

***Romantic Notions  
And Rose-Colored Glasses***

by Michael Bevilacqua

August 2011



It still surprises me when I meet people seeking a better way with horses and looking for a better relationship with them. Not only for the fact that they are seeking a different way, but they are often well educated about horses, in health, nutrition, homeopathy and massage techniques. They try to give the best lifestyle for the horse as can be obtained in a domestic situation, and generally want the best for the horse. Yet, perhaps, as I experienced, many are stuck in some kind of norm of thought.

In many cases, such people are also vegetarian, or spiritual. They also have incredible relationships with dogs or birds and all kinds of other animals. I have had people tell me about the characters and moods of different animals in their lives. How they learned from each other, adapted to each other, learned likes

and dislikes, to communicate fun, sadness, jealousy, curiosity, speech recognition and the simple processes of learning and growing together. In many cases, seeing this in action, I would directly ask the person why they called me for help. Why, after so many years of experience of relating to other species, did they not realise that they can simply do the same with horses? Why were horses inaccessibly beyond some imaginary curtain? It made many people think. Unfortunately, it did not really change the situation.



*SPH El Primo - age nine*

***Open Your Heart To Love***

Notice how people react or interact with a young foal. If I had the power to take

anyone's horse and shrink him down to the size of a Chihuahua, the relationship would instantly change between horse and owner. Mainly due to the person's new and different interaction with the super-mini horse and more quality time spent with him. A lot more time. He would be so cuddly, loveable, and cute. They would laugh, stroke, tease, and play with the tiny horse. Just like they do with dogs or cats or birds - but not with their real horse. Along with what we have been programmed to believe in the standard horse world, there is an aspect of fear involved.

Put a person face to face with an unknown, adult horse in a paddock and the entire dynamic, at least due to the human point of view, instantly changes. What causes that change, that restriction, that distance? Reasons can vary for everyone but one common factor would be our own conditioned expectations. That available innocence, joy and spontaneity are often discarded when looking at an adult horse.

Why would an adult horse have changed *his* perspective or attitude toward humans as compared to an exuberant, playful, affectionate foal?



At any stage along the development of the relationship with the horse, through the various interactions that we initiate or allow to evolve, we must be conscious of doing only that with which we are comfortable. Likewise, if we are very certain and emotionally comfortable about a particular request we may have, it does not automatically mean that the horse is at the same level. It is by being self-aware and by adjusting to the horse that we can progress through various comfort zones.

Horses react to that which they are subjected. Once they become big, heavy and strong a simple move from them can unintentionally, seriously injure us. Yet, it is simply abuse if we hammer repeatedly any reaction out of, or into, a horse. If we teach a horse, and I do not mean `train`, but really teach with patience and clarity for understanding, view the horse with a positive, creative, loving and happy

attitude, then the self-imposed wall crumbles.



Enjoying the warm sun with The Big Book of Horses

Time spent with the horse should not be solely for trying to get something done. By treating the horse as a cherished companion, the barrier between human and horse ceases to exist. We will begin to see the gentleness, intelligence, and cooperation that were before us all along, but masked through proliferated notions that a horse is an animal that needs to be conquered and trained.

However, this is not always possible. There are very few circumstances or places in today's world where horses play a necessary traditional, subservient role but they still exist. The best that can be achieved at this time is to educate people about the physical needs of work horses. One such organization is

[HSVMA](#) (Human Society Veterinary Medical Association) which helps people in poorer rural areas at home and abroad. There are other organizations that send people abroad to educate. It is not to impose ideals or change but to improve the lives of the horses. It can be as basic as informing people of feeding and water requirements to hoof care.

In the journey with horses in our lives, many people come to realisations on their own and simply develop a shift in attitude toward the horse. This, also, does not always bode well. If someone has a change of heart or viewpoint but is making a living off the usage of horses there better be a well-established plan to be able to continue to survive and care for the horses. It is when the head and the heart go on divergent paths that problems arise. In my book I mention someone who had a bed & breakfast with horse rental. This person rented out horses to strangers on a steady basis to ride in the mountains at night. To continue to do that, there is no question about the possibility of giving the horse a choice, freedom of expression and removing controlling headgear. In the situation that they are in and the life that they live, those horses must be trained and do as they are told. At best, they can be well-cared for from a nutritional standpoint, shoeless and bitless.



Painting courtesy of artist [Gill Bustamente](https://www.fineartamerica.com): *Creation of Horse* -

[fineartamerica.com](https://www.fineartamerica.com)

### ***Removing the Veil***

There are so many beautiful stories about the creation of the horse and how they were revered in so many different, ancient cultures around the world. The Arabian is highlighted for its strength of spirit and loyalty. One folklore makes mention of [Mohammad](#) who deprived his horses of water for three days. After releasing them to run toward an oasis, he sounded a battle call. Out of the hundreds of horses running to quench their burning thirst, only five mares responded and returned to him. Those five mares became the foundation bloodlines of the Arabian horse. Al Khamsa, meaning The Five. The Bedouins of Desert Arabia recognized their high intelligence and swaddled and cleaned a

newborn foal as they would a baby. They protected the horse like a family member, believed in preserving their spirit and did not believe in harsh training methods. What would be considered harsh training methods back then? It is said that the native Arabian horses had no fear of man and could be easily approached and handled for they did not understand why anyone would hurt them. What is portrayed as a beautiful, divine gift, look what we have done to and with horses in history.

I have heard of a technique to bury a horse standing upright (head above ground) who would then be exposed to what is termed flooding. (The technique is very old but studying this and coining the term is only recent) This is more than systematically presenting objects that a horse considers frightful. It is a barrage of all sorts of visual stimuli or noises and any imagined scary thing that could be presented to intentionally bring the horse way past the threshold of fear. The horse could not move; could not injure himself but also could not escape. When the horse would no longer respond to any stimuli, he was broke, or domesticated, or obedient, or rideable. Is that better than tying a horse to a post and slowly sacking out? Is it better than psychological dominance? Behavior modification or manipulation?

We no longer live with the horse on a daily, full-time basis to roam and survive together in a symbiotic relationship. It may seem like a romantic notion to some, but the reality was a harsh, nomadic life with constant dangers and threats to survival. Yet, we are still drawn to the horse and seek that mutual

understanding and loyalty because part of the human spirit identifies with that of the horse.

If someone says that they have a cooperative, willing horse that will do whatever is asked at any time, it is most likely that what they have is a conditioned, trained horse. Even with no tack, it may be clear to onlookers that a horse may not seem very enthusiastic about standing still to be mounted. The worse case would be a result of learned helplessness in the horse to put on entertaining shows. Actually, that is total loss of will due to being subjected to repeated or prolonged painful or unpleasant circumstances. This holds true for people and animals as studied by the American psychologist, Martin E.P. Seligman, Ph.D. Learned helplessness is basically like giving up, throwing in the towel before even trying and even if the chance to escape is presented, it is not taken.



*Pauvre poulain (poor foal)* by [Brunhilde Reinig](#)

A simple, real-life example would be a woman who was jubilant to demonstrate how her horse would stand still in the alley with no restraints as she walks off to her locker to get a brush. I have seen a horse stand still, look at a feed bucket a few feet away, look back toward the woman, and just hang his head with a face filled with anxiety. He knew that if he moved, it would get very unpleasant. This also has physiological impacts such as stress and the

ensuing results from prolonged stress; depression and diminished learning capability. The woman loved to show a very obedient horse, but I saw a very sad horse. Just like the word ‘respect’ mentioned in the previous newsletter, the term ‘willing’ is yet another word in the horse world that is interpreted in many different ways.

### ***Beginning a New History***

With all the different methods that have existed and do exist, consider that people are often looking for new ways to make the horse do the same things as always. Change, for humans, is not an easy process. We always tend to hang on to the old while slowly incorporating the new. It comes to a point where adding the new pieces to the old just does not make sense anymore. We are now at a point where there is a seemingly radical departure in horse-human relationships.

This different mentality toward horses, seeing things the way they are, is more commonly being applied as a result of our modern world, the long road we have done with horses throughout history and all that we have learned about them. We no longer need horses to facilitate our survival. We certainly do not need them for war.

It is not as simple as suddenly making a decision to change our apparent attitude. We can decide to change but only truly change when we come to some realisations. It is not so much that it is a work to build toward, but more important to let go of old thought and deal with feelings in a new way. It should be with love, or at least, honesty. It really turns almost all we have learned about training horses upside down. The horses never changed. They are just waiting, patiently,

for people to meet them halfway. They never forget, but they can forgive. If freedom, respect, understanding and teaching is given to horses instead of trying to train them, they give us their all. What we do with that is another question.

**Resources:**

Positive Psychology Center, University of Pennsylvania:

[www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/lh.htm](http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/lh.htm)

**References:**

Bevilacqua, Michael (2010). *Beyond the Dream Horse*, Quebec, Canada: ISBN 10: 1453725261; ISBN 13: 9781453725269

Seligman, M.E.P. (1975). *Helplessness: On Depression, Development, and Death*. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman. ISBN 0-7167-2328-X

Carissa Kelvens, California State University: *Fear and Anxiety*

Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association: [ruralareavet.org](http://ruralareavet.org)

Kelsa Staffa, *Fire in the Heart: The Al Khamsa Arabian*: [culturemagazine.ca](http://culturemagazine.ca)

Al Khamsa: [alkhamsa.org](http://alkhamsa.org)

Havemeyer Equine Behavior Lab, University of Pennsylvania: *Unpredictable Fear*

*The Horse*: [theosophytrust.org](http://theosophytrust.org)