



YOUR HORSE IS NEVER WRONG

By Tim Hayes



Reading a horse at Tim's Clinic. The horse has his attention away from Tim.

Have you ever watched or ridden your friend's horse and thought: "I wish my horse was like that"? Have you ever known the husband or wife of one of your friends and thought "Gee, they're terrific. I wish my spouse was more like them"? When you were growing up did you ever hear a parent say to their kid: "Why can't you be more like your friend, 'Stephanie' or 'Dave'?"

Not only are you not alone, you are part of a large majority of people who wish they could get their partner (human or horse) to

change. Have you ever tried to get another person to change or behave differently? If you're like me, you've tried it more than once and it hasn't worked yet.

It's taken me a lifetime to learn the only person in my life I can change or get to behave differently is me. Changing things about myself for the better can be difficult and requires a lot of effort. However the outcome is usually a double win. Not only do I improve and feel better about myself but others seem to miraculously change for the better as well. This axiom not only works with humans, it works identically with horses. Ironically most horse owners rarely practice it.

The horse is never wrong. This principle is paramount in the horse training of any discipline and unequivocally essential in my Natural Horsemanship program. The moment one understands why this is true and relates to their horse with this knowledge, his or her riding and horsemanship dramatically begins to improve.

The vast majority of all horse behavior is motivated by self-preservation. Horses know they're prey animals and therefore food for predator animals. Every decision they make is preceded with a thought: "Does what I'm about to do or not do put my survival in jeopardy?" If there is even a .001% chance that their action could put them in a vulnerable position, they will not do it.

When our horse resists our request, (read: doesn't do what we



Reading a horse at Tim's Clinic. The horse has his attention on Tim. Photos courtesy of Tim Hayes.

want, does what we don't want, disobeys, acts up, shuts down, ignores us, etc.) it is usually for one of 4 reasons all of which are originally motivated by his need for self preservation: Fear, Disrespect, Pain, Misunderstanding. The following are some examples:

Fear – *“I'm not going in there! My human calls it a horse trailer. It looks to me like a dark metal cave with only one way out. Predators live in caves. Going in there doesn't seem like a good idea. I need time and help to be confident and sure that if I go inside I will be safe. I know my human loves me, why on earth would he force me to go in there?”*

Disrespect – *“For my survival I will always decide what's best for me unless I have found a leader I love, trust and respect (read: mother or alpha herd member). I always know who my leader is. They have earned their leadership by the way they treat me. They understand I'm a horse, always look out for my safety and have proven they will never compromise my self-preservation in any of their requests. They will never force me to do anything. I will not completely trust or respect any horse or human who doesn't demonstrate these qualities.”*

Pain – *“When I am hurt, injured or in pain I am more vulnerable to predators. To survive it is in my best interest to curtail any physical activity, rest and heal and not make the situation worse.”*

Misunderstanding – *“If I'm not 100% clear on what is being asked of me it is safer to not act. I will wait until I'm certain rather than do something that could cause me to become vulnerable.”*

If you don't know all this and don't learn to read horses in order to respond appropriately to these four very different behaviors, when you horse doesn't do what you want, you will most likely continue to blame him or her and make them wrong. And if you keep doing the same thing... you will keep getting the same results.

Natural Horsemanship teaches us to see our relationship from the horses' point of view. When we do, we discover not only do his actions make perfect sense, but given the same circumstances we would probably behave exactly the same way. When we consider that hors-

es don't speak English but communicate with body language and physical actions, it instantly becomes apparent that every time they resist our request, they are telling us in the only way they know how why they are resisting e.g. *“If I do what you're asking of me, I don't feel it will be in the best interest of my self-preservation. If you will change how and what you're doing in a way that allows me to understand that what you are asking of me is safe, I will be able to trust and respect you. Then I will be happy to respond to your request with confidence and enthusiasm.”*

Natural Horsemanship provides us with this equine knowledge. We learn to recognize our horses' questions and then how to offer them the right answers. It also teaches us how to communicate (speak and listen) with our horse in their language first on the ground, which is always safer if they resist, and then on their back. We know if they resist our request, they are telling us they're either afraid, don't respect our judgement, they're hurting or they don't understand. We realize these are all reasonable, logical and understandable situations that require us to communicate differently. It requires us to change.

It tells us our horse has not accepted us as their leader and therefore we need to learn more and do more to earn their trust and respect and to become their leader. We become a better human in the process and they become a better horse. Not only is our horse never wrong, but if we listen to them, we discover they're our greatest teachers. ©Tim Hayes 2013

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