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chapter 3

The Horse: Healer, Teacher, Partner

the “mental contract” that
needs to exist between
horse and rider

I discussed the idea of a “mental contract” between horse and rider in my previous books *Dressage for the New Age* and *Meditation for Two*. A mental contract can be entered into after we have found a place of physical comfort for the horse. Then we can ask the horse, “Do you want to dance with me?” The horse considers whether or not to say, “Yes,” and when he does, that is the original contract: We make sure the horse feels good, and in return, he agrees to dance with us.

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But negotiations do not stop there. We have to play with the horse all the time...our work with him has to be fun, a relationship with two happy participants. The invitation to enter a mental contract becomes, “Do you want to play with me?” As a trainer or a rider we have to always think about the *joy* in riding because this feeling is not natural to a lot of people. Many riders take it too seriously. *Joy* and *play* are always there when working with horses...if we want them. We just need to get on the same level as our horse and say, “Hey, I want to play now, and then I want to dance, and if we dance we need to do this and that and that...” so the mental contract is saying “let’s play together.” Whether longeing, or schooling in hand, or riding, it can all be a dance and a lot of fun. But, when any of these things *becomes a bore*, then it becomes a *bad* dance.

*Joy and play are always there when working with horses...
if we want them.*

healing *from* the horse and healing *of* the horse seen through a scientific lens

Recent studies conducted by the Institute of HeartMath¹³ provide a clue to explain the bidirectional “healing” that happens when we are near horses. According to researchers, the heart has a *larger electromagnetic field* and *higher level of intelligence* than the brain: A magnetometer can measure the heart’s energy field radiating up to 8 to 10 feet around the human body. While this is certainly significant, it is perhaps more impressive that the electromagnetic field projected by the horse’s heart is five times larger than the human one (imagine a sphere-shaped field that completely surrounds you). The horse’s electromagnetic field is also stronger than ours and can actually directly influence our own heart rhythm!

Horses are also likely to have what science has identified as a “coherent” heart rhythm (heart rate pattern), which explains why we may “feel better” when we are around them. Earlier I mentioned Dr. Ellen Gehrke’s work with heart rate variability (HRV)¹⁵: Her work along with studies at the Institute of HeartMath have found that a coherent heart pattern or HRV is a robust measure of well-being and consistent with emotional states of calm and joy—that is, we exhibit such patterns when we feel positive emotions.

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A coherent heart pattern is indicative of a system that can recover and adjust to stressful situations very efficiently. This is generally consistent with a prey animal whose very survival depends on being mindfully alert of danger, quick to react, but also quick to recover and resume normal activities. Oftentimes, we only need to be in a horse's presence to feel a sense of wellness and peace. In fact, research shows that people experience many physiological benefits while interacting with horses, including lowered blood pressure and heart rate; increased levels of beta-endorphins (neurotransmitters that serve as pain suppressors); decreased stress levels; reduced feelings of anger, hostility, tension, and anxiety; improved social functioning; and increased feelings of empowerment, trust, patience, and self-efficacy.

It is the heart that holds the horse's inner secrets and provides evidence to suggest that horses, just like us, emote and feel. And like ours, their inner state appears to be measureable. Any electrocardiogram (ECG or EKG) measures the electromagnetic signal that the heart uses to send information to the brain and the rest of the body on different levels. This electromagnetic energy tells the story about what is going on inside us, physically and emotionally. In a preliminary study conducted by Dr. Gehrke in collaboration with the Institute of HeartMath, ambulatory ECG recorders were placed on four horses to measure HRV during a series of different conditions and interactions, and evidence was found that suggests a horse's inner state is reflected in his heart rhythm (heart rate pattern), similar to humans and other mammals.¹⁵

This rather naturally leads us to the question of our horse's emotions—many people doubt the existence of “emotion” such as we experience it in the horse, but recent studies have perhaps begun to prove otherwise. For example, ethologists Dr. Marc Bekoff (*The Animal Manifesto: Six Reasons for Expanding Our Compassion Footprint*) and Dr. Jonathon Balcombe (*Second Nature: The Inner Lives of Animals*) have been exploring the emotions of animals. Their works summarize research suggesting that animals have an emotional and moral code that includes the capacity for pleasure.⁶⁷

what do we wish for the horse?

Our wish for the horse is to provide him with the gift of training that maximizes his level of comfort and allows him to be able to perform a dance together with his rider. Therefore, first we must invite him into a position

*We must invite the horse
into a position where he
is able to dance.*



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where he is *able to dance*. Then the goal is to have the horse so mentally and physically in harmony with us that *the dancing becomes what he wants to do*. It is in this balance that a transmutation—a change of consciousness—occurs, giving us that incredible feeling of oneness.

And what are the elements that contribute to the horse's comfort and thus make all this possible? Imagine that you are a horse. What would you need to be willing to dance with a human partner; to be fully aware of what is asked of you? The Molecular Mantra I described in *Dressage for the New Age* and at the beginning of this book (see p. 16 for more about it) illustrates the basic elements necessary for the dance, and here I have rephrased the last element to highlight that which ensures the horse's comfort:

1 *Direction*

We have to clearly visualize the direction in which we are traveling, as the horse needs to know where he is going.

2 *Rhythm*

This element is the balance and energy apparent in the horse's movement.

3 *Bend*

Knowledge of the biomechanics of the horse has helped to explain that establishing a light longitudinal bend through his body puts him in the best position to relax in his movement. This is, in effect, his physical centering.

4 *On the Bit and Light*

Being on the bit is both a mental and physical attitude that allows the horse to be 100 percent with his rider. Lightness, as we discussed earlier in the book, is the release, the cessation of action on the rider's part, the result of which gives all the beauty to the performance.