

Harry is fond of illustrating a lesson with a narrative. This method creates an effective teaching tool, the power of which is not lost on his students. The following is a first person account, written by one of his students, that captures the essence of who he is and how he teaches.

“It wasn’t what I expected...”

I had expected it to be fun—it was. I had expected to learn a lot about horsemanship—I did. I expected to make new friends and have an adventure. Yep, did that, too.

What I didn’t expect was what else happened that week—it had nothing to do with horsemanship, but everything to do with the philosophy of the teacher.

I went to this particular week-long horsemanship clinic on the recommendation of friends who raved about Harry Whitney, a guy whose name I was unfamiliar with—hasn’t written a book and doesn’t sell his own brand of halters and leads. No showmanship, swagger or flash at all. But, he seemed to be a man who taught with depth.

By the first night of the clinic, I could see how this man might be different. He speaks slowly, considering each word, often speaking in allegory, telling a story that parallels his point. It is an engaging style; you have to be involved in what he saying to understand. He doesn’t just want to tell you; he illustrates his philosophy with stories. This slow, deliberate story-telling style threw me off at first. I learned I have to slow down...really pay attention....He won’t TELL me; I have to SEE his point of view from the picture of the story he paints.

Pretty soon, I get the hang of this story-telling method of teaching. Next thing I know, he’s telling stories full of emotion and feeling, and relating it—not to how the person feels—but to how the HORSE feels.

A student complained that her sometimes-hot horse spooked at a rock near her barn. “The horse had walked by that rock every day for years, and this one day, she decides to spook at it!” Harry then tells us a story to illustrate his philosophy regarding the horse spooking at the rock.

“You are at home, alone, at night. A storm comes up complete with thunder and bright lightning, and you are feeling a little scared—glad to be safe in your house. Suddenly, a loud clap of thunder makes you jump just as the power goes out. A second later the phone rings and you jump again, your heart pounding as you grab the phone. On the other end of the line is someone, someone breathing heavily. “Who is this?” you shout—really scared now! He hangs up. There is a knock on the back door. Who is out there in this weather? Is it the caller? You decide to barricade yourself in your room. As you head to the door in the dark, suddenly you bang into a table. You SCREAM and jump back, terrified...”

The story stops there. We all just sit a minute in silence, thinking about what Harry has just said. “It’s not about the table,” Harry tells us. “You are not afraid of the table. It’s about how you were feeling right before you ran into the table.”

The room is silent. Then, one of us says to Harry, “It’s not about the rock. The horse was feeling overwhelmed inside way before she startled at the rock.” “Right”, says Harry quietly. “Say that you told someone your storm story. That person might think “...she’s afraid of the table, I can help fix that.” They take you to the table to show you it isn’t a scary table—encourage you to stroke the table and stand by the table and eat off the table. You’d think they were crazy! It’s NOT about the table.” Harry continued, “the trick is to be able to see what the horse is feeling before she spooks at the rock.”

I can feel this lesson sinking deep into my body. I now understand how the horse felt when she came upon the rock.

The following day, Harry is teaching me how to bring my horse in to me and send her back out the other way, by using very subtle cues—not by leaping in front of her, shaking a rope at her feet or waving a stick in her face. Harry considers those techniques to be the equivalent of shouting—a rude way to communicate with a super-sensitive being like a horse.

He is instructing me on what to do, and despite some progress, it's clumsy and awkward. My horse is doing her best, but judging by her responses, I am not being clear to her. Harry comes into the round pen and takes her lead line. He fluidly and easily executes the maneuver I had been trying to communicate to my horse. My horse relaxed and was happy to slow dance with this tall, gentle cowboy. Sure looks easy, I think nervously. My turn again...we start out okay but I can't get the last part right. "Don't worry," he says, "you'll get it." I relax—he sure seems confident in me. He stands behind me while I try again, and at the crucial moment, he gently puts light pressure on the top of my arm to guide me at a precise point. My horse effortlessly executes the turn and I am amazed at how easy that was—just that one tiny direction at that one precise point in time.

Later that day, Harry is working with a nervous, suspicious mare. He wants her to choose to stand near him and allow him to rub her with the saddle pad while standing at liberty. It takes quite a while to convey that she doesn't need to worry, but Harry hangs in there. Finally, she chooses to stand with him and he pets her all over. There was no overwhelming pressure, no chasing, no driving up her fear so we could see her lick and chew as her fear let down a notch. Anyone can put a lot of pressure on a horse in order to get a lick and chew as she lets down when you release that extra pressure.

Harry wants to meet the suspicious horse without adding a lot of pressure, getting her to let down and relax with him and feel better without having to feel worse first.

That night, comes the epiphany. Someone asked Harry how he was able to be so incredibly patient with that horse. "I didn't need patience," he says, "I had faith." That's when it hit me. He had used that technique on me that day in the round pen! I was feeling self-conscious, nervous and afraid I couldn't do it. Harry had FAITH in me...he simply knew I would get it once I understood. All I needed was that tiny nudge at precisely the right point. His skill was in adapting his technique to my individual needs as a learner.

Faith implies a lot of positive qualities in the other, believing in them, finding a way to reach that person or horse, without ever faltering once in your belief that he or she will get there. It implied KNOWING that they can do it. I experienced that myself in the round pen. Harry simply believed in me and worked out a way to communicate with me that made sense to me. He didn't just poke me in the arm at the right moment; he gave me the gift of his time and belief in me.

Contemplating my time with Harry, I wonder now if he set it up that way, so I could learn about myself from watching the horse, just as he had taught us about horses by telling stories about people. I had expected to improve my horsemanship at this week-long clinic. I hadn't realized I would be learning life lessons that applied everywhere in my life or that I would come away with understandings that would shape me as a person.