

THE HORSE, MY HEALER AND GUIDE

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Therapeutic horseback riding and equine-partnered mental health practices are becoming increasingly well-known in the fields of education and psychology as experiential modalities for promoting physical and emotional health. This narrative presents reflections on the author's experience of becoming involved in equine-partnered work and provides resources for further information. Note: Names have been changed to preserve confidentiality.

The morning light had not yet seeped under our tent but my small son Martín and I were already getting into our jeans and sweatshirts. I was pulling on my boots and putting his sneakers on him. We headed down to the Santa Ynez Valley pasture with a sense of excitement that did not abate, despite the many times we had done this.

We were going to the herd, to see the magnificent animals before the truck came with their hay and the sun got hot, and the horses would be rotated out for their work on the trails of the ranch.

We loved to watch their changing formations as they romped, nipped, and bucked, then settled near each other, heads together, saying who knows what. Equine curiosity would draw some, nickering, close to us. Their velvety muzzles caressed our hands as they sniffed, and we breathed their sweet hay breath in the cold morning air.

"Horse crazy." That's what my son calls me. And he reminds me that he's responsible for the fever because of our horse camping trips. It's true. But now I can scarcely remember what my life was like before horses became so important. It almost equals the amnesia I experience when trying to recall my life before him.

Horse fever can strike at any time of life. Little girls and women seem especially susceptible and books have been written trying to figure out the connection. Some posit that the horse, an especially intuitive animal, connects with the female of our species on that level. A survivor, an ancient prey animal,

the horse is a genius for scoping out a situation, sometimes from miles away. Running from danger is usually preferred to a battle, unless it's an in-fight for a position in the herd.

The horse also has a seemingly uncanny capacity to perceive and reflect a person's internal state, kind of like living biofeedback. A horse will tell you if you are being patronizing, pushy, wimpy, or mean. If you are smiling on the outside and crying on the inside, you can count on the horse to let you know about it.

I came back to our urban routine from the first camping trip to that ranch with a burning desire to get horses into my daily life. I don't like being a tourist, so I searched for a way to be with horses at work.

I scoured the Internet for "horses" and "therapy" and discovered that there was a flourishing field called therapeutic horseback riding. I also found educators and psychotherapists who work with horses specifically in the mental health realm. I looked for a professional organization and found the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) and its specialty division, Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA). The closest NARHA program was Move a Child Higher (MACH1) in Pasadena. I called and showed up to volunteer.

There I met Joy Rittenhouse, the Executive Director and Head Instructor, and Cric Dupuis, the Program Director, both gifted and extraordinary horsewomen. They showed me the ropes and soon I was side-walking

along the children on horseback, leading the horses, grooming them, and even teaching the horses some things. I learned in short order that, in fact, they were teaching me far more than I them.

How is being with horses therapeutic? The movement of the horses mimics the human walk. Even children who can't walk on their own reap the benefits from the horse's gait, with resulting increases in strength, coordination, confidence, and grace. They also gain from the emotional qualities of relating to and bonding with these large, powerful, and beautiful animals. They can learn to adjust their levels of arousal, and their interactions with the horse, to get the desired responses. When it's really happening, it looks like a dance, with a natural and mutual ebb and flow. And there are ways that the horse-human bond heals us that we don't even have words for yet.

Let me tell you about our herd. Wrigley is a wily and talented blond-maned Haflinger (with plenty of stallion in him), who doesn't like it when people try to "cowboy" him. He has puffed up and bucked off more than one "trainer" who wanted to show him who's boss. But when Wrigley has a kid on his back, he is exquisitely sensitive to his or her needs. If he feels that a child is unbalanced on the bareback pad, or is slipping to one side, he will stop, even before the leader and side-walkers realize the danger. That's just Wrig. Sometimes volunteers will complain about him, saying that he is "stubborn." I say, listen to him. He's usually right on.

Heidi is a sturdy and stocky Norwegian Fjord mare, a mother several times over. She is as steady as the sun. She communicates total acceptance and gracefully accepts the work she is asked to do. I give Heidi extra grooming when I am especially in need of her TLC. Somehow she knows when I need a hug, and at those times she will turn her head around and press me to her side. One thousand pounds of pure love, no questions asked.

One time I was at a training workshop and we were asked to take on the persona of one of our horses. I took on Heidi's calm gaze. When we were instructed to pair up with another person and sit in silence, making contact only with our "horse" eyes, my partner

suddenly burst into tears. It was all right. I have burst into tears several times under Heidi's nonjudgmental look. I always felt better for it.

Dillon is new to our herd. He was a police horse for 13 years and is now retired. Dillon is a big, beautiful chestnut-red horse and is famous for his gentle nature. He can be led around and ridden by very small children. Horses typically startle at unexpected or unusual stimuli. Dillon is quite reactive, even for a horse, but he is also self-controlled. When he startles, he "startles in place" and doesn't run, buck, rear up, or strike out. I have an exaggerated startle reflex, probably from living and working as a psychologist for so many years in war zones or maybe just from living in Brooklyn! When Dillon and I were first getting to know one another, his startle would trigger my startle, and then mine his, and so on. We must have looked pretty funny jumping around like that. At that time I was becoming familiar with stress-management techniques called the HeartMath Solution (Childre & Martin, 1999). As I got to know Dillon and realized that he wouldn't run me down, I was also learning to become more attuned to my inner state and to use breath, thought, emotion, and imagery to bring my heart and autonomic nervous system into increased coherence. This all came together and resulted in Dillon and me being calmer together.

Our other horses are Will-O, Danny, Dr. Dotz, and Mercy Lavender, a donkey who follows Cric around like a dog.

The children who come to the program have various needs. We see usually see changes in small increments although there are also sometimes dramatic changes.

One of our first participants is Tasha who has been coming to MACH1 for ten years. He has severe cerebral palsy. At first he had little or no upper trunk support or strength. With a lesson plan designed by his physical therapist and MACH1 staff, he has gradually gained balance and strength in his upper body and has begun to focus on fine motor control with his hands and arms. He now rides with minimum assistance weekly.

Another child, Darren, who has autism, was afraid of the horses when he first came

to MACH1 seven years ago. He spent the first six weeks pushing the manure cart. He gradually worked his way up to closer contact with the horses and now rides independently. We have seen big changes in his self-esteem, confidence, and courage.

Allison has cerebral palsy and is blind and non-verbal. When she first arrived she was apprehensive and didn't want to wear a helmet. Over time she grew to love riding. She makes "ha-ha" sounds to signal the pony to go and moves her body forward to direct more movement. Her mother says that she makes happy sounds the mornings she comes to ride. Now sometimes when she rides, she sings along with me in her own way. She gives great renditions of "Old MacDonald" and "The Wheels on the Bus."

For some of the children, the changes are in the quantity of movement, strength, and range of motion. For others, the major changes are in the quality of their lives. They may have increased enjoyment, confidence, poise, and grace, and they may change or push the boundaries of their limitations. For children who use a wheelchair, the powerful horse becomes their legs and takes them wherever they request. The therapy horse is also a warm, living, and even affectionate partner who is sensitive to their balance and energy.

People often tell me that I'm generous to volunteer my time at MACH1. But the truth is, I get more than I give. It is wonderful to see the kids grow, develop, and improve through their time with the horses.

And lucky me, I get to spend time with my equine buddies who every day teach me what it means to be more authentic, more focused, stronger, more playful, more supportive, and congruent. Becoming more like a horse, I have become a better human.

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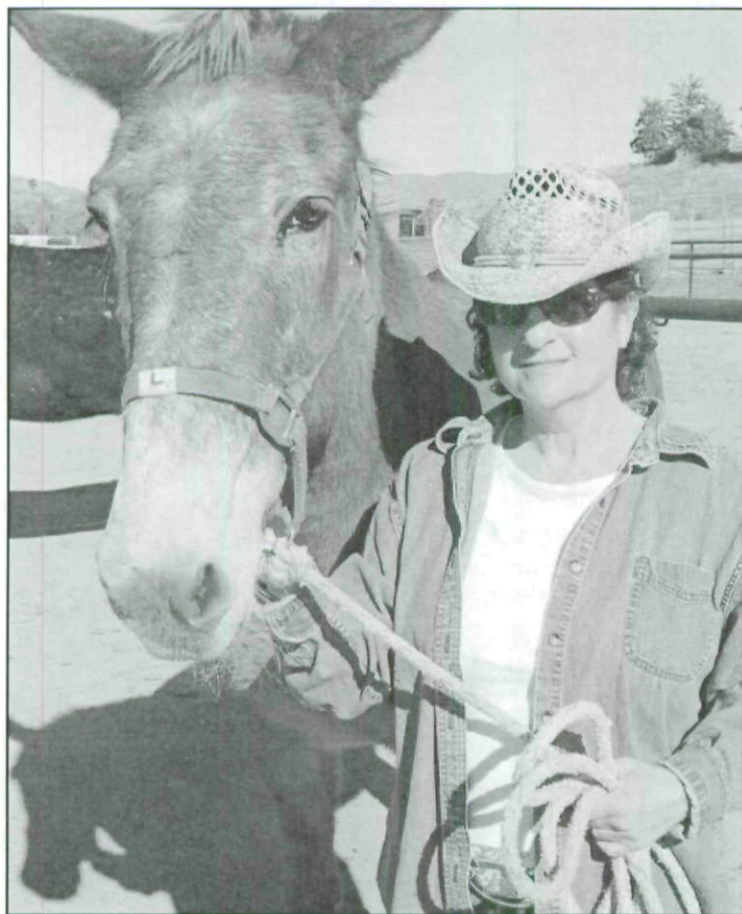
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Joanne with Lolly. Photograph by Jonnie Greslie-Stroud.

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