

Memoir of Horses

Moments before we, too, drifted apart..."

The words of an old song reverberate in my head as I think and wonder how to write about my experiences of natural horsemanship over a couple of years. I could talk about the details of how I found out about Christa Miremadi and set up the lessons. I could talk about clear, sunny days driving out to the farm, first to Richmond, then to Langley, and the excitement of Thursdays, knowing that the prospect of hanging around animals for a couple of hours would connect me to myself in ways I could not have imagined. Dogs and cats were my familiars, who could see through my defenses, and, with whom I learned about unconditional love and caring. There was no agenda. It was with horses however, that I discovered the nature of big and small, and how they interchanged within the blink of an eye with a language not always verbal.

"The strong silent type" favoured by books and females would describe some characteristics of the equine manner. What would they have to say to anyone? I would respond by telling the story of the day that Christa advised me that I would be changing horses. Saige was a very busy school horse and I would be riding Oliver instead. This decision unleashed sorrow in me that had long been buried in my being about things lost and gained over the years! My tears were a surprise to me, who had controlled emotions to a point of starvation. Why such a response to a simple change?

Anyhow, my first day with Oliver was a revelation. It was obvious that he had knowledge of my distress for he continuously rubbed his nose against me as I groomed and saddled him before riding. The lessons always went well and we would end each lesson with a horse/human hug that nourished my heart and soul. Over the months that I had Oliver as my mount, I began to acknowledge the importance of these lessons to my being and our unspoken conversations engendered a kind of peace — this experience was mine and what happened at the stable would not be co-opted or shared unless I chose it.

Adventure awaited, like the day I was returning Saige to the oval/paddock. I was walking along the outside of a fence and a black

horse inside followed our progress toward the gate. I opened it inward as instructed and brought Saige in ... and Midnight sneaked out to crop grass in the alley between the paddock and the perimeter fence. What to do? I left Saige, raced toward Midnight and grabbed hold of his mane. Of course, he wouldn't move! While I considered what to do next, he ambled off toward another horse whose head was sticking over the fence and began to exchange information with her. Did I mention that there was a Greek chorus of other horses who silently watched this little drama play itself out? Ah, training! I remembered that Saige still had her halter and lead rope on and they could be helpful. I went back into the oval, removed the harness from Saige, closed the gate so no more horses could effect an escape and made my way calmly toward Midnight. What if he just moved away? What if I could not reach him? What if I had to go and get Christa to help me solve this dilemma?

I moved cautiously and firmly toward him. When I was close enough to him and he hadn't moved, I threw the lead rope around his neck and he was caught! I brought him back to the gate, opened it carefully and brought him back into the fold. With a huge sigh of relief, I removed the lead rope, closed the gate and sauntered off to the car, reflecting on my good fortune. I had arrived!! Just like in the movie, all of my training with Christa had prepared me for this challenge and I had successfully solved this problem.

It was my rite of passage in so many ways. There was so much to learn about the tack, about how to catch and halter, grooming and saddling and feed and ... would I, could I, ever learn and remember how to do it all? I often found myself in the car on the way out mentally rehearsing the steps for catching, grooming, saddling and the myriad other instructions patiently repeated. But, there were also benchmarks, like the day Christa suggested that the nature of my lessons could change. If I could come out early and do all of the prep work of catching, grooming, and saddling, my lesson could be about actually riding my horse. No first grader could have been more proud! I had achieved a level of horsemanship that allowed for some independence. Ah emotions! Pride in my accomplishments filled the corners of my lonely heart and my attitude about possibility improved.

I had come a long way from the beginning when it took me 45 minutes just to catch, halter and groom Saige and now I was able to do so much more.

Another memory involves me going out to collect Chief, the third of my mounts. After an absence of a few months because of an accident, I went out unaccompanied to catch and bring Chief to the stable for our work together. He was skittish and not compliant; it was not until my second visit with him and the mental rehearsal about why it was so difficult that I remembered I had approached him incorrectly and had not thrown the rope over his neck to indicate he was caught before attaching his halter. Holding his head up so he could not crop grass and not converse with the other horses were other tricks in our arsenal. Chief liked to nip while being groomed, so ways had to be found for our mutual pleasure and accomplishment. But I could do the work!!

All of the lessons regarding my posture, ways to signal instructions, and the small amount of leg and arm movement needed to ride when I was in the saddle with him remain in my body and soul as guidelines for living. Life is a series of small movements that have such large consequences.

For a person who was little accustomed to touch, this place was a surprise. From the beginning, Bowie, the German shepherd, would appear and the petting conversations would begin. And, as I worked in the stall, one of the cats would come for some non-verbal chat and check in. However, it was the horses who rocked my world. The bump and grind of working together in the stall and the sensuousness of touching their flesh and inhaling their scent as I groomed, saddled and rode offered me little escape. I did not resist. I was in love with the process and the size. The response that I felt leaped over old boundaries and my neglected body and heart were thankful. Words had always created and maintained my world over the years. This language of touch, which relied more on stroking and other gestures of connection, made my body more connected and gave me a new vocabulary of options. The learned parts of the horse connected with the learning parts of my body. What I said mattered much less than what I did and the power I carried inside me finally had a place to show its face.

Seeing and feeling the response to this approach opened another avenue of living that I had thought was not mine to have. Through the round-penning exercises, I learned more about my body strength and discovered I could communicate my desires without uttering a word, as required. My concept of self enlarged considerably. This knowledge carried me forward as I rode.

I remember vividly the first day of the horseback experience. Walking with Oliver down to the ring and through the gate was a first step to freedom. Christa checked his harness and saddle for correct placement, I put my foot in a stirrup, and hoisted myself into the saddle. What a view of the world from that vantage point! My wobbly self was not at all sure I could stay aboard. Adjustments of me in the saddle and of stirrup length happened and we began. Slowly, with a little leg pressure, we moved forward. I was hooked! These lessons took feeling to a whole new level: Courage to sit straight in the saddle and to let my horse do the work. I had only to make small movements with the reins and to apply varying amounts of leg pressure for success. Arms and legs? Again, my body was engaged in unfamiliar level of activity. My ability to allow them to be the indicators was an exercise of some length as my mind just could not conceive of a circumstance that allowed partnership. Christa and my horse nurtured my emerging strength and ability to guide these magnificent animals around the ring, around in a circle and to feel confident in doing so. My heart opened. My connection to the world was forever changed. I was part of a much larger world inside and out.

It is said that horses mirror us in many ways; we can see ourselves in how they behave toward us. I learned so much about the framework that makes this relationship possible. Feed choices, illness diagnosis and treatment, kinds of equipment and how to look after it all supported this developing connection. Christa and I had many discussions about bit/no bit, indoor/outdoor housing of the horses and the human/horse connection that forms the philosophy of natural horsemanship. Learning to ride had so many more components than simply sitting on his back. I needed to know them all if I was to bond

with and derive the benefits of the loving and caring Saige, Oliver and Chief could and did bestow during my lessons there. It was the full meal deal.

And the boots. From the first, they were the ticket to this adventure. I seemed to become this person awake from some dormancy as I strode around the stables and paddocks, and learned all of the established routines. Christa often commented that I seemed to be unafraid of the horse nature and their movements; I believe that my nature came alive as our lives touched on those Thursday mornings. Information and knowledge passed amongst all who were on the property and, in its nexus, I continued my journey towards wholeness. I sang while I groomed my horse and cleaned the stalls. I hummed while I selected the right harness and saddled my horse and did the reverse after my lesson. Most of all, I learned to sit straight in the saddle and assume my rightful place in the world. Gentle determination made much possible.

So, go ahead and ask: How do you catch and halter a horse in a field, what are the grooming steps, the steps to saddling a horse properly? In my mind I can recall and my body can feel the weight and shape of the harness and horse and how these bits of leather harnessed both my horse and my human potential that had been just waiting for me to acknowledge it. My being remembers the smell and closeness and warm regard of these big bodies. My emotions remember many moments of joy and frustration, eagerness and big bodies. My emotions remember many moments of joy and frustration, eagerness and resignation within an adventure in living that has defined so much of the person I am becoming in this Third Age. When I close my eyes, I can return to Silverstar Stables and the many adventures in lifelong learning I had there. My connection with the horses allowed my interior and exterior journeys to become the same pathway. Routine and ritual held hands as I grew and changed with equine and human guides to lead the way. Hope and emptiness changed places as the resignation within an adventure in living that has defined so much of the person I am becoming in this Third Age. When I close my eyes, I can return to Silverstar Stables and the many adventures in lifelong

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