

## **'Stang**

**By Leigh Shambo MSW, LMHC**

People come to study at HEAL (Human-Equine Alliances for Learning) for a variety of reasons, but one urge is so widely experienced that I might call it a "symptom" of living in modern society. It is a yearning that is at once utterly simple and almost unbearably complex, and it could simply be called "the urge to connect". I am no stranger to this yearning, and neither are my horses. Have you heard the plaintive whinnies of a horse fenced away from its companions?

I recall my own specific moment of understanding my fear of and need to connect, on a particular day with a particular horse. He was a mustang gelding who was simply called "Stang". Stang had been by himself with no other horses, for seven of his nine years. In those years, Stang had virtually no close human contact either. After being captured, gelded and sold through the BLM, the new owner had turned Stang loose on their large ranch and – guess what? – he was never willingly caught again. Until me, that is... but it took me quite awhile. And longer than that to actually touch him.

Getting him to my farm was the first challenge, but we were able to herd him into my roomy trailer once he understood we were not going to try to touch him while he was in there. I hauled him to my farm, and I unloaded him into a paddock with shelter and food, a paddock small enough to start negotiating a more connected relationship. I worked with Stang every day. He was very sure of himself, sure he wanted no part of any connecting! He'd gotten along completely on his own, "just fine", for seven years.

And the particular moment that made such an impression on me came the first time I saw him question whether he might really choose connection, with all of its complexities. A moment in the round pen when this horse, who had done nothing but run from me, turned toward me and fully considered me for a moment. All of a sudden I saw the whole situation from his point of view, and I literally felt my heart energy center open wide and connect with his vulnerable, precious and independent spirit. Stang as a survivor, Stang in need.

So the first wave of illumination I experienced was personal, and it allowed me to see Stang in his pride and his isolation. The second wave of illumination was seeing myself, in my own pride and... *isolation*. In the moment following, I was struck by a profound sadness as I realized that my heart was only rarely open to my fellow humans in the way it was to that horse at that moment. A particular horse, on a particular day, who only a moment before had seemed particularly defiant – until he turned and looked at me from 30 feet away, and told me who he was, a soul at once simple and complicated.

That moment happened 15 years ago, and it changed my life. I thought, "It would be a *miracle* if I could see people this truly, if I could feel such a deep acceptance for each person's difficult, intricate and particular life." I made a commitment to myself that day, and it led me to study in depth a body of knowledge

called The Course in Miracles<sup>1</sup>, which further changed the way I see horses and people (and the nature of reality).

At its poignant center, the urge to connect is not about the horse, although the horse time fulfills the yearning in the moment (and in such engaging and delightful ways!). It's about being able to connect with each other, and connect with the human environments we live in, in ways that illuminate our true understanding. I think it is safe to say that most of the time it's much easier with horses than with people to establish the mutual attentiveness and respect that make authentic connection possible. One HEAL student recently wrote to me, "I wish people were more like horses! Navigating around people proves to be challenging more often than not, so I retreat to my horses and then get lonely for human conversation!"

Another HEAL student, "Beth" (not her real name), came to a HEAL workshop called "Understanding Fear: Finding the Silver Lining". Beth wasn't sure why she felt drawn to that particular workshop, since she is an accomplished horsewoman who experiences a deep connection with the horses in her herd. She handles and rides them without any problems, experiencing a grand sense of mutual communication most of the time. So I had Beth work with the most difficult workshop horse, a reactive and previously traumatized Thoroughbred named Nikki.

As the other workshop participants and I witnessed, Beth began some groundwork with this gelding. Beth's face was transformed by reverence and complete absorption as timeless moments unfolded in the round pen. Beth's abilities as a horse whisperer left us all in awe, and fairly quickly she established between herself and Nikki a palpable mood of unconditional attentiveness and trust.

Just at the moment that Nikki granted his full trust to Beth, Beth's tears started to flow, and she was shaking so hard she had to sit down. Beth was feeling *fear*—and it was not of the horses! Beth was feeling fear of *us*—of any humans—witnessing her in what we could only call "her sacredness". As Beth talked through her feelings, she confessed that her fear of judgment from other people was what most hampered her riding and her life in general: she could only enjoy her horses in complete privacy, and it had taken tremendous courage for her to attend the workshop. The heart of the work horses do at HEAL is not about teaching us how to love them, which we already do so easily, but how to love each other, and how to make our human circles safe for our souls to come forward.

Author Parker Palmer<sup>2</sup> likens the deepest parts of the human soul to an animal, not just any animal, but a *wild* animal, who will only come close when it can assure itself of safety. Maybe that is why Stang was able to teach me so much about my human spirit. He continued to be a wild one, and sharp, very sharp. With his mustang hypervigilance (in the wild, I think that's a valued trait!) he was a bit of a one-person horse. You had to know what he was thinking, and you had to respect it. Our proudest moment came when he trusted me enough for us to ride in a little 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade in my town. Quite an accomplishment for a mustang who was completely alone most of his life!

---

<sup>1</sup> A Course in Miracles, The Foundation for Inner Peace, 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, Parker J. A Hidden Wholeness: Journey Toward an Undivided Life, 2004 Jossey-Bass Publishing

But this story has an interesting footnote that illustrates the challenges of non-judgment among humans. I was paid to ride Stang, and within six months I knew that horse would do almost anything for me, including walk among drums, fire engines, flags and other human silliness. Unfortunately for Stang, his owners underestimated the challenges of continuing to own such a horse, although we discussed it on many occasions. They did not handle him much, and he never granted his full trust. Soon, they could not catch him. Stang had returned to a wild condition and I found out the next spring that he had foundered and died, out on their ranch, alone.

And so the lessons of non-judgment with people are indeed difficult to master. I really loved that little horse, and I thought bitter thoughts against the owners, although I had very little understanding of their side of the picture. I have to believe that they were doing the best they could, and I have to trust that Stang valued the connection we made and the adventures we shared. I have spent as many hours on forgiveness of his owners as I originally spent working with Stang, and I guess both took me longer than I thought they would! The hours spent with our horses are indeed a course in miracles.

### **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](mailto:leigh@humanequinealliance.org)

[www.humanequinealliance.org](http://www.humanequinealliance.org)