

A Horse Shall Forever Be ... A Horse

c. Marlis Amato 2011

This month, I'd like to share with you a story a horse told me recently. No, I'm not an animal communicator. I can't read their minds. But, I can read Equus pretty well. Horses continually talk to us, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly. The problem is, we don't hear them. Their language is silent. They feel energy. They see invisible space lines. We humans rely on our hearing, our voice, and our vision to communicate. We pay almost no attention to our bodies, though our bodies do speak for us without our knowledge. Essentially, horses survive by "feel," that is, they sense, read, and respond to very small changes in energy. Their reaction to what they sense is completely instinctual. Humans *physically* "feel", through touch and contact. We're taught to ignore our instincts in response to the information we see, hear, or feel. We subdue our "gut" reactions and override them through cognitive thought processes. The result is, we make judgments about a situation and then create an action plan to handle what we've experienced.

Equine communication and human communication are worlds apart, and so it's very predictable that we would have behavior problems with the horse. The majority of problems stem from misunderstanding between the two languages. Actually, a horse is not capable of bad behavior. They are only capable of horse behavior. The "bad" behavior is a label *we've* assigned for what's acceptable to us.

I met a cute little gray horse with huge soft eyes last month who has been very loudly trying to tell his rider what makes him uncomfortable and unhappy. Under saddle, he head tosses and bucks. The owner had enlisted the help of other trainers, but his behavior actually worsened. She was told by all who knew him that she should get rid of him because he's dangerous. Indeed, she was thrown and suffered major injuries, but did not give up on him.

When I first met him, he was standing quietly and relaxed, with head down. He certainly didn't look the picture of danger that had been described. As the owner mounted and walked off on a loose rein, he was calm and quiet. I asked her to pick up some rein contact and pick up to an energetic walk. That's when he began to tell me his story. Within a few steps, he started head tossing, appearing to try to pull the reins from the rider. She said, "This is the attitude I always get. He starts bucking whenever we pick up a canter, and sometimes at the trot. He just wants to get rid of me." The sentence I heard from him was, "I'm more than happy to let my rider get on, and I'll do the best I can to do what she asks. But! Sometimes there's just too much pressure for me and I can't bear it."

The rider didn't really appear to have much contact, but he was definitely saying it was too much for him. We worked for a while on teaching her how to deliver soft contact to the bit, and rewarded him for every little attempt to give to the bridle. Once she was able to find the right amount of softness, voila, no more head tossing, ears were forward, his stride lengthened, and all the "attitude" went away. He began actually looking for the bit, licking and chewing every few feet. When we moved to the trot, she had to again find the right amount of contact. Initially, he did put his ears back, head toss, tail swish, and threaten to buck. It didn't take long, and they were picking up the trot smoothly. He was responding

beautifully to just very light contact on the bit. We haven't cantered yet, because at this point it's up to his rider to learn how much pressure is too much for him. He is a very sensitive horse, and requires almost no amount of contact to do the right thing. I'm going to insert here, for those of you who are thinking it already, that his objection was not to the bit. He complained about *pressure*. The owner had changed to a bitless bridle, but the "attitude" still came through. He also complained about leg pressure. His complaint stopped as soon as I explained to "touch" his sides, not squeeze.

So, the rider found out that her cute little horse was only trying to deliver the message to her that he couldn't stand the pressure. He had no other way to tell her than to display horse behaviors, bad by our definition, but clear and natural horse behavior. Horses instinctively move away or run away from what makes them uncomfortable. Flight, of course, is their first line of defense. In this situation, he can't run away. If he does, the discomfort just gets worse. Their second line of defense is to fight. Interesting, our human language, we have different terms for the same thing, and judge in which instance we're going to use which term. In the field, when a horse is defending space or themselves from harm, we call the behavior "kicking out." Under saddle, though, we call it bucking. Hmm... kicking out is normal behavior, bucking is unacceptable. But, these are identical behaviors. He only knows one definition. This little horse was expressing in the only language he knows, that he was uncomfortable, and perhaps even in pain. It does seem counterintuitive to us humans, that if a little pressure causes a bad behavior, then we need to lighten up more. Unfortunately, our instinctive reaction is to apply more pressure to get a response, and so the behavior worsens. Soon the horse begins to buck before the actual discomfort hits, in anticipation of what's to come. If every time he goes forward hard, he meets discomfort or pain, he will learn either not to go forward or display his evasive behaviors ahead of time. The key to behavior cures lies in understanding the source of the behavior, and addressing that, not trying to force the horse to do things our way, or punishing him. In a different horse, the pressure the rider was using would most likely have been fine. But – we must strive to adapt based on what the horse says. This horse simply has to be taught quietly and slowly exactly how to respond to pressure. It takes a bit of time and effort, but will create a happy and willing horse.

Please, if your horse is exhibiting "bad" behavior, take the time to figure out why. Don't automatically chalk him/her off to being a bad horse and blame or punish. You would be punishing a horse for being a horse. Be sensitive to the fact that your horse can only speak to you through horse behavior. Very few horses have a "don't want to" attitude for no reason. That's a human trait, not a horse trait. We can change our responses and behaviors, a horse cannot.

I applaud this owner for trying to find a cure for her boy, rather than passing the problem along to a different owner. It's lucky for this little horse that his owner truly loves him and now knows to listen, and can understand, what he has to say.