

FINDING COURAGE Through the Heart of the Horse

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Creating Resilience, Managing Stress, Regulating Emotions in times of challenge and unexpected change.

Guided by relationship with horses and heart focus practices we can strengthen our courage, compassion, confidence, and community.

Leaning lazily back against a sturdy tree in the warmth of a sunny pasture, listening to the munching of our grazing horses and the soft sighs of contented ponies, and admiring the amazing patterns on Holly, our zebra, my personal cares and the uncertainty of life seemed as far away as the overhead clouds.

I am aware that we are in the midst of rough times, unprecedented change, disruption, challenge, and transition. Yet, in this moment, in the pasture belonging to a resilient and wise-hearted herd of horses, I feel calm and at peace.

Change is all around us and for many, within us as well. In this present moment of uncertainty and unprecedented life changes we can learn from the unbridled spirit of the horse about finding courage from our heart and discovering resiliency within ourselves.

Resilience is born in the heart. The word courage comes from the Latin word *cor*, heart, and the French word *coeur*, of the heart. Resilience is a matter of following your heart; the courage to go



optimistically beyond life's obstacles and challenges and be the better for it.

In the presence of our big-hearted horses we can more easily and clearly listen to and connect from our heart. We can learn from the relationship with our horse partners to tap into the internal and innate resilience with which we are born, like all of nature's beings. Responding in present time from our senses, the intelligence of our heart, and the

wisdom of our mind, we are resilient, able to prepare for, recover from, and adapt in the presence of stress, challenge, or adversity. It's how horses naturally survive and thrive.

"Resilience is that ineffable quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes." Psychology Today

When we tap into our resiliency, we can allow stressful situations and life challenges to be experienced as outside of us and not overwhelm us. We can witness the drama of adversity without being a participant in the drama - staying connected,



centered, positive, aware, and ready to act for the best possible present and future.

We share with our horses three basic needs: the need for safety, the need to belong, and the need to insure the survival of the next generation. Resiliency provides the internal resource for horses and humans to meet these basic needs, especially in times of challenge and unexpected change.

We can learn from our horses how to embody resiliency as an expression of our authentic nature and inner knowing. Our internal capacity does not depend only on external resource, it supports us to experience a sense of internal safety in our life and compassion for those in our world.

Horses are masters of resiliency, tracing their lineage back over 65 million years. Horses have embodied resilience for generations, thriving inherently through changing life conditions by:

- Being united as they stand steady and galloping forward as one
- Responding with a big brave heart and *sense-ability*
- Being present to the moment and optimistic for the future
- Seeking safety, finding their place of belonging, and protecting each other in their herd
- Adapting effectively and efficiently to change

Horses create conditions for their best possible future to emerge by building on their collective strengths and wisdom, by being resilient in unexpected change, by living in harmony with each other and their environment, and by moving toward what is positive and life-giving.

They are always on the lookout for greener grass, a friend to scratch an itch that cannot be reached alone, a way out of a corner or unpredictable dilemma, such as a locked gate. They hold no grudges toward each other, carry no imagined assumptions, and look for the value and best in one another.

Our horses at Pebble Ledge Ranch are the ultimate optimists. They move forward toward that which is of most value to them and never look back in disappointment or dwell on past regrets.

They learn from what does not work and stay focused on what does work. Our horses, like yours, lead from their hearts



and are free from the human mental models of negative, unproductive thought.

As humans who have not yet survived the 65 million years of horses' existence, we can learn resilience from being with our horses:

- To have a natural curiosity about life
- To believe that the world is a good place and has the resources to meet your need for safety and a place of belonging in your herd
- To live in the present, rather than allowing past occurrences to define current life and determine future outcome
- To engage from your heart with courage and compassion
- To celebrate often with the herd and find joy from within

Spending time in the presence of our horses can expand the range of what we are humanly capable of by opening our minds and hearts and informing our actions. Standing tall next to our horses we can practice expanding more fully into who we are. Feeling our

hooves alongside our horses' hooves we can feel the ground firmly under us. We can take a stand for our values and be clearer about that which is important to us.

Breathing deeply and slowly in rhythm with our horses' breath we can slow up, quiet down, shake off our cares and "snuffle" out our stress. Listening quietly, in the good company of our horses, we can ask ourselves our most important life questions and listen from within for what wants to be heard.

John is a coaching client with whom my horses and I work. He came to the ranch for some guidance as he was enormously unhappy in his career, even though he was a great success in his daily work. His skills were well-matched to what he was successful at doing, but his interests and heart were not. He joined the herd in the pasture, and in the peace and stillness of the horses he was able to quiet the noise inside his head, and the voices around him that were giving their fearful advice. *"How would he pay his bills? Would the well-being of his family be at risk*

if he left his current job as a factory manager and followed his love of working with computers?"

In the expansiveness of the pasture and the powerful presence of the horses he could courageously and sensibly explore how he might make that transition, from his outwardly successful career to something that had more heart and meaning for him. Envisioning a more joyful, meaningful life he was able to let go of old patterns, fears, and assumptions, and open his heart with curiosity to new possibilities.

He was able to listen and reflect on what was the truth for him about his situation. John realized that it was important to live the life he wanted to live rather than the life others thought he should live.

John returned to the ranch and pasture a few months later and much had changed. He was working for a great computer start-up company, using many of the management skills he had learned in his past career but following his heart to what was exciting for him now in his life. He said he was happier (while giving his favorite horse a hug),

but even better was that his whole family was happier.

I am not sure whether horses "feel happy" like John, making a life change, but they do seem to experience joy. Maybe it is just being honestly who they are - in the wave of their tail, toss of their head, and flow of their body as they run and play on a cool crisp morning, without a care in the world.

We can, in the good company of our horses, feel the joy of being just who we are when we are more in alignment and in the flow of our hearts and minds and actions.

When we live fully like horses, in the present moment with care for the collective and in the flow of our life purpose, we can be more compassionate, courageous, and resilient in the face of adversity - and in that we gain the strength to thrive.

Doctors from a Cleveland hospital system came to our Pebble Ledge Ranch with the intention to discover and create a healthier way of being amid the Covid-19 crisis. At first they were a bit skeptical that spending time with our horses

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could help them recover calm, release stress, or to remember to listen from their hearts. In the presence of the horses they began to relax, slow up, de-stress, and reflect on what really mattered - and have some fun.

Hanging out with our horses like old-time friends, the docs were invited to have silent, heart-to-heart conversations with the horses and then with each other. In the presence of the herd of six steadfast horses and one playful zebra, they listened compassionately. This deeper listening from the heart and horse whispering revealed heartfelt messages beneath words and beyond what could be spoken. This “horse” way of connecting supported the docs to slow up, sense from a responsive mode, and focus their attention through their senses. Surrounded by the herd they could be more awake and aware, softly speaking from heart and listening from soul.

We next invited the docs to approach a horse that they had connected with and share silently - from their heart to the horse’s heart - a true story of when they made a difference in someone’s life. In doing this they became aware of their strengths and their heartfelt compassion which made that possible.

The docs then shared silently, from their heart to the horses’ heart, a deep desire, dream, or vision; first for themselves, next for someone they love, and third, for humanity.

In the presence of the horses, the docs each listened from within for a message, dream, or vision shared by the horse that they would be responsible for sharing with their fellow herd members accompanying them that day.

During the lunch break they each created a symbol representing their hope for each other. Then, while social distancing in small groups,



they created a symbol that incorporated all of their symbols. Taking their group symbol (drawn on a paper plate) with them, they returned to the horses. Each team consulted with their horses about what would happen next and then, after getting approval from the horses, they painted their symbol on their horse companion as a way to carry the message out into the world.

What occurred next was an unusual art walk as each group walked, introduced their horse buddy, and shared something about vision as represented by their symbol. What did all the symbols have in common? There was a heart within each of their symbols.

The docs discovered (or rediscovered) their strengths, shared meaningful stories, and brought to life through image some of their dreams. They now would have the opportunity to learn from the horses how they might move to action toward their goals, facing challenges with collaboration and courage, humor and purpose, on what we call “the obstacle course of possibility.”

Collectively, the docs decided on a common goal; to take better care of themselves and their own well-being as they

continue their good care of others.

They were given materials such as ropes, buckets, cones, and PVC pipe, with the task for each small group to build an obstacle that all of the groups (with their horse companions) could get “over,” “around”, or “through.” They decided that what they needed to “get over” was feeling stressed by not being able to do enough to save their patients. What they needed to do to “get through” was support from each other, and what they needed to “get around to” was better self-care. One of the docs was responsible for taking the lead with the horse, one for showing the way forward, one for safety, one for making sure no one got left behind, and one to make sure they were having fun. With creativity, adaptability, and resilience they accomplished getting over, around, and through the obstacles to reach the goal line of their well-being on their co-created course of possibility - *A path with heart.*

At the end of the day, tired but inspired, the docs said a heartfelt “thank you” to their horse partners and gathered to share their reflections and learning. The docs spoke about what they were taking from

their experience that had value for them, and what they would take away from this adventure with the horses and one playful zebra:

- Slow up, quiet down, and allow for silence in order to hear what matters most
- Be open-minded, open-hearted, and curious - rather than judgmental
- Find our “hooves” and be fully aware and grounded in the reality of the present moment
- Listen from the heart with the intent to understand and be compassionate
- Take time to rest, regain strength, and heal from the stress and trauma of daily work
- Support each other and have each other’s back
- Remember to smile, laugh a lot, and have fun

Horses and The Intelligence of the Heart

Horses have a big heart. This is literally true – an average horse heart is considerably larger than a human heart and weighs (on the average) seven to nine pounds as compared to a half pound human heart.

Thoroughbred horses’ hearts weigh an average of nine to

eleven pounds, while the “wonder horse”, Secretariat, had a heart that weighed 22 pounds.

The scientific research of the Heartmath Institute has measured the electromagnetic field from a horse’s heart extending out to a range of 40-50 feet or more, while the human heart was measured extending out only 8-10 feet.

Research from the Heartmath Institute has demonstrated that a horse’s most natural state is one of “coherence”, where the mind and heart are connected, and the intelligence of the heart takes the lead. The hearts of both horses and humans contain more neurons than their brains and take in essential information from their senses. But, unlike horses, who listen primarily from the intelligence of their heart, we humans override our heart intelligence in favor of our mind. Horses, in their most natural state, live in heartfelt calm and harmony with themselves, their herdmates, and their environment, allowing for their resiliency, agility, and adaptability.

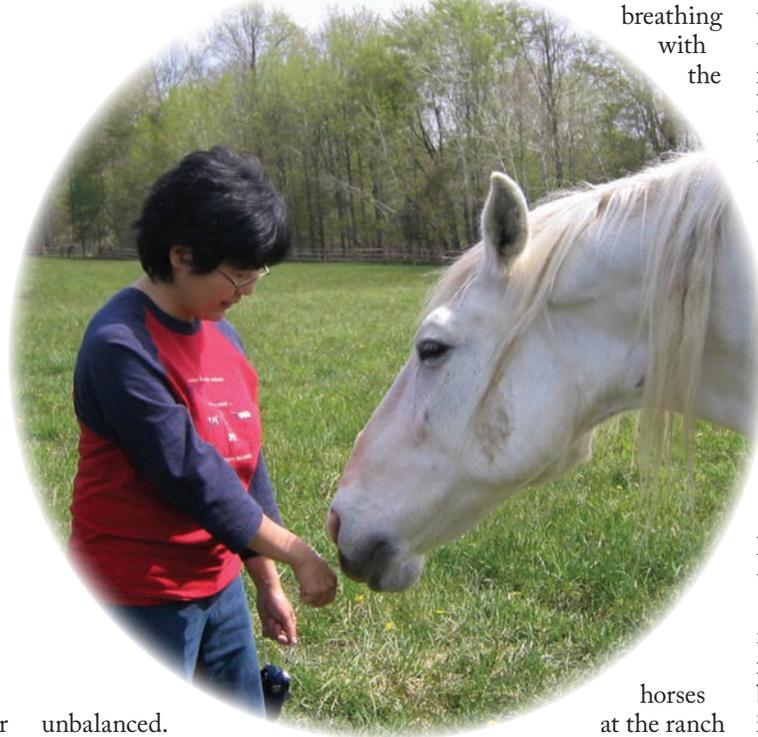
Most all of us can remember a time hanging out with our horse in the pasture, riding comfortably along a trail, or sitting curled up in the stall with them while they munched hay when effortlessly and magically any stress and worry melted away, our negative thoughts and anxiety disappeared.

In the presence of our horse, and the coherence and harmony of their big hearts, we can feel the compassion of our heart towards ourselves and to others.

Our heart is amazing; roughly the size of two hands clasped together, it beats about 100,000 times a day, pumping blood through 60,000 miles of blood vessels. One of the most amazing facts about the heart is that it is a source of essential intelligence.

At Pebble Ledge Ranch

we have benefited from scientific research from the HeartMath Institute. Incorporating engagement with horses and heart-focused practices, we can more easily connect with our heart’s intelligence. This wisdom of the heart strengthens resilience, promotes recovery from trauma, and creates realignment when life becomes



unbalanced. Through horses, nature, and heart-focused practices, we can learn to create a coherent rhythm and connection of the heart and mind, leading to emotional and physical well-being.

Horses live most of the time (when allowed to “just be horses”) calmly and in harmony. They inherently have a “coherent” heart rhythm and pattern which is a reliable measure of well-being and is consistent with the emotional states of calm and joy, which we too embody when we feel positive emotions.

A horse’s heart rhythm is strong enough to influence the human’s heart rhythm in regulating and balancing our emotions, calming our unsupported fears. That is one of the reasons that we may feel better, more ourselves, when

we are around our horses.

We have introduced many people to the practice of heart-focused breathing in the presence of the horse, as an easy, energy-saving, self-regulation strategy - designed to reduce the intensity of a stress reaction and replace it with an alert calm.

People who practiced engaged, heart-focused breathing with the

horses at the ranch commented that they felt “a sense of well-being and peace, decreased stress and anxiety, and increased feelings of trust, patience, and compassion.”

They can then practice this at home by just thinking about the horses to feel more connected to themselves, more at ease, energized, and more in touch with what matters most.

Jen, a coaching client, returned to the ranch after two years, remembering that with the horses she felt at peace, and that with them she had a safe place to remember who she was. She arrived at the ranch stressed, deeply sad, and unable to get hold of her emotions and her life. Jen engaged with the horses as they wandered through their pasture and began to feel a sense of calm and well-being that had been

missing from her life. “I cannot take your horses home with me, but I wish I could,” she said, “so I could be me, feel safe, and regain my balance.”

I asked her if she would be interested in learning about heart-focused practices to create the internal capacity for balance, and harmony that she felt with horses. I demonstrated the heart-focused practices and then in the presence of the herd, we practiced them together. We practiced heart-focused breathing and aligning heart and head, slowing up and breathing deeply, bringing to heart what we appreciated in our life and what had important value. The horses all moved closer to her and stood, relaxed and calm.

Holly, the zebra, walked in front of her and laid down on the ground, sighed, and completely relaxed, closing her eyes to rest.

“Wow, this really works,” Jen laughed. “Not only did I calm myself, I calmed the horses and put Holly, the zebra, to sleep!”

We know that most people do not have a horse readily available for heart-focused practices, but once they have the hang of it they can bring the horse to mind and heart, and use the heart-focused practices anytime and anywhere they want:

- to stop the impact of stress on the body
- to eliminate the energy drain
- to remove the drama or significance of a situation
- to neutralize emotional reactions

Horses, with their big hearts, communicate with each other over long distances and through generations. They share information through the resonance of their heart, and can listen through the connection to the pulse of the earth through their feet. I call this the “heart and hoof” wide web.

The world wide web, our global connection, is fragile and its technology can be hacked, interrupted, or shut down by

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outside sources, but not the “heart and hoof” wide web. We all have access within us to the “heart and hoof” wide web, an internal source of information and connection which is resilient and secure from external disturbance. You just bring to your heart and mind someone with whom you want to connect. As you think of them from your heart, feel their presence. This is how the “heart and hoof” wide web helps us stay connected when physical presence is not possible.

Try bringing into your thoughts, your heart and mind, a horse or pony with whom you have a heart connection and try bringing them *more fully* into your heart and mind right now. Whether this pony or horse is across the pasture or country, or has passed over the Rainbow Bridge, you are still deeply connected and their resilient, optimistic presence and wisdom is with you.

We Can Find Courage Through the Heart of the Horse - we need but just ask them.

Horses as Our Trustworthy Traveling Companions Through Uncertain Times.

Join one of your horses in your pasture or barn, or visit a horse across a fence in a field. Bring to your attention

a current situation you are facing with concern, anxiety, uncertainty, or a seemingly impossible decision.

Gaze softly at your horse companion while you slow and deepen your breathing, maybe even matching it to your horse’s breathing.

Notice your feet on the ground alongside your horse’s hooves as your feet become hooves feeling the heartbeat of the earth.

Turn your attention to the area you feel as your heart space and place your palm or hand or finger on your heart to get a better feel of your heart space.

Slow and deepen your breath and begin to allow your breath to come from your heart. You might want to place your hand on your horse and join its breathing.

Sensing safety from within, allow your feelings to come up and be held in your heart and the heart of your horse with compassion.

Bring to your heart your

appreciation for your horse companion, maybe their beauty, or the joy you feel with them, maybe it’s appreciation for the challenges you have met together, or maybe it’s the warm feeling of love you felt for your first pony. Create and sustain the positive feelings of joy, appreciation, and care, allowing them to fill you and flow through you - and to and from your horse companion.

Listen from the place of your heart’s knowing as you bring your attention back to the current situation you began with; the situation you are facing with concern, anxiety, or uncertainty.

Notice what has changed emotionally and physically as you support yourself with the presence of your horse companion and from within, with heart-focused breath, and heartfelt appreciation.

Guided by our relationship with horses and basic heart-focused practices, we can strengthen our resiliency and

our courage, compassion, confidence, and communities.

Inspired by the amazing resiliency and courageous heart of horses, maybe we can gallop beyond conventional boundaries to reach new heights of success for ourselves and the herds to which we belong.

We already have courage of the heart within us, and the capacity to create resilience to better manage stress and regulate our emotions in times of challenge and unexpected change. Horses live this way, and with the wisdom of the heart and relationship with a horse, we can too, for a life well lived. ♦

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