

The Invisible Way: Horse as Spiritual Mirror

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

I recently saw a Grizwells comic strip where the campground bear Gunther's porcupine sidekick, Pierpont, races up and cries, "Gunther, there's a bunch of equestrians hooting and hollering down at the campground!" Gunther yawns and says, "I'm not at all surprised... it seems like someone comes up with a new church every time I turn around." I laughed, for I find myself on the forefront of a great movement in the horse world, and there is no question that it is a spiritual as well as an equestrian movement. It is an opening into the deeper lessons that horses can teach us about ourselves.

These lessons are rippling beyond the traditional horse world, attracting other people who are interested in the healing potential of the horse-human bond although they may not own a horse or even be able to ride. With my colleague Mary Louise Gould, I teach a workshop titled, "The Invisible Way: Horse as Spiritual Mirror". What is the invisible way? Quite simply, it is an inner path that involves recognizing false thinking that does not serve ourselves or those around us. In an almost miraculous way that is also very casual and even mundane, the horses demonstrate an exquisite responsiveness to our ability to stay close to the truth of who we are.

The story of Cheryl illustrates the profound sense of opening that can occur when the horses help show us the way to our authentic self. Cheryl came to her first workshop with no horse experience, and yet she had seen the flyer and felt a distinct tug of interest. In our opening circle, she introduced herself by saying, "I am a nobody, really." You could almost feel others in the group wince as her words fell on compassionate ears. As the workshop unfolded over three days, Cheryl also revealed that her life had long been dictated by what others found sensible for her: a career as an accountant, marriage to a successful man she wasn't sure she loved, and almost no recreation or independence.

Horses are very personal teachers of the spiritual path. They care not about our level of learned knowledge, or any of the worldly markers of what has come to be called "success". They do care what is in our hearts, and about our state of clarity, or "innocence". Most horses respond gently and with care to the touch of a child, and this is what Cheryl found in her interactions with a mustang mare named Shadow.

Shadow clearly showed a preference for interacting with Cheryl as she spoke words of truth about who she was and what she wanted to do with her life. It was like biofeedback for the soul, and a beautiful dance unfolded between Cheryl and Shadow. By the end of the workshop, Cheryl was radiant and exuded presence from a rediscovered authentic self that she had been unsure how to find. Over the next year Cheryl came back for more horse experiences, and it was wonderful to witness the unfoldment of soul-fulfilling changes in her life.

The workshop exercises teach a body based self-awareness method, and we educate participants in reading and responding to equine body language so that a person can easily discern many of the horse's reactions to their thoughts and feelings. In very specific ways, the horses can teach us how to stay in a consciousness that

optimizes harmonious co-creation, and to bring even our most subtle non-verbal behavior into congruence with intention. And, they can help us become aware of the ways in which we send the universe mixed messages, as happened with a workshop participant named Terry.

A single, mature adult, Terry had been adopted as an infant. He had struggled his entire life with a deep sense of loneliness, an old ache that sent him searching in spiritual directions. He wasn't sure what drew him to the horse workshop. He had an admiration for horses, but no experience, and he felt some fear of their power and size. Assured that there was no riding in the workshop, he felt the horses might just have something to teach him about "walking the talk" of the inner work he had done. Maybe, in some way, Spirit could speak through the horses and tell him how to do his part in calling forth the gift of engagement in his most personal relationships.

Early in the workshop, Terry felt that a horse named Dasha seemed to be reaching out to him, and he chose her to work with individually. He felt comfortable being close to Dasha, feeling her silky coat, and the whisper of her breath on his arm as she nuzzled him. Suddenly, something distracted Dasha and she looked away for a long moment. Not knowing what to do, Terry turned and walked away several steps, and the dainty mare followed him. This is the "join up" response, the attraction that horses have for a person who has earned their trust and respect. Her neck was stretched long and low, with her ears pricked, indicating trust and interest.

When Terry turned and saw that Dasha was still at his elbow, he looked shocked. Doubt was written on his face and slowly, he walked backward several steps. This time, Dasha did not follow. Terry could begin to identify the ways in which he sent signals that invited Dasha to disconnect from him – the same signals he unconsciously sent in human relationships. Over the workshop period, Terry learned how to cultivate equine join-up, to work with it and make it more durable, more palpable, safer. And he learned a lot about the specific ways that his fears could actually drive away that which he most desired.

My elderly riding master used to say, "The horse is nature," meaning that I was not to work against my mount, only with her energies. Every aspect of a horse's presence opens our senses and calls us into the immediacy of the present moment. In moment-to-moment interactions they provide a reliable roadmap to clearing our psyches of erroneous thought patterns that no longer serve us, so that the authentic Self can shine through more vibrantly than before. As with other elements of nature, moments of embodied, earthy bliss are interspersed with moments of challenge and discomfort. From the moments of challenge we have the opportunity to emerge as one unit, human and horse, *of one mind* – if we stay grounded in the flexibility and wisdom of the authentic Self. Partnering with horses gives practice in creating unity as a living, breathing process.

It was almost a year after her experience with Shadow that Cheryl wrote a letter to me expressing her heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to work with the horses in the "Invisible Way". Her life had changed and she would never again characterize herself as a nobody. Her final sentence said it all. "I entered into this process expecting to find out what was wrong with me", she wrote. "Instead, I found out all

that is *right* with me, and I've learned how to stand by myself and extend this out into the world. To dance in the world and with the world, as I danced with Shadow that day."

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.humanequineallince.org