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Heartfelt Connections: Equine Facilitated Learning

by Victoria Poe,
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Let's celebrate the horse and the heartfelt connections they create. I am so excited about the field of Equine Facilitated Learning (EFL), where the horse is teacher, inspiring intuitive knowing, consensual leadership and sustainable change.

Recently I returned from a conference in California, co-founded by Ariana Strozzi, author of 'Horse Sense for the Leader Within'. She encouraged EFL practitioners to take action, and as a result, I have collected some stories that applaud this field. I have been learning about and facilitating EFL for the past twelve years. Slowly, more and more people in Ontario and across Canada are engaging in this transformational experiential learning modality where horses assist people.

On a personal level, I was deeply touched when my mother Teddy, fearful of horses, took a leap and attended the Discover Your Inner Self workshop at Horse Spirit Connections so she could understand what I do. Teddy still refers to her time with the horses:

My horse spirit connection at the farm was in an ambiance that permeated a sense of solace and a perfect comfort zone to explore with facilitators an honest relationship with one's inner self. After instructions concerning horses' body language to convey their reactions, quiet time with them helped build respect and an exchange of confidence. After several opportunities of practicing acceptance, I was able to relax, measure my approach alone in the ring with Lady and Dusty.

Teddy Forman Poe, Guelph, Ontario

So what is Equine Facilitated Learning? EFL fosters growth, knowledge and personal transformation working in a respectful horse and human partnership. No experience with horses or riding is necessary for most EFL sessions. Horses access people's spirit of freedom and heart and enable self discovery and connection with the environment. They also develop Emotional Intelligence (EQ) competencies in self and relationship management to build self-confidence, cultivate trust, inspire, influence and invoke responsibility.

So who engages in EFL? Personal development for individuals is offered in small group workshop settings or in one-on-one sessions. Organizations engage in EFL for team building, working together with one or more horses to develop leadership styles, decision making processes, problem solving abilities, non-verbal communication, intention and intuition.

Working with different organizations, I am amazed how the horses align staff to articulate and implement change. For example, during an activity with the horses, one organization decided on implementing a weekly communication process that promoted

constructive feedback. A month later the team reported back how they had improved internal performance. Horses also allow people to feel and observe leadership qualities:

"Unlike any other workshop I have attended before, this one 'cut to the chase' and made you 'feel' how to be a better leader rather than teaching you. This is the most powerful leadership experience I've had!!!"

Eric LeJeune, Toronto, Ontario

"As a motivated, competitive business person, the big 'aha' I got from this course is that sometimes leadership means 'not leading' - which to me means 'not pushing'. I was the kind of person who - if things weren't working - would just lead (push) harder.

Elizabeth Winter, Brighton, Ontario

As prey animals, horses often move to 'flight' mode when they sense fear or uncertainty. When harm or threat is no longer present they let go and return to grazing. Horses are herd animals, surviving and thriving in social hierarchical groupings where each knows his or her place in the social structure. Humans react to internal personal emotions and external emotions of others resulting sometimes in the instinctual need for flight or disassociation. Or people move into a 'freeze zone' under stress and have difficulty making decisions or prioritizing tasks. Horses mirror the human fight, flight or freeze responses. This reflective feedback offered by horses can provide powerful information about how we communicate and engage in relationships.

Five years ago only a few horse centres offered EFL in Ontario and now there are several options. I am an associate with Horse Spirit Connections where we offer a variety of workshops and customized leadership training sessions with horses. Horse Spirit Connections also offers a Facilitated Equine Experiential Learning (FEEL) train-the-trainers program for persons who want to incorporate this field into their work with their horses and add a unique specialization that is innovative to their coaching, healing or educational services. This is of great benefit to the horse industry - most activities for EFL are on the ground and horses of different breeds and ages can participate, if they are physically and emotionally willing and able.

As a co-facilitator and mentor to graduates of the FEEL program, I witness EFL practitioners connect with their horses practicing stewardship with integrity. In addition, I witness the horses establishing boundaries, sharing their presence and unconditional compassion.

Hibou, an Arabian mare, captured Cindy's attention at Anahata Horse Centre in Bancroft, ON where I co-facilitated a workshop. On the first day, Cindy had an 'aha' moment while leading Hibou through an obstacle course she had created. She received the message 'know when to ask for help'. This carried over to her second day, where she writes about the reflective round pen activity:

"I stopped at the centre (of the round pen) and I didn't know what to do next so decided to do nothing. Hibou is the lead mare of the herd so I was able to let her lead. I began to mirror her actions. If she looked at something in the distance attentively, so did I...if she turned her head away, I followed suit. Our feet didn't move and after a few moments, we raised our heads and I got the idea to do a second spiral so I stepped off and she walked off in unison with me. When I stopped she stopped. When we began again, we took the first step exactly at the same time, off the same foot. It was surreal; I'd never felt anything like it. After finishing the second spiral, I turned slightly towards her, feeling so much joy I thought my heart would burst, but I did not have to touch her, I was complete just the way it was. I'd asked for and received a two-part message of horse wisdom to take with me: it's extremely beneficial at times to "do nothing" and I can lead by following.

Now that I'm back in my hectic life, when I feel overwhelmed (which is often), I easily take myself back to the round pen experience with Hibou. It's extremely calming....

Cindy MacDonald, Lindsay, Ontario

Cindy was so inspired by the horses she decided to add EFL as one of the services that the permaculture based farm she lives on can offer. She will be graduating from Horse Spirit Connections' facilitator course in the spring.

"I want to tell as many people as possible about the magic of horses as teachers, and have all who desire it to experience it for themselves.

It's why I decided to take the FEEL facilitator course to offer this incredible experience to the public here at our farm, Greenshire."

Last fall, Horse Spirit Connections offered another horse and human EFL experience that included participants riding their own horse. This two day workshop, Connected Riding combines horse-human discovery and intuitive inquiry through working with movement, being centered, attuned with the felt-sense and non-verbal communication. How can a person ride his or her horse and yet also be in the moment, fully aware of the horse and surroundings without judgment or agenda? To apply the principals of breath, softening, focus, and awareness of feelings while riding a horse is a powerful experience. This inner calmness and ability to be grounded with your horse partner creates a true presence of consensual leadership. The workshop participants were able to take the lessons of this deeper connection back to their own barns, where they engage in competition, training or trail riding.

"The connected riding workshop was amazing. It allowed me to be in a space with my horse that was very rewarding. It is the perfect horse/owner get away to spend quality time with your horse and open a deeper connection."

Janice Ische, Parkside, Ontario

"This clinic brought me to a new level of understanding. It gave me the ability to freely move with my horse as opposed to force my horse. It also brought back the pure innocence and joy of riding and being with horses."

Kristin Brophy, L'Amable, Ontario.

Now that you know more about EFL, I urge all horse enthusiasts to promote the EFL field! Encourage organizations to engage in an exciting equine experiential learning event or sign up for a personal development workshop. Follow your heart and let the horses lead the way and inspire curiosity. I invite you to visit www.horsespiritconnections.com for upcoming workshops. Working as an EFL practitioner, my heart soars and my passion sings with joy each time I witness the horse-human connection. Let's be part of building positive sustainable hoofprints together. ✿