

THE XEN OF HOPE

"Nothing of beauty can ever be accomplished by the use of force." - Xenophon

by Sandra Wallin

A few weeks ago, I went to a confidence building clinic with 2 of our horses, Chiron and our new horse Xenophon... Xen for short. The flyer talked about building trust and understanding, two things I'm all for.

The clinician introduced his philosophy, starting with, "Horses are stupid!" I should have taken that as my cue to leave but I reasoned he must have something more to say that would be in keeping with the flyer. I was intrigued by the information he shared about a horse's tri-ocular vision and when he asked if there were any volunteers to see how he worked with this vision, I put my hand up, then went to get Xen while he worked with another horse.

Xen walked quietly along beside me into the arena to where there was a very small round pen. We entered the circle at the clinician's invitation and as I took Xen's halter off the clinician said, "Actually, you stay in there and you do it." I wondered - do what? - as I had not seen his previous demonstration however I agreed, looking forward to learning something new with Xen.

What followed were a series of confusing commands aimed at moving a horse out submissively but using a language of dominance and aggression that as far as I knew, Xen had never been subjected to. It certainly was not a language I had any proficiency with so I bumbled along ineffectually. The clinician opened the round pen gate and entered, taking the halter and lead from my hands, telling me to watch from outside. Why I complied I am still trying to understand, but I did, and before I could reorient myself to what had transpired, the clinician charged at Xen. With his predatory body language he was driving Xen forward however with the rope and halter he was blocking forward movement by throwing them at Xen's head. Xen turned outward trying to get away from the intense pressure, lifting his hind end inches off the ground in an attempt to tell the clinician he was confused and to please back off.

The clinician charged again with a barrage of mixed messages and violent manoeuvres. I watched in horror as Xen tried to launch himself over the six foot fence. He became entangled in the metal panels, his left hind and right foreleg stuck between the bars. His chest and upper left side hung over the top of the round pen and the only part of him that had contact with the ground was his back right foot. He dangled there patiently for over 5 minutes while an exit plan was devised. When one of the opposite panels was finally unhinged, the fence flipped up into the air around Xen except for the panel that he was caught on, which crashed to the ground under his weight. Xen extricated himself from his prison while the bystanders, who had gotten close to watch the scene unfold, had to run quickly to avoid the flying fence.

Shaking in shock, I went to Xen, tears streaming down my face. He had some lacerations on his chest and legs but by all accounts, it was a miracle he had not broken his legs. Xen settled however I continued to tremble. Disbelief and anger coursed my veins. Then relief and gratitude followed by the feeling that endured - shame. I reflected on Buck Brannaman's quote, "Your horse is a mirror to your soul and sometimes you may not like what you see. Sometimes, you will." In this case, I sure did not like what I saw and I agonized over the whys and the whats.

Xen bounced back quickly and we did some soft and respectful round pen work as soon as his swelling had gone down. I wanted to make sure he felt safe with me again and knew that the round pen was safe as well. He walked along beside me, ever his trusting self, turning and changing gate with fluidity and grace. I stopped and bent my head, tears once again filling my eyes as I wondered at the benevolence of horses. As we walked to the edge the circle, looking out over the valley, I leaned into Xen's strong shoulder and asked if he could forgive me for losing my voice. He turned his head toward me, wrapping me in his mane and neck, then raised his head high, whinnying into the wind, his whole body resonating with power. Chiron called back and I smiled, wishing I could whinny like that.

A week later, I received an email from the clinic sponsor outlining her perspective of what happened, one that is in stark contrast to mine. I saw a horse who was confused by contradiction and violence. She saw a horse who left the round pen not because he was scared but because he saw it as an easy way out. She continued to say that when we came to Xen's rescue we did him a huge disservice by setting him free, fixing him up and then not addressing the situation that caused him to jump in the first place. I imagine we would disagree on what or who that cause was.

I know there are many opinions about how to work and BE WITH horses but I don't understand how someone can think that a horse who chooses to leave in the face of violence instead of meeting it with the same is unworthy of our care? I'm saddened that round pens continue to be used as mini coliseums and hope that one day soon, we outgrow this Romanesque tendency and see more and more people holding their thumbs up so the voice of the horse can be heard.

P.S. After reading the sponsor's email, I went out to share how I was feeling with Xen. Standing tall he looked into my eyes and in his great exhale I heard, "Being hopeful is an intuitive call. Do what feels right in the service of love and only then can you beat the odds."

This article is my whinny.



HOW HORSES HELP US BECOME OUR OWN MASTERPIECE

Sandra Wallin is a registered clinical counselor, an educator, author and presenter, who divides her professional time between a private practice, working in a local school district and teaching Equine Guided Development and PSYCH-K. As an expressive arts therapist, Sandra often combines the arts with equine guided activities.



SANDRA'S THOUGHTS ON THIS SERIES: Horses have inspired artists throughout the ages and in turn, those of us who look upon their art are captivated by the beauty and majesty of the horse. The cave drawings in Lascaux, Leonardo's sculptures, and the finger paintings that adorn kindergarten classrooms, created by little girls who dream of being a horse. What I want to share however, is a new way of looking at horses, through stories that pay homage to the master artist in each horse. Instead of the painted, they are now the painters, transforming the at times tattered canvas of the human spirit into glowing masterpieces, alive with the colours of love, compassion and joy. Learn more at www.chironsway.com



Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.
- Martin Luther King, Jr.



Photography by Sandra Wallin