

LIBERTY WORK

The power to transform

By Jenny Rolfe

Humans can forget how to listen to horses. Once in the saddle we are continually asking questions, whilst our horses are doing their best to respond. Repetition of pressure and expectations can put horses on auto pilot (even shut down), so they can really benefit from down time to relax and play with their rider and friend.

Liberty provides time for mutual listening and play. Time for us to reflect and observe. Time to paint our picture of colour as communication becomes art. The art of listening. The art of LOVE.

DELFIN MY PROFESSOR

Many years ago I imported my first Spanish stallion, Delfin, into the UK. He was extremely traumatised from his experiences as a bullfighting stallion. I spent months just being with him, sitting in the field whilst he grazed or just lounging around outside his stable - sometimes just passing time peeling our home grown vegetables!!

He couldn't settle in his own skin and I so wanted him to know I was there and begin to feel secure with me. Gradually I could leave him in the field without me. He would watch my every move and walk up and down mirroring my path whilst I walked up and down with the wheelbarrow. He was really tuning in and showing me the importance of our relationship from the ground.

Then we moved to Claytown Farm where we organised the building of an indoor school, but until it was built Delfin and I learnt more about 'power within play'. He would be loose in a small building with supporting pillars positioned around. It was not suitable for riding but we played in between the pillars, 'follow you - follow me'.

THE POWER WITHIN A BREATH

Once the school was ready we had a super play area and now I was pretty tuned into his connection with my breathing, which he first revealed one day when I was riding. It was a windy day when he became more engaged by mares in a nearby field and ignored my more traditional aids as he strutted around with his head in the air! I exhaled with an exasperated deep sigh! He stopped and mirrored my sigh. I then exhaled more deeply and he walked forward. At last, he was listening. We had begun a new conversation.

This began a life changing journey for me and over years I have studied how our breathing and energy connects with the mind, emotions and energy field with our horses. Frustration won't allow us to connect but creates a barrier within communication. However, when we control our breathing and emotions and offer a more coherent field of energy, this will open a door to communication which is natural to the herd.

Delfin, over many years, revealed much more to me and to my students as I learnt the power of this connection within 'dance' and play.

This connection can grow into a bond where we invite the horse to move in self carriage and balance. This natural energy will encourage self carriage and a release throughout the spine and lowered neck and head.



The horse who started Jenny on a life changing journey, her Spanish stallion Delfin dancing with a student, Ella



Generoso and Henriette Boissevain start a new relationship based on leadership and trust

This is the path to helping the horse grow stronger and more athletic, learning lessons of the Classical School before a rider even sits on his back.

I would love to see all horses, from basic to advanced levels, within their training express themselves and the truth of their connection with their rider through play and connected energy in liberty work. If we look to ride with subtle aids and empathy, the journey can so beautifully begin here. It is saying 'HELLO' in a more natural herd language.

So what can we learn from our horse at liberty?

GENEROSO

I was invited to visit Co Cork in Ireland to help with a Spanish PRE stallion, Generoso, who had suffered traumatic experiences and was causing some considerable anguish. A groom was hired to look after him but he had become terrified of the horse and things deteriorated rapidly. Generoso sensed his fear and began to attack him, causing serious injuries. Needless to say, I spent a sleepless night considering how to turn this situation around.

Several years of my life had been spent fostering teenagers with major behavioural problems and seeking to find a reason for the behaviour patterns with a positive way forward. Frequently, aggressive behaviour stemmed from abuse, lack of trust in adults and little hope of any love from the parents. All of the children were missing a role model whom they could love and trust. Maybe Generoso was having problems with his identity, in need of a herd leader - a role model to respect. Once



Cultivating love between handler and horse -
Henriette and Generoso

he could gain trust in a herd leader then his own confidence could grow. Hopefully his need for aggression would cease as he could begin to feel more calm and secure.

I asked if Generoso could be taken to the indoor school where I could work with him from the ground. This brought a small audience of spectators who were intrigued to see my fate, as most of them were nervous of him loose in the stable.

Generoso and I stood looking at each other in the school and then I encouraged him to trot and canter in a circle around me. He began to show signs of listening as he lowered his head and neck. He looked more attentive as his inside ear moved back. Then I lowered my stance and turned away from him looking inwards and he halted, turning to face me. I walked backward slowly towards him and talked softly until I was directly in front of him. We changed direction and he continued working in trot and canter, and again he was prepared to tune in with me on the other rein.

I led Generoso back to the stable and felt that he was beginning to acknowledge me as his friend and part of his herd. Previously he was menacing to lead in hand as he would launch at the handler, but I now felt a more relaxed response after the loose work.

We repeated the same work over several days until I felt that he was really listening to me and demonstrating respect for my commands. Our bond was increasing with trust and empathy gained from the loose work, so we decided he was ready for further instruction, under saddle.

When I began to ride him, I found Generoso to be a highly trained and intelligent horse, with great sensitivity and a joy to ride. His attitude to me as a rider appeared to be co-operative and willing to listen. He was finding his security. I stayed in contact and was pleased to hear that Generoso had turned a corner. He began to trust again and find his place of peace in his human herd.

Aggressive horses are often frightened horses seeking to protect themselves from humans.

LIBERTY CONNECTION FOR THE HANDLER

Time spent at liberty will offer us TIME:

- For focus on our horse, our body language and breathing, as so often we are too busy within our 'chattering' head.
- To observe our horse - his movement and responses.
- Opportunity to assess his mood, joy and interest or detachment within his training.

- Time to tune into our own breath patterns and observe his natural breathing, no horse can move with fluidity if he is shallow breathing.
- Observe his energy and how it influences his way of moving with no disturbance from a saddle or rider on his back.
- Enjoy play and introduce joy and fun within discipline.
- Time to build our relationship so our horse tunes in to our most subtle communications - such as great preparation for riding.
- Whatever level of training under saddle, the liberty work can refresh the relationship and we can practise our ridden exercises with no tack, for instance my stallions would work movements such as Spanish walk, half pass, passage at liberty.



Cassie Hall with Jenny's stallion Red

THE RIDER

Only too often, riding can become rather intense and serious. A rider may have a problem in training which becomes a block or barrier to communication. When we bring negative energy into a situation our horse will respond with anxiety. We all know how difficult it is to concentrate when we feel stressed, and so it is for our horse. Stressed horse and rider can make for a volatile combination.

When we bring liberty training into the equation we can lose this intensity instead of creating and re-creating our problems. So often we can observe the cause of a problem as we can see how quickly the horse reacts and builds up tension if our 'asks' are too strong or confusing. When we focus on our energy exchange we begin the conversation OF LISTENING which can translate into subtle communication once in the saddle.

LOKI (KNOWN AS LOKI BEAR OR LOKI BABY!!)

I had an ambition with my young PRE palomino colt to see how much we could bond with no tack. What responses could we both achieve?

Over months he would choose to follow me to the school and then we would work at liberty. He always had choices as my school is 40 metres, so he could avoid my instruction at any time by cantering off!

He has become so joyous, confident and responsive. He will also walk laterally when I move sideways and just mirror my energy and body language. He has learnt so much about self carriage and balance, and through transitions and work over poles he has become more collected and engaged. His muscle structure has strengthened and well prepared for the weight of a saddle and rider.

Loki has also learnt about energy, so I don't encourage lazy strides but active, without rushing, so he has time in the air to grow his natural balance and cadence.



Jenny's colt, Loki, has matured physically and mentally through liberty work and learned to mirror Jenny's body language



Loki with Jenny building a place for peace



Cassie's body language encourages Red to actively step over the poles



By the time he reaches the final pole Red is concentrating, looking forwards and down and using his spine

We can achieve so much with no tack to follow progress within the Classical principles of training. Loki has learnt flying changes in figure of eights and enjoys in walk some lateral exercises. I change my own body posture and breathing to encourage energy with relaxation and a release with lowered head and neck.

Exercises over the poles helps Loki to concentrate, looking forwards and down as the energy creates a more mobilised spine, active limbs and cadence. He then responds to more 'proud' body posture and begins to change his self carriage into more pride in collection and engagement as his movement changes in balance.

For me the most exciting progress has been his joy in listening. He so wants to play my games and I know once under saddle we already have built this beautiful bond between us through freedom of choices at liberty.

In the next issue, .LUNGEING- building self carriage and balance- naturally.



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Home of the
GENTIL BITLESS BRIDLE

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