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by

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2011

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**Galloping Through Millennia:
A Multimedia Examination of Horses in the Modern World**

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Abstract

Galloping Through Millennia: A Multimedia Examination of Horses in the Modern World

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

Supervisor: Dennis Darling

The horse has been an integral and ubiquitous element in the development of human civilization for centuries. However, in the last 150 years, its presence in and relevance to peoples' daily routines has waned. What previous cultures used to comprehend and appreciate, modern technology-based routines have rendered nearly obsolete. Consequently, the perception of their legacy has been diminished, their nature misunderstood, and their virtues devalued. However, their immediate presence still affects humans on a visceral level.

Through a combination of three multimedia pieces and a written essay, I attempt to reveal various ways in which horses provide man with more than a means of transportation. By examining officers in Austin Police Department's Mounted Division, an experienced horse trainer, and a licensed therapist who employs horses in her practice, I hope to dispel various misconceptions and reveal the rewards of shared company, beyond the utilitarian functions. Ideally, both parties stand to benefit from a proactive effort on behalf of the viewer to explore and better understand the connective tissue that still binds our two species.

Table of Contents

Galloping Through Millennia1

 Saddling Up1

 The Road Behind2

 Corral to Garage.....3

 Around the Bend5

 Badge of Honor6

 Zen Cowboy.....9

 Healing Hooves.....12

Bibliography16

Saddling Up

A few years ago, I dated a woman named Erika. She grew up near Durango, Colorado, surrounded by horses on a guest ranch that her parents owned and operated. I had no idea about her extensive equine experience when we met in California, but we briefly reunited once she moved back to Colorado. There, the visceral connection she had with these creatures became evident. It was riveting. She understood horses better than most of us know our own families. My obvious nerves around the horses made her snicker.

I felt like a voyeur when she was engaged with training her mare. I was envious of both the horse for holding Erika's attention in such a magnificent way, and of Erika's abilities. I wanted to stand between their shared gaze to feel their exchange of energy. Until I met her, I had spent exactly one day around horses, but I knew if I remained in the dark, we had no future. I decided to be proactive in my education about these magnificent spirited beasts.

I grew up in the West Texas town of El Paso (in time, it lost the suffix, "del Norte" or *The Pass of the North*). The town reminds many visitors of the Old West. It is in the heart of the American Southwest, the home of the cowboy. The geography made it a prime passage route for Native Americans, Spaniards, and Mexicans all of whom used horses in their quests. In 2006 the erection of a humongous statue of 16th Century conquistador Don Juan de Oñate on his rearing Andalusian horse was the subject of much furor in the area. (He is infamous for amputating the left feet of Acoma indigenous people in what is now New Mexico.) Tony Lama started his boot empire here. Pearl snap shirts and cowboy hats are standard attire for many laborers. It's easy to picture a hitching post in front of many older establishments. Many a gunfighter has spent time here on horseback, including Pat Garrett (the man who killed Billy the Kid) and John Wesley Hardin. In the far eastern and western regions of the city, many residents with land own and ride horses.

Thirty miles east of my childhood home is Cattleman's Steakhouse and Ranch. The sprawling multi-purpose facility is where I first laid eyes on a real horse during a swim team banquet. The encounter was far from romantic. Despite my slight seven-year-old frame, I had no reason to fear this creature I'd seen in books. I approached his corral

to pet his soft, whiskered nose, which I thought would feel like my cat's. I put my hand within a foot of his snout when it turned and snapped at me like a turtle. I dropped to the ground and wondered what I had done to provoke such vitriol. My pals howled and giggled.

Minutes later I embarked on a two-hour ride atop what may have been the same dastardly creature. My rear paid the price for days after. I blame the hasty ineptitude of the wrangler who failed to adjust my stirrups for perpetuating the interspecies miscommunication. Had he taken the time to set me up properly and explain that horses have moods just like people, my entire life could have taken a more compassionate course. Not that they ever knew or cared, but it was fair to say that I did not like horses at that point. I held that grudge of ignorance for over two decades.

In the years since meeting Erika, my connection for horses has taken an independent life, as she and I are now simply great friends. Our meeting led me to my first professional photography job shooting visitors on her Colorado ranch. There I saw firsthand the positive effect horses have had on the psyche of bratty kids, hardened city folk and the physically and mentally challenged. My ignorance dissolved and I found enlightenment in the way of the horse. I now feel obligated to atone for my own prolonged misconception by sharing what I've witnessed.

The Road Behind

We have grown so accustomed to the vision of man on horseback that we may take the genesis of that relationship for granted. The way the width and shape of a horse's midsection matches a man's straddled legs is a miracle of nature. In addition to the animals' brains, strength, speed, and endurance, it leads us to believe our interactive coexistence was predestined.

Regardless of the many thousand years of horses (a prey animal) carrying predators (humans) on their backs, their primal instincts do not include a desire to be ridden. Each individual party has their first time riding or being ridden. It is a precarious and terrifying baptism, placing both in positions of extreme physical vulnerability. Despite the relative comfort in our mounted posture, our height from the ground—as well

as the exposed contact point—is anything but reassuring. The trust and communication starts there.

One is free to debate the relative size of the limb upon which any one of God's creatures roosts in the tree of human history. At the risk of appearing apathetic to the Northern spotted owl's plight and trivializing the dodo and the woolly mammoth, whose leaves browned and quickly blew away, the most sensible placement of the horse (*equus caballus*) must be near the trunk. Because of its protracted and comprehensive partnership with man throughout the centuries, only one other genus can claim to rival the reach and breadth of the horse. Aside from companionship, even *canis* (the dog), has marked limitations. We cannot travel on a dog. Dogs cannot carry more than a few pound of our supplies. Dogs could not have provided a tactical advantage in a battle.

In a recent Animal Planet survey, horses were voted near the top of the most beloved animals. They earned it. Since before the time of Egyptian Pharaohs, they have done our work with their strength. They have survived weeks at sea, taken us through the most inhospitable climates and across the most rugged terrain on Earth with their endurance and confident strides. They have fought our wars and died as loyal soldiers, indifferent to our whimsical political motivations. They have not simply been counterparts in our discoveries, explorations and conquests; in large part they have been responsible for them. It is impossible to account for the contributions horses have made in the advancement of our own species. They have asked nothing in return.

Corral to Garage

The horse planted its seeds in our orchard as long ago as 50,000 years in the Asian Steppes, near modern day Kazakhstan. This is where J. Edward Chamberlain, author of *Horse: How The Horse Has Shaped Civilizations*, posits that human consciousness first shifted its perception of the horse away from merely being a source of meat and valued for its hide.

“Horses...were something to praise and paint and carve and collect. Horse culture begins there.” It is unclear exactly why this transformation took place, but anything beyond a cursory examination of its speed, strength, intelligence and spirit (there is no

other word for it) still evokes a primal reverence. One can assume the potency of these observations affected our ancestors similarly, and the initial magnetism became manifest.

Sometime between 10,000–5,000 BCE, just before the first peoples began riding, scientists mentioned the arrival of a peculiar sacrificial rite. Horse pelts were hung at the end of long poles, with skulls, hooves and tails still held in their respective places. Chamberlain identifies it as a “moment of suspension between earth and air that is their ultimate gift of grace.” As gruesome and macabre as it may sound, the meticulous nature of the effort that went into the display signifies considerable respect. Both Pita Kelekna, author of *The Horse In Human History*, and Chamberlain describe this ritual as ascension to a ceremonial status, and a major turning point in our perception and interaction with horses.

The appraisal of horses’ connection to a spiritual realm is reflected in subsequent generations, with tails and bones placed amongst the graves of humans. Islam states that the prophet Mohammad was transported from Mecca to Jerusalem on the back of a mythological white horse, Buraq, where he was greeted by other prophets, even God himself. Horses belonging to fallen Native American warriors were sacrificed to commemorate the passing. Discoveries of ancient figurines, tools, weapons and pottery from regions across the world all carry emblems of the horse. Its form is as pervasive as any other animated form besides our own.

Despite its ubiquitous and vital presence, recent centuries have been largely apathetic to the horse. Once the Industrial Revolution began, the horse began its canter toward a marginalized role in most traditional aspects of human life. The shift from rural to urban left horses with fewer places to feed and roam, and fewer jobs to perform. Necessities could be bought across the street, not 50 miles away. Trading posts became towns, towns became cities, and cities became sprawling piles of steel and concrete, breathing smoke and singing with cacophonous buzzes and hisses.

Transportation shifted from mules, elephants and horses and toward mechanization. In 1869, when Leland Stanford (who commissioned Eadweard Muybridge’s “Horse In Motion” photography project that proved galloping horses did, in fact, have all four hooves off the ground at once) drove Golden Spike in Utah that linked railroads from coast to coast, it may as well have been a nail in the coffin of the horses’

fate. Assembly lines cranked out Henry Ford's Model T at an astonishing rate, and fuel turned from hay to petroleum and coal. *Horsepower* was no longer a term to measure the strength of a single animal, but the output of a combustion engine in a horseless carriage.

Where do these and countless other "advancements" leave the horse, a creature that has remained veritably unchanged for thousands of years? Did our self-absorbed idolatry of manmade objects sway us from a creature whose strength and will are often beyond our control or facile understanding? Did we tire of the requisite patience needed to "break" them, or find a more profitable use for grazing land? Has its diminished utilitarian purpose attenuated its ability to enrich our own lives in ways that have no unit of measure?

Around the Bend

Even if the answers reveal a bleak condition, the optimist would believe that horses have survived for a reason. As horse lover and illustrator Clarence William Anderson recognized, "Many people have sighed for the 'good old days' and regretted the 'passing of the horse,' but today, when only those who like horses own them, it is a far better time for horses."

There are numerous examples that demonstrate how the relationship between human and horse has proven itself to be a resilient, rejuvenating force to balance this age of technology and consumerism. Though less abundant and more specialized, the horse's impact on our conscience can be as textured and profound as a relationship between two humans. The interspecies communication elevates the bond into something mystical; the exclusive language transcends written words, and spoken dialects. It approaches a psychic level that only those the experienced can appreciate, and the unfamiliar cannot fathom. Winston Churchill was at a loss for specifics when he said, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man."

Our active relationship with horses has been built around three major functions: leisure (including sports and entertainment), work (be it transportation, hunting partners, hauling, or plowing), and warfare. While their efficacy in modern battle is diminished, there is one prominent niche where horses still serve public security, though their numbers are declining there as well.

The sight of a well-groomed steed working in tandem with an officer in matching regalia is both imposing and disarming. Sergeant Anthony French, of the Austin Police Department's Mounted Patrol, says that nothing is more efficient or effective at managing such mobs than an officer on the back of a well-trained horse. He revels in the ambassador role the unit plays in the community. Sgt. French describes the bond each officer has cultivated with his or her horse by learning to speak their language. These are not simply vehicles; they are partners in every relevant sense.

Ben Quinters is the quintessential horseman, an expert horse trainer with over four decades of equine experience. He lives thirty miles southeast of San Antonio, where he trains both humans and horses in hopes of attaining mutual respect and understanding of each other. From there, the fundamental tenets can apply to any number of human-equine interactions. Spend five minutes with Ben and he'll undoubtedly remind you (sometimes unintentionally) of a romantic place in our own history where time on horseback meant discovery through uncertainty, unconstrained by lanes, rails and flight paths. Ben will assure you that horses remind us of our humanity, as paradoxical as that may sound.

Sara Willerson is a licensed therapist who specializes equine assisted psychotherapy. She and her four horses have helped many clients deal with bouts of grief, anxiety, or stress of any kind. They also boost patients' spirits with visits to local hospitals. Her work, though new to the field of psychotherapy, is not impossible to quantify. Ask one of her clients how effective and in-tune her furry co-workers are at their job, and they will extol the significant and undeniable benefits of engaging with the horses.

Badge of Honor

Within minutes of requesting time to photograph the Austin Mounted Patrol, I received a phone call from Sergeant Anthony French, head honcho of the Division since 2007. He invited me to their stables later that afternoon. I was gratefully surprised by the prompt hospitality.

The first thing one identifies when visiting the stables is the relaxed atmosphere that permeates the facility. It runs counter to most pedestrian preconceptions about rigid

police attitudes. Further, the presence of animals may infer that more discipline is needed to “show them who’s boss.” Instead, you will catch officers nuzzling their geldings, or grooming them for up to half an hour, building trust and rapport. Things weren’t always this way.

The Austin unit was started around 1985 by a collection of officers who worked in the Downtown 6th Street entertainment district. At first, the officers used their own steeds, supplies and facilities, and the department’s contribution was nil. In time that changed, as the benefits and advantages of having these officers with an extra three to four feet of height and a thousand pounds of mass soon became evident.

“They saw the need for horses to help with crowd control situations because (the scene) was getting bigger and bigger,” notes Sgt. French.

Officer Richard Hubbard explains that horses, like humans, have brain hemispheres that process information differently.

“Right side being ‘Run like hell!’ and left side: they have to think about it. Predator and prey have to work together somehow, so you want a horse that thinks a little bit. We want the fear to be short-lived. [But] we don’t want them to be a deadhead horse either.”

Curiosity is the word most of officers mention first as the most desirable trait. However, Levi and Rocky have grown callous after been forced into action over so many years to the extent that they withdraw. That is less than ideal for both horse and rider. The bulk of their time was served under the old-style method of training mentality of “Make ‘em! Make ‘em!” as Sgt. French refers to it.

Just as the officers need to be trained in basic “equitation,” so too must the horses be prepared to capably handle countless potentially frightening situations that may arise at any time. One can never eliminate or fully predict the horse’s hypersensitive and reactionary nature, as it does have its benefits, but one can teach the animal that certain things are not worth its attention. For that reason, Officer Hubbard stresses the importance of keeping both parties’ minds calm and alert, and their attention focused on points beyond any potential distractions or “threats” (yes, even a plastic bag or a flag can be mistaken for a villain). This is especially true for the police horses, as their life and the life of their rider may truly depend on it.

The main function of the unit is crowd control every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday night. While they are rarely faced with riot situations, they are called upon occasionally to form a box around emergency medical technicians as they work on an injured in an overly curious crowd, or to protect officers on foot while they make an arrest.

Sergeant Anthony French explains, “It’s believed that a trained officer on horseback is equivalent up to 10 officers on foot in a crowd control situation. People naturally respect a horse’s space. When you start moving your horse toward somebody, it’s human nature to get out of the way.”

The imposing size of the man/horse combination is also effective to the point where more violent or intrusive means of coercion (batons, pepper spray, etc) are rendered unnecessary.

The unit’s secondary function is rough terrain search (as in the Green Belt that runs through Austin), where the height of the officer and the sure-footedness of the horse greatly improve the chances of locating evidence or people who have gone missing.

The last duty is that of ambassadors between the department and the public, and the officers appear at schools and other events once a month. Sgt. French pushed for this in a savvy appeal to bolster the image of not only the department, but to showcase the obvious advantage that his unit has over most others. At the police training center, hundreds of Boy Scouts attended the Camp-O-Rama in early April, and the level of fascination on the faces of the kids may come in handy when it comes time to defend the expenses of maintaining the unit. You can’t groom a motorcycle, and sirens are only a temporary thrill, but one scout lingered petting the horses and asking questions for over an hour. The officers answered every one he posed. There is no way to put a price tag on the enduring mark that such efforts may leave on the next generation of horses or humans.

Sgt. French grew up around horses, and knew there was a better way than what was being taught when he first trained with the elite patrol in 2002. Prior to his arrival, the unit was split between dichotomous schools of thought. One subscribed to the aforementioned faction, which essentially demanded the horses’ compliance when and

how the officer wished. If the horse resisted, a larger curb bit (the metal piece that rests in a horse's mouth) might be used; thereby multiplying the pressure a rider applies.

The other faction supported a method whereby the officer encourages the horse to do what he or she wants in a language the steed understands best. This is the basic explanation of “natural horsemanship,” a style of training both parties. Though some say it has been around for centuries, most people would credit Tom Dorrance with its modern revival. His apprentice, Ray Hunt, mentored Buck Brannaman (the inspiration for *The Horse Whisperer*), and they—along with Pat Parelli, whose teachings have influenced the APD officers—are all proponents of this empathetic equine communication.

Once Sgt. French took command of the fractured unit, he implemented the natural horsemanship method across the board. A couple of the more militaristic officers left the unit. However, two of those who subscribed to the natural horsemanship route, Julie Payne and Melinda Robinson, became certified Parelli trainers. They began edifying the other eight officers on its nuances.

The mandate has received nothing but their resounding support. It has helped the officers remain appropriately focused when making the rounds downtown. It has also cultivated a harmonious, familial vibe at the stables. The horses are colleagues, not nameless ATVs with appetites for grain and hay. The interplay between the humans and horses is constant. “Undemanding time,” as Sgt. French refers to it, is one way to strengthen the bond between officer and steed. This consists of nothing more than shared time in the horse's stall. Both parties are locked in a silent exchange of affectionate looks and physical contact, similar to how a mother and her newborn child develop their bond. There is nothing at stake, nothing to prove, and no particular goal in mind.

Zen Cowboy

Ben Quinters is in his mid-60s, but you'd never know it by the fire in his eyes and hustle in his step. His hearty handshake evinces both his direct attitude and years of physical labor. His 20-acre property east of San Antonio is home to a few well-placed trees and an efficiently sized house with no television but shelves of books. Training a horse to the extent that satisfies Ben's perfectionist standard is an all-consuming endeavor. He needs to monitor their condition at all points in a day for weeks on end, so

his property may host a dozen animals at a time, depending on the season and how much business is rolling through. (It's currently quite thin.)

I met Ben in the summer of 2010 at Erika's house in Colorado, as Ben worked a colt in the round pen. The twenty feet of braided fibers that connected them may as well have been an umbilical cord. He wore an oversized sombrero that made him look like a mushroom with a beard, and his moss green eyes brand one's memory. After two sentences, it is clear that this man channels a lifestyle that has gone the way of Tombstone's economy. He speaks in complete sentences, with requisite eye contact. He notices and cares about the minutiae held in simple conversation. What some dismiss as mundane, he calls sacred.

His unfamiliarity with Facebook is an endearing relief, as is the reverence he has for the animal tattooed on his left forearm. Two marriages and two divorces, along with the death of one of his two sons at a young age, make one believe horses have forged his most reliable and meaningful relationship. They are his family, his friends, his church. They listen to him, and impart their own wisdom, which he has learned to read as easily as others read words.

He claims to have learned how to mount a horse by watching Western movies in his youth, and his first time on a horse arrived fatefully as a teenager. On his parents' Texas property, his brother was thrown from a mare, and cut his ear badly on a barbed wire fence that Ben had just strung. After a hospital visit, they both returned to their task, but because his brother was pumped with medication, it was Ben's responsibility to finish what they started. He modestly claims that wearing the saddle had exhausted mare to the point of compliance.

"I didn't know much about what the hell I was doing, but enough to get by. She filled in for me in the spots that weren't working for me. She did things in spite of what I was doing, maybe, not because of what I was doing." Humble from the start.

Ben quit his job as an airplane mechanic on the advice of a friend who encouraged him to follow his heart and hung up his shingle as a horse trainer. The one tip he got before going into business: *Get your money up front*. There's an unfortunate penchant for owners to pick up their horse from the trainer, and "forget" to pay for the

service. There is no remote reset button on the horse's memory. Ben's investment of time cannot be erased.

He once trained a horse for Robert Redford's daughter and denied Mr. Redford's assistant's request to pick it up on her behalf. He insisted that *she* be the one to come get it, as it was *her* horse, and he needed to show *her* how it was done firsthand. She and her father complied, taking the time to meet Ben at his property and glean what she could about the horse's nuances in order to ensure a successful relationship going forward. Ben feels that level of consideration is mandatory.

He fortifies his points by invoking passages from books (mostly about horses) or quotes from two of his now deceased heroes—Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt—as if they were Plato, Confucius, or the Dali Lama. No matter whom he cites, he adds just the right inflection, twang and pace to ensure his delivery matches the original memory. One of his new favorites is from a friend who vented about having to tell a novice rider, “If it doesn't matter to you what matters to the horse, it makes me madder.”

It is fitting that Ben mirrors the horse's gift of memory, which is said to be impressively long, especially when stamped with emotions. Evelyn Hanggi, MS, PhD, co-director at the Equine Research Foundation (ERF) in Aptos, Calif., found that horses could retake recognition tests with varying rules from 10 years earlier and repeat their performance with stunning accuracy.

As with the Arabs and the Mongols, the horse occupies a substantial role in the Spaniards' history. Vaqueros (“cowboy” in Spanish) took pride in the uniform methodology of cultivating a horse's ability to respond to its rider. They spent centuries to refining ways to make the relationship flourish, and they took those lessons with them when they crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

A well-read historian, Ben takes issue with industry fads that compensate for man's growing inability to read the subtleties of the horse. “It's obvious to me that it's become more mechanical, that relationship between the horse and the rider. There's not as many people practicing those fine traditions, trying to do it the way (the vaqueros) did it.”

One example of this shift is the use of the hackamore. It is style of headpiece that, along with the reins, forms the bridle. It is a simple strap that has no bit and rests on snout

of the horse. It is one of the first tools used to control a horse, with early varieties dating back to the first equestrians. Its use is very specific and stylized, and it's not for the beginner.

“When the modern cowboy started using the hackamore without the understanding that the vaquero had [...], it didn't work for him, because there wasn't enough pain involved. When the hackamore didn't work anymore, they made the mechanical hackamore,” which compounds the rider's pressure on a horse's snout.

What used to take a spark now requires a flamethrower. Ben contends it has nothing to do with increased evolutionary apathy on behalf of the horse. It is man who has grown lazy and numb.

“We've lost sight of how to attain that super-sensitive feel.”

Ben describes an ideal relationship between an experienced rider and a well-trained horse where the two animals work as one in unison. The slightest pressure from leg or rein can encourage the horse to respond as the rider wishes. The relationship takes on an almost psychic level. It takes patience and attention, both rare commodities in the age of Twitter.

The word most commonly used to describe the currency of this exchange is *spirit*. That word or idea peppers countless book titles in the equine world to the extent that it might be considered hackneyed. Ben cites Tom Dorrance's use of it as the cornerstone to the human/horse dynamic. Yes, *feel, timing and balance* (the title of his famous book) are critical, but above those is spirituality. There is no way to supplant that with anything one can buy or build.

Healing Hooves

“It was like I experienced this download.” That's how Sara Willerson describes the twist of fate that pulled her toward the path she now walks, a path usually flanked by her Australian shepherd, Jack, and her four horses. All six creatures facilitate healing. Sara is a licensed therapist, who uses her horses as a buffer, a conduit and a mirror in order to promote growth in her clients. Instead of an office, she conducts her sessions outdoors, on a few acres of land north of Dallas.

Like Erika, Sara Willerson's life has been shaped by horses. She rode her grandfather's horse, Spice, as a child and was hooked by age seven. She was instantly attracted to Pooh, her first horse. An Arabian quarter horse, he lived and traveled with her for over 20 years. He kept her out of "a whole lot of trouble."

In 2001, following her recent divorce, her father gave her a book called *The Tao of Equus*, by Linda Kohanov. It chronicles the author's extensive experiences as a woman relating to horses, including visitations by their ghostly spirits. Her story may be far-fetched for some, but both Erika and Sara were profoundly affected by Kohanov's accounts. Page after page resonated with Sara, and many times she was moved to tears by the way it mirrored her experiences with Pooh. Sara credits the book with revealing her true calling.

"I realized what I was supposed to do when I grow up."

As a newly licensed therapist, she was inspired to use the horses in her practice, and thereby solidified her professional path. After studying at Kohanov's Epona Center in Tuscon, she returned to Texas where she established her practice. She also visits hospitals with Jack, who is also trained therapy dog, and Spirit (yes, Sprit), her Shetland pony whose size makes him easily transportable.

After passing a battery of behavioral tests that proved Spirit's demeanor could handle a hospital environment and be tranquil near patients, he was ready to start work at Animal Assisted Therapy program at Baylor Hospital in Dallas. She recounted the first time she took him to the hospital to assist with various physical and emotional ailments. He quickly learned that jumping over the crack between the elevator and floor was a disastrous idea, and went down hard. Undeterred, he regained his composure and immediately began to rejuvenate patients.

He had an epiphany, and knew exactly what to do. Despite the patients' initial uncertainty, their energy changed rapidly. "You could see their whole body relax. He put his head in their arms, and really understood where they were coming from in their healing process."

Before Sara acquired him, Spirit's hooves were shaped like elf shoes, curling up at the ends and causing him pain. She recalls how evident his boosted confidence was after returning to his three colleagues (Magno, Moonbeam, and Jingles) at the stable.

Her property is removed from urban land- and soundscapes in order to reduce the psychic clutter and give clients who can the requisite peace they need to access what may be buried so deep they cannot find it alone. That's where the horses step in. Her small stable of resources (literally) provides the tools that allow her clients to get to the root of their concerns with astonishing efficiency.

The first thing each client does before a session is clear the mind and ground themselves. At that point, Sara will check in with them to see what he or she is feeling. At the appropriate time, both will wander into where the horses general presence and see what the interaction can induce. Sara is there to ensure that the session stays focused, and hopefully, the healing begins.

"It happens every single session," she states confidently.

Some might perceive the process as "new age nonsense," and Sara finds difficulty in articulating what is "so incredibly experiential" about the sessions between the horse and client. I learned this firsthand, as I had a session in mid-April. The recent passing of my mother has weighed heavy on my mind, as have other personal and academic situations, and the stress was affecting my normally abundant confidence. The novelty of the process promotes a natural sense of healthy tranquility that an office setting can stifle. The horses have a way of allaying any pretense and preparing the mind for a positively transformative experience.

Andrea Durant, a continuing client of Sara's, had been in a state of depression and anxiety prior to her grandfather's ("Paw Paw") suicide in 2005, but his death sent her into a downward spiral. She describes the horse's ability to locate where Andrea physically held her stress and nudged that exact spot with their heads.

"No matter where you are or what you try to hide, the horses know," Durant admits.

In essence, they call "bullshit" on whatever shield we use to prevent ourselves from achieving real growth and connection with the source of our fear. Horses have a gift for identifying threats, but they also know their great strength is how to find peace again once they reach safety. They seem to encourage that in us.

Sara's warm, frank candor and casual cowgirl style is far from what anyone would call a flower child. However, her lexicon developed from witnessing the effects

session after session, client after client. she is reduced to using far-out clichés when describing why she thinks the horse is a balancing force to counter the sensory onslaught that accompanies our current technological dependence.

“Their purpose is to help us as humans clear out everything around us, within us, beyond us that keeps us from being the absolute essence of our sole purpose here. They are coming from an absolute total place of pure love and expansion and being and that’s what they see in us, that possibility.”

Sara describes horses as “magical beings” that were put on this earth for a reason. “They use their entire being. They use their emotional self, their spiritual self, their physical self and their mental self. It’s like the wind flowing through them; they pick up on everything. They live from their heart and their soul, and that’s what they want us to do.”

Physical prowess and intellect of the horse have allowed them to persevere as a species for eons, but any human who’s spent a week in their presence knows it carries an ineffable charge that transcends this tangible realm. Unlike us, they never let their spiritual and emotional aspects atrophy. Sara believes they can awaken those dormant aspects in us if we could allow ourselves the time to understand their language. It’s clear we already speak it, as we’ve been commanding them for the last few thousand years. Now it’s time to listen. Instead of satisfying our hunger for knowledge with answers found on a sterile glowing screen, we might gaze over the horse’s mane at a glowing horizon, allowing their rhythmic stride to deliver wisdom at a pace that suits us both.

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