

Lily's Thoughts

by Linda Davenport

The first Ray Hunt clinic I attended was in the early 80s. As I sat there on my little Morgan, listening to him talk about how he was there to “make a better deal for the horse,” I felt a tremendous surge of emotion. I wanted to know more, a lot more. I watched Ray demonstrate how he could “dance” with his horse. While in the saddle, he’d lift each one of the horse’s feet off the ground by squeezing his rein almost imperceptibly, then he’d move each foot out to the side, and before it touched the ground, put it back where it was. Pretty soon, he picked up a rhythm and they were dancing. All the while, the expression on that horse’s face was as soft as butter, incredibly peaceful. Ray and that horse were one. Pursuing that “oneness” with my horses became my life’s ambition.

Not long after that I attended my first Tom Dorrance clinic, and my life was changed forever. I saw Tom do things with horses that are extremely difficult to even describe. At one clinic (a Ray Hunt-Tom Dorrance clinic) a stock trailer was backed up to the arena and a herd of untouched colts jumped out and Ray started working the herd from horseback, moving them around the arena. They were wild-eyed and looking for a way out. Tom asked Ray to stop and come over to the fence, and Tom walked into the area with those wild colts, and every single one of them stopped, turned, and looked at that man, as if they knew that everything would be okay now. They were calm. How was that possible? I don’t know. There was something extraordinary about Tom that cannot be explained.

I attempted to achieve oneness with my horses by correcting them with pressure when they were wrong, and when they were right, I gave them total relief from pressure. Fortunately, God blessed me with horses along the way that worked okay with that approach, and I had some success, but I still struggled between doing too much and not doing enough.

Then came Lily. Lily was, well, different. When she was good, she was awesome; but when she was bad, she was very bad. I’ll describe just one incident so that you can get the flavor of who Lily was. We were heading down through some thick brush, and a deer popped out just ahead of us. She spun around, which is completely understandable, and I stayed with her, got her turned back, and off we went down the trail. She felt like a block of concrete, that tight. I thought, well, we’ll just get out into the open, out of the brush, and we’ll trot for a ways to help her relax. We trotted a half a mile or so down the trail. Still concrete. So we turned up a very long, gently-rising hill and flowed into a lope. About three-quarters of the way up that long slope, she exploded into a fit of bucking. Stayed with her, and we managed to make it back home in one piece, but she was still tight and upset. I had not helped her relieve that stress one iota. Why? Definitely not “oneness.”

This became Lily’s M.O. Something would bother her, she’d hold onto it, and 10-15 minutes later, boom, an explosion, and I ultimately got hurt. Then I started “playing it safe,” avoiding confrontation, staying in our “comfort zone.” That approach wasn’t helping either one of us.

Over the past few years, I have come across some exceptional articles written by Tom Moates’ about his journey into “natural” horsemanship, with the help of Clinician Harry Whitney. Having been around natural horsemanship for quite a few years, I was extremely impressed with his uncanny ability to put in writing this

“oneness” thing, and I sent him off an email and told him so and ordered his books, “Between the Reins” and “A Horse’s Thought”.

In “A Horse's Thought” Tom describes Harry sitting in the saddle, looking down the horse's neck, holding the reins and he says, "Hanging between those reins is a thought, and if you have the thought, you have the feet, and if you have the feet, you have the horse!" Tom goes on to say, “You should learn to ask a horse to send his thoughts to places before thinking about having his body go there. This is the key to the universe, pretty much ... one leads a horse's mind, and the horse moves himself without the crude need to be mechanically convinced ... To lead a horse is a very different situation than to cause the horse to escape from pressure we inflict ... The horse is often committed to his own thought, even when this mental condition causes him trouble and anxiety. Our changing this pattern and leading the horse into a new direction should always be to prove to the horse that there is another way that will make him feel better.” [Emphasis mine.] Giant light bulb moment! Could this be the answer to my problem with Lily? Could I get her to leave a troubled thought? I knew then and there I just had to go and check out this Harry Whitney fellow for myself, and signed up for a clinic in Montana.

Fast forward to our first day at Harry's clinic. I was nervous; I was dreading what I knew would probably come; Lily and I were out of our comfort zone completely and all hell could break loose. The first day was the individual time with Harry, in front of the whole group. I got Lily ready and brought her over to the round pen area ahead of my scheduled time so she'd have time, I hoped, to take in the surroundings and be okay with them. I had her tied to a hitching rail next to the round pen and stayed next to her, hoping she'd be comforted by my presence, while I stroked her softly. There was a lot of activity around the round pen, what with spectators, horses going and coming all around. She suddenly exploded and set back on that rope with all she had, but the rope and rail held. My turn came. We went into the round pen and walked to the area nearest Harry and told the group about Lily and why I was there. Lily was everywhere but with me, a case of dynamite ready to explode. Harry asked me to see if I could direct her around me, and when I asked her to go, she exploded. Enter Harry to the rescue. He took a hold of the lead and proceeded to get her "thought" in very short order, and to my embarrassment, with very little effort really. It happened just like that; he made a suggestion where her thought should go, and it went. When her thought left where he'd directed, he brought it back. Just like that.

Harry said, “The best thing we can ever do for our horse is to teach them to let go of a thought!” At last, the answer. Once I saw it, I knew I had it, and so did Lily. With Harry’s help, what Lily and I went on to accomplish during that 4-day clinic and the time since have been astounding. Figuratively speaking, I feel like I could ride her down a badger hole or right up a telephone pole, and she’d be willing to do it if I asked. Sometimes I only have to “think” about where I want to go, and she goes. Incredible!

(Tom Moates has written a chapter about Lily and me and our journey in his book, “Further Along the Trail”.)