



GYPSY AND ME: A LOVE STORY

It was a cold March day in 2007, and Joan and I arrived at Gypsy’s stall to find her all the way at the back, where beyond the fence was the riding paddock and round pen, with her back to us, and not at all interested in turning around or even letting on that she knew I was there. Joan stepped into the vacant stall next door and said to me, “I want you to go into her stall, close the gate, stay just inside it, stand still, don’t say anything out loud, and don’t gesture, and get her to come to you.” I’m sure my face was a study, but we had talked briefly about “where I was” before we came to the barn, and I had disclosed that I was in severe pain about missing Louisiana and having a very tough time with it, so I had plenty of material for such an experiment.¹

¹ Elizabeth Buchan, in *Perfect Love*, one of her wonderful novels, says “Loss does not arrive all at once: it comes as an injection that drives under the skin and floods the system. Then it disperses until the next time when, summoned by smell, a word, a memory, the needle jabs into the flesh.” Something had given me a major jab shortly before this appointment, and I was truly flooded with the pain of loss. Perhaps it was the 30 inches of snow we had in December and January in Colorado that had reminded me of Louisiana’s opulent heat I had learned to love.

I took up a position just inside the stall, and fixed my eyes on Gypsy's ample rear, and began to talk to her silently. It took a few minutes, and then she turned her head. I kept going, and she turned and took a couple of steps away from the end of the stall. I kept going and she took a couple more. Suddenly I realized that my whole body stance had changed – I had loosened, my shoulders were back, my arms and hands were relaxed at my sides, my head was up, and I was saying, very, very quietly, “Oh, it isn't any use to talk about it, I couldn't afford to live there anymore even if I could go back.” She walked over to me and put her nose down on my heart. The floodgates of course opened, but for every tear of pain that I shed, I shed two of joy – it was a breakthrough, and it has lasted.

Every person I ever fell in love with during my life proved a disappointment. Finally, I fell in love with a horse, and it's working out just fine.

The pathway to the horse began with a storm warning in Louisiana. It was late August, 2005, and a hurricane was on its way. I lived in Mandeville, on the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain across from New Orleans, and my parish (Louisiana counties are called parishes) had ordered a mandatory evacuation on Saturday, August 27th. I was given 30 minutes to get myself and my three cats behind my niece's RV to evacuate to her daughter's home in Houston – I packed three days worth of clothes in a duffel bag, got water, food, and litter into the car, and then packed the cats into their cage in the rear and drove for seven hours, not knowing where I was going, how to get there, what the phone number was, what the address was – I just followed the RV.

In Houston, the atmosphere was tense and tentative – the year before, Hurricane Ivan had taken a right turn just before landfall, and swacked Florida, but left Mandeville completely untouched. Surely the same thing would happen again. The bad news, the awful pictures, the sounds, the stories, the tragedies, the suffering, the dying, did not begin until Monday, and from Monday through Thursday, I was glued to CNN as it reported the tearing apart of the world I had come to love. I was grateful for my safe haven in Houston, but also guilt-ridden for being there -- a classic case of survivor guilt. I also became convinced as the week went on that I could not return, that I would die if I went back.

I called my son in Longmont, Colorado, and asked him to meet me in Dallas Friday evening, September 2, to drive with me back to his home. I asked for refuge, and by golly, I got it. He and Sara, his wife, and their son Tobin, made room for me and my cats in their home, I found an apartment in two or three weeks and moved into it, and then I began the process of transferring my psyche, my spirit, and my heart to Colorado. I was a mess, and I knew it, and I knew I was going to need some help, but I'd had psychotherapy in the past, and I knew the process of choosing a therapist was not easy, and I had no tried and tested sources of referral in Colorado.

ENTER THE HORSE

During a casual visit to a bookstore, I came across a book named *The Tao of Equus*, by Linda Kohanov. I read it skeptically, because I thought the idea of using a horse as a co-therapist was crazy, but the sources she used were good ones, and she was using their data correctly. There

was another book by her too – called *Riding Between the Worlds* – and that was the anecdotal support for the theory in the *Tao*. I laughed and cried my way through that, realized that I could no way go to Tucson, Arizona, where Kohanov worked, but there had to be something going on in Colorado, which is the land of wall-to-wall horses. Thank goodness for Google – I typed in “Boulder County, CO equine-assisted therapy” and up came Medicine Horse. And at Medicine Horse I met Gypsy.

She’s a bay Morgan mare in her early twenties (about my age in horse-to-human ratio) with black mane and tail, and rock-solid steady. My meetings with her included the presence of a human therapist² whose job was to interpret her body language to me and to teach me some rudimentary horsemanship skills which would get us to “join up” and facilitate the process of healing.

At my first appointment, in early 2006, I spent a few minutes with Jackie, signing waivers and giving a very abbreviated life story, and then followed her to the barn area to begin the process of meeting the horses. I was introduced to about twelve horses, all of whom were very interested in me (perhaps in hopes of apples? Maybe not – but then again, maybe so!), almost all of whom were very big (I had forgotten that size thing!), and by the end of the tour, I couldn’t have told you anything about any of them, except that there was a spectacularly beautiful white Arabian mare that I thought might be just perfect. The therapist guided me to the last stall in the big barn, and said, “This is Gypsy – I’m thinking you might want to work with her for awhile and see if it’s a fit.” It wasn’t the white mare. I said okay, we’d try her and see, and because that appointment was ending in just a few minutes, I spent a little time talking to her (feeling like a total fool – what do you say to a horse you’ve never met before and to whom you’re supposed to be baring your soul?) and then we made another appointment and I left.

I drove home feeling oddly guarded about this experience. I didn’t want to talk to anyone about it, for fear of hearing “horse laughs” and having to explain and defend. But I also wanted to shout it from the housetops. I settled for another trip to Borders, an internet trip to Amazon, a trip to the Longmont Public Library, and the beginning of the acquisition of a shelf full of books about horses. I thought I should know not only what the names of all their parts were (I have a diagram on my wall next to my desk, but I still don’t know them all by heart), but also everything written about how to have a relationship with one. I didn’t really know how my sons were going to react to this latest ‘Mom-caper’ and I dreaded the possibility that they would think this was crazy. But my sons are used to my enthusiasms, not all of which are short-lived, and they were, and remain, pretty happy about this one.

I had a couple of appointments with Gypsy and Jackie over the next three or four weeks, and was beginning to feel comfortable with the situation. I learned to halter her, how to lead her out of the barn without getting mashed against the doorjamb, how to keep her from dropping her head

² I had three human therapists and two horse therapists in the course of this therapy. The human therapists were Jackie, Maggie and the third is Joan, because I’m not finished as of this writing. The horse was Gypsy, then Sophie, then Gypsy again.

to graze along the path to the hitching post, and how to tie her to the post so I could do some grooming while I talked. (I've never mastered the knot – I think that at my next appointment I'm going to have to ask to do the knot ten times in a row and maybe it will stay in my hands. I could play the Bach Toccata & Fugue in D Minor on the organ, and I can't tie a simple knot??? What's that about?) I learned how to get her to lift her feet so I could pick her hooves, and even one day groomed off the watercolor-painted name from her side where the youth group members had "branded" her. I walked her into a grassy field to let her graze to her heart's content, and brought her back to the barn and gave her an apple at the end of each appointment, which she loved.

I have never owned a horse. I have had a minimal amount of experience with riding horses: a few summers of camp, a season of lessons at a nearby stables with my sons when they were old enough, and four or five trail rides at vacation spots – Mt. Desert Island, Maine and Galena, Illinois, I remember, but there were a few more – and then a long period of no riding, no horses. I always loved horses, but from a distance. My parents had no desire to have a horse-crazy girl in their house, so there was really no provision for them on a regular basis.

I moved to Louisiana from Illinois in 2001, and in 2003 went to work for Michael Hingle & Associates, a law firm headquartered in Slidell, LA. Michael is a wonderful horseman, who breeds and raises Paso Finos, and shows them in competition all over the country, bringing home boatloads of ribbons, almost all of them blue. I became aware that Southeastern Louisiana was horse country, and nearby Mississippi was a species of horse heaven, but I thought by then I was too old and not athletic enough to start riding, so I suppressed the urge, ate up the conversations with Michael and his family about their Paso Finos, visited the barn one day and was introduced to all of them, inhaled the aroma of horse and stables (they are not the same smell, you know) down to my toes, and went home with something new nestled in my soul. I didn't know what it was, but it felt special.

And then came Katrina. And then came Gypsy.

STARTERS

About the fourth or fifth appointment into the therapy, came the day I walked into her stall to halter her, started to talk about how good I was feeling, and she stepped away from me and presented me with her considerable rump. My jaw must have dropped, because Jackie said "How are you feeling right now?" and I said "Rejected!!" right smartly. Jackie nodded, and asked what I was going to do about it, and I mumbled something about getting in touch with myself, she nodded again, and I proceeded to talk to Gypsy's rump about how I was really feeling, which was crappy – displaced, lost, unhappy, missing Louisiana, missing my friends there, missing my life there, feeling so bad about what was happening there – and pretty soon she turned around and walked over to me and stood with her shoulder near my chest. I accepted the invitation, put my arms around her, and started to sob on her shoulder. It was the beginning.

When I thought I had sobbed long enough, I started to pull away from her, but she put her chin

over my shoulder and held me against her – “Get it out, girl!!” was the message. Eventually I stopped, she released me, and I said my goodbyes and went home, feeling scoured out and lighter, but aware that I had a very long row to hoe before I was healed.

Jackie began to challenge me in terms of learning how to be with Gypsy on her terms – elements of horsemanship that would bring us closer to each other – and so we began to do some rather formal (to me, at least) things that were new to me. We spent several hot afternoons in the round pen, with me learning how to get her to do what I was being instructed to want (how ignorant can you be, when you don’t even know what you could want that a horse will provide if you can only figure out how to ask?) and getting more and more successful with it. There was a wonderful day when I draped the lead rope over her neck and asked her to “walk on” beside me, and she did, all the way around the pen and then into the center to meet Jackie, and then back out to the fence again to do another circuit, all hands-free, just my voice and my movement next to her. I was astounded by the degree of concentration it took to get that result, and exhilarated by the outcome. There was another wonderful day when I stopped her in the center of the pen and dropped her lead rope to the ground and stepped away from her, and then walked all the way around her, and back around in the other direction, and she never budged. That was the day I fell absolutely in love with her and knew it was for life – she and I had truly joined up.

I think it was the week after the first ground-tie experience that we couldn’t use the round pen because someone else was using it, so we went into the big obstacle pen to play for awhile, and after she and I had walked together through a substantial number of “lanes” and over a few obstacles, Jackie suggested that I walk her up to an obstacle, stop her, tell her about something that I was stuck on, and ask her to help me get over it. I had been wanting to do some organized exercise and couldn’t seem to make myself start, and so I thought “What have I got to lose?” and told Gypsy about it, and asked for her help, and as I took a step forward, so did she, and together we stepped over the obstacle. Do you know, I started exercising that very night, and kept up a regular regimen for several months? I’ve fallen away again, but Gypsy and I talked about it just last week, and I’ll be on the bike tonight.

Jackie and I had talked about my riding her. I had a lot of misgivings – she is considered an elderly horse, and I am not a flyweight. I worried about her back. But the day came that she found herself with a bareback pad on her back, and me on top of it, my fingers twined in her mane, being sedately led around the big paddock at a walk – and within seconds, I had remembered how to move with a moving horse, and was rocking comfortably on her back and feeling her spine with my spine, and loving it. It didn’t last long, because Jackie and I had agreed that it couldn’t be a big long ride, but it was wonderful, and I haven’t forgotten how it felt. I can’t begin to describe the shared sense of trust and intimacy I felt on her back – experienced riders know without being told, someone who has never ridden can’t know until they ride.

Throughout this time, there were conversations with her. And they were conversations, with

mutual communication going on. I was talking a blue streak with her, and painfully peeling layers of scar tissue off my psyche, and she was telling me, with gestures, that I was going to be okay, that she understood, that she sympathized, that I could get through it all.

TRANSITION

It wasn't very long after riding her that I came to Medicine Horse for an appointment and learned that Jackie was leaving. I was severely upset, and angry. I had my last two appointments with Gypsy and Jackie, and then said a tearful goodbye (Gypsy rubbed her nose across my chest 3 or 4 times in farewell, leaving generous smears of apple juice and pulp – that T-shirt has an honored place on the shelf in my closet, having never been washed!), and left. I knew I wasn't really ready to be without therapy, but I didn't know what to do. Medicine Horse was changing its organizational structure, relying on contract therapists who would be there on a per-hour basis rather than having a full-time therapist on the staff. I was lost, because I didn't know anything about these folks.

After some more Google research and an initial interview and some reference checking, in September, 2006, I hooked up with Maggie, who had a horse at a facility closer to home. I worked with her and Sophie, her horse, until December, when Maggie informed me that she had received a job offer too good to refuse, and was leaving Colorado at the end of December. Again, I was feeling cut adrift, but she left me the names of several equine-assisted therapists who either had their own horses, or who were at Medicine Horse on a contract basis, and enough information about each of the referrals to assist me in making a choice. There wasn't really any choice: I wanted to be back with Gypsy, and that meant one of the contract therapists, and I chose the one that had been described as having “nice centered energy.” Her name is Joan.

ANOTHER TRANSITION

It was wonderful to be back at Medicine Horse, back with “my herd” – and especially with Gypsy. Joan turned out to have been born and raised about forty miles from my childhood home, we had both spent time at the University of Michigan (though not at the same time), and we moved effortlessly into a solid sense of working together.

I still visit Gypsy regularly and view her as my primary therapist. But I had a significant birthday in April, 2007 – my 70th, and now Gypsy and I are the same age, and I have moved into “cronehood.” My most recent appointment with her provided both me and Joan with another wonderful moment. We had taken her out for grooming, and when I had brushed her to a high shine, we decided to take her into the obstacle pen for a little while. Joan removed her halter and hung it on the fence, and she started to roam around looking for some grass at the fence line, and Joan and I talked about the significance of this particular birthday for me, and pretty soon it was time to take Gypsy back to the barn to her stall. Joan said to me, “I want you to catch her and

halter her,” and handed me the halter, adding, “It may take awhile, because you know she’s the alpha mare here, she kind of does as she pleases, and she may not want to come in yet.” I took the halter and turned toward Gypsy, who was at the far side of the pen from us. She had her head down at the fence line pulling some grass, and I made some kissing sounds and called her name. She lifted her head, and I started toward her. She turned and faced me, and stood stock still, and let me walk right up to her and halter her and lead her back to Joan – no fuss, no muss, no bother. Joan said, “What is it with you and this horse?” and I said, “We’re soul sisters – we’re the same age!”

In reading back over what I have just written, I think I want to amend the second sentence in this paragraph – I am not just a crone, I have become an alpha too.

Keep reading.

AND WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

My encounters with Gypsy are not just a series of isolated moments in the lives of two disparate creatures. The progress of this relationship has been marked by the development of ever-deepening interest, caring behavior, remembrance, trust, insight, intuitive understanding, and even love on both sides of the biological barrier between us. I utterly trust Gypsy, because in the going-on-two-years I have known her, I have never once had any reason to think she might really hurt me.

This is not to say I don’t respect her size and weight – I keep track of my feet and her feet, and put a lot of space between us when I walk around her back. But I have seen her exercise her alpha mare position to protect me (one day when we met her in the pasture in the middle of part of the herd including a couple juvenile delinquents and she shielded me from their “I’m so big and scary!” antics by standing in front of me and snorting them off.) She has willingly tendered to me respect and cooperation in exchange for some grooming and a Golden Delicious apple and what she appears to regard as interesting conversation. And probably most important, she has never judged me so long as I have been honest with myself and her. I can tell her anything, feel anything, express any kind of emotion, and it’s okay by her. What human being can you say that about?

And that is the secret of equine-assisted therapy – honor your responsibility to learn to be honest with yourself, join up with a horse, and the therapy will happen. And because the behavior of the horse is being monitored by an experienced human therapist, it will happen a whole heck of a lot faster than traditional human-to-human talking therapy. I know that’s true because I’ve had that kind, and the time consumed in “Getting to Know You, Getting to Know All About You” was at least twenty times longer than it was with Gypsy on the job. With the insights provided by the horse’s reaction to me, as translated into English by the human therapists, the whole process went a lot faster and, in my estimation, cut a lot deeper.³

³ This course of therapy has not been a once-a-week pattern, because I simply did not have the money to manage that. Sometimes it was once every two weeks, sometimes once a month. She never forgets me, and we

I'm ready to wind up the therapy part of this journey in a couple of months or so, and then I will commit myself to a rest-of-my-life or rest-of-her-life (whichever is shorter) relationship of grooming, apple-feeding and chit-chat for Gypsy and me. She ranks up there with my family and close human friends as my idea of a lifetime relationship to cherish.

Hanging out with a horse can be a real life-saver!!

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pick up where we left off without a hitch (no pun intended). The money to complete my therapy is being provided by the American Red Cross Access2Care program, which is part of its Hurricane Recovery effort.