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The Mirror

When I arrived at Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch, spring of 2004, I was 44 years of age. I came as a volunteer, to donate my time and effort to a work I highly respected. This work consisted of rescuing abused and neglected horses, and partnering those same wounded animals with abused and neglected children, allowing them to heal one another. Truth be told, I was as broken as the children and horses I came to serve. Crystal Peaks was an escape from my every day life, which was slowly choking the very will to live out of my being. We often do not realize how unhealthy we are, until we taste wholeness. I had some monumental changes to make in my life.

Growing up was often a harsh experience. Consequently, I was harassed by nightmares on a regular basis (some nights not sleeping at all). I kept watch. The night season was my nemesis. Yet, amidst this darkened image, there was hope. Occasionally, when I would least expect it, I would have *The Dream*. This dream, in its various forms, placed a soothing balm upon my anxious, young mind. I dreamed of horses, two of them, taking their abode in my back yard. They would graze and run across my fitful sleep. I had no clue that these dreams were but a sweet foretaste of things to come.

I recall the freedom I felt, as I arrived at the Ranch only moments after the sun had risen, illuminating the majestic Cascade Mountains before me. I was happily lost among the horses and open spaces, while mucking the multiple paddocks. Kim, (the Ranch's founder), had a trained eye that pierced through my facades. Thanks to her insightful heart, I was given ample periods of unstructured time, just "to be" with the horses. I was longing for a place safe enough, so as to find the courage, the words, to say what I could not speak.

Horses use precious little vocalization. They dwell in the very present now. It is believed that one has only three seconds to respond to, or correct, a certain behavior in a horse, so as to enable the horse to associate the correction with the behavior. If you delay, the incident will have become history. They embody a keen awareness, for their lives depend upon it. One could call them “hyper-vigilant.” That was a language I spoke all too well. This survival technique, this “language,” gave me an edge in understanding how to work with horses. I identified with them at a core level.

The Latin word for horse is *Equus*. Loosely translated, *Equus* means "like us." At first glance, nothing seems further from the truth! But many things at first glance can appear preposterous and untrue. I have come to the conclusion that the Equine, the horse, is the purest mirror before which I have ever stood. What I found within them was my reflection. As Buck Brannaman, renowned Natural Horsemanship expert and teacher, has often said, "Your horses are mirrors to your soul. Sometimes you won't like what you see. Sometimes you will."

To truly connect with horses, I had to learn to stop hiding, deep within myself, and to choose sight. You cannot commune with a horse, or another person, if you do not, in essence, show up. True Horsemanship is not about domination and control, breaking the spirit, the will of the animal. True Horsemanship is about partnership. These were concepts to which I was quite ignorant. Having been on the receiving end of domination and control, in relational, as well as religious contexts, such words were grievously loaded. My marriage at the time could not be defined as a true partnership of equals. My paradigm was being greatly challenged. I did not like what I was seeing in the mirror.

Equine Escapes, a therapeutic, horse centered retreat facility, has this to say about horses on their homepage: *Horses are truly magnificent and majestic creatures. As the ultimate prey animal, they rely on their instinct and ability to feel and perceive danger, thus they are*

incredible at feeling our energy, emotions and intent. Most materials I have read pertaining to Natural Horsemanship (otherwise known as Horse Whispering), address this issue, that being, horses are the ultimate prey animal, in all ways designed for flight. Their defense is in their awareness, as well as their agility and speed, though in desperation they will indeed strike or kick. I too was designed for flight, and just like my equine partners, I would run as well as retreat within, as I have often seen horses do when I have placed too much pressure on them. I too would “kick and buck” when cornered, though never before a real threat. I tended to “kick and kick” at those trying to help, just as some of the frightened horses kicked and bucked towards me when I attempted to help.

At Crystal Peaks, I had the opportunity of a lifetime, to study the horse, and discover their commonality, as well as their uniqueness. I had to learn their language. Every swish of the tail, bending of the ear, the position of the lower lip, the muscles around the eye, had much to say about what was going on inside the mind and heart of the animal. As I studied the language of their bodies, I began to tune in to mine. The more I worked with the horses, the more I saw myself mirrored in their behavior and reactions. I was a scared animal. As I learned their language, I found my own words. The ways in which the horses responded to me, spoke loudly of that which emanated *from* me. I had to learn to take personal responsibility for how my actions influenced others. I too was capable of dominating, controlling another being, though unintentionally. More often than not, I had the opposite struggle. I wasn't assertive enough, and the horses took clear advantage.

According to Joe Lally, Dr. of Chiropractic, who has shifted his practice from human to equine, the horse has five times the neurological wiring in his spine than does the human. This image adds new meaning to the expression "a bundle of nerves." It's no wonder they can feel a gnat landing on their flank and twitch that same section of hide so as to remove it. Due to this

high voltage wiring, it is thought that a horse can "feel" your heart beat as you sit upon their back. My identification with these creatures grew.

If you were to sit and study herds of horses, you will notice that no matter how spread out the herd, how focused the horses appear on their grazing, napping, grooming or play, if a single horse makes a sudden move, the entire herd will react as if one. This reminded me of schools of sardines, maneuvering within the sea. They are separate. They are one. If I was to lead, and partner with a horse, I had to be accepted as part of their herd. Without this, the horse will feel it necessary to take matters into its own "hooves." When a horse feels it must revert back to its own primal instincts for survival, disaster is forthcoming. Behaviors such as bolting, bucking, rearing and striking are simply a manifestation of the animal's attempt to find safety. As I touched on earlier, the *Equus* is indeed like us. We as their stewards must learn to lead well and move in strength and confidence. Not the strength of fear inducing power, but the strength *imparted* by true leadership. It is our responsibility, our job, to transfer this confidence into the domesticated horse, (who we have taken out of its natural environment), allowing freedom of choice and wisdom with which to choose. I had never experienced this style of leadership. It awakened a sleeping hope within me.

Being a student of Natural Horsemanship, I equipped myself with the skills necessary to become savvy around horses, and in so doing, I began to better understand myself, and those around me. Horses respected my boundaries, and I theirs. Perhaps for the first time in my life I knew what a boundary was, and how to establish one. I discovered the difference between anger and assertiveness. As I worked with these 1,000 lb. dance partners, and lead from the ground, as well as from above, my sense of personal empowerment soared. Here I was, directing these massive animals, and they were responding respectfully to my requests. I began to embrace my own body, which in many ways had long since abandoned. Riding required of me that I be fully

present with every part of my body. The reins serve only as a backup to the body's cues. When you are working with such a large and powerful animal, you do well to know where every inch of your body is at times. It was difficult at first, to take back my body, and actually be present with it, sit with it, own it. My teachers patiently waited, as I sat and often sobbed, while seated on their bare backs.

Years have passed since those childhood dreams first began to cross over into reality. I am now the steward, (for the word *owner* connotes a hierarchy I do not wish to convey), of two horses of my own, who are boarded within minutes of my home. One could say they are living in my backyard. Solace, a gift from Kim at Crystal Peaks, is as black as night, with a white diamond on her forehead, and a teardrop below. Her face is a metaphor before me, confirming that the greatest gems, such as the diamond, are found in the darkest places of immense pressure and pain. Solace reflects my night season. I also purchased a young colt, as gold as a brass lamp, with flaxen mane and tail. Boaz is my golden dawn. The barn, with its 34 acres of treed cities, woven with riding trails and lush open pastures, is my Sanctuary. The smell of horses, Eastern Oregon orchard grass, and even the smell of the manure piles not yet mucked from the stalls, transports me to a place far detached from life's demands. When I am feeling cornered by the pressures of life, it is here you will find me, standing before the mirror. Sometimes I don't like what I see. Now, more often than not, I do.