

A close-up photograph of a woman wearing a light-colored straw hat and a dark shirt, leaning her head towards a dark brown horse. The background is a bright, green field. The woman has a nose ring and is wearing a watch on her left wrist. The horse's head is in the upper left corner of the frame.

Paula Josa-Jones  
CMA, RSMET, SEP

Meditations and Strategies  
for Deeper Understanding and  
Enhanced Communication

# OUR HORSES, OURSELVES

DISCOVERING THE COMMON BODY

## CONTENTS

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Foreword by Linda Tellington-Jones .....	vii
Preface .....	ix
Introduction .....	1
<b>The Common Body: Sharing Breath, Body, and Earth .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>The Sensual Body</i> .....	4
<i>The Human and the Horse</i> .....	6
<i>Connecting</i> .....	11
<i>The Language of the Somatic Self</i> .....	13
<i>Body-Mind Centering®</i> .....	14
<i>Learning to Listen</i> .....	19
<i>The Letting Go</i> .....	23
<i>The Earth and the Common Body</i> .....	28
<b>The Heart of the Matter: Connecting and Centering .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<i>The Heart and the Horse</i> .....	30
<i>Helping, Not Making</i> .....	38
<i>Softening, Opening</i> .....	41
<i>Lessons Learned</i> .....	45
<i>Opening All the Way</i> .....	48
<b>The Limits: Opening the Gates .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Understanding the Limits</i> .....	50
<i>The Limits of Desire</i> .....	56
<i>The Limits of the Body</i> .....	63
<i>The Limits of Our Nature</i> .....	70
<i>Listening Beyond Limits</i> .....	74
<i>Unraveling the Limits</i> .....	79
<b>The Space Between Two Minds: Touching the Body.....</b>	<b>81</b>
<i>The Language of Touch</i> .....	82
<i>Touch and Attunement</i> .....	93
<i>Touch Strategies</i> .....	102
<b>The Glassblower's Breath: Falling Toward the Source .....</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>The Body as Source</i> .....	108
<i>Seeing the Moment</i> .....	114
<i>Deep Listening</i> .....	120
<i>Intentional Transitions</i> .....	126
<i>Finding Feeling and Resonance</i> .....	131
<i>The Glassblower's Breath</i> .....	133

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The Flight: Finding Earth and Sky .....	135
<i>Flying with Horses</i> .....	137
<i>Alignment and Finding Center</i> .....	146
<i>Gravity and Levity</i> .....	143
<i>The Weight of the Body</i> .....	149
The Third Walk: Breaking It Down, Learning the Steps .....	153
<i>Learning the Steps</i> .....	154
<i>Finding Faith</i> .....	166
<i>The Chicken and the Choreographer</i> .....	162
<i>Reassembling the Whole</i> .....	173
<i>How Less Can Be More</i> .....	164
The Mirror: Seeing Ourselves, Seeing the Other .....	175
<i>Through the Looking Glass</i> .....	176
<i>The Intentional Mirror</i> .....	188
<i>Patterns in the Sand</i> .....	181
<i>Our Horses, Ourselves</i> .....	191
<i>Body-Mind Riding</i> .....	184
<i>Bedlam Farm</i> .....	193
<i>The Fluid Body</i> .....	187
<i>Letting Go of the Story</i> .....	203
The Dance: Improvising and the Language of the Herd.....	205
<i>The Dancer and the Dance</i> .....	206
<i>Pony Redux</i> .....	227
<i>Pony Dances</i> .....	212
<i>Putting the Pieces Together</i> .....	227
The Wild Arena: Taming the Body.....	229
<i>Into the Wild</i> .....	230
<i>The Wild Ride</i> .....	240
<i>Dancing the Wild and the Tame</i> .....	232
<i>The Rogue Wave</i> .....	245
<i>The Horse Artist</i> .....	235
The Landscape of Delight: Savoring the Body.....	247
<i>The Rapturous Body</i> .....	248
<i>The Whole, The Parts</i> .....	261
<i>The Blessing of the Body</i> .....	249
<i>What Is Concealed, What Is Revealed</i> .....	264
<i>Horses and the Landscape</i> .....	253
<i>Entering the Body,</i> <i>Entering the Landscape</i> .....	256
Endnotes .....	267
Bibliography .....	271
Special Thanks .....	273
Index .....	275

## Learning and Listening with Heart

Horses can teach us a great deal about ourselves if we are willing to listen. On the ground or in the saddle, finding harmony with a horse is like sitting with a Zen master or practicing yoga. In yoga, where you place your feet and hands, the details of how you move into and out of a form, the support of your breath and intention, are all essential to that *asana*, or pose. Being with horses requires both yogic mindfulness and a receptive, friendly mind. There is nothing terribly abstract about being around a 1,200-pound flight animal. You have to be in the moment. When we listen, horses—with their clarity, honesty, and generosity—will teach us again and again what is really important: softness, balance, connection, and love.

As a beginner rider I could not decode what I was feeling in the saddle; it was all a jumble of sensation and motion. Tom Davis, my trainer at the time, described learning to ride as being like trying to listen to 500 radio stations at once. I couldn't begin to sort out all the different parts of what I was sensing and feeling: hands, reins, feet, stirrups, legs, the horse's flanks, his footfalls, his balance, my seat in and out of the saddle, the voice of the trainer, breath, ears, eyes! My trained dancer's body felt illiterate. It did not feel like my own—and in fact, it was not—because sitting on a horse, you become a part of another body, sharing breath, movement, skin, muscle, and bone.

As I spent more time riding and being with horses, I was drawn into a vortex of questions for which I had no answers: questions about the nature of communication, relationship, and body language. I hungered for more than the grooming and riding. I wanted to speak with them through my body with gesture, play, and touch, meeting the horse in the shared landscape of body and movement, to become more fully attuned in ways that were unknown, even unimaginable to me at the time. I wanted to know: *How can I be understood and how can I better understand? What is communication with a horse, actually?* I became troubled by other questions: *What is the role of force, domination, and control in this delicate relationship?*

I remember seeing horseman Monty Roberts giving a demonstration at a large equine event and feeling uneasy as the horse ran in circles in a round pen, eventually allowing Roberts to put a halter on his head and lead him. Roberts explained that in driving the horse away from him, he was establishing a herd hierarchy in which he was the leader and the horse learned to follow him.

In Carey Wolfe's *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), philosopher Paul Patton asks, "Could there ever be a purely nonviolent method of training the horse, or is the very idea of training inseparable from a kind of violence to the horse's intrinsic untrained nature?" He notes that all the riding aids are "part of a larger somatic framework of inter-species communication...embedded within a larger sensory field of touch, pressure, body contact, and attitude, including eye contact." He quotes English cavalry trainer

Henry Wynmalen, who says that riding must “endeavor always to detect what is the lightest possible aid to which our horse will respond, and on the discovery of this lightest possible aid, to continue trying to obtain response to a lighter one still.” However, Patton concludes, “Appealing as I found this idea, I could not help but think that it was also a lure or an illusion that served only to mask the reality of a relationship that was fundamentally coercive.”<sup>19</sup>

When I read this I felt a plunging despair. If paddocks, stalls, tack, and riding were all part of the subjugation and coercion of these beings I so loved, how could I continue? I felt that I had interpreted the horse’s cooperation and acquiescence as an agreement, a choice. The whole question of relationship and right action was blown wide open.

Should I stop riding? I could not imagine it. Riding a horse is a miraculous language of skin, bone, nerve, and fluid, shared rhythms—a vibrant poetry of the flesh. At its very best, it is improvisatory—an unfolding jazz played by two bodies sharing a vernacular spoken in touch and movement. I could not imagine giving up the exhilaration, delight, and sensuality that I experienced in riding. But does the horse love any part of that? I realized that I had to *feel*, not *think* my way into an answer that was right for me.

Horsewoman, poet, and philosopher Vicki Hearne says that when you ride, you must “learn not only to read what your skin tells you but also to be, as it were, kinesthetically legible to yourself.”<sup>20</sup> This means that we must be able to read our own skins in order to be physically intelligible to the horse. Most of us do not speak the language of the body with any fluency. Hearne goes on to say, “Horses have continually to forgive us for what must seem to them to be extraordinarily blunt and clumsy communication most of the time.”<sup>21</sup> To be with them *fully*, we must become bilinguals, consciously and continually threading between the specific vocabularies of our two distinct physicalities and perceptions.

Reading this, I began to understand that feeling my own body more clearly was a way to become less “blunt and clumsy,” in my communications with my horses, both in and out of the saddle. What I did not know at the time was that becoming more conscious of my body—moment to moment—and seeking greater softness and subtlety in my riding would spill into other parts of my life in profound and unexpected ways. Perhaps the greatest surprise was that my riding practice could lead me to greater self-compassion.

Dressage trainer and author Erik Herbermann says, “It is up to us to initiate harmonious resolutions to any negative cycles which occur. The horses do not know how to do so, and tend to continue to resist (that which they perceive to be our resistance against them) until we help them out of their cul-de-sac by dissolving the resistance in ourselves first. In this way we give them nothing to be against in the first place.”<sup>22</sup> Through their physical responses, horses show us *exactly* when we are helping and when we are obstructing through tension or harshness. Cowboy and Aikido master and author Mark Rashid said in a work-

## TRY THIS

### OPENING WITH HEART

 10 MINUTES

**PURPOSE:** Imagine bringing a quality of openness and vulnerability into your riding and your time with your horse. How would that feel in your body? In your mind? Practice this meditation:

1. As you breathe, feel your lungs surrounding and “holding” your heart. Visualize the heart expanding into this cradling support. Picture your horse’s heart enfolded by his lungs.
2. Can you bring this quality of nurturance into your body and mind as you ride? As your legs drape on the sides of the horse, can you imagine them like another pair of lungs, surrounding and supporting the heart of the horse?
3. Instead of looking for what is wrong, what needs to be improved, or some difficulty with your horse, focus on what is pleasurable: your legs receiving the warmth of the horse’s sides, the undulating sensation of your hips in the saddle, the softness of his eye.
4. While you are riding, try saying out loud, “How can I help?” and notice how that changes the conversation between you and your horse.

shop I took with him that we want to ask ourselves, “How can I *help* the horse do what I want him to do?” *not* “How can I *make* him do it?” Because of our big brains and the big egos that accompany them, we often default to *making*, not *helping*. We direct, we push, we demand. *Helping* requires us to listen and feel. *Helping* engages our more generous, receptive, and willing selves.

On the “good” days with Amadeo, when I was able to open my heart, mind, and body to him *and to myself*, I did not feel that he had surrendered to me, but that he was able to expand into an expression of his own exuberance. I was approaching what Vicki Hearne describes as the moment when “the horse thinks and the rider creates, or becomes a space and direction for the execution of the horse’s thoughts.”<sup>23</sup> To do this requires—in addition to the language of pressure, touch, and balance—a willingness to take full responsibility for your physical and emotional presence and participation in that relationship. To open to our shared vulnerability and imperfection in this relationship, on the ground, in the saddle—to open and open and open.

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*“The capacity for unmediated knowledge of us is not unique to horses, but because we ride them, because they carry us, it is particularly hard to avoid noticing not only that horses know us but that they know us without yielding their own volition, which continues to belong to the horse.”*

Vicki Hearne

*Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name*  
(The Akadine Press, 1982)

*“Anything forced and misunderstood can never be beautiful. And to quote the words of Simon: If a dancer was forced to dance by whip and spikes he would be no more beautiful than a horse trained under similar conditions.”*

Xenophon

*The Art of Horsemanship*  
(Dover Publications, 2006)

## HELPING, NOT MAKING

Several years ago I went to a clinic being offered in our neighborhood by someone who was an “expert” in “natural horsemanship.” My wife Pam and I went with our daughters, Chandrika and Bimala, and brought some folding canvas chairs to sit and watch. The instructor was working with a beautiful and very nervous young Arabian stallion. She kept shaking the lead rope at him, explaining that it was a way of getting his attention and making him move away from her. Each time she shook the rope, she increased the pressure, saying in a sarcastic tone, “Hello? Hello?” The rope was like a dancing snake; the little stallion was clearly upset, wide-eyed, head straight up in the air, and doing anything he could to get away from the lead and the person on the other end of it. I could feel my stomach tighten and my daughters’ consternation as they watched. Suddenly the clinician walked up to the horse and struck him hard in the face, turning to explain that she needed his attention and his respect. In a single movement, all four of us stood up, closed our folding chairs, and walked out, the girls’ eyes streaming with tears. She called after us, noting in front of the other auditors that we obviously didn’t know anything about horses.

The little stallion *had* learned a lot that day. He learned about distrust; about violence and fear. He did not learn about softness, dependability, curiosity, or co-

operation. A frightened animal (or human) cannot listen or learn—he or she just wants to get away from the threat. Instinctually, we often respond in kind to the tone of another person: For example, if someone is harsh with us, we are harsh; if someone is impatient, we are impatient. A hard-wired part of the more primitive section of our brain puts us in an endless loop of reactivity and rage. But that does not work well with horses. For one thing, they outweigh us by around ten times. For another, they can always pull harder and run faster. To step out of the fight cycle, to make a *real connection*, we have to move within, listen to the body, observe the mind, and settle our nervous system.

My dressage trainer told me how one day she was speaking to a group of her young students following a competition. She praised them for their focus, their seriousness of purpose, their willingness to learn, as well as the emotional and physical balance they showed with their horses. She remarked that she had not seen anyone lose her temper or punish her horse if the horse happened to miss a jump or make an error during the test.

Then the second trainer began to speak. “Riding is war,” she said, and then proceeded to tell these aspiring riders that they had to constantly fight for control of their horses, that they had to treat competitions as if they were entering a battle. Above all, they must force their horses to obey, no matter what. “Hold the reins tight and kick them on.”

There is a way to be with horses that honors their nature by listening and responding with sensitivity, and another way that violates it with force and domination. The same thing can be true of how we treat our own bodies. Real partnership demands that we find a way to be at one with our horses, and by extension, ourselves.

Renowned horse trainer and life coach Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling says that horses, because they are so much larger and stronger than us and so quick to react, can easily expose our imbalances and shortcomings as riders...and as humans. Feeling inadequate, we resort to using more and more force—a pattern that can spiral out of control into an adversarial and punishing relationship rather than one that is cooperative and friendly. The unfortunate results show up in our bodies and the bodies of our horses—as tension, anxiety, or injury, as unconscious habits or problems in our horsemanship and relationship with the horse that remain stubbornly unresolved. Caught up in the struggle, we miss the opportunity to experience the beautiful, shared landscape of sensing and feeling that is the Common Body.

According to Alexandra Kurland, author of *Clicker Training for Your Horse* (Sunshine Books, 2007), when a horse is made to do something via force or exhaustion—lying down is the example she uses, but she could easily be speaking of loading a horse into a trailer—his essential nature is violated and he simply gives up. When this happens, the movement or action you’ve trained may be “poisoned” forevermore because “at the heart of that behavior, in the formation



## TRY THIS

### SETTLE DOWN

 5-10 MINUTES

**PURPOSE:** Sometimes when our nervous system is overwhelmed, or we find ourselves in a vortex of reactivity, we need simple strategies to settle ourselves and find an emotional and physical balance. As you become more settled, that equilibrium will transmit from your body and mind to your horse.

1. **Breathe.** Whatever you are doing, make breathing a part of it. Pause and take a few easy, conscious breaths. Whatever you are doing, intentionally bring a quality of flowing breath to the activity.
2. **Pause.** Simply slow down and then stop what you are doing, and come into stillness. If you or your horse feels agitated, allow the “hot” energy of that activation to disperse and quiet in the stillness, taking as much time as you need.
3. **Smile.** As you breathe, invite a soft smile and let the sensation of that smile percolate through the rest of your body.
4. **Orient to pleasure.** Look around and notice something you find beautiful or pleasing. Pause and absorb the details of what delights you. Enjoy the richness of your sense perceptions. Can you let this pleasure permeate your body? What is the difference between *seeing* and *looking*, between *hearing* and *listening*?
5. **Change the activity.** If you have been riding a particular exercise, do something different—for example, take a walk with your horse or end your ride early. When you encounter a challenge in your work, change your perspective, or simply “let it go” for now, knowing that you can begin again when the time is right.
6. **Interrogate the feeling.** When you begin to feel tense, flustered, or anxious, take a moment to ask what is happening in your body, in your mind, or with your horse. Let the sensation in your body be a cue to “get quiet” and tune into what is triggering this feeling. Then breathe consciously for a few moments, and allow it to dissolve.

of it, the horse *gave up*.... You may applaud that the horse lay [*sic*] down, but if you can see what is at the heart of that training, it is hard to applaud.”<sup>24</sup>

It is, of course, possible to go back and teach the behavior a different way, but if you use the old cues, you will see the deadened response again. Kurland reminds us that it is possible for a performance to be beautiful and exciting and at the same time truly honor the horse, working with the horse’s willing participation.

“You can teach the horse to bow and have the horse love to bow,” she writes. “You can teach the horse to lie down and have the horse love to lie down. Or, you can teach the horse to lie down by taking its leg away so that the horse thinks it is going to die, because when you take the horse’s leg away, you are pulling the horse down in the way a predator would pull a horse down.”

The important question is this: Do our relationships with our horses (spouses, children, friends) evoke cruelty or kindness? What are the intentions that define our relationships? Mark Rashid says that humans are not very good at making connections—that we spend a lot of our time *disconnecting*. This is a particular problem when we then want to join with our horses and each other. We haven’t practiced listening, feeling, and acknowledging the other being. On the other hand, Rashid says that we *are* good at creating “openings.” I believe that means that the big human brain is flexible, improvisational, and good at generating options and possibilities. To find those options and openings, we have to take the time to look inwardly and become willing to feel ourselves more deeply, both physically and emotionally. Sometimes this requires the intentional dismantling of old habits, and sometimes it can happen on an exhale.

## SOFTENING, OPENING

During a four-day workshop with Mark Rashid, I found myself looking again and again at the mouth of his horse, Baxter. I loved the roundness of it, the soft way that he held his jaw, the easy line of his lips, and the fact that he never opened his mouth or struggled with the bit. The reason for that was that there was nothing to struggle against. Rashid’s hands on the reins were flowing, generous, and yet effective. He was always consciously offering *softness*. Baxter, in turn, was a peaceful, quiet, balanced horse, which showed me that he was working with a feeling, connected, and kind rider.

In that same workshop, I was riding a lovely, young, blue roan Quarter Horse named Sam, who had, as Rashid said, “an industrial-strength brace” that showed up in the way he resisted the bit, throwing his head. Sam would hit the bit so hard that he would back himself up—like a wave striking a sea wall. He could not soften, and apparently, neither could I. With me still in the saddle, Rashid held my reins without pulling, using a neutral but firm contact that resulted in Sam backing himself all the way across the big paddock—not because Rashid was pulling (he wasn’t) but because Sam was simply reacting to *his own* resistance.

## TRY THIS

### HELPING, NOT MAKING

 10-15 MINUTES

**PURPOSE:** In riding (and in our human relationships) sometimes control overshadows communication; harshness and impatience displace softness and connection. We are riding by making statements and declarations, forgetting to ask the questions. Learning to practice self-compassion and self-help can teach us to become more generous and patient in our relationships with our horses. Learning to listen to our own bodies helps us listen to our horses.

1. From a standing position, slowly lower your body to the floor, settling on either your right or left side. Let the body yield deeply into the floor, seeking ease and comfort. As you settle, breathe gently into this restful connection. When you feel the need, shift slowly to another comfortable position, using your hands and arms to help protect your joints from bumping the floor. Again, settle deeply and comfortably. Ask yourself how you could be more comfortable and make those adjustments.
2. Begin to rise slowly to a standing position. Instead of pushing yourself up quickly, go slowly, helping your body move in a smooth and supported way to standing. Pause along the way. Look for a leisurely unhurried feeling. You are not “making” yourself stand, you are “helping” your body find the most easeful and gentle way to rise.
3. Repeat this sinking and rising a couple times, letting your movement be slow and languorous, each time discovering more ways to help your body change level and position on the floor with greater ease and flow.

Rashid showed me what he does with the reins with an exercise on the ground: On one end of a pair of reins, I was the “horse,” bracing my hands and arms. On the other end, he softened my resistance with something invisible that felt like warm water moving up the lines to me. He never changed the position of his hands or arms. He was sending intention, he explained, and “going underneath” my stiffness—something he learned through his practice of Aikido. The solution was not mechanical, he told me, but happened by finding the connection between the *inside of the rider* and the *inside of the horse*. And he said that if you aren’t connected to yourself, there is no way you can connect to the horse.



*The easy round softness of Baxter's mouth on the bit.*



*Through a simple exercise off the horse, Rashid showed me how to communicate softness through the reins.*



*Baxter easily moving back as Rashid asks with softness and intention.*

## TRY THIS

### BREATHING RHYTHMS

 5 MINUTES

**PURPOSE:** We often forget to breathe, or we breathe shallowly, irregularly. We hold our breath, sometimes for a long time. Breathless, our bodies stiffen and “close.” Mark Rashid’s intentional breathing exercise is a way to remind us to breathe more fully and consciously. Over time, this practice can become a natural and instinctual part of our riding and our daily lives.

1. Standing with your feet beneath your sit bones and your knees slightly bent, place your hands on either side of your navel, so that you can feel both your lower ribs and your belly.
2. For the next several minutes, breathe in on three counts and out on four. Focus primarily on the horizontal dimension of the breath, feeling your ribs widen and narrow laterally as you breathe in and out. When thoughts arise, gently put your mind back on the breath. Remember that even as you count, you are looking for an easy, restful quality, letting the breath enter and leave the body without effort.
3. Try breathing with this in-on-three-out-on-four count when you are riding. You can change to in-on-four-out-on-five or any other rhythm that feels comfortable. Breathing with an intentional rhythm is a good way to find out if you are breathing continuously or only occasionally. Breathing consciously also communicates a quality of relaxation and consistency to your horse, helping him to relax, too.
4. Now let go of counting, while staying softly aware of the breath. Can you allow the breath to penetrate all of the spaces and tissues of the body? Can you feel the breath as a bridge connecting your body and your horse’s body?

What I felt was not just a change in the sensation in my hands or a mechanical “fix” in the reins, but a quality of open-hearted kindness in the contact—making connection with heart.

When I got back on Sam and took up the reins again, Rashid told me that instead of meeting Sam’s resistance with my own resistance, to just picture my hands moving toward the horse’s mouth, without actually shifting their position in space. This dissolved the bracing in Sam...and in me—the beginning of a reliable softness between us. When I asked him to back up now, he moved back-

ward in a smooth, easy motion. Rashid explained that Sam had felt my intention for him to move backward, and because there was no force or restriction, he simply began to flow like a river in the direction I had visualized.

During the clinic, Rashid also saw that I was not breathing—at least, not in a way that would allow me to soften or continue riding for very long. With a smile, he said, “An exhale would go a long way here,” or “When the wheels come off, try exhaling.” He instructed me to breathe in on a four-count and breathe out on a five-count in rhythm during the walk, then to maintain that rhythm in the trot. As I rode with this conscious breathing, I felt Sam begin to breathe differently, too, his stride opening and lengthening. And then Rashid pointed out, with a chuckle, that I was actually smiling!

What Mark Rashid taught me while I was riding actually applies to everything: “When things are falling apart, let that be your cue to breathe.” Beyond that, I could feel in my own body and mind how the breath also created an opening to qualities of soft, open-hearted engagement with my horse.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Testy Pony

*I am given a pony for my birthday, but it is the wrong kind of pony. It is the kind of pony that won't listen. It is testy. When I ask it to go left, it goes right. When I ask it to run, it sleeps on its side in the tall grass. So when I ask it to jump us over the river into the field I have never before been, I have every reason to believe it will fail, that we will be swept down the river to our deaths. It is a fate for which I am prepared. The blame of our death will rest with the testy pony, and with that, I will be remembered with reverence, and the pony will be remembered with great anger. But with me on its back, the testy pony rears and approaches the river with unfettered bravery. Its leap is glorious. It clears the river with ease, not even getting its pony hooves wet. And then there we are on the other side of the river, the sun going down, the pony circling, looking for something to eat in the dirt. Real trust is to do so in the face of clear doubt, and to trust is to love. This is my failure, and for that I cannot be forgiven.*

Zachary Schomburg

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Sometimes what appears to be the “wrong pony” is actually the one that helps us make a leap of faith. Many of the horses in my life have seemed like wrong ponies, but they have taught me the right lessons. I wasn’t always willing to listen or able to hear, but these ponies were patient and persistent. They taught me about feeling my body, noticing my emotions, and being more connected to the present moment and another being.

### Empty the Mind, Open the Heart

In her book, *Dressage with Mind, Body & Soul* (Trafalgar Square Books, 2013), Linda Tellington-Jones<sup>25</sup> tells a story of a Hungarian stallion named Brado, who had been slated for the US Olympic Eventing Team. But Brado did not like to jump ditches, which ultimately kept him from competing. Tellington-Jones was at the Pebble Beach event course, one of the premier courses in the country with many natural water ditches, and since she had successfully competed in eventing for many years, she used the opportunity to see if she could change Brado’s mind about such obstacles. The first thing she did was *empty her mind*, mentally picturing that he could choose to go forward on his own. According to Tellington-Jones, emptying the mind is “a great way to stop unwanted left-brain chatter or negative thought and leave room for positive outcome.” She learned about emptying the mind when she read *Judge Dee and the Blind Samurai*: A legendary, unbeatable fourteenth-century samurai prepared for combat by emptying his head of thoughts “like a hollowed gourd.” In doing that, he was prepared for whatever might arise rather than confused by a mind full of expectations and fears.

“I sat quietly, not allowing Brado to go left or right or back, but not urging him to go forward,” writes Tellington-Jones in her book, “and simply held the intention that he would lose his fear and go forward when he felt safe and confident. In a few minutes he walked forward on his own, jumped the ditch easily, and I never had one stop at a ditch in the years I competed with this wonderful stallion.”

Alexandra Kurland notes that with horses (or spouses, children, friends) we can become distracted by all the things we *don’t* want; we feel we have to react to unwanted behaviors. “If the horse is nudging us we feel the need to elbow the horse away. The horse is pushing at our pockets, looking for a treat, so we feel that we should be doing something with the lead line to send the horse away.” Her advice is that rather than focusing on all the things you *don’t* want, look for what you *do* want and give *that* your attention.

“We must learn to be aware of everything but to be non-reactive to it,” she says. “This creates an enormous shift in people. You can have bad things happening around you, but you do not have to be reactive to them. As you focus on the one or two elements that you *can* reinforce, and you find that those elements become magnified. Other pieces of good behavior then begin to emerge and to add onto that central core of behavior that you have been reinforcing.”

What horses have taught me with great precision is that focusing on what I want instead of the problem is the key to finding both the solution and greater connection. Giving attention to what I *don't* want only adds energy and momentum to the negative thing. For example, if I am riding and focusing on the terrible quality of my shoulder-in, that situation is unlikely to improve. Instead, if I take a moment to picture a clear, flowing image of the shoulder-in that I want, that feeling will more often than not transmit to the horse. As classical horseman Erik Herbermann says, "There is a saying in carpentry, 'Let the hammer drive the nail.' So too in riding, we should let the aids inspire the horse to respond as we wish, rather than trying to move the horse's body with our own physical effort. Dance your horse forward; do not push him."<sup>26</sup>

In a workshop with Linda Tellington-Jones, I watched as another attendee brought her horse into the arena, dragging him behind her like a bag of heavy sand. She looked frustrated and angry, and more than a little embarrassed by her horse's "bad behavior." Tellington-Jones took the line from the student and showed her how to lead the horse with an enthusiastic "Let's do it!" attitude,

## TRY THIS

### TRY THIS: LET'S DO IT!

 5 MINUTES

**PURPOSE:** Bringing a quality of "Let's do it!" to your horse and to your other interactions with humans and animals in your life invites qualities of enthusiasm and playfulness to those relationships.

1. Begin walking, and as you walk, mentally repeat the words, "Do it!" over and over. Imagine a stern quality in your voice, like a scolding coach or an angry parent urging you on. Notice your body and your emotions. Does your body feel heavy or tight? Do you feel resistant or frustrated?
2. Now turn to face a different direction and breathe in and out in a soft, easy rhythm, three or four times.
3. Start walking, mentally saying the words, "Let's do it!" with a quick, eager quality, as if you were being invited to dance by a playful partner. What shifts do you sense in your emotions and body? Is there more lightness and ease in your step?



instead of a demanding, “Do it!” The change was immediate as Tellington-Jones playfully invited the horse to join her at the walk, and he relaxed, stepping forward with her easily.

As a choreographer, I am used to telling dancers where to move, what kind of movement I am looking for, and what needs more or less “juice.” Over the years I have learned that when my direction is infused with the “Let’s do it!” feeling, the results from my dancer-collaborators are confident and generous. When I am anxious or frustrated, the whole process of working with others becomes strained and “sticky.” It is the same with the horse, whether in the saddle or on the ground: If I respond to my horse with anxiety, fear, or anger—if I think, “Do it!”—*that* is what will be reflected back to me, rather than playfulness, openness, ease, and flow.

## OPENING ALL THE WAY

Consider this passage from Margery Williams’ *The Velveteen Rabbit* (Harper Festival, 2006):

*“It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out, and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real, you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”*

The Skin Horse is talking about the time it takes for body and mind to soften, for self-consciousness and self-importance to be worn away, for demands to become less insistent, for the ability to listen to deepen, and for our hearts to open. As that happens, we become more connected to our horse and human friends—and ourselves.

In the film *Pina* (2011), the great choreographer Pina Bausch tells a dancer who is struggling with the motivation for her movement, “Just dance for love.” In the same way, we should ride for love, nothing less. There is nothing like stopping to take in the sun, the trees, the hills while standing next to a horse that is choosing to be there, to be near you in that full-hearted, breathing moment.