying up. When we are called to listen to the intelligence of our equine partners, life changes. We are suddenly aware that intelligence whispers through all of life, if we are just practiced in hearing it.

The consciousness of assertion

On the other hand, sometimes Invisible Horsemanship involves standing by our own intentions without backing down. A rider named Anita had a horse who started balking at the gate that led to the trail out from the barn. She tried to figure out why, and when the horse turned away, she would ride in circles for awhile and then try

¹ The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1997

² The Tao of Equus, 2001

again, without success. In a conversation with me, Anita changed her mind. The next time she went to ride Frosty out the gate, she did not allow Frosty to turn after balking at the gate. Instead, she practiced skills she had learned in Invisible Horsemanship, staying focused on her goal in stillness, staying present and allowing Frosty time and stillness to feel her way. It required that Anita stay in a mental place of stillness, curiosity and non-judgment while not backing away from her intention. To her amazement, within one minute, Frosty decided willingly to walk through the gate toward the trail, never looking back, and not acting the least bit anxious.

The self-honesty to look in the mirror

Another rider named Cathy, had several horses consecutively, all of whom balked. The horses loved her, enjoyed her kindness, and were sympathetic and in agreement with her desire not to feel like she was making them work! In her work at HEAL, Cathy realized that deep inside, she was conditioned to believe that she was not worth listening to, and she had energetically almost turned herself into a mouse. She also realized she had a fear that she was merely an inconvenience to others. In releasing this belief, Cathy was amazed to discover that her current horse and others that she rode flowed easily forward, playful and full of impulsion. It seemed to her that they had previously been mirroring her own listless, I'm No Fun energy.

Childlike creative communication

This story was told to me by a Parelli Natural Horsemanship coach who also loved to see how varied horses are in their communication style. A young man was trying to persuade his horse to jump over a barrel in a ground exercise on a 20 foot line. He was well versed in all of the games and seemed to be sending the right signals. When he finally ceased all communication and buried his head in his hands, the horse jumped the barrel, unaided! Another creative solution was found by my assistant horse handler Val Hampson. My best energetic coaching had failed to help Val convince wise Ameer to join up and walk beside her. Now he was marching enthusiastically by her side. "What did you do?" I called out. "Oh, I simply offered him a deal, 2 minutes of this and its lunch-time!" Oh yeah, I forgot that Ameer speaks English, too!

There are reliable ways of learning to work within this field of consciousness to pick up the right attitude. Once you find the right angle, the right question... your horse will be right there showing you how to proceed to understanding him or her. In each vignette presented here the essential harmony, or common ground, was first found and recognized in the field of consciousness, as a rider responding out of the invisible feel or empathy of horsemanship.

You find the right way by feeling. The field of consciousness holds an infinite number of possible choices and outcomes or directions for a particular situation. Often, students are surprised to see their mentors deviate from their own method! We can learn to tune in and discern the many ways that horsemanship *feels*. At HEAL, we practice ways of working within the field of consciousness first, then bringing our

actions into alignment with conscious choices, practicing the dance of reflection and action until an effortless, spontaneously right action and acceptance is felt in each moment. And each moment seems to fit with its adjoining others. This is the magic of horsemanship at its finest, which we all love to experience.

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.

Contact:

HEAL

PO Box 84

Chehalis, WA 98532

Tel: (360) 266-0778

Fax: (360) 748-4762

leigh@humanequinealliance.org

www.humanequinealliance.org