



Insights – Equine-Facilitated Learning

Will Rogers said, “There is nothing better for the inside of a man as the outside of a horse”. I would take this one step further and say also the insides and the outsides of a horse since they teach us so much about being in the present moment and coming from a congruent place in our hearts. My privilege for the past 10 years has been to learn from these consummate teachers about myself, life and relationships. I began my journey with horses as therapists at Sierra Tucson, a hospital in Arizona specializing in addiction treatment, where Reed Smith hired Barbara Rector to engage equines in the treatment team for the new adolescent center in the early 1990’s. At the time I was the corporate director of marketing for this world renowned center and you can read more about this story at: www.sacredplaceofpossibility.com in an article titled “Unexpected Grace”.

In 1992 I began my private practice in psychotherapy and I worked with Barbara Rector and Ann Alden, it was at one of their workshops that I met Linda Kohanov. Linda and I developed and taught the Epona Approach™ for eight years. We taught nine Epona apprenticeship classes together, many workshops, and experienced the incredible growth of this approach working with our equine colleagues. I have immense gratitude for all that Linda and I experienced, learned and developed over those years. What I lovingly call the “straw bale/ porta potty days” with our first workshops in late 1999 to Epona’s move to the magnificent facility at Apache Springs Ranch located in Gardner Canyon in Sonoita, Arizona; we met, taught and engaged with people and horses from all over the world.

In 2008 I began my current journey which has taken me to England, Ireland, Belgium, Vermont, Florida, New York State, Oregon, Washington, Colorado and Canada. One of the most consistent observations I have had is that the horses world-wide are speaking to each other. Rupert Sheldrake’s concept of the morphogenetic field; Candace Pert’s research on the molecules of emotion; and Larry Dossey’s description of the nonlocal nature of mind has demonstrated that all of the horses are communicating with each other and are taking us to new levels of personal and interpersonal awareness. They are literally helping us to wake up!

I have been conducting advanced workshops with others, some of whom were my students, and also am teaming up with people like Leigh Shambo and teaching what I call the psychological/spiritual/scientific foundations underlying equine facilitated learning in various training programs. What I have noticed as a theme is the people I am teaching and training are asking for guidance and direction for their life work based on their own intuition, self-awareness, and personal knowledge gleaned from life challenges; and turning possibilities into probabilities. Some come as students to learn this work with

horses and people in advanced human development, others come for their own personal growth, and some come as a group to learn leadership from a collaborative point of view. The horses, as always, infuse people with wisdom, courage, vision and strength. As our role models, they teach us to offer support when appropriate, wait for the right moment to intervene and not take anything too personally.

One of the key components developed at Epona is something Linda created called the “Emotional Message Chart”. Horses teach us to use emotion as information and that no emotion is good or bad. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson’s ground breaking book, “Positivity” defines, records and validates her research and findings over a period of 20 years regarding the importance of balancing *Positive Emotions* with *Negative Emotions*. She has found that a ration of 3:1 positive to negative is needed to balance our emotions. She says, “Negative emotions are necessary for us to flourish, and positive emotions are by nature subtle and fleeting; the secret is not to deny their transience but to find ways to increase their quantity. Without a balance of positive to negative emotions, she has found that people get pulled into a downward spiral, their behavior becomes lifeless, rigid, and predictable and they begin to feel burdened. It is also important to note that she is not advocating suppression of any emotions but rather balancing them. All positive emotions have one thing in common, which is they are reactions to our current circumstances and are not a permanent state. Why is this so important to note and remember? Positive emotions tend to be more fleeting than negative emotions and happiness is the overall outcome of many positive emotions. She says that positive emotions are triggered by our interpretations of our current circumstances and are felt not only in the body but also tell us what we need emotionally and mentally for the future. This helps us to broaden our minds and outlook and to build what she calls the “broaden and build effect”. Positive emotions are a narrower band of feelings and not an overall judgment about life. A study cited in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in November 2008 called “Open Hearts Build Lives” looked at the effects of loving-kindness meditation on people’s resources and attributed the benefits not to learning loving-kindness meditation but to the daily increase in positive emotions that the participants got from this and they concluded that over time positive emotions literally change who we are. I often refer to the psychological concept of a “corrective emotional experience” which happens consistently in the work with horses. When the identity of the facilitator/horse is confused with past figures from childhood, the horses help correct negative thoughts and feelings about certain circumstances or memories by responding positively in the present. This experience helps the client to develop new “neural pathways” in the brain with positive emotions which eventually replace the “super highway” reaction based on past experiences.

You are invited to take this journey with us and begin to live from your true essence. We are often asked how does this work with horses enhance and develop us as Spiritual beings. Michael Singer’s book, “The Untethered Soul” gives one of the best definitions of Spirituality I have seen:

Spirituality begins when you decide that you’ll never stop trying. Spirituality is the commitment to go beyond, no matter what it takes. It’s an infinite journey based upon going beyond yourself every minute of the day for the rest of your life.

If you're truly going beyond you are always at your limits. You're never back in the comfort zone. A spiritual being feels as though they are always against the edge, and they are constantly being pushed through it. (p 124) "The Untethered Soul" by Michael Singer

The essence of spirituality is letting go of this false sense of self, this façade, and this need to have others behave predictably. It is being in the vulnerable, unknowing part of you. It is taking the risk to chart your own course. You decide to take the journey by constantly letting go, not clinging, and being a witness to your thoughts, your feelings, and your state of mind. Living authentically from this soulful place is the way to true freedom.

What would it be like to live in the Undivided Self, to use the power of the undivided self to create, to live and to participate fully in life and to chart your own course? What would it be like to view all people and experiences as new opportunities to **see with the heart and the mind**?

What I have noticed with my travels is that there is always one common thread. That thread is each horse's innate ability to take in and honor the essence of the individual exactly where they are in that **present moment**. We know that being in the present is really the only place where actual change can happen. We have also seen that the experiences with horses allows the individual to "implicitly know" what is important for a full life and also gives them a glimmer of what that could look like.

Seeing with the heart allows us to be in present moment awareness and to live from our authentic self. Your heart is an instrument made of extremely subtle energy. When you "feel" music, see the beauty of a flower, or bird song, you can hear it and see it, but the feeling comes through the filter of the heart. The heart controls the energy flow of opening and closing to others. The heart closes when stored energy, feelings, or unfinished business block the opening of the heart. Barbara Fredrickson and Marty Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association and founder of positive psychology, among others have taken the scientific rigor developed in traditional psychology, based on the medical model and directed it towards understanding human potential. Seligman challenged the field to look at what makes a person healthy rather than what makes them sick. Fredrickson says that one way to increase positivity is to be aware of the present moment, because she says most moments are positive. She says we miss many opportunities to experience positive emotions by thinking too much about the past and the future, rather than being open to what is. "Living in my head got me through difficult times when I was younger and helped me become a great student. But I think it disconnected me from my heart". I would encourage Barbara and others to join us in nature, to enjoy the present moment, and learn directly from the heart of the horses.

Kathleen Barry Ingram, MA
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