

| What do You Mean My Horse is My Mirror?

by: Linda Parelli

It's funny. I never really noticed that all four horses I've owned had the same problem... they were highly excitable and were prone to run off with me.

All I could think was, "Why do I keep choosing this type of horse?"

I know, now, that it was no accident. My horses were trying to teach me something - if only I could be humble enough to listen. I finally did, and here is my story about learning to take responsibility.

Somehow, I enjoyed having horses that were difficult to handle. There was something exciting about 1200 pounds of spirited horse flesh that pranced and snorted under me. Over the years, I won competitions in jumping, cross-country, and gymkhana events where I would bravely steer these missiles.

My biceps were impressive. A masseuse once asked me if I lifted weights! I was proud of my strength. Little did I know that I was being strong in the wrong places as far as horses were concerned.

Everything was okay until I decided to try dressage. When it was time to ask my horses to concentrate and be in harmony with me, things began to fall apart.

"Get a different bit." "Try draw reins." "Lunge him in a Chambon." "What about this martingale, or that one." "Tie his mouth shut so he can't avoid the bit."

I took all the advice. I tried all of these things. I could keep my horses' mouths closed, their heads in and down so that they worked in the correct outline. But, my horses weren't happy.

One of them, Regalo, got worse. The more I tried to force him to comply, the more explosive he became. The other, Siren, became more and more dull. It was as if his exuberance and natural charisma were being drilled out of him. However, I started to win competitions with him!

As the months passed by and Regalo's problems became worse, I began to hear, "It's not you, it's the horse. He's a man's horse." I was told that the fact we weren't progressing wasn't my fault, nor was it caused by a lack of trying on my part.

I was faced with a decision: sell him, retire him (as an 8-year-old!), or send him to a trainer. Well, in my mind, a trainer was out of the question. I had seen what happened to disobedient horses that my friends sent to be "remouthed," or "sorted out." I was not going to put my horse through that kind of torture.

It was just when I thought all the doors were closed, that a new one appeared in a most unlikely setting.

I saw a video of Pat Parelli spinning, galloping, doing lead changes, and sliding to a stop... all without a bridle. I had never seen anything like it. I was triply impressed because I knew what would happen to me if I took the bridle off one of my horses!

Never mind that this man wore a cowboy hat, I had to find out more. I truly believed that he might have the answer for me and Regalo.

It is unfortunate that I had to get desperate before I really started to search for the truth. Had I not had serious problems with one of my horses, I probably never would have looked into Pat's training system. It was too far removed from dressage and my goals... or so I thought.

I arrived well prepared for the clinic with Pat Parelli. I even had a list of everything that was wrong with my horse so I could be sure to have every problem answered.

But, nothing prepared me for the truth.

In the first ten minutes, I learned that my horse was just being a horse (a prey animal) and that I was the problem. Of course Pat didn't directly point the finger, but when he started to speak some truths about people thinking and behaving like people around horses, I saw every little thing I was doing to cause my horses to respond or react negatively.

To be honest, though the information was exciting, it was also a little hard to take. I was causing my horses to run off with me. I was useless at communicating with my horses. I didn't know enough about horses to correct this, yet I was winning competitions?

I never thought that there was anything wrong with me if one of my horses dragged me while I was leading him, or if he couldn't stand still to be groomed... saddled... mounted, or if he wouldn't get into a trailer. Boy, did I learn a lot.

Now that I was finally confronted with the truth, my lessons in responsibility began.

Lesson Number 1: Look first into myself

Attitudinally, I had to shift. First, I needed to learn to take my horses' perspective and see things from their point of view. What did I look like when I came to get them out of the pasture? How did I prepare them to be saddled? Did I really prepare them at all? What were our rides like for the horses? Did they feel positively stimulated by the experience?

Dealing with this new found responsibility was difficult. It never occurred to me that maybe my horses weren't having such a good time. Then there came the question of "How?" How do I do the right thing by my horses?

The answer, I found out, was by learning to think like a horse myself. To do this I needed to learn about their psychology...why they do what they do. I had to learn about communicating the way horses communicate: to use body language; to understand that horses are motivated by comfort (not praise).

I needed to realize that horses are playful animals and they need things that stimulate their minds-not just physical work. I learned to play games with my horses. I began to give them tasks that would help them think; that were mentally and emotionally stimulating; and that would help them become braver. I started to send them over, under, and through obstacles that normally would have terrified them!

Once I became less strict and less critical of my horses' performance, they became less tense, and more positive. They actually enjoyed their time with me. They'd even come to meet me at the fence for a change!

Lesson Number 2: Don't blame the horse

I guess learning not to blame the horse was the hardest part. I had to unlearn all the labels that I had been taught to describe horses. I had to quit categorizing them as: puller, rearer, buckler, bolter, etc. I said to myself, "If a horse doesn't do any of these things when I'm not around, maybe I need to take some responsibility for those actions. -Hmmm." It's a difficult thought to accept.

I once learned at a seminar (that was not horsey at all) that if you are not part of the solution, you are probably part of the problem. I finally had to admit that this was true with me and my horses. I could no longer blame my horses. While I was busy taking advice about better bits and martingales, I was missing out on the opportunity to gain knowledge.

In order to become part of the solution, I had to understand why my horses would behave in these undesirable ways. Horses are incredibly sensitive creatures. Their first defense is to run away. Their second is to stand and fight. Fear, frustration, and confusion all produce the same response in the horse. I saw for the first time that my horses weren't being bad... they were confused and frustrated.

I found that I was not clear in my communication. I didn't even use the right "language" for a horse. I just used a series of kicks and pulls on the reins. My hands and legs could help to direct my horses, but the horses didn't understand when I used the reins to stop because my body was still telling them to go. My body never stopped riding.

The truth is that I never believed my horses were going to stop. My seat was continually tight! Inside of me was this anticipation of the horse running off if given half a chance, so my emotions were continually engaged and so was my rear. I had to learn how to slouch... how to exaggerate my body language to have no life in it. Do you know how hard it is to teach a dressage rider to slouch?!

On the other end of the spectrum, if my horses were pulling back, it was my fault for not helping them to get over their claustrophobic tendencies and teaching them to yield to pressure instead of opposing it.

In not one of the riding lessons I'd taken since the age of 9 did I learn how to do this. I learned it from Pat Parelli.

Lesson Number 3: Get a grip on myself!

I had to learn how to stay mentally, emotionally, and physically calm no matter what. I had to prove to my horses that I wasn't going to get tight, mean, or mad with them. I was finally understanding that their so-called misbehaviors were only their defense mechanisms. They only misbehaved because they were scared or confused and frustrated by my inability to understand them, and to effectively communicate what I wanted.

I also had to be able to correct them if they were disrespectful, without them thinking I was being mean. It's an art - this learning to become a Horseman, naturally.

I found that the more knowledge I gained on horse psychology, communication techniques, and communication tools (instead of artificial aids), the more confidence I gained. I actually started to know what to do when things weren't going right... and I stopped getting tight.

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I am attracted to a certain kind of horse... big, high spirited, sensitive. Absolutely the wrong type for someone who is not a horseman! But, had I not been confronted with the problems that I wanted to solve, I would never have looked outside the dressage arena, and I certainly wouldn't have thought about becoming a Horseman. I didn't know I wasn't.

For this, I am thankful to my horses. They helped me open my mind. They helped me transcend that English-Western barrier. They taught me a lot about myself. Who would have thought that some of my most valuable lessons in self-development would come from my horses? And, I am indebted to the man who led me to the truth, Pat Parelli.

Not that I've given up dressage - I haven't! I've just changed my approach. I do it naturally, now, using lateral strategies and tasks that develop harmony and refinement so that whatever I ask for is happily granted... flying changes, half passes, screeching halts... all at four ounces or less. And, it's fun for both me and my horses!

So, if you want to know how well I'm doing, just look at my horses. They'll tell you. Because they are my mirror. They'll show you how well I am managing myself these days, and how well I'm doing on my journey to become a Natural Horseman.