


TAKE BACK THE REINS



The Truth About
Why You're Stuck and
How to Get Moving Again

Hallie Bigliardi

Take Back the Reins: The Truth About Why You're Stuck and How to Get Moving Again

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Bringing It to the Horse

The idea of getting advice from a horse isn't new. The television show *Mister Ed*, which first aired in 1961, about the talking horse that shared wisdom with his hapless owner, Wilbur, was inspired by short stories written in 1937 by Walter Brooks.⁴⁵

Horses are archetypal, representing strength, courage, beauty, power, sensitivity, steadfastness, honesty, wisdom, and the list goes on. You'd be hard pressed to find a person who is not captivated by the sight of a swiftly moving horse. For multiple generations before the invention of the automobile, horses were a part of everyday life, whether you owned a horse or not. They were our partners in survival, with key roles in farming, ranching, transportation, and war.

In her book *The Power of The Herd: A Nonpredatory Approach to Social Intelligence, Leadership, and Innovation*, Linda Kohanov profiles cultural innovators who employed extraordinary leadership skills to change history, and they all had one thing in common. They were all accomplished equestrians: Winston Churchill, Alexander the Great, George Washington, Catherine the Great, Joan of Arc, General George Patton, and Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), among others. Winston Churchill is known for saying, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." But this other, less well-known quote of his gives us a little more insight into his perspective. He said, "The substitution of the internal combustion engine for the horse marked a very gloomy milestone in the progress

of mankind.” Perhaps Churchill saw something of value in time spent around horses that went beyond accomplishing a day-to-day task or getting from point A to point B.

As horses have become less and less a part of daily life, their use has become more and more relegated to sport and entertainment. As urban areas expand, horse properties are being sold and developed for higher density housing and commercial use. Keeping a horse is becoming more difficult and more expensive, thus fewer and fewer people have access to horses. As a result multiple generations of city dwellers and others have grown up without horses in daily life and without the benefits of being around them.

Through her research of history’s influential leaders, Kohanov points to a pattern that emerged in their stories. For thousands of years, the invisible forces of charisma, bravery, poise, focus, endurance, and conviction have been most reliably bolstered by a silent tutor (the horse). These qualities of influential leaders listed by Kohanov that came through riding, training, and time spent with horses are the same qualities we need to lead our own lives and to make powerful choices for meaningful change. If we can recognize the importance of the horse, not as a beast of burden or a companion, but as a teacher of kings, conquerors, heroes, and pioneers, surely we can see the value in becoming a student of the horse.⁴⁶

Social Instinct

The main substrate for connection between humans and horses is the social instinct. Horses and humans are social animals, and we share similar social instincts. Horses are herd animals, and in order to survive in the wild, they need to be part of a herd, just like humans need to be part of our human herd, the group or community. Being alone or separated from the herd means certain death for both horse

and human. Because of this herd instinct, horses are hardwired to relate to the other members of the herd, creating a social, hierarchical structure for coordination. This instinct in the horse creates a natural inclination for relationship and communication with humans.

A common misconception in some models of equine learning and therapy is that because the horse is a prey animal, there is a predator-prey relationship between humans and horses, with the human as the predator of the horse. I believe this misconception comes from equine activities based on certain horse training philosophies and methods like that of Monty Roberts and his Join-Up® technique.

Roberts studied wild mustangs and their movements and instincts. He learned that he could get a horse to trust him and come to him, what he calls “Join Up,” by utilizing the horse’s instinctual responses. Initially, he sends the horse away using predatory type movements. Then, when the horse gets tired of running away, and the horse is looking for other options, Roberts switches to movements and behaviors that are horse like, inviting the horse to join up or connect. The horse finds more comfort in being near Roberts than it does by continually trying to get away from him. While using a predatory movement may assist you in sending a horse away from you, it is not the only way to get a horse to move, and it does not mean you have a predator-prey relationship with the horse.

The predator-prey relationship is a specific biological relationship between two organisms of unlike species where one species is the hunted food source for the other. Examples of predator-prey relationships are the lion and zebra, bear and salmon, fox and rabbit. Horses and humans do not share in a predator-prey relationship.⁴⁷ But we can learn from their prey animal sensibilities.

Horse as Teacher

Unlike humans, a horse's default is to live in the present moment. As prey animals, their survival hinges on their ability to attune to their senses. Their systems are wired to go quickly into a survival response, and once a threat has passed, to quickly return to a balanced and relaxed state. In contrast, humans tend to prolong states of arousal by worrying about what to do or what we did. We relive a stressful scenario in our mind, holding on to the arousal and perpetuating its impact. We remain in higher states of stress far beyond what is necessary, causing damage to our health. Horses teach us a better way.

Horses are somatically integrated beings. When horses are not chronically confined to a stall and are given plenty of time outside and freedom to move around, they do not hold on to energy or energetic contractions. Horses will whinny, snort, toss their heads, fart, roll, buck, and rear as ways of expressing and moving energy through their bodies. Horses don't worry that their herd mates will judge them for such movements or for tending to their own needs.

This non-judgmental quality is an important factor in accepting the horse as our teacher, especially for people who have lost their trust in their fellow man due to deep wounds, trauma, spiritual abuse, or a long-time pattern of being and feeling judged. The horse doesn't care about how much money we make, what car we drive, or where we grew up, and the horse doesn't have an agenda. While in an EGE session, people feel that the horse sees into them and they trust the horse. Because of this, people are more open to the horse's feedback than that of another human. Those who have lost trust in people can establish trust with the horse, and through relationship with the horse, they find healing and a renewed ability to trust people.

When we are near a horse, the wisdom of the body becomes more accessible than when we are sitting in chairs in a room. The

horse connects to and responds to the energy of who we are being and how we are being in the moment, without labels, titles, or pretense. If we make a change in our body, our attitude, or our energy, the horse's response is immediate, helping us to zero in on our core topic or issue in minutes, rather than the weeks or months that it often takes in other coaching and therapy modalities. Being connected to the energy of the horse raises our awareness and accelerates the process of learning and change.

Horses reflect the energy of their environment, and that can include reflecting our energy back to us, helping us to see something we didn't see in ourselves or our situation (something unconscious). Often a horse will mirror the unproductive mood or attitude of a person, and when that person sees the impact of their mood or attitude on the horse, that the horse is at consequence for something inside of them, they become motivated to change, not for their own sake but for the horse's sake. This ability to reflect what's inside of us sometimes puts the horse in the role of the healer. When the horse's reflection offers validation of our energy or suppressed emotion, we feel seen, acknowledged, and understood. Horses can help us heal on an energetic/spiritual level through this connection.

When we are around horses, it usually means we are in a natural environment with less electricity, concrete, and mechanical influences. In urban settings, these influences bombard our bodies, causing a necessary desensitization. But when we are in a more natural environment, our sensitivity can return, allowing us to take in more information and listen more closely to our own internal messages.

Horse as Guide

Since prehistoric times, horses have been closely involved with humans, and until the early to mid-20th century, horses were part of day to day life, whether you owned a horse or not. Traveling into town to

pick up your groceries you'd be riding a horse, driving a horse, or walking near and around horses. Based on the stories I've heard from hundreds of people, you'd be hard-pressed to find a person born before 1980 who didn't have an experience of being around a horse. It may have been unconscious, but if you ask someone about the experience, and they reflect back to it, they will note feeling something different, likely better, when they were in the presence of a horse.

There is no record of when horses became beneficial contributors to the lives of humans. But we can trace the beginning of the incorporation of horses into learning and healing models to the mid-1900s. In 1969, horses became part of physical therapy and rehabilitation with the founding of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA), later renamed PATH International. The physiological benefits of riding for the handicapped are well established. Because horseback riding rhythmically moves the rider's body in a manner similar to a human gait, riders with physical disabilities often show improvement in flexibility, balance, and muscle strength. As an activity, therapeutic riding contributes positively to the cognitive, physical, emotional, and social well-being of individuals with special needs, both physical and mental.⁴⁸ These programs are considered equine-assisted activities.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, horses became involved with mental health and self-development. In 1989, Ariana Strozzi Mazzucchi, who later became my mentor, began incorporating horses into leadership training programs. As a lifelong horsewoman, Ariana knew the horses would give real-time feedback to her students who were practicing their leadership presence and coming into alignment with their goals. What Ariana didn't expect was that each and every person reported that the interaction they were having with the horse reflected exactly what was happening for them in their job, home life, relationship, etc.

Ariana invited her students to work with the horse as a metaphor for what was happening in their everyday life, and see if they could make a change. These early sessions created the groundwork for what she would later call Equine Guided Education.

The incorporation of horses into psychotherapy began in 1990 when Barbara K. Rector, M.A., implemented equine-facilitated psychotherapy at the Sierra Tucson treatment center, and later began her Adventures in Awareness programs, influencing current equine-facilitated activity models. Various forms of equine-assisted and equine-facilitated learning and therapy models continued to expand and evolve through the 1990s.

In 1999, after incorporating horses into self-development and leadership programs for ten years, Ariana coined the term Equine Guided Education. She carefully chose each word and assigned it a specific definition unique to the work:

Equine - A horse representing the ancient archetypes of strength, courage, dignity, power, honor, beauty, endurance, and resilience.

Guided - The magical ability of horses to take us into unknown or unexplored territory; a place where we can heal the past, reimagine our future, and connect to our life purpose and share our natural wisdom.

Education - Discipline of mind or character through study or instruction; dealing with the principles and practices of teaching and learning. Including educational, coaching, and therapeutic models that encourage effective relationship, communication, coordination, and social interaction skills for individuals and/or groups.⁴⁹

Ariana found that the horses were not merely assisting or facilitating the process, they were actually guiding it. She learned that by directing

her attention to follow the horse, and suggesting her students and clients also follow the attention of the horse, the reflection of the horse, or the energy reflected by the horse, everyone gained insights and clarity that had previously eluded them.

The value of the horse's guidance is not only relevant for the participant, but also for the facilitator. As a facilitator, it's easy to create our own interpretation of a client's situation, but to be an effective facilitator or coach, we must avoid projecting our own preferences, stories, or ideals onto the client's situation. My SkyHorseEGE™ training included getting to know myself, my own triggers, and my own preferences. This awareness helps me separate my "stuff" from what is happening with my client. If I have an idea of what's happening, and I'm following the horse, I will notice if my interpretation doesn't match the horse's reflection, and in that case, I know to let go of my interpretation and see what else is there.

Ariana felt the word education, based on her definition, encompassed the variety of models this work serves, and so far, it has served many. Between 2010 and 2017, I had the opportunity to work alongside Ariana in the SkyHorse Equine Guided Education certification program to train over one hundred students from within the United States and all over the world, including Spain, Italy, Switzerland, Canada, Netherlands, Turkey, Taiwan, Colombia, England, Australia, France, and Korea. The students came to learn how to incorporate horses into their own unique professional services, which include coaching, psychotherapy, art therapy, yoga, teaching, human resource development, organizational development, social work, horse training, riding instruction, and more.

By adding in the experiential component of horses, we accelerate the learning process, and we deepen the integration of what we have learned. When you engage in learning with a horse, your entire being becomes involved, not just your mind and intellect. The body becomes

an active participant, and the spirit is activated through the energetic connection with the horse. When learning or an Aha! moment takes place, you have a visceral experience. It is not just a thought or mental concept, but it is felt throughout your entire being. This experience becomes a somatic marker, a feeling or sensation that you can return to later, even when the horse isn't present.

Heart of the Matter

For years there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence that people feel better when they are around horses. Participants who engage in equine supported educational activities report that when they addressed their issue or inquiry with the horse present, they discovered insights or clarity that had previously been inaccessible to them. As a facilitator, I've witnessed this with the students and participants I work with, and I've felt it for myself. In the past, I couldn't have said exactly *why* it was so, and I didn't feel the necessity to prove it. Knowing Equine Guided Education worked for people because I saw and felt it was good enough for me to keep doing it and trust it.

But recently, research has been done that seems to explain some of the how and the why that make EGE work. The research indicates that the heart of the horse plays a key role in the effectiveness of equine coaching, learning, and therapy models.

First, let's look at the human heart. The human heart generates the largest electromagnetic field in the body. The magnetic field produced by the heart is more than 100 times greater in strength than that of the brain, and this field can be detected and measured three feet away, in all directions from a person's body, and between two individuals in close proximity.⁵⁰ The average human heart weighs less than one pound, while the average horse heart weighs between nine and eleven pounds. Highly athletic horses have been found to have larger than

average hearts. Secretariat's heart was twenty-two pounds. The horse's larger heart generates an electromagnetic field that is five times greater than the human one.

According to a HeartMath study when people touch or are in close proximity, there's a transference of the electromagnetic energy produced by the heart and encoded within it is subtle energetic communication beyond what's typically considered non-verbal communication, i.e. facial expression, tone of voice, and body language. This electromagnetic or "energetic" communication operates at a subconscious level via the nervous system, which acts as an antenna, tuning into the magnetic field produced by the hearts of other people (and animals).⁵¹ This transference of subtle energetic information occurring between the magnetic field of a human and horse helps to explain how a horse is able to detect subtle feelings, moods, and energetic shifts, and reflect them back to the participant in an EGE session.

Horses living in natural, non-stressful environments are likely to spend most of their time in balanced states characterized as *coherent*. As it relates to the heart, coherence refers to a state characterized by harmony, stability, synchronization, and efficient or optimal function. While functioning in a coherent mode, the heart pulls other biological systems into synchronization, leading to entrainment, a state with increased coherence between each system. The coherent state correlates to improvements in cognitive function, and social and physical performance, and a general sense of well-being.⁵²

With the horse's magnetic field being stronger than that of a human, it is not difficult to see how a horse in a coherent state can influence the humans in their proximity into a more coherent state, and it is not surprising that many people report "feeling better" when they are around horses. This may also explain why a person can get to the "heart of the matter" more quickly when they are in the presence of a horse. With the horse's state contributing to coherence in the human

and entrainment of the human's heart and brain, they are better able to find alignment between what the heart wants and what the brain thinks. This state is more conducive to integrating new information and perspectives, and finding clarity.

It is from a state of coherence that we are best able to access our internal guidance system, increasing our ability to move beyond habitual reactions and perceptions, and to better access our inner wisdom and intuitive discernment. With practice, we can learn to more easily make self-directed, heart-centered choices through a connection to our internal guidance system.

It may not only be the energetics of the horse's heart that influence the effectiveness of EGE. There is also something interesting about the physical alignment of our heart space with a horse's heart space when we interact with them.

If an average-sized person stands next to an average-sized horse, the two hearts line up on the same horizontal plane. And when we sit on a horse's back to ride, our hearts share the same vertical plane. Time and time again, when I have been working with a client, and that client begins to speak from their heart, the horse will walk over and align its heart space to the person's heart. With no agenda or judgment, this response by the horse has given many people the affirmation and confirmation they needed to trust what their hearts wanted.

A Uniquely Integrated Approach

Equine Guided Education, as it relates to human development, is the basis of my work. Through years of studying the principles and practicing EGE, I have integrated it deeply into my everyday life and how I work with clients, even when I don't have a horse present. Because each person is unique, no singular system or method is sufficient, and I can't always have a horse with me so it has been necessary to develop additional tools and methods.

When I work with my clients, I listen to their stories. I listen for beliefs and fears, and I take note of what repeats. I pay attention to what they are focused on, what does or doesn't have energy in their story, how they interpret what is happening for them, repetitive phrases, or attitudes and habits. I note if their body language is or is not congruent with their words. I watch to see how the horse responds to them, to what they are saying. All of these give clues to what might be going on that we can further explore. The additional tools and methods I choose to use at any given time depend on the specifics of the client's situation and needs.

In addition to the method of EGE, I incorporate the wisdom gained from my own life lessons and a variety of complementary philosophies, tools, and methods. Tools and methods derived from psychology and somatics provide certain language and practices that are useful in addressing the mind and body, but these languages alone are not sufficient to address the spirit and soul. EGE provides language to address the spirit, and the language and articulation provided by the use of archetypes, myths, and metaphors expand on it to include the soul.

CONCLUSION

I hope that somewhere in these pages you have found an insight or an Aha! that leads you to freedom, to break free of the beliefs, patterns, fears, and habits that might be holding you back, preventing you from living a satisfying life. Flow and satisfaction come through alignment with your internal guidance system and the pursuit of your soul's destiny. I encourage you to take up the reins and lead yourself into your future. Make a commitment to be you. Begin now.