



Holding the Line

Lessons from the horses. By Joan Chevalier

It was a *Huffington Post* opinion piece that got me thinking. Written by a Ph.D., an expert in “spiritual connections and the art of manifestation,” it tells the story of her 60-year quest to “manifest” a 35-acre ranch with hay fields enough for a horse, a “rescued” one of course. (Whatever you do, don’t tell her that her habitat-fragmenting ranch is a disaster for other species—don’t want to shatter too many self-absorbed delusions.)

Her essay casually offers this sentimentality as a proxy for horse sense: “My horse has learned to respond to my heartfelt kisses

with his own, slurping me with his big tongue across my cheek!” I was still flinching at the picture of the slurp, just missing her nose as a proxy for a carrot, when I got to the always casual vilification of that social pariah, the cowboy: “Unfortunately, the old-fashioned cowboys, who ‘break’ horses when they train them, don’t understand this. They see them as ‘dumb’ animals or treat them like lawn furniture.”

It’s an essay emblematic of the growing rift between rural and urban lives—between those who work in nature and those who visit it to “spiritually connect.”

Her essay is an urban folly, even if written from something as pathetically plausible today as a 35-acre ranch.

I grew up with an entirely different sort of horsewoman—my mother, Nancy, the daughter of a Pennsylvania coal miner. When I was eight years old, she put me on my first horse and provided what passed for instruction in my family: “Pull back to stop.” The horse, rather unwisely, decided he didn’t much care for babysitting Nancy’s daughter. He walked to a tree with the intention of scraping me off his back. When that didn’t work, he kept the pressure on my pinned leg, while turning to bite my available one. I guess that I just wasn’t sending him sufficiently loving thoughts.

Then I heard my mother shout, “Why are you letting that horse do that to you?”

Yes, indeed, that was what I was doing—letting him kill me. Now this may be the fantasy of a child facing death-by-pony, but I swear my mother marched up to that horse, riding crop in hand, and slugged it. To this day, that’s how I see her. I even imagine her in heaven that way—young, slim, long black hair, jodhpurs and riding boots—striding wherever it was she determined to go.

But I am not the Hungarian magyar (horse warrior) that my mother was. Of less stern stuff, I decided that—Black Beauty novels aside—these were big dumb animals with malevolent intentions toward children. My riding days were over. Until, as an adult, I “manifested” what I considered a fate worse than death—an extended visit to a Wyoming ranch. I hoped against hope for a horseless ranch.

I am not entirely to blame for what followed. The ancient Chester, onto whose saddle I was unceremoniously dumped, had a trot like a jackhammer. Nonetheless, when Richard Hamilton looked back at me, bouncing like a basketball in the saddle, he pushed back his hat and shook his head in frustration. I could just barely make out his under-the-breath cursing. Unlike the other ranch horses referred to simply as “Richard’s bay” or “Carol’s buckskin,” Chester had earned himself a name. In his dotage, he didn’t deserve a backbreaking novice rider.

Despite the fiasco of my riding, the Hamiltons invited me back and this time for the fall roundup. I told Ted Roosevelt IV, for whom I wrote speeches, that I didn’t think I should go, given the strong possibility I would die. He said, “How on earth can you pass on such an incredible opportunity?” I

signed up for riding lessons.

By the time I returned West, I had managed a vague sort of “seat” and could post when that seat wore out in about the first hour. Crossing the sagebrush flats, Carol advised me to follow the easily discernible paths through that squat nasty shrubbery. Paths? What paths? Carol looked at me squarely, nodded toward the sagebrush and tried to draw an air path with her finger. It was her version of a “Star Trek” (Vulcan) mind-meld. I looked at her finger, the air path, and then I looked at the ground. Back to her hopeful face. I nodded knowledgeably—still entirely dumbfounded.

Chester and I weed-whacked our way through the sagebrush with his ankles. Trip

“You are hurting your hands because you are lunging her wrong. I’ll show you.”

two to the ranch confirmed the horse’s hatred for me. As soon as we reached a stream, he balked and started down it for home. I had to be ponied across the stream, while all those dear little ranch children tried not to smirk.

And yet I keep on manifesting. Now I own a horse.

When I told ranch friends I purchased a former reiner, they all guffawed. “What the hell are you doing with a reiner? Twitchy damn horses. We call them water bugs.” Yes, but Diva is really pretty.

One day at the barn, the stable hand, Freddy, stopped to look at my hands. I had thumb braces, wrist braces, and a splint of sorts on one of the fingers Diva had broken when I was lunging her. Freddy is Mexican and had broken racehorses. As a result, his body is pretty well shattered, and he doesn’t ride anymore. It is not his habit to interfere with the whacky horse owners at the barn. But I recognized Richard Hamilton’s expression as he looked at my hands. He said: “You are hurting your hands because you are lunging her wrong. I’ll show you.”

A rail-thin man, he took the lunge line in his hands. Diva tried him once. She tried

him twice. She shook her pretty little head, kicked up her heels in that oh so adorable way of hers, and tried him a third time. He showed me how to brace and stood stock still, passing the line behind his back, then in front of him. He kept it short and her close to him. He never turned; he never stepped one way or the other. He didn’t shout reprimands. (Or my personal preference—invectives.) He did not anticipate Diva doing anything other than what he wanted her to do...however long it took. He held the line.

There was knowledge in his hands that could not be easily translated to the dull human, but that was signaled to the astute creature that is a horse. Knowledge



Nancy, the Hungarian magyar, in breeches and riding jacket, ca. 1947.

sent along a well-held line, and the line became safety, anchor, guide even to a “twitchy” reiner. Diva remained a good girl...for about three weeks.

But this is the valor and the miracle of working hands. Not a “manifestation” of much other than hard-won survival. And with it comes, in the best of us, a measure of equanimity, even compassion. Not the slippy horse-kiss sort of compassion—the sterner stuff that understands the value of holding the line for the animal, the community, oneself.

After my mother’s death, one of her British cousins returned a packet of her correspondence, from 1945 to 1965, 20 of 40 years; the letters of the last 20 years, the cousin said, were too sad to send.

Feb. 3, 1953. Arlington, Va. Has mother written to you recently? When I was home for the Xmas holidays, she said she was going to write and send you the clipping of my engagement announcement. But I imagine she’s been too busy. Daddy was hurt in a mining accident—his right hand was crushed and he lost

two fingers. It was bizarre; Dad said it wouldn’t happen again in a million years. He and his men were taking all the heavy machinery out of the mine, and Daddy was helping them by dismantling a pump. There are large battery boxes which furnish the power for the pumps (they weigh about 1,500 pounds); while Daddy was dismantling the pump, the battery box tipped over and caught his hand. It took the ring finger off immediately; they amputated the third finger in the hospital. There was only a skeleton crew working at the time so there was no one to administer first aid. The men were just dumbstruck because Daddy has worked 35 years in the mines without an acci-

dent. So he told them to put an overcoat around his shoulders and another around his head because of the terrific updraft in the shaft and he was losing a lot of blood. Gripping his right hand tightly with his left, he walked almost two miles up the slope.

By the 1930s the anthracite fields were doomed; by the ’50s they were in their last throes of production. There were still high hopes for the daughter who strode forth into

the bigger world with such determination, the daughter who never was thrown from any horse. Until her marriage.

On his deathbed, my grandfather, the coal miner, pointed to a catheter and asked his squeamish granddaughter, “Do you know what that is, love?” To my “no,” he said, “All I am telling you is you better aim straight.” When I understood his literal meaning, I shrieked my outraged sense of decorum. Later, I got it. Without the medium, the message would have been a pompous, empty thing. Aim straight indeed.

It is failure that builds strength into working hands, what is left in us at the end of the day that still stands, unflinching, uncomplaining before the last defeat. A good horse moves toward courage. ■

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