

THE ART IN HORSES

The Sacred Ride

by Sandra Wallin

*Be welcomed to the land by an 18 hand giant
- whose gentle shadow follows as you walk
amongst the herd.*

*There, in a creek - lined meadow, you are visited
by horses who are balanced and loved, who choose
to approach, to inquire, sharing space with you on
their terms, in their own way.*

You're on horse time now...

See your reflection in the eye of the horse.

Look closely, and know...

*There is more to horses than just "the ride".
Partnership over ownership.
Companionship over conquest.*

The power comes in connection.

These are some of the words my friend Ainsley and I use to describe The Sacred Ride, a program we offer each summer that connects people to the heart of horses and to their own heart as well.

Every year I look forward to joining my dear friend to share our love of horses and the wilderness with six kindred spirits. Though the name of the ride infers quiet and serenity, which is certainly found during some of our activities, there is always an abundance of laughter and good humour – which we are told is one of the hallmarks of the experience.

Big Guy, who is the 18 hand percheron mentioned earlier is often at the centre of a good chuckle. He likes to rub against a massive cable that anchors the power poles which run up the valley. Ainsley says that her neighbours will report knowing when Big Guy is out on the 100 acres because the power lines sway for miles when he has an itch.

Riding had always been a joy for me but in May of 2008, this changed. A month before the 2008 Sacred Ride, I had a riding accident on my young horse while he was in training up in the mountains. I was left unconscious and badly broken. I used to feel confident and secure in my riding abilities and in my connection to whatever horse I was with. The cold sweat on my back as I thought about The Sacred Ride told me things had changed. I knew I had more to heal than my body.

Day one arrived and the guests pulled up the driveway. We spent a splendid day with the horses, doing reflective ground work out on the 100 acres. That night when I climbed into bed, my thoughts tossed and turned as I contemplated our first ride the following day. I wasn't too worried because it would be a meandering ride along the river. It was the day after that caught in my heart. There were streams to ford and mountains to climb but what goes up, must come down, and the descent worried me.

The honest truth was my faith in myself and in horses and been torn apart along with my body and I was not sure if either



Big Guy has an itch.

Photography by Sandra Wallin

were repaired enough for the ride ahead. Riding felt about as far away from sacred as I could imagine so I focused on what I wanted to experience in the days to come and eventually I fell asleep.

Day two passed joyfully and the river ride was a good temperature check for me. I was riding Tank, a darling and handsome bay who had found his way into my heart over the last few years. He carried me with steadfast assuredness and I could feel some of my old body memories coming back – the ones that remembered the joy of the ride. On the flat the torque on my knees and pelvis were manageable. I relaxed more with every step.

The next day, as we tacked up our horses, I conferred quietly with Tank about the upcoming ride. I confided in him and asked him to help me get home safely. Tank and I brought up the rear as was customary when Ainsley and I rode out with a group. I'd ridden this mountain many times, up and down and all around. The beauty can capture your attention and it's not until that final homeward leg that you realize how far you had climbed. It's not quite as steep as the scene in *The Man From Snowy River*, where the brumbies run down the mountain, but for a gal with fractures, chips and tears, it could easily have been.

Ainsley stopped at the top of the trail head to ask if I'd be alright. I smiled with false bravery and nodded for her to go ahead. I watched as the other horses disappeared over the ridge then asked Tank to stop at the top so we could both get our bearings. The others already seemed so far away. I took a deep breath, shifted my weight and opened for Tank to move downward. The first step sent pain searing through my spine. I gulped for air but realized there was no room in my lungs for I'd not yet exhaled. Tank stopped immediately, without my asking, and I readjusted myself in the saddle.

"Ok," I said, and Tank edged onward. Step by careful step he carried me down that mountain. My focus was completely on maintaining a posture that would keep me astride. His focus was on me. Entirely unconcerned that his herd mates were getting further and further away, Tank balanced his strong, powerful body while holding me in his tender embrace. As the pain would crescendo, Tank would pause to give me a rest, even if it meant he had to stop at a most precarious or unforgiving place on the trail. He anchored himself to that mountainside, allowing me as much respite as I needed, and then without a word or motion from me, he would begin again. He was completely attuned to me, physically and emotionally.

As we neared the bottom of the hill, I allowed myself a glance ahead. I had not dared to before, for fear the bottom would never be near. The rest of the herd was waiting for us, watching and holding space for the horse angel and his charge.

We'd done it – he'd done it! There were tears, laughter and yahoos as we celebrated, one and all. My eyes met Ainsley's. A world of understanding passed between us. We smiled at each other then turned for home. Tank and I brought up the rear again as if we'd just done the most natural thing in the world and maybe we had, or should I say, maybe he had...

I paused to look back at the virtual and symbolic mountain we had climbed, or in this case, descended. It was our Sacred Ride, mine and Tank's, and I will remember it and him for a lifetime.

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*A group nuzzle
with Tank, Ainsley
and Beau.*

Author's Note: Although Tank has more rides in him before he retires, he will come to share his retirement with Sandra where they will explore more deeply their sacred friendship. If you'd like to join Sandra, Ainsley and Tank for The 2012 Sacred Ride, contact Sandra for details at www.chironsway.com

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

