

# THE SPIRIT OF HORSES

by Caitlin Collins

Experiencing deeper levels of being, glimpsing that elusive state that lies beyond the usual ups and downs of ego, is traditionally the province of the spiritual seeker. But the opportunity can also pop up in other places: the arts, for instance; sports; or extreme experiences such as mountaineering; and, of course, if we can just prise our attention away from our habitual distraction long enough to notice it, we'll find that the doorway is really always open.

Over the past 10 years or so, with the happy coincidence of the rise of natural horsemanship – 'horse whispering' – combined with the development of personal and corporate performance coaching, another field of opportunity has appeared with the recognition of horses as guides and doorkeepers.

Stepping through the doorway into our 'true nature' requires us to dare to go beyond the limits of our habitual ego-identifications; beyond the conventional barter systems of trying to please and wanting to be liked; beyond the learned hypocrisy that prevents our truly honouring ourselves or another person. Horses are extremely sensitive to human incongruence or hypocrisy; they can pick up, and are afraid of, our fear and aggression. They have an extraordinary ability to respond accurately to others' intentions. Maybe this comes from their evolution as flight animals whose survival depends on their being able to correctly read and react to the intentions of predators. And, as social animals, they are skilled communicators with a natural inclination to form harmonious relationships, and they value the qualities of herd-leaders who can help them to stay safe in a dangerous environment.

The world of personal and corporate coaching has begun to recognise the significance to humans of the equine response to human intentions and leadership qualities, and a number of horse-assisted coaching systems have appeared. One such system is overtly venturing into the spiritual realms, despite being largely aimed at business managers wanting to develop leadership skills! Here in the UK, Cotswold-based leadership coach Paul Hunting has combined his horsemanship skills with his coaching training and his personal spiritual practice to come up with what he's calling Horse-Assisted Transformation (HAT) coaching: he calls it transformational because it's not about learning to do better at what we're already doing, it's about finding a radically different way of being.

My own background includes a lifetime of being around horses – working with them, riding them, just being friends with them – combined with over 30 years of Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice, plus professional training in counselling and NLP coaching. Meeting Paul and training with him has given me the key I was looking for to bring all three together. Bring in a beautiful palomino mare called Brigit as the senior partner, and we're ready to go!

Imagine yourself in a small space with a very large, fast-moving animal with hair-trigger reactions. You can't be anything but fully present! Mental chatter stops right there! You're highly motivated to find whatever it takes to stay safe – and that means finding the qualities or state of being within you that will enable the horse to relax and be confident in your ability to direct her properly. It's fast, it's effective, and it's exhilarating. It's also egalitarian: Brigit doesn't care about your income, your beauty, your achievements, your cleverness, or your ancestry; all she is interested in is your trustworthiness right here now.

As with any interaction, there are inner and outer aspects. On the outside, you're learning how to handle a horse in such a way that you can both enjoy each other's company. On the inside, you're learning how to connect with Brigit at that deeper, shared level of being that is always there, waiting for us, if we dare step through the door.

Brigit has been working her magic with a range of people over the past few months. She brings to each encounter exactly what each person needs to help them make that shift. Epiphanies are taking place in a muddy field on Exmoor! Some of the seekers are meditators: for them, it's a way to find the deeper level of experience they're seeking; later they can take it into their meditation practice and learn to stabilise in it. Others are hoping to find some solution to a problem: what they learn is that the answer lies less in doing and more in being and in connecting with another person at a different way from the usual titanic clash of egos. Brigit's sensitivity and flexibility are extraordinary. I recently experimented by working with two people at the same time. We were working at liberty, with Brigit free to express herself unconstrained by halter or rope. One moment she was standing quietly, absolutely immobile, allowing a woman who was afraid – afraid of horses, afraid of other people, afraid to be herself – to find the trust and courage to duck right under Brigit's belly, inches from her hooves. The next moment she was racing madly round the field, bucking and kicking, slide-stopping and rearing – for the benefit of the other woman, a dancer who wanted to overcome the inhibitions holding her back; standing in the middle of Brigit's wild display, this woman was both weeping and laughing as she said, 'She's dancing for me – she's showing me how *I* could dance!' And with another seeker, someone with no knowledge of horses but a loving, nurturing person with a strong spiritual practice, Brigit simply walked over and lay down in front of her – perhaps the greatest way a flight animal can demonstrate that they find you trustworthy.

As the Sufi mystic Rumi said: 'Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there.' Brigit and her fellows want us to meet them in that field. Horses will forgive us again and again as we come at them from our ego-based, exploitative agendas; they will invite us again and again to join them in the field of authentic being, authentic connection. When we respond to their invitation and the transformation happens we experience it as a moment of shattering truth and a shifting to another state of being, free of fear, free of aggression. That's true 'horse-whispering': it's not about our talking to horses; it's about our having the humility to listen to horses. If we listen to them, they can guide us through that door.

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