

Which Way?

Something that has stayed with me for many years is what a yoga teacher told the class I was attending when explaining how yoga was a way to enlightenment.

He said, "Yoga is just one door of many that all lead to becoming more aware and more spiritually in tune with your understanding of Life, Love and God. It is not the way. It is one of many that are available to those who seek these things and this is what makes yoga different from some religions which insist that they are the only way".

You may well ask, "What has this got to do with horses?"

They must be out there but I have yet to meet, read of or hear any horsemanship teacher say something that aligns with the revelation our yoga teacher shared with us so long ago, (well maybe Bill Dorrance did). In fact many of the really popular - and skilled and influential - horsemanship teachers indicate or often insist that their way is the best, and occasionally, the only way; and most of them take a swipe at the other popular horsemanship teachers around the world.

Why is this so?

Just as every horse is different and just as every person who is interested in horses is different, how then can one person's way of teaching be 'the' way? I don't believe it can and I also believe many people are being deceived by degree into thinking that the way they are learning and being taught about horsemanship is, in an almost fanatical religious way, the 'only' way. This in itself is not really a problem if their relationship with their horses gets better. It is a problem though when they, like their teachers, insist to others that their way is 'the' only or 'the' best way.

When we step back, move on from or rise above a given situation we see it in a clearer, more balanced and less one eyed way. Take, for example, folk art. Were any of you reading this ever fanatical about folk art? And did you impose all your creations upon friends and relatives as gifts and couldn't understand why they didn't appear on the mail boxes, front doors and living room walls of the recipients of your creations? You may even have thought that you were going to make a squillion dollars from selling your stuff. And then one day you stepped back and saw it for what it really was. I was like that with flying. Fanatical, passionate and one eyed. Only when I stopped could I see that it was expensive, noisy, imposing and rather irrelevant to the bigger picture.

Now I guess I'm like that with horses. But I'd like to think that I am a little wiser and more open minded, allowing me to see through the 'sleights' that so many good and talented horsemanship teachers make regarding their contemporaries. This allows me to take on board, and also reject, various aspects, thoughts, techniques, tools and philosophies of many great horsemanship teachers in the world today.

But they still seem to go to great lengths to have a go at each other.

Why for example does A.Nevzorov have a public dig at P.Parelli? Why does B.Brannerman have a go at M.Roberts? Why does C.Tabernaberry, in veiled terms, reject the tools and techniques of others? Why does K.F.Hempfling insist that webbing halters are the way to go and rope halters are not? He also poo poos the use of round yards and insists that square ones are better. Europe vs. USA! And so it goes on. I wish it didn't though.

It makes me uncomfortable when I hear the person I have chosen to spend time and money with, to learn more about horsemanship, bag one of my other teachers. I treasure the experiences and knowledge I have accumulated over the years that have allowed me to become better with horses. Those memories and experiences, more often than not, were initiated by people who were willing to share their knowledge with me. Consistently they had the best interests of the horse at heart. But whenever a person tries, in no matter how subtle a way, to denigrate another, all they manage to do in my eyes is to put down themselves. They lose credibility and esteem.

I wish these teachers could rise above 'their way' and see, just like my yoga teacher did, that their way was just 'one way' in achieving a better way; in this case with horses. They could praise the other teachers and encourage us to explore their ideas too.

Freedom to choose. If we cast our minds back to earlier in this piece, I made the observation that there are infinite differences in the horses and humans and the relationships they have. Taking that onto the next step; that may mean that no one 'way', no single teacher and no specific set of tools applies to horsemanship. They may all have an important part to play but as you and your horse grow and progress, what worked yesterday with one horse may not be appropriate today, or work with a different horse.

I used to believe (I was taught) that the way to back a horse away from you was to take the rope in your hand with about 15 cm hanging out the front of your hand (some insist it should be hanging out the back, but that is another story) and with a mean look, eye to eye, you point your finger of that hand at your horse. If he didn't move within a given time, you wagged your finger. If he still didn't move you waved your hand. If he didn't move you waved your forearm. If he didn't move you waved your whole arm and if he was still standing there looking at you (and probably thinking "Gee, don't you look silly!"), YOU WAVED YOUR WHOLE BLOODY SELF!!!

And it usually worked. But over time I discovered that there are plenty of ways to back a horse and many of them are softer, more polite, more subtle and elicit a nicer back up. One horse here has, at last count, about eighteen ways of backing up. I do believe you could wave a soggy weetbix at him and he'd back up. I also believe that he is reading my thoughts and despite what I do physically, he knows that I'd like him to back. Another belief I have is that with enough training you can use any cue to get any result. The weetbix could also be used to draw a horse or send a horse off in a playful circle. And there are probably some readers thinking that the fingerhandarmrope wiggle is the best way or the only way to back a horse up. Of course it is - until you discover another way that works just as well, if not better.

So, something as simple as getting a horse to move backwards can split the horsemanship world into many camps. Which makes me think; What do the fingerhandarmrope wiggle people do if they haven't got a rope? Hmmmm.

All the horsemanship teachers and horse men and women in the world have something to teach us. They may also have things that we would not, in a fit of pink Sundays, consider using on or with our horses. It is, after all, our choice who we follow, what tools we use, what 'system' we employ, how good we wish to be, how fair we are with our horses and whether we are satisfied with where we are or whether we continue to seek other ideas and options. We can take all the particles that work best for us from all the teachers we encounter and blend

them with the ones we have discovered ourselves to create our own unique way with horses. We may find that even if we do take and make our own version of the 'path', we all end up in a similar place. There is nothing quite as sweet as the truth we discover ourselves though.

If we choose, we can just get better and better on a never ending changing horse playground.

So ultimately, the choice of which way we think is the best is ours alone to make. If anyone tells us their way is the best way, if we ever stop asking questions and stop looking for our own truth, if we are required to lock into a system or program to advance our skills or if we ever think we have found the holy grail of horsemanship; start asking questions and challenge all that you know, read, see or hear. That way we can continue exploring, learning and growing our understanding and relationships with our horses, and all of life matters for that matter.

It could be fun!

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