

CONNECTING WITH A HORSE

My conventional medical training had always focused on pathology or disease, just as the old-style horse training focused on negative behavior. But in holistic medicine, I fostered overall wellness through strengthening the entire body's immune, endocrine and organ systems. Similarly, Liberty Horse Training emphasized the whole horse by creating a trusting bond, mutual understanding and a foundation of positive thought.

Attempting to see the world through a horse's eyes, I realized that sitting motionless in one place might be considered predatory behavior, a tiger patiently stalking its prey. So I gradually stood and began wandering in small circles, looking up at the clouds, listening to the birds and creating a peaceful place inside myself in which I did not expect anything from him. I relaxed my body and dropped my shoulders to appear smaller. I focused on my breathing, concentrating on long, slow, deep breaths, a moving meditation. When Tino took one step towards me, I quietly said, "Good boy," establishing eye contact only when he looked up at me. And if he retreated a step, I would retreat too, gently matching his energy.

I recalled my old meditation instructor, who had once given a preparatory talk before sitting silently for a whole day. "The body mirrors the mind. If your mind is unsettled, your body will be restless. But if you allow your thoughts to pass through your mind like clouds in a blue sky, eventually, your mind will become clear." As I sat watching Tino, I noticed the clouds floating by. A graceful

THE PROOF IS IN THE POODLE

heron silently glided above us. At that moment, Tino began cautiously walking towards me, pausing occasionally, as though he doubted his growing trust in me, but nonetheless overcoming his uncertainty with each step. Eventually he stood beside me. Careful not to make any sudden movements, I slowly handed him some grain and scratched his withers until he was sure that all I wanted was companionship. The focus had shifted from coercion to cooperation, from eliminating a negative behavior to fostering a bond.

When I turned to walk away, he chose to walk with me. He had decided that being emotionally connected to me felt better than wandering away on his own. So, I opened the gate and we walked together around the field. Once in a while I bent to show him grass, telling him with silent body language, “Now is a safe time to eat.” After a few minutes, he’d walk beside me again, chewing and lowering his head as he relaxed. If I turned my shoulders slightly, he mirrored my action. Before long, we were trotting together, occasionally halting and backing up with no verbal cues, only gentle body language and close attention to the present moment.

As the weeks passed, Tino’s confidence grew and he began seeking me out over the gate, whinnying his enthusiasm for whatever I had lined up that day. Some days I’d set up an obstacle course with small poles, a green mounting block and a purple exercise ball. I would allow him to discover his own games:

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grabbing the ball with his teeth and tossing it in my direction or flinging an empty burlap sack into the air. After hiding treats under rocks or upside-down tubs, I'd watch him and laugh as he happily discovered them one by one.

Over the next few months, I would have to repeatedly apply the ideas of trust and acceptance as Tino and I forged our new relationship. It was a sunny day in March when a small group of horsewomen joined me for a ride up a steep slippery trail behind our house. Even with no certain breeding history or known lineage, Tino could have run circles around all the other horses, most of them expensive warmbloods that were more at home in a dressage arena than on a narrow trail. As they tripped over logs and clumsily lurched their heavy bodies up the trail, Tino used his hooves like hands, gripping each step with the dexterity of a mountain goat. While his ears listened to my cues, he tapped into his own deep reservoir of new confidence.

“Donna, where did you get that talented little horse?” one woman said, already breathless from her own horse's anxiety, an emotion carried through to her.

Going into Tino's full story would bring back too many negative shadows of the past. I thought of the scars, wounds and hours of working with him at Liberty. “I just found him in a muddy paddock,” I replied. I gave him a pat and we passed up the big horses, slowly climbing towards the clear blue sky.