

'When You Sigh' Communicating in Horse

By Hildreth Rinehart

The horse is an ancient planetary creature, originally only two feet tall, living in the North American woodlands. They have been on the planet for some 45 million years before the appearance of the earliest human genetic and have adapted with great resilience through the ages. Theirs is a world without words, of deep and powerful instincts, natural cycles, resilience and balance.

These are facts I try to remember when I interact in a herd. Stillness, quietness, clarity, gentleness, dignity and sensitivity are all qualities present in a horse herd leader. The magic of the horse's world is available to anyone who sets aside their ambition and simply allows themselves to be with them. To enter into willing partnership with a horse may well be a lifetime's journey of growth and deepening; one that will surely bring the same to all other aspects of one's life.

The beginning of our story

I began this journey by the side of the road in rural Tennessee one day while my car was blocked by a herd of cows. I noticed a young black and white mare watching me from behind her fence. It was as though she spoke in a language directly wired to my soul. I knew everything she was feeling in that moment – the loneliness, sadness and boredom. I later learned she'd been standing in that field alone for seven years.

I visited every day, read some books and began to explore our relationship. I did not want anything from her, simply to be there with her. I see now how fundamental this is to building a true bond with a horse. They do not resonate with ambition or selfishness. We slowly developed our heart and mind connections, together with some fundamentals from the books of Monty Roberts (my first 'guru') to the point where I was able to ride without bit or saddle. In hindsight, it amazes me how we rode safely for almost seven years through the countryside with no injury!

Now, fourteen years later, we've expanded our skills and herd with three geldings and people of all ages coming to join us in this discovery of equine communication. Now we're developing three core principles from which it seems all natural horse-human communication flows. The questions "What is natural horsemanship?" and "What is natural?" are two that continue to run through all of the work we do. This is an ongoing journey of enlightenment, not a set of rules or fixed ideas!

Lead by Example

Horses learn by observation and imitation. They naturally want to be with you in synchronicity – it is simply in the design of the herd. It is a leader's job to be something that the horse wants to synchronize with. This, like all things worthwhile, takes practice, personal development and time.

So it follows, if you want a calm horse, calm yourself. If you want a horse who is confident in you, act confidently. If you want a respectful horse, respect yourself, your space and safety. If you want them to relax their necks, relax your neck. Try it – see if it works! When your horse is unsure or edgy, try giving them a big, relaxing, audible sigh. When you sigh, your horse sighs! Consider what you want for your horse partner and what the horse needs, and demonstrate that. Some qualities we find horse look for in leaders are calmness, responsiveness, awareness, patience, confidence, fluidity, courage, kindness, fairness, inner quiet, openness and centeredness.

Energy First

A lead horse, in a natural circumstance, does not lead in a physical way as a first principle. In fact, the higher the rank, the less fighting they do to maintain their position. Instead, they lead by the magnetism of their presence. There is an aura of charisma, intelligence and experience around them. They are fully aware and energetically connected with the herd and the entire natural world. They may give a glance, an ear movement, a gesture of the head or a sudden stop to communicate what's needed from other herd members.

Depending on the temperament of the horse you are communicating with, they may find it intolerably rude to be pushed and pulled around. The classic 'lesson horse' syndrome is when the highly sensitive creature grows totally dull to human touch. It is one way that horses cope with humans who do not have correct sentiment or training in horse communication.

So, we always begin with sending a clear mental request, then align the body position, placement and posture to match it. That may be enough. If not, then a gesture (indirect pressure), and lastly, if the horse has not yet responded, a physical touch (direct pressure) from lightest to the firmest needed for an appropriate response. It is a dance, unique to each horse and situation. With practice it becomes highly intuitive – when to wait, how much to ask for, what questions or concerns the horse is sending you in each moment.

Be in Rhythm

Horses are rhythmic creatures. To earn their trust and show them that we can be fluent in their language, it helps to be aware of one's own rhythms, both inner (heartbeat, breath) and outer (walking, arm movements etc.); music often helps, or simply setting a rhythm by which you brush the horse, or walk.

Also, essential in this is understanding that, for a horse, **release is reward**. For a dog it may be a biscuit but for a horse, when you release pressure, you are saying YES, that is what I want, do more of that! Here's a practical example: if I am asking a horse to back up and instead they move sideways, or maybe even step on my foot, what happens next is essential. If I jump away, releasing the horse and breaking the 'rhythm of my ask' then I have just rewarded them. Maybe they did not understand what I was asking, maybe they were testing me, or maybe they got frightened. Either way, I stay cool, stay in rhythm and ask them to move their feet until at least they show me a try.

If they are very distressed, I may ask for something simpler than a back up before returning to this request, but I will not reward by breaking rhythm or giving them the lead. THEN once the horse has given response, I reward with a release (maybe look or turn away, release the halter etc.) yet not breaking the feeling connection. We are still in the dance, even when standing still!

When we jumble up our signals by rewarding incorrect behaviour one minute and punishing it the next, we appear confused and even deranged to the horse. This is not a leader they will naturally, willingly partner with. So, to be in rhythm with release and reward for your horse, is to give them the sanctity of feeling that all is sensible, fair and right with the world.

With these three principles put into practice at many levels and many ways each moment, we find that trust in oneself grows, trust in the horse grows and it starts to feel easy and natural. You are now in the dance together! May the journey be one of love, safety and deep fulfillment for all humans and horses so fortunate to engage in seeking mutually enhancing connection.