

Tara: Love Beyond Boundaries

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

For all of us, human or horse, significant loss and the grief that accompany it are part of life. I will always remember my first encounter with grief: the sudden and unexpected death of the beloved horse companion of my teenage years, Tara. With her I learned how it felt to be seen, and found more than good enough; in her reflection I discovered my Self. And after giving me these powerful lessons in loving, she initiated me into the mysteries of death and the redemptive nature of grief.

Tara was my first full size horse, and we found each other when I was 14 years old. I had just sold my first horse, a Welsh cob named Little Bit, which was heart-wrenching, but together with my best friend Gail who also had a cob-sized gelding, we knew we were ready for 'big' horses. Little Bit found a good home, I cried my tears, and then to his purchase price I added my baby-sitting money and went looking to upgrade.

At a nearby livery stable the owner assured me that he had several suitable horses, calm and reliable enough for a young rider. My eyes swept across the crowded paddocks in anticipation. In the furthest corner, a high headed horse with a delicate dished face stared intently at me. The chestnut mare and I locked eyes and our gaze held. I asked to see her, and the livery owner told me, "You don't want *her*." Oh, but I did!

I insisted on riding her. She was full of fire, yet as soft and responsive as a kitten to my lightest signals. My heart was instantly and irrevocably captured. I rode a couple of the other horses to humor the stable owner, who continued trying to talk me into plodding animals that were earthbound and clumsy in comparison to my new love. Meanwhile the mare continued to stare at me from the hitching post where she was tied. Finally the man shrugged and took my money. She was mine!

I suppose in reality she was a plain-looking sorrel, with two white socks behind and a narrow blaze on her face. She came with no name and no known history, although we could tell from her teeth that she was in her late teens. This lack of a past made her an orphan horse, and I was metaphorically an orphan kid in my moderately dysfunctional family of origin. I named her Tara, a word that I knew meant "earth", because of her brown coat and because the word signified all that I held most dear.

To me she was the most beautiful being I had ever encountered, and I fell at once into an obsessed, unbounded teenage love. I wondered if I *was* her, or she was me; I was astonished that we existed in separate bodies. Tara returned my adoration, meeting me at the pasture gate and showering me with attentive, solicitous horse gestures. Once I mounted, our bodies were no longer isolated, and the puzzle of seemingly distinct bodies was solved, at least temporarily.

Tara was proud and full of fiery energy. Ours was the pure and sensual physicality shared by a spirited, "hot" horse and a daredevil teenage girl. Together we explored every far reach of the Illinois countryside where I grew up. We rarely walked: her slowest gait was a prancing half walk-half trot, as if she wanted to break free of the earth she was named for, and her fastest gait was – like the wind!

Horses not only offer us their friendship, they offer us a framework which supports human relationships as well. Gail had found for herself an equine friend named Kemosabi, and they were often our companions and partners in adventure. For Gail too, the horses were a refuge from family complexities and pain. We were rebellious, wild children striving to grow up in families too preoccupied with survival to nourish our spirits and souls. Our horses took care of us in every crazy adventure; at the same time, taking care of our horses guided us toward the grown up world of responsibility. We ditched high school classes in order to go riding, but tended to the needs of Tara and Kemo diligently and without complaint or resentment.

So it was not just Tara whose neck often absorbed the hot tears of my confusion and isolation from my family; often Gail stood by as well, mutely holding Kemo on lead. Much like my horse, she felt my pain without words, and simply offered me her presence. Thirty-five years later, Gail is still one of my most trusted friends, in spite of the many miles that have separated us in our adult lives.

Gail and I graduated from high school, and she moved away to join her boyfriend in the college town where she would also attend school. It was late in the summer of that year when I got an emergency call from the farm where Tara lived. During the night, she had wandered off, plowing through a couple of wire fences in the process, and instead of staying close to the other horses, they found her in the woods, alone, disoriented and uncoordinated. They had already called the vet, and my father drove me out to the farm to meet him there. My beautiful, fiery mare was staggering and covered with blood from the fences she had not even seen as she walked through them. It took two of us to hold her so that she could be sedated for tests and to treat her wounds.

My father cancelled work, and sat with me all day in the hot sun as Tara lay flat on the ground, unconscious. We kept the flies off her, we wiped her with cool water, and my dad held my hand as I sat stunned with helplessness and horror, trying to hold on to hope. By the end of the day, it became obvious that there was no hope – when the sedatives wore off, Tara's heart-rending efforts to struggle to her feet were unsuccessful, and I gave the vet permission to euthanize her. An autopsy revealed that cancer of the liver had metastasized to her blood, affecting her brain and neurological function. I could not watch the autopsy, and it was a mistake to glance back for a last look at my beloved as my father helped me into the car. The vet was incising and peeling back her hide, still as rich and brown as the earth she had come from.

At home, I went to my room and stayed there for days, crying, not eating, and contemplating suicide as I tried to come to terms with a world that could rip away in an instant what had also been given in that instant when my eyes had first found Tara's. I'm not sure if it was wisdom that caused my parents to leave me alone in my suffering, more likely they had simply returned to their standard preoccupation with their own lives, but the solitude allowed me full immersion into my grief, my shock, and my loneliness. I emptied my well of tears over and over again.

Such crying cleanses the soul and prepares us for new insights; I believe it was on the fourth day of my grieving that I suddenly felt a great peace, and Tara's presence literally entered the room. I could feel her, imagine her in vivid detail and even smell

her unique horsy odor. These sensations brought not another wave of grief, but an unexpected and overwhelming wave of gratitude and reassurance. Was she really there?

The thought occurred to me with startling clarity: only one thing could be worse than this loss. The only thing harder to bear would be having never known her, loved her, ridden the wind upon her, felt the eagerness of her prancing hooves as she waited for my whispered "let's go, girl!". Never having felt her wrap me in her neck and nuzzle into me as I cried. The redemption in grief is that *loving is worth it*. Only deep love brings deep grief, and that gives us the courage to say yes to loving again, to loving as deeply as possible again, and again.

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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