

Horsefeathers
The Therapeutic Effect of Equus

by Lillian Tepera

I

The wind of heaven is that which blows between a horse's ears. (Arabian Proverb)

I packed up my books and my laptop, slinging three heavy bags over my shoulder: computer, assignments to be marked, and the textbooks I would need for prepping next week's classes. When I'd left my job in the corporate world, I hadn't realized the academic life would require so much heavy lifting.

It was quite a switch for me, learning the routines of teaching Marketing rather than practicing it. But I liked the change of pace; liked the students and the opportunity to actually think about things for a change, instead of always being in a hurry to act, as the high-tech universe in which I'd spent the previous twenty years of my working life had often forced me to do. Leaving the pressure cooker of high-technology for a teaching gig at the local community college had been liberating. The relatively leisurely pace of teaching certainly had its attractions.

And then I ruined it all by buying a horse farm. Giving up our little 6-acre backyard with barn for a real farm, and everything that real "farming" entails.

But at the moment my mind was on other things. I had a horse show to get ready for. As I loaded my bags into my Beetle and wheeled out of the parking lot a little more quickly than I probably should have, I was making a check-list in my head of all that had to be done in the course of the next two hours: post the show schedule in the barn for parents and riders to refer to, set up the arena with the necessary poles, pylons and props needed for the various competitions and games, make sure the ribbons, certificates and t-shirts for the riders were laid out, bring in the horses and start grooming them. This last bit would take extra time today, since we would be braiding manes and tails and decorating them with ribbons in addition to the regular brushing and hoof-cleaning. And the horses would need to be extra-shiny today. Many pictures would be taken. Thankfully, Krystal would be along to help out early, and Meghan and Sarah, too. They would be coming straight from school to help get the horses ready and then work with riders as they normally did during lessons.

I also needed my list of horse show "classes" – those tasks each rider would have to accomplish to earn his or her ribbon, based on the list of goals we'd laid out weeks ago when the riders first joined us. Because this was no ordinary horse show. It was graduation day for the latest group of riders in my therapeutic riding program. Only two of these riders had been on a horse before joining our program -- one was in fact a very capable rider, able to control a horse quite nicely on her own, while the other had been riding with us for several months now, and progressed to trotting despite quite significant physical and cognitive limitations caused by Cerebral Palsy. The other six ranged from a young girl who would require frequent breaks during the hour as her ability to concentrate ran out, to the tall, gangly teen-aged boy who polished up his cowboy boots for every lesson and prided himself on the extra "homework" he did each week to learn more about horses than I had in fact assigned. The common thread among all eight riders

– split into two groups of four for their weekly lessons and the horse show -- was that each had been diagnosed with some form of developmental delay or disability. These riders had been hand-picked and funded by a community support agency to experience an enriched version of our regular therapeutic riding program – one that would teach some horsemanship skills as well as riding, and give the students a specific set of goals to accomplish, which they would demonstrate today in our “show.”

For Connie, the little girl with the short attention-span, the program had proved challenging. Besides a lack of tolerance for odours – a definite problem when you’re in a stable, and quite common in children with Autism – she had a tendency to become anxious when separated from her parents, even by the half-door of the arena. She became frightened easily. For her, one of the biggest challenges would be the beginning of today’s horse show, when she would be required to lead her horse into the arena and through an obstacle course of pylons before coming to the mounting block to get on the horse and ride. She was intimidated by the horse’s size – much more noticeable from the ground than from his back – and his tendency to rub his muzzle on her arm. Although the volunteer who worked with Connie was never more than a step or two away, Connie’s courage and perseverance were stretched to the limit by this exercise.

But pushing the envelope was what this particular program was all about. Unlike the riders in our regular lessons who simply came and rode and then went home, these students went home with homework every week. That meant homework for the parents, too, but they seemed happy to do it. In week one they’d learned the names of different grooming tools – hoof picks, curry combs, dandy brushes – and took home a sheet that showed the names and pictures in two columns that had to be matched up. Of course, not all the riders could read, so the parents had to work with them to get the homework done. When learning parts of the horse, the parents had to read the names of different conformation points and have the children point to them on a drawing of a horse. Knee. Hock. Elbow. Muzzle. Mane. The end result was parents who now knew much more about horses than they had banked on learning! The children rose to the occasion and proudly showed off completed homework assignments at the beginning of each week’s lesson.

I hoped Connie would make it through the scariest parts at the start without too many problems. The rest of the “show” would be easy for her after that.

The barn door opened as I was musing about Connie while tying a ribbon around a braid I’d just completed and I could hear Meghan and Sarah chatting as they walked in. When they saw what I was doing, they practically squealed with excitement.

“Awesome!” Sarah said. “Can I braid Wilby’s mane?”

“Of course,” I answered. “And Meghan, you can do Oscar if you’d like. Krystal should be here any minute to start on Louis. We need to have all four of them gussied up before the riders arrive.”

The girls rushed off to get the horses and start braiding. Both were teen-agers who took riding lessons at a nearby competition barn, but neither had her own horse. Volunteering in my program gave them extra “horse time,” and I tried to make sure they always got the opportunity to ride before the evening’s lessons. Polishing up the horses for our little show seemed to make them almost as happy as braiding for a show they would be competing in themselves.

As the rest of the volunteers trickled in by ones and twos, I noticed everyone seemed to have a little extra bounce in their step. The evening had a real sense of occasion to it – a feeling that only got stronger when I unpacked the shirts I’d had made up for the occasion: dark blue polo shirts with the Stonegate Farm name and logo embroidered on them. It was little enough to give these dedicated volunteers as thanks for their hard work every week, but they all seemed delighted as they changed into their new shirts and joined in the brushing, braiding and tacking-up of the horses. And then the first of the riders came in.

It was Lisa, a delicate fourteen-year-old who had fallen madly, passionately in love with horses and riding. Before the session was even half-way over she was already pestering her parents about coming back for more lessons. Her eyes opened wide as she saw the horses.

“They look beautiful!” she exclaimed, the sight of our dolled-up beasties stopping her in her tracks. Then she walked to Henk, “her” horse for the duration of the program, and took him in from nose to tail: the gleaming black coat, the long French braid coiling along the crest of his neck and finished with a white ribbon at the end, the bow in his long, thick tail. There were tears in her eyes as she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him. Henk stretched his neck around as far as the cross-ties holding him would allow, and playfully lipped the back of Lisa’s shirt. A year or two earlier, the lips might have been followed by his teeth, but he had done a great deal of growing up, and understood now that biting humans – even if it was meant to be playful – was simply not acceptable.

Once the other riders arrived, each one was handed the reins and instructed to lead his or her horse into the arena. The parents and grandparents followed as far as the arena doors, cameras dangling from straps around their necks. Each horse/rider combination was surrounded by its own little team of volunteers, sporting their matching Stonegate Farm shirts. It all looked very festive.

The first of our two lesson groups had the younger riders in it, including Connie. As I stood in the centre of the arena watching them all come in, I found myself holding my breath. Connie looked tense as she came through the door with Oscar, but she was holding onto those reins, not dropping them and dashing off to her Mom as she had done once or twice before. She caught my eye and smiled, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I smiled back, hoping it looked encouraging and not nervous, and gave her a “thumbs-up.” She looked tiny next to the very tall Oscar who, while physically imposing, had the solid, go-slow attitude she needed to build her confidence. Together they strolled toward the

first pylon, Oscar managing to keep his nose off her sleeve and next to her hand where it belonged. I felt myself relax a little.

One by one the riders completed their required leading pattern and handed their horses to the volunteers. A quick tack-check to make sure all girths were tight and bridles secure and we put the riders up using our oversized mounting block that made mounting manageable even for riders in wheelchairs. Now the volunteers would lead, with most riders accompanied by one or two “sidewalkers” as well. While the leader was in control of the horse, the sidewalkers were responsible for the rider: enforcing my directions as needed, encouraging, prompting, calming, and even holding the rider if required. For the most physically challenged riders, the assistance of sidewalkers is all that keeps them on their horses, and the job becomes exhausting if volunteers cannot be switched-out for a rest. But tonight’s group was not that physically demanding, and the volunteers rarely had to hold the riders steady, except to trot.

The goals of therapeutic riding, as opposed to the kind of riding lessons provided by most riding schools, are as varied as the riders themselves. For some, it is the movement of the horse that provides the most important therapy. Human bodies that are limited in their own ability to move by illness or injury benefit greatly from sitting on a strong, large creature that moves underneath them, and that moves them, in turn. Joints and ligaments loosen up gently, and muscles grow stronger without too much strain. Balance improves as the horse’s movement challenges the rider with changes of speed and direction. For others, like the riders in this evening’s horse show, the therapy is more related to teaching focus, improving attention span and self-control by teaching riding skills. Maneuvering a horse through a zig-zag course of pylons or learning how to sit the bounciness of a trotting horse requires concentration, but the reward is pure fun. Riders learn without realizing they are learning, and the friendships developed with horses, volunteers and other riders go a long way toward teaching the inter-personal skills many of these youngsters find so difficult in other parts of their lives. A mutual love of horses is a great basis on which to start a conversation.

Much of what our young riders had learned, and were asked to demonstrate in the show, had to do with control of the horse. While the leader remained at the end of the lead rope (except for Helena, who would be allowed to “solo” without a leader), the riders steered the horses by pulling on the correct rein at the right time, asked them to “whoa” and “walk-on,” and even “trot!” They had to sit up straight and look where they were going, keep their heels down and their shoulders back. Just like competitors at The Royal Winter Fair or the winter show circuit in Florida, they were expected to show good form while controlling their horses. But for these riders, the ultimate goals were far greater than just taking home that ribbon at the end.

We worked our way through mounted egg-and-spoon races, a “command class” requiring riders to walk, halt, turn and trot “on command,” a modified trail class where riders steered through a course of poles and pylons, tossed stuffed animals into a bucket and rings onto a cone. We even had a walking race, won easily by the long-legged Oscar. This victory gave Connie an extra boost of confidence, and soon she was smiling broadly

as she rode around the ring. To show their knowledge of grooming equipment the riders were sent on a scavenger hunt around the arena to collect a complete grooming kit before gathering in the centre of the ring to name the parts of horse, saddle and bridle they had learned each week. There were one or two tense moments as riders struggled to remember pommel (front of saddle) or withers (where the horse's neck joins his back), but the volunteers were shameless with their helpful hints and soon enough everyone was finished. I dismounted the riders, and presented each one with a ribbon (the colour matched the skill level each had been assigned to at the session's start), a t-shirt and a certificate of achievement they could hang on a wall. Cameras flashed as riders showed off proud trophies.

I had not expected so much excitement. The Mom of a rider in the second group told me her son had been nervous about remembering how to do everything. He had gone over all the homework assignments before coming to the horse show, and was even nervous about riding well enough to earn his ribbon. This surprised me, particularly since Paul was one of our regular riders, and had never shown this determination to achieve before. Even Helena, the young woman with years of riding experience, admitted to practicing the dressage test (pattern of movements to be performed in a specific order) I had asked her to perform as part of our show, on foot in her backyard. Twenty times or so! And James, he of the polished cowboy boots, outdid himself by posting at the trot (a rhythmical rising up and sitting down in time to the horse's movement) and naming obscure body parts like "poll" and "croup" that I had not even discussed in classes (evidently his school's library had a good book on the subject). He even explained to us that horses had feathers as well as hair – feathers being the long hair some horses, including our two Friesians, grew on their lower legs. He had even brought a photo of the Budweiser Clydesdale team to show us, with its eight gorgeous horses all sporting luxurious, spotlessly white feathers that covered their hooves and rippled when they walked.

Of course everyone "graduated." All riders had demonstrated the skills they had been assigned to learn, with several of them going well beyond what I had thought they could realistically achieve in our relatively short five weeks together.

After so much excitement, untying bows and shaking out braids seemed a little sad. Too final. Some of these riders, I knew, would not be back: their funding had run out and their families could not afford even the modest fees we had to charge to keep the horses fed and cared for. Everyone seemed reluctant to go: riders insisted on giving their horse that final stroke of the brush or dashed off to the feed room for "just one more carrot" to feed their horse. Volunteers swept and swept until the floor practically gleamed. Then they decided to stay and help me do the evening feeding, and then swept again because wisps of hay had fallen on the immaculate floor. I was tired. It had been a long day from the 5:30 feeding and turn-out in the morning through my classes at the college to this grand finale and late-night chores. Yet I felt a deep satisfaction, too, of something well accomplished. My horses had done me proud, and the little community that gathered in my stable two evenings a week to work with the horses and their special riders had given something to those children that they could get nowhere else. As the riders reluctantly tagged behind their parents through a soft summer night, out to their cars and then home,

they were different than they had been five weeks ago when their program started. They had been changed in the way that only horses can change you.