

My Accident (or, Are There Really Any Accidents?)

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

One of the pivotal moments in my horse experience came suddenly, on a spring day in 1988 when a QH mare that I was riding reared high, throwing herself backward and landing on top of me, breaking my pelvis. I was lucky; the fractures were not displaced and no internal organs had been injured. It would be a matter of several months' recovery, essentially moving as little as possible and being very careful to avoid re-injury.

I felt grateful... and I was stunned by the realization that my strong, capable, and altogether reliable body *could* have in a moment been forever paralyzed. I was profoundly astonished to consider that my soul, my identity, was somehow much greater than the fact of my physical being. Seven years later, actor Christopher Reeve proved that exact thing to the world, leading him to articulate what I had only glimpsed. There are, he said "...powers we all have inside us; the ability to endure; the ability to love, to carry on, to make the best of what we have – and you don't have to be a 'Superman' to do it."

In essence, I suppose you could say I was playing Superman, or trying to, the day of my accident. I was 28 years old at the time, the main instructor and barn manager in a busy riding school near Seattle called the Kelly Ranch. John Kelly and I had traveled to a nearby farm to take a look at a candidate for trail horse. From my post-accident hospital bed, I could recollect all of the clues that should have told me the horse was not safe to ride; yet somehow that day, my ego put all of the clues in the wrong order, leading me to climb on a problem horse with a chip on my shoulder, intent on proving that I could "fix" the horse with my good riding skills. Superman indeed. It certainly was time for me to glimpse into that bigger soul, and begin to move beyond the strong ego that had, at least in this case, led me completely astray.

Kelly Ranch was a small vibrant community united by affection for the horses and for the Kellys themselves. Housing for my husband and I was part of our contract, and I loved the fabric of life on the Ranch and called the Kellys "my adopted parents". It was a bright and enlivened life, and it stood in stark contrast to the serious emotional and spiritual turmoil that my real parents struggled with 2000 miles away in Illinois.

Living across the country from my parents made it easy to hide the difficulties in my family of origin from others (except my husband). My mother had become, over the course of a five year period, critically depressed and at times psychotic. I could not understand the disintegration of this woman who had been so strong and vibrant in my years of growing up. I did not understand the increasing severity of my dad's alcoholism. Both of them were in the grip of a deep and desperate hopelessness, but they were like strangers to me and I did not know how to help. At that time in my life, I simply did not do helplessness, and so I told no one. In fact, in a classic case of psychosomatic expression, I completely lost my voice for a period of several months! The same overzealous ego that urged me onto the horse that injured me, also walled off with shame and secrecy the fact of my mother's mental illness and my father's addiction.

Perhaps for a person who does not do helplessness, spending 2 months in a prone position is not such a bad thing. The Kellys kept me employed by answering calls and telling other people what to do with the horses, and more friends flowed in with previously unimaginable (to me!) affection, support and encouragement. I was indeed loved, and amply cared for. When I graduated from the couch to a wheelchair, my riding students would wheel me from my little house down to the riding arena and park me in the middle to teach their lessons. Two months after my accident, long before I was supposed to ride, I went from my wheelchair to the back of Scotty, a tall white Arabian, King of the Lesson Horses.

But if the physical vulnerability and need for help was challenge enough, immediately following the accident my mother – remember, she’s crazy now – would not be dissuaded from coming out to “help” me. Yeah right, like it will help for all of my friends to see that I have a crazy mother that I don’t know what to do about! But this event turned out to be a particular bit of concentrated grace, as it cemented my developing friendship with a stable volunteer named Barb. Barb understood my mother’s mental illness, and that understanding gave her great compassion and gentleness for both my mother and I. I was able to bring my pain and shame out of the shadow and into the light. That autumn, my mother died by suicide.

My enduring friendship with Barb is one of the gifts of my lifetime, a gift that has extended itself many times over. Barb inspired me to give friendship, as well as receiving it, and showed me that one could hold many friends in one’s heart. I understood then that it is not our perfection that induces other people to love us. While friends may admire our strengths, vulnerabilities and imperfections are openings that invite trust and understanding, the fertile ground for true intimacy.

In my months of contemplation, as I think of it – this longish period of recovery – I softened a lot. I saw past my ego, even past my physical self. I learned that I was loved and supported, and to accept the caring of others both physically and emotionally. In consciousness, the accident, and its juxtaposition with my mother’s illness and death, caused me to turn 180 degrees. Looking inward more than outward now, I went on with life. And for me, that meant life with horses.

The accident’s imprint on my body/mind yielded another surprise once I recovered enough to ride regularly. My then 3 year-old mare, Frieda, got balky one day on the trail and popped up slightly in a half-hearted attempt to avoid a water crossing. Fear! Intense fear! Out of proportion fear! In a blinding flash of the obvious, I recalled the hundreds of times I had coached riders to ignore fear. “Just do it anyway,” I would call out supportively. “Breathe your way through it!” Oh sure! Now that I felt it, I realized that this was fear of an entirely different league. It demanded to be listened to, and so I did.

I’ve learned many things about fear, how to work with it and diminish its power to rob us of our most precious joys. It was painstaking work to dissect and then confront my own fear, but it yielded a huge gift in that it pointed me in the direction of round pen training and “horse whispering” – learning to build true relationship prior to riding and maintaining it while riding, for the physical and emotional safety it offers both the horse and the person.

How fortunate I was in this period of my life, to find a really good therapist! *And* to be working daily with several horses, with much of the work being done at liberty! A world opened up within me and around me as I realized how responsive the horses were to my emotional energy and my beliefs. As I dismantled parts of my ego that were rigid, and found new emotional fitness and flexibility, every horse I worked with would be extra responsive. As I healed my childhood wounds, I found creativity and a spirit of free collaboration with the horses that always yielded good results, sometimes in surprising ways. *As if they read my mind, or my heart.*

And so this accident, this near-tragedy, was a turning point so significant that I now embrace it as an important part of who I have become. It was the beginning of an emotional and spiritual maturity which today is the foundation of my work with people and horses. The accident was my experience of being "broken open" – made ready for deeper and more authentic growth that continues today, 18 years later. Sometimes I joke, "That horse taught me more in 5 minutes, than other horses that I rode for years."

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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