

Herd to Horse: A Focus from Macro to Micro, Lessons from the Nokota[®] Horse

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Abstract: The Preserve for Nokota[®] horses in Chester Springs, PA was founded in 2011 to celebrate the Nokota[®] breed of North Dakota, their remarkable personalities, and their exquisite, intimate language. The focus of The Preserve is to share the unique qualities and universal language of the Nokota[®] horse to ignite well-being, confidence, and partnership in human beings. The Preserve is where individuals learn to share in school, community, family or employee teams with authenticity, curiosity and clear leadership. It is shown through the wisdom of the horse communicating within the “herd.” Join hands and hooves of the human and horse to create one magical herd with “one head and one tail.”

We treasure the gifts shared by the Nokota[®] horse at The Preserve in Chester Springs: Those gifts heal hearts, minds, souls—the replacement of addiction with passion and anxiety with calm, positively embracing harmony and peace and partnership, all taught from the language of the horse within its herd.

Nokota[®] is a registered trademark of Nokota Horse Conservancy, Inc.

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Wild and Mild, Lessons from the Herd

A Road Less Traveled

The inspiration for The Preserve in Chester Springs was born from long roads of personal reflection. An eating disorder which controlled most of a 40-year-old woman’s life became the impetus of a journey to heal. She sought to begin with the last place she felt okay, where time passed without measure, where she felt safe to step into a moment without overthinking, reviewing or revising. That place was a memory of endless summer days spent with her equine friends. She needed to recapture that peace, that place. The equine wisdom she would reveal from those happy memories would light an answer to her heart’s calling.

Little did this woman, her family or her horses know that she would discover a dialect of equine language which could be interpreted and shared! And perhaps this dialect would include a language which spoke of inherent peace. And with this translation would come an arsenal of healing and gentle emotions that could build and replace negative and self-destructive voices, peaceful emotions which could replace fear and fraud with confidence and authenticity. The more time spent with her equine professors, the more clear language integrated into her vocabulary. Calm replaced confusion and secured a reserve of peace to reassess the unapproachable patterns and overwhelming conditions that seemed insurmountable before. The

future could now be equipped with skills to manage life's challenges and turns, thereby avoiding trauma and pain.

With passionate determination and focus she completely shifted her life to reflect this mission. The next 40 years would be devoted to the discovery of how to manifest the peace and the essence of equilibrium that the human condition fails for so many. She would start with the horse and its mystical, magical offering. The horse leads deeper, to the exceptional Nokota® horse and herd that run free and have the most exquisite equine language perfectly intact. Years of independence from human intervention and self-preservation have kept the Nokota® as true to their original language and social structure as possible, making them a fantastic study. This equine language houses the “je ne sais quoi”—the secret of authenticity and the celebration of the micro self held safely in the macro herd. While discovering her own healing and peace, she was able to script the NPC program for emotional well-being. The program is structured on tiny successes which increase with each visit. The effect is to quiet the client's negative voices and to raise the volume of the herd's voices and wisdom. Working with the horses, specifically the Nokota®, give many the emotional sustenance and library of positive emotions to manifest healthy self-esteem, joy and happy outcomes in real life circumstances.

The Magnificent Nokota® Horse

These spectacular horses are the last of Sitting Bull's War Pony. Sitting Bull was a medicine man, a great peacemaker and a master horseman. The qualities he treasured for his horses included their adaptive, willing, curious, calm, communal traits, the makings of super emotional intelligence we seek as humans. The horses were recognized with a DNA test at Harvard University as the last of Sitting Bull's herd, and they lived as a feral band for many years in what is currently Theodore Roosevelt National Park. Nokota® are affectionately known as the “Labrador Retrievers of the Horse World,” friendly and smart with a wonderful sense of humor. These traits are easily and subconsciously adopted by humans with mere association, and the horses radiate as well as mirror honesty and authenticity thereby supporting a beautiful, healthy herd. Leaders of the horse world and human world alike, who rise to the top by natural order to lead with calm, clear, kind, authority—whether to lead on the pasture or playground or the courtroom podium—there is much to learn from these gentle, wild and mild creatures. The idea of sharing time and gentle moments with these majestic horses is the core and the success of the therapeutic Nokota® at The Preserve in Chester Springs: The leadership qualities they embody become more and more apparent within ourselves as the Nokota® teach us to become more authentically human.

A Herd with One Head and One Tail

To relate this to bridging the micro and macro divide, we must think personally (ourselves, our family and our relationships), and then consider our herd (all the other horses, and our schools, neighborhoods and communities). The feral horse philosophically manages the herd to ultimately care for the horse in its community. What can we adopt of the horse's wisdom with a herd designed with meticulous care and attention to detail, a herd which quietly comes together to support the whole, one head and one tail? The herd becomes one: A group of two or more

formed in delicate union to create a mercurial safety and to harmonize. Exquisitely designed to celebrate equilibrium or “nothingness,” the individual members are perfectly at peace with their unspoken roles and rules. The only sign of unrest is in a member struggling to discover his placement in the herd or who is immature and learning from those elders before him. If a member of the herd is drawing too much attention to itself—thereby threatening the safety of the whole—the lead horse will banish and isolate the animal until it is no longer producing a threat to itself and others. Isolation is death to the horse. There is a moment of permission asked and granted for reentry. Imagine our “world human herd” working in tandem to create this “nothingness”, a structure supporting the whole with one head and one tail, moving together always, forward towards ultimate peace.

Suggestions from the Herd to the Individual, Macro Magic

At the NPCCS we strive to show the beauty of the herd both conceptually and literally. The individual horses who make up the herd form a perfect parallel to the individuals who make up family units, communities and systems. Through time spent with the horse and time spent with the herd we are reminded of the interdependent relationship of the herd and its members. The emotional health of the singular horses defines the health of the herd. We see this illustrated with two unique friends of the NPCCS: “Timmy” and “April.” Timmy is a 12 year-old boy whose social awkwardness escapes singular diagnosis and isolates him from his herd—his community and friends—and April is an 8 year-old autistic child who struggles to fit into her herd of family, friends and school.

In the Case of Timmy

Timmy is highly intelligent, kind and empathic. He and his family celebrate his “special way” with animals. Timmy’s behaviors with people often render him unsocial and hard to engage with others. Ultimately, Timmy’s body language makes him appear awkward and contributes to his isolation from his community at school and in the world. Timmy is unaware of his awkwardness and the disconnection it creates around him. What he notices is that he feels misunderstood and alone in his “herd.” The public school system magnified Timmy’s suffering and lack of confidence by asking him to leave with a financial trust to support education elsewhere. This was a huge failing in our community’s efforts to care for one of it’s individual members.

Timmy spends most of his waking hours gaming, where he is not confronted with the loneliness of feeling misunderstood and disconnected. The virtual team players are unaware of Timmy’s body language, which reads so differently from his peers. It is in effect self-medicating and self-soothing for him to hide from being present. While safe behind the screen, Timmy’s daily routine is becoming less social and less personal. He yearns for friends, understanding and sharing. Fortunately, Timmy’s mother was aware of his pain and sought to engage him beyond the gaming screen.

When Timmy arrived at the NPCCS, we recognized his sensitivity for animals immediately. Our first course of action was to let the horse envelop him into their herd. Now within a nuzzling and curious group of new friends who are reading Timmy for his heart’s authenticity and not social

labeling, Timmy began to laugh and laugh. The horses literally were following him around in play. Timmy's affect had no bearing on the Nokota's® inclusion of this tender boy into their herd. Timmy immediately went from isolation and feeling very hesitant to participating to not wanting to leave the horse's pasture. The "herd medicine" translated successfully to "self-confidence" and "success."

It would now be up to Timmy to reach to his new found self-esteem and feelings of inclusion, and decide which of his own traits are creating the community to accept him. The hope would be that this new language of confidence and esteem would begin to be incorporated into Timmy's own body and carry over into his day-to-day interactions with his human herd.

And that is what happened. After two years, Timmy returned to a regular school program where he engaged friendships, and he now laughs with sincere joy more than ever. The sensitivity of Nokota® feral herd language allows Timmy to feel inclusion. He is participating in a system of "one head and one tail" micro skills, towards placement within a macro herd/community. This gives Timmy the confidence to share his life and reengage as a healthy young adolescent. He is learning skills to resist old patterns of isolation, hurting and confusion and to replace them with feelings of inclusion, calm joy and understanding.

In the Case of April

April is an 8-year-old sensitive, lovely, young lady who inspires the horses as much as they inspire her. April's favorite mare, "Moon," is a stunning steel grey shining star. The mare embraces her role as leader, or alpha, and shares her wisdom with April's wisdom on a weekly basis. Static and inauthenticity trouble April in the classroom, her home and in her environment as a whole; Moon struggles with the same. She is ever-seeking calm and quiet, and she celebrates the magical wisdom of "nothing." "Nothing" is a feeling of balance and removal of life's pressure which can so often act as relief or "release" to those who suffer from sensitivity to imbalance. It is the very goal of every horse to maintain this essence, and they strive to disconnect and associate behavior which will lead to this release at all times. If April is overwhelmed she will appear to be stuck in a stare or daydream until she can rejoin on her own terms.

Both Moon and April are hyper-sensitive to input and static and are highly empathic. April is often overlooked or shunned by her shallow and emotional peers as strange and over-functioning. Moon enjoys April's sensitivity and strives to mirror April with her attention to details such as the tiniest fly perching on her leg and the shiver that dislodges it. April hears a distant crow—unheard by others—which Moon points out to her with a shift of ear focus. The language is purely non-verbal and quite soothing to those lost on empty words. The two share and enjoy far beyond the predictable Disney realm of most childhood entertainment. The details absorbed by this lovely herd of two are received, acknowledged, shared and rebalanced—details which would be largely lost on regular people and even most domestic horses.

The isolation April feels in her world as a little girl is joyously encircled by an understanding and empathic herd and community spirit. In the therapeutic environment it takes only two to

form a herd: one human, one horse. The Nokota® has the clearest and most sensitive language to offer the human with an undiluted script exquisitely preserved over time and without interference. Nokota® carry a wisdom beyond years of traditional talk therapy, often putting themselves out of business with one or two sessions. April is a dynamic inspiration to the investigation of this magical, empathic path. April is nearly fully non-verbal, which appears to outsiders to send her deeper into her private world. However, the silent missives exploding between Moon and April lead us to ask: How may we adopt this macro intelligence, this non-verbal language of the horse and the comfort supplied by the herd, so that the individuals are embraced, included and comforted within the context of a family or community?

Moon greets April at the gate with each visit; they both lower their eyes and bow to each other, exchanging breath. The race between these two delicate souls is to be the first to offer “draw” or softness to the other. Neither exhibits nor chooses to apply pressure to the other but to offer a haven and a joining between two spirits. Both mare—representing the wisdom of the herd—and child seek to nurture the other with acceptance and offering of selfless partnership. Piercing eye contact and isolation feels like too much pressure to both mare and child. However, the exchange of breath and touch and lowering of energy as they embrace each other’s aura is a lesson in itself as they balance each other and become as one, essentially their own self-supporting and gentle herd. April and Moon celebrate their visits without time and place. They are completely present and in the moment.

Equus, Sharing the Unspoken Language

For the individual clients, the “mild” language of the “wild” equine becomes a gentle and powerful translation of equine wisdom shared from the horse to the human. The herd gives the security and comfort so necessary for an individual to feel understood and secure within community, the macro supporting the micro in a canopy of healing hearts and hands. In circle, the woman’s journey to heal her addiction to food and pain has been realized in the exquisite language of the horse and the social support of the herd. Ten years later, children like Timmy and April are blessed with an early introduction to the healing equine language of trust and truth offered to support their life’s journey. The hope is the wisdom of the horse can be shared early and often and will be found within human community—with or without the physical horse herd—as the language becomes more and more known. It is small wonder that the equine therapeutic industry is fast growing and dynamic as we learn more about the language of the horse and specifically the communal and magnificent “wild” but “mild” Nokota® horses.

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