

relationships  
matter!



Lessons from  
a Half-Ton  
Teacher

LINDSAY PONTIUS

When the bus filled with teachers pulled into my barnyard and the teachers began to understand they had arrived at a horse farm, there was general excitement. A few, who had had bad experiences with horses in their youth, groaned. One, named Sue, was overwhelmed with fear and fell to the ground in a heap of tears. She refused to enter the barn and remained outside as her colleagues greeted the horses, stall by stall.

I stayed with Sue and let her know that the day's activities were "challenge by choice." She could participate or simply observe, as she felt willing. Sue stood in the paddock where she could watch her colleagues take turns grooming a few horses in the rustic converted cow barn. Occasionally she diverted her gaze towards the pastures and the sweeping vistas of Vermont's Green Mountains and stretches of Lake Champlain. There was a clear blue sky with a slight breeze on that warm September day. Many have commented over the years on how the setting encourages a sense of peace, helping visitors to relax and to be present with the animals. After a while, Sue tentatively joined two other teachers while they groomed a dozing horse. I admired her bravery and curiosity as she brushed through her fears.

Neither Sue nor I had any idea of the courageous acts she would attempt later in the afternoon. But by the end of the day, we would all learn about a horse's capacity to teach us how to be even better humans.

### **Horses Are My Students and My Teachers**

For more than 40 years, I have had horses in my life. Mostly, my horses are pets and partners. But I have always wanted to share with other humans the wisdom and gifts the horses offer, day by day and year by year. Now, I use my herd to give workshops to groups, such as veterans and educators, about the profound experience of linking nurturing with nature.

Sue and 16 other teachers had come to an in-service day called "Staff Mystery Fun Day"—an annual event for the staff of a nearby children's center. They would board a bus in the morning, and only the driver and the center director would know where they were headed and what they would be doing for the day.

This day, after they groomed horses and learned some leading techniques, the participants joined me in the arena for a team-building obstacle course, to be navigated while blindfolded. There were no horses present for this activity. Everyone was quite game to play, and they took great care of each other. By

then, Sue was laughing and cheering on her companions.

### **Teaming Up with an Emotionally Sensitive Horse**

During the lunch break, the teachers were divided into teams of four or five. I assigned each team a horse. There was Team Pride, Team Juli, and Team Hanna. I gave each team a picture of their horse and a description of the horse's challenges and behaviors. They were to read the information and strategize about how they might establish a relationship with their horse and take on the challenges of moving with the horse through an equine obstacle course.

Sue asked, "Who will be blindfolded? Us or the horse?" I assured everyone, "For this, there would be no blindfolding."

The teachers immediately engaged with the challenge. As they planned their approach, I visited each group, urging them to consider safety first—for the humans and the horse. They were to think about what "success" meant, given their horse's particular biography. They could use a halter and lead rope, carrots, rubs and scratches, praise, and the signals I had taught them earlier in the day, such as "come forward," "back up," or "turn your hind quarters away."

### **Sue Was on Team Hanna**

Hanna's bio read: *Hanna is a high-energy, sensitive horse. Her response to fearful stimulus is to snort, puff herself up, (her fur stands on end), and then she runs back and forth, facing and roaring at the scary object or situation. She wants to trust humans and accept their leadership so she can be part of their herd, but emotions can get the best of her.*

*When I first met Hanna, she had been kept in a round pen for a day and a half with no food or water. Her owner at the time used the round-pen treatment to tire her out and get her to stop running and puffing. The owner had tied several plastic bags that blew in the air to the rails of the pen, incorrectly believing this would desensitize Hanna and help her calm down. It just made her continue to freak out. While it has taken lots of patience on my part (and lots of deep breaths), Hanna has learned to accept and trust humans.*

### **Success: Knowing When to Quit**

The obstacle course included two eight-foot poles to back up between, a small jump, and stations where the teams had to experiment with the proximity to which a large physio-ball, an umbrella, and a plastic tarp could be introduced

to the horse. All of these are potentially upsetting to my equine friends. “Success” would come from reading the horse and knowing when to quit—the umbrella doesn’t have to be opened over the horse’s head, the ball doesn’t have to bounce off her back, and the tarp does not need to be walked upon to complete the course.

Sue was brimming with ideas as she met with her team. Their strategies included using the language of touch to encourage Hanna to trust them. I reminded them, “Just getting her to the arena might be cause for celebration.”

### **Team Hanna Blew Everyone Away**

The team spent at least 30 minutes grooming Hanna. She emerged shiny and proud. They all placed their hands on her body as they walked her to the arena. Hanna swaggered with the confidence of a Hollywood star surrounded by her entourage. She was relaxed; her strides were long and rhythmic. Her eyelids fluttered lightly over her soft focus. Each member took the lead at an obstacle. She smoothly backed straight through the poles and gently jumped the little cavaletti.

Traveling to each obstacle, Sue remained on Hanna’s left side, between her nose and shoulder, on the lookout like a bodyguard. When they reached the umbrella, Sue held it out while Hanna sniffed it. Sue flapped it a little. The second she sensed any tension she retreated, and Hanna let out a sigh and did a lick and chew. Licking and chewing is what horses do as foals to ask their mothers for milk. In an adult horse, a lick and chew is a form of agreement or understanding. Sue seemed to read all the signs: she and Hanna were truly in communication.

When it was time for Sue to lead Hanna to the tarp, I held my breath. Hanna slowed her step and tensed her brow, her eyes wide open, her breath held, and then Sue walked out ahead of her onto the tarp and sat down. The team had decided not to use treats. Hanna sniffed, then pawed the tarp. Sue patted the tarp from her seated position, and Hanna walked directly to Sue and dropped her head to Sue’s lap. Sue began to weep. I think we all did. But Hanna just hung with Sue as the team came close. Sue got up, and they led the horse off the tarp and through the gate, back to the barn.

After the retreat, the children’s center staff sent me a scrapbook with pictures and quotes documenting their day at the farm. Pinned in the center was a handwritten note from Sue. She described the personal issues she

had been going through at the time and explained how she had been facing enormous burnout as a teacher. She was planning to take a leave from the center.

But after her deeply meaningful encounter with Hanna, things turned around for her. She felt transformed physically, emotionally, and creatively. She wrote: “I felt proud that I had a part in helping her succeed and overcome her fears. I know now that I’m a great teacher, that I still have that passion, and I feel confident that I will accomplish all the goals I have set for myself. I thank Hanna for giving me back what I had thought I had lost!”

### **“I Know Now that I Am a Great Teacher”**

I know from my years of experience leading these workshops that the immediacy of communicating with a 1,000-pound animal brings our humanity and compassion to the fore. Educators worry about helping children in the classroom learn to self-regulate, but all the self-help articles, the social/emotional learning websites, the sterile classroom walls covered with color-coded pictures or plastic cue cards reminding students to “be courageous,” “consider empathy,” or “practice active listening” won’t take the place of creating a relationship between teacher and student—human to human.

It’s the gift of reciprocity, like the one Sue and Hanna had: the gift of being all in, together, full of agreement and understanding, on a small patch of earth.

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