

Spider Web and Soap Bubbles

© Glenn Wilson June 2010

Not too long after I began riding horses I was shown the most amazing trick by a lady horse rider.

She could lower the horse's head with just a gentle pull on the lead rope, till the horse's head was in reach (she was somewhat vertically challenged) and then, with her hand on the horse's poll, she kept asking until the horse had its nose on the ground. I had never seen anything like it! And I doubted that I could do it either so for a while we, my horse and I, kept on doing what we did. A year or so later, at a horsemanship clinic, I was shown that I and my horse could do the head lowering thing. Wowwww!!! So cool!!!

If we all pause, just for a moment, on our horse journey and look at where we have come from, most of us will feel quite proud and satisfied. Generally our horses are happier, they are more cooperative, they seem to like us more than they used to and they often give us little insights into things that make the hair stand up on the back of our necks.

If we and our horses have come as far as we have, then how much further can we go? What comes after twirling ropes and using sticks? Can it get better than freestyle riding? After a black string, then what?

Maybe, just maybe, we have only really just begun the journey of discovery?

Wow! If that is indeed the case then the hairs really stand up on the back of my neck! That is so exciting!

It seems the 'new' thing to do with our horses is dance with them. Some teachers of this facet of horsemanship write about the 'dance'; they have pictures and video of the dances; and they are all teaching others about it too.

The dance is started and often continues on the ground - just like two humans do when they dance. It has little to do with what is commonly known as sport dressage but may in some schools be aligned with true, classical training (dressage). It is not necessarily about riding horses either. It is E-motion. That is; energy in motion. It is a free flowing and moving expression between human and horse. Each so in tune with the other with each move and step and energy level; so in sync, it's hard to believe man and horse can be so together mentally and physically. It is a new twist on the word and the deed called choreography.

In its pure form, the other really interesting aspect of this facet of horsemanship is that the horse has a real say as to its level of involvement and engagement. If it wishes and if the human partner is immersed in the true spirit of the dance, then total freedom to engage, or to leave, is given to the horse. In other words, the activity has to capture the imagination and attention of the horse if he is to be a willing and cooperative partner. Restraint is a dirty word. Boundaries are far away, space is ample and integrity, intent and participation are of the highest calibre.

To move around, to dance, on the ground, with a horse fully engaged with you is a very nice (some would say "awesome") thing to do. It may not necessarily be a spectator sport but it does require a real connection between the horse's mind and yours. Gently moving, pushing and pulling, without touching is how it begins. Getting a rhythm happening with all six feet is the next step. Lifting one's life to match or inspire the horse's energy level follows. And pretty soon some dance steps emerge from the paddock.

My two special tools for the dance are spider web and soap bubbles. The spider web is used to pull the horse to me and the soap bubbles are used to move the horse away from me. If I pull too much, too soon or too strongly, or for too long and too far, the bond between the horse and myself is broken, and we disconnect. If I pull 'just right' then the horse feels the gentle tug and follows my lead. Similarly I use the soap bubble between the horse and I to move him away from me. A big soft bubble works best. It has some give but if pushed too hard, it bursts. If pushed too softly, the horse can't feel it and stands and looks and says, "What?" But if the amount of push is just right then the horse feels it and moves in the direction of the 'bubble suggestion'.

One day I hope I can dispense with the spider web and soap bubble and just use my mind. We will both know! Meanwhile I have to be content with a basic dance, in very short sessions and I also have to get my fitness level up.

It's good fun though.

The 'journey' that some of us, indeed all of us, are on is an interesting one. Whether or not it is the 'one' journey or whether it is a multitude of individual journeys that combine to make a large, all embracing journey is not really the point. The point, I feel, is that we are on it, and also that we are at our chosen part of the journey and we also have chosen the route, the season and the 'class' in which we travel. It's sort of like deciding to travel from your home to London where there are a multitude of ways to travel, modes of transport and en route accommodation options. Anything between backpacking our way across the globe to flying first class. We get to choose.

If we take this metaphor another step; some of us are still booking tickets and getting visas and some of us are travel wise or weary and about to take the final trip across the English Channel. And most of us are somewhere in between. Some of us may have even decided to take the 'other' route and are stuck on an ice floe in the arctic circle waiting for the weather to clear: metaphorically speaking, that is

It seems that no one way is 'the' way on this horse journey. Whilst the temptation is strong to believe that the way we have individually chosen is the 'best' or the only way and where we are at and the guide we have chosen are the absolute best; it is, and it isn't, necessarily the case. In reality, the way we have chosen and the point we are at is perfect for us as individuals. Your path and en-route point is perfect for you and my path and place is perfect for me. Seeing, understanding and respecting that can be quite a challenge and maybe is one of the great lessons of being on the journey in the first place.

Life is full of learning challenges. The horse journey is full of challenges. I guess another point of taking both, that is 'life' and a 'horse journey', is not necessarily to complete them but to be on them and to learn from them; to meet the challenges, to deal with them and to move on to the next one. As we progress, these challenges seem to become less straightforward. They seem to become more complex, more interesting and require a deeper understanding of 'stuff' to be able to deal with them.

Once upon a time it was big deal for me to be able to lower a horse's head. That was my challenge. Nowadays one of my challenges is to be able to read and understand what is going on inside a horse's head. I also now believe and accept that the horse can read what is going on inside my head, (even if he doesn't necessarily understand it, or relate to it).

I now realise that my conduct as a horseperson is under scrutiny - by the horse. And that is a sobering realization.