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Creative Nonfiction

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Creative Nonfiction: Equine Therapy

Many have heard of the power of the horses. This up-and-coming therapy has transformed the lives of many people throughout the globe, and has been said to “work magic” on those participating in the therapy. The horses are said to promote a calming effect on some of the most violent patients. They install bonds. They promote trust: trust in others, and trust in the patients themselves. When I was a young girl, I watched my father suffer from an extreme case of manic depressive disorder, commonly known as the Bipolar disorder. When I was twelve years old, he went to an equine therapy facility. He was reluctant to go, but the medication he was on was not enough to compensate for his constant struggle for a stable mind. It was not giving him sanity. When he reached his breaking point he finally agreed to go work with the horses. He referred to it as “fluffy bullshit” back then, but has come to agree with the claim that many experts have made based on this kind of therapy. He now believes that horses are unique animals that promote bonding and trust within oneself: aspects that will help with psycho illnesses and traumas. He agrees with experts on the idea that therapeutic horseback riding is an effective form of therapy that can be beneficial to different types of patients. This is my father’s story.

He had salt and pepper hair that looked soft enough to run your hands through. His beard was lacking a shape and ran down his neck in that mountain man way. It was mostly grey with a few struggling black hairs poking their way through. His hands had calluses covering them,

telling the story of a life of labor. His shoulders were broad and his muscles toned. He had a scar from his elbow all the way down to his wrist. His story was that he had elbow surgery when he played baseball for the major leagues, but you never knew what the truth was with a man like that. His eyes were green blue. The kind of color of the sky right before a big storm, the kind of storm that would tear rooves off buildings, leave people homeless. They were kind, too: his eyes. They were kind and sad. They seemed tired; it was like his manic depression even took a toll on his eyes. They were tired of the tears they cried when he spiraled into depression. They were just as tired of looking wild, of running blindly, showing white, like a horse who was out of control. His voice was loud. It was kind of voice that you heard and you knew instantly to listen. He had this light about him. The hippies and fortune tellers would have called it an aura. But it was something deeper than that. He was vivacious through his illness. He seemed to shine wherever he went. It was only when you looked closer, past the charming crooked smile, past his booming laugh, that you could sense his pain.

As he stepped onto the mud of the pasture, and stared out at the horses through the mist, he thought to himself,

“This is crazy. It’s even crazier than I am. Why am I here? What can an animal do for me?”

As he went up to the old grey gelding named Buck, his hands were shaking. Normally he is the one in control. Even when he is spiraling out of control, he is the one who demands respect. Seeing this creature in front of him who was more powerful than he made him feel odd. This creature towered over him. His heavy hooves struck the ground as he moved towards Duke. His nostrils puffed as he took in the cool air, and his neck stood proud and wise. It was as if the

horse had seen another life before this one. He seemed to look at Duke as if to say, “this ain't nothin'.” The horse’s eyes were what got to him. They were big and honest. It was like they could see Duke for what he really was. It was like the horse looked straight through him. It looked past the anger, the chaos, the depression. It saw him raw; as a human; nothing more and nothing less.

He had done his research on this kind of therapy. All the studies that he found said things like “the horse promotes bonding and can help with interpersonal relationships.” Or “this kind of therapy is unique and can stimulate results of trust and responsibility in patients.” He never bought into any of it until he looked that horse in the eye. He knew that peer-reviewed journals and other research papers made claims such as “The horse is a large powerful animal that commands respect and elicits fear. Overcoming these obstacles and building a relationship promotes confidence, relationship skills and problem solving skills” (Schultz, Barlow, and Robbins par. 5), but he never imagined the transformation would be as intense as this.

The more he spent time with Buck, the more human he felt.

“The second I got up on top of that horse it was like my entire world changed. It was like I could breathe, I could see past my own crap, and I could see freedom. I felt free on top of him. I felt free from my illness; it was like the only time I truly felt like myself... it was magical” (Schaefer).

He clutched Buck's mane as he mounted him. The second his body shifted, his world shifted as well. With Buck it was like he was a part of something. It was like he was a part of something stronger, something wiser. As he moved around the simple arena, Buck’s movements seemed to say,

“It’s ok. I have you.”

And that was how he felt. It was as if he was untouchable. He was even safe from himself.

Every night he came home to two blonde haired girls with bouncy curls. His wife would linger in the corner, bracing herself for what kind of mood she would be greeted with. The oldest child could sense some kind of change after he came home smelling of horses and hay. She could sense some kind of shift in his step. It seemed to be lighter. She began to believe the horses were magical, and that they could fix her father entirely if he just went a little bit longer. She didn’t know about the counseling that went along with it, or the specific kind of riding he was participating in; all she cared about was the fact that her father seemed to be more like a father now, instead of an absent creature sitting alone in the bedroom, or keeping strange hours after he should long be asleep.

His wife was a worrier. She would stay awake at night and research this therapy that she was putting all her faith in to save her husband. Growing up around horses, she knew of the magical healing powers they could have on humans, but she always wondered; would it be enough? She knew that all the statistics said that patients who went through this kind of treatment were able to improve their interpersonal relationships. She knew that the horse was like a mirror to the patients, and they were able to understand some of their subconscious actions and where they came from and why (Kesner and Pritzker par. 8). She knew that the counseling that went along with the kind of therapy was outstanding, but still she would wonder as she lay awake at night, would it be enough to save the man sleeping next to her.

He grew to be able to drive the way to the barn with his eyes closed. It was his safe haven. No matter what was going on in the world around him, he could always count on Buck. He grew to trust Buck, even more so than he had trusted any other human. Buck didn't know the meaning of the word Bipolar. He didn't understand what manic highs were and what depression was. All Buck cared about was his love, and his respect. It was Buck who helped to teach Duke what it meant to have love and respect in his human relationships.

He kicked the sides of Buck's stomach hard as the frustration boiled through him. He could feel the anger rising from the pit of his stomach and his face reddening. He was sure that Buck was backing up just to piss him off. His wrists clenched and grip tightened the father Buck backed up. He felt like he was going to scream, or break something.

“Move you god-damned animal, what the hell is wrong with you!?” (Darren Schaefer).

Seeing this, one of the counselors ran up and took the reins from Duke's hands. She led Buck over to the post and stared strongly into Duke's eyes.

“He can't back up when you pull the reins in to tight. Horses are like humans, they need to feel like they can move their head around a bit. You were suffocating him. He could tell you didn't trust him so why would you continue to move with someone who didn't trust you? Someone who didn't open up to you?” the counselor handed Duke back his reins, gave him a little wink, and walked away.

Duke sat on top of Buck for a good while. He stroked the side of his proud back, apologizing for his behavior. It dawned on him right then that the people in his life must feel that way sometimes too. They must be scared to move ahead because of the strength that the anger he releases on them. He thought of his two young girls who tip toe by him in fear of angering him,

and the picture tore him to pieces. He thought of his wife and the worried look she got on her face when his voice would raise.

“Is this how I am making them feel? Is my anger trapping us in this place that keeps us stuck, keeps us afraid?” he wondered.

He sat on top of Buck for a long while, picturing the faces of all the people he loved when he let his anger get the best of him. His entire life he had used the disease as an explanation to his actions. And to an extent it was, but he wasn't a child anymore. This disease was the card he was dealt, and it was time that he started owning it. He made a promise to himself at that moment, to live his life in a way that he can hold his head high like Buck does. He promised himself he would show the people in his life the patience that Buck had shown him. He also promised that he would show the people in his life the love that Buck had unconditionally given to him. In that moment, Duke Schaefer, the man who had spent his entire life searching for some kind of control, something substantial to hold on to, took it upon himself to control himself. He gathered this perspective while sitting on the back of one of the world's most magnificent creatures, the horse.

My father still rides horses regularly, and now owns one of his own. He often talks about Buck, and how he changed his life. My father is still a manic-depressive, and the equine therapy did not magically make it disappear. It did, however, bring him peace. It brought him self respect, and trust. Through that it brought our family love, and openness. The depth of power that this therapy can do is indescribable, and to have a family member experience it is a profound experience that cannot be forgotten.

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