

Finding a Place to Belong

By Ariana Strozzi

It's amazing to me how fast the application of the horse's innate wisdom and heart has expanded into the domains of human growth and learning. For so many years, I felt alone teaching concepts of authenticity, trust, intention, and intuition through the eyes of the horse. My students would ask me if I knew of other people doing this work. "I imagine there may be some people out there, but I don't know who and where they are." I would say. It wasn't until late 1999 that people began to send me newspaper clippings or other written material about folks applying horse logic to prisoners, to medical students, and to youth at risk.

One day, a regular student of mine came to my ranch for her monthly session. As she was catching me up with her recent adventures, she announced, "I am now a certified equine therapist." There was a question mark behind her tone, as if she herself wondered what that meant. I had never heard of an Equine Therapist, so I asked her, "Does that mean that you are a therapist to the horse?"

"No, no", she replied, "It's similar to the work you do with humans and horses. In Equine Therapy there is a horse specialist and a therapist during the session." Many months later, she asked me to do a clinic in her area. She had enrolled several people who claimed to be equine therapists. What I witnessed were that some of these folks had very little horse experience and many more had no official training to be working with people on an emotional or spiritual level. For the first time, I felt fear about this body of work that I am so deeply passionate about and committed to.

My feelings were mixed. I felt both a sense of, 'finally the world sees the profound role horses play as teachers and healers to humans'. On the other hand, I worried, 'What if these new people don't know what they are doing and someone gets hurt emotionally or physically? What if the public walks away from a program or facilitator thinking it was too weird and this new discourse disappears before it had a chance?' At the end of the day I ended our session as a spokeswoman of the vision of what is possible for humans and horses and advised these people to find a teacher/mentor who confirms that they are ready to do this work.

These innocent newcomers to the complex field of equine emotional, spiritual, biological and psychological awareness had no idea how silly it sounded to me that someone could be certified in just three days. Will they be able to identify and deal with the dramatic shift in a horse's state of being in the presence of emotional incongruence or inauthentic expression? Will they know what to do when a horse mirrors unresolved trauma in a person's body? Having witnessed several thousand human/horse interactions since 1990, and continually awed by the depth of insight and 6th sense that horses bring to humans, I couldn't help but think, 'they have no idea what they are getting into.' Will they be able to protect the horse and the human when there is emotional, physical or psychological incongruence present? Do they even know what that means?

As I left the dusty arena that day, I began a quest to find the answer to these questions. As I researched EAGALA and EFMHA, I tried to understand the difference between Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy and Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. I figured that if I was confused about the difference, then surely the public was as well. After several years of looking and trying to belong somewhere, the closest I can gather is that EFP, EAP and EEL are lineage based. EFP goes with EFMHA and EAP goes with

EAGALA and EEL describes a process. I didn't seem to fit in the category of EFP or EAP because I am not a licensed psychotherapist. I am a Certified Master Somatic Coach, I have a degree in Zoology, I have 36 years of experience working with horses, 14 years working with human education through experiential practices with horses, and 10 years as a 4H Horse Leader. Even though I am now on the certification team for EFMHA, I may never be able to be certified by the very standards I help set, because I am not a licensed psychotherapist.

To further complicate my search for a herd, perspective students continue to ask me where they can belong if they are not psychotherapists. And so, nudged by the blossoming field of Horse Sense for Humans, I felt pressed to explore a bigger container for the diversity of this work.

I imagined a blank canvas and I imagined what the painting of 'horses as healers and teachers' would look like fifty years from now. I imagined a unified field where we would each say in a simple term "I am a certified..." and I do". Kind of like, "I am a chiropractor". As I thought about the adjectives used to describe the work such as "facilitated", "experiential", "assisted", my heart kept saying, 'horses do more than facilitate. They are more than assistants. They literally 'guide' the process. If the horse says, 'pay attention here', I can't imagine a situation in which we, as facilitators, would choose not to follow the horse's lead'.

When we allow horses to 'guide' us into a psycho spiritual landscape, we are providing more than an equine experience. If and when we are ready, the horse even guides us into a mythical landscape far beyond words.

Persistently pursued by the next generation of educators to define and create standards for this work, I assembled a group of equine/human educators to discuss a broader brushstroke to equine/human education. We researched the best adjective to describe the respectful application of 'horse sense' to human growth and learning. We found that the word 'guide' implies intimate knowledge of the course or way and all of its difficulties and dangers. Synonyms include: direct, escort, lead, pilot, shepherd, show, steer; to set upon one's way. The noun 'guide' means -someone takes one through unknown or unexplored territory. The word 'Experiential' means-a personal reality; existential: derived from experience or the experience of existence. The word 'Facilitate' means - to make easy or less difficult. 'To educate' means-to develop or cultivate in mind and character. Synonyms include: to train, develop, prepare, school, cultivate, civilize. To be 'Educated' means-having an education according to an accepted standard.

So after many years of exploration I found a place to belong. I am an Equine Guided Educator and I do Equine Guided Education. The term Education encompasses a wide variety of learning models including therapy and coaching. Its definition includes the principles and practices of developing the 'self', which lends itself well to horses as healers/teachers.