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Nurturing Willing Participation

By Erik Herbermann

**To create a harmonious equestrian partnership, we must begin with ourselves.**

Finding ways of assisting our horses to respond ever more easily and lightly to our wishes and creating a more harmonious and satisfying equestrian relationship, is surely a goal we all so dearly wish for.

In order to move away from the 'land of frustration and forcefulness' and towards the 'land of harmony and joyfulness' we must find ways of nurturing the horse's willing participation, I will explore this concept in detail.

**What is the greatest obstacle to achieving willing participation?**  
Few things sabotage our endeavors to achieve harmony with the horse and to elicit his willing participation more than the use of force or aggression.

Why, then, do we resort to forcefulness at all? Here, we can possibly find answers to this question by asking ourselves some further questions.

What is our perception of our horse? Is he truly a partner in our riding, respected and cherished and with whom we seek to be harmonious as our highest priority? Do we possibly see the creature as an opponent who constantly needs to be coerced into complying? Do we ignore or roughly 'silence' the horse's objections to our approach, instead of listening to his voice and striving to find better ways of helping him understand our intentions, thereby avoiding confrontation as much as possible?

Are we being realistic about our own and our horse's actual level of development? Do we leave our kind heart and friendship behind at the mounting block, and take on unfitting ambitions when in the saddle, becoming inconsiderate and overbearing? Are we sincere about being the benevolent leader of the equestrian partnership?

**What qualities are essential for good leadership?**  
The concept of stewardship seems natural enough to a gardener, who realizes that only through serving the special needs of each plant, shrub or tree will the garden bring forth a joyful bounty of lovely blossoms and cool green shade.

The concept of serving, however, appears to be somewhat more difficult for us riders to accept or appreciate. Somewhere deep down inside we seem to feel that the horse should serve us! This is indeed an unfortunate miss-perception. If we wish to unlock the creature's natural beauty and talents, then we, like the gardener, need to serve the unique needs of our charges.

In riding, as with most human endeavour, extremes are not very helpful. Neither the faint-hearted unassertive soul, nor the aggressive, insensitive individual will succeed in the task of horsemanship. Besides the need for equestrian skill and experience, the finest leadership is a state in which inner strength, confidence and purposefulness is merged with compassion, gentleness and patience.

**To enjoy, or not to enjoy . . .**  
Can the horse actually enjoy our interaction with him when being ridden?' The answer is, yes. But it is extremely unlikely, if not impossible, for the rider to enjoy the ride when the horse is unhappy; or for the horse to be happy when the rider is unhappy. Goodwill and harmony promote joy; misunderstanding and discord breed unhappiness and frustration. It is entirely up to us riders whether harmony or discord rules. As the leader of the partnership, every rider needs to learn how to deftly diffuse any potential discord by giving the horse nothing to be against in the first place.

**How is good horsemanship like a bird?**  
Riding could be compared with an imaginary bird. One of the bird's wings represents the need for good attitudes, the other wing, the need for good technical skills. The bird's body and head symbolize the need for good leadership, entailing clarity of purpose combined with application of our will toward a benign purpose. Clearly, good technical skills alone will not suffice. Good attitudes alone will also not suffice. Riding without benevolent and sensitive yet assertive leadership will similarly not get us very far. All three elements must be skillfully integrated to enable the 'bird of horsemanship' to fly gracefully and well.

By far the most important of these three is good attitudes - having the right 'heart' toward the matter. A good attitude allows us to overcome the inevitable weaknesses in our leadership or technique more easily. It also helps to open the sluice gaits of the horse's beautiful nature more readily; with the confidence that the trust given will not be violated, either physically or mentally.

**What qualities are indispensable for progress?**  
Besides embodying genuine love for the horses, the corner stone of our equestrian attitude comprises the qualities of 'Recognition' and 'Gratitude'. 'Recognize' that the horse has offered even the smallest response to our requests; then show genuine 'Gratitude'. Take nothing for granted, and be thankful for literally everything. Here, an old Dutch saying certainly rings true: "He who does not honour the small is not worthy of the big".

It is crucial for us to realize that horses owe us absolutely nothing, ever! The key to unlocking the horse's willing contribution is based on genuine regard for him and showing our appreciation generously. Horses thrive on this. Lack of appreciation kills exuberance and desire. Considering that horses almost invariably go well when we ride well, it should be clear that we need to let the rays of our benign heart smile on our horses frequently, patting and encouraging them often during the ride. After all, patting the horse does not mean 'This is perfect'; it means 'I appreciate you'; 'Let's do this together', 'Good boy'!

**How can understanding the horse's childlike quality help us?**  
Horses are so much like young children. When a child proudly brings us a simple drawing and we exclaim over it, before long, she makes us ten more drawings. Horses are surprisingly similar. For that matter, so are adults? Most of us would rather work for an encouraging who engages our talents than for one who is critical and seemingly never satisfied with our efforts.

**The power of words**  
Free your equestrian vocabulary of words such as 'make' and 'get' ('Make him go forward!'; 'Make him bend!'; 'Get him to listen'; 'Get after him!'), and replace them with the words 'encourage', 'show', 'help', 'inspire' and 'invite'. Speak these words to your horse quietly with your 'inner voice' as you aid him.

'Obedience' is another word that is best left unused. It taints our attitudes with the implied presumption that the horse possesses the nefarious tendency to be disobedient. With force we may well achieve 'obedience' and apparent success, but beauty and harmony will most assuredly elude us. If only we would come to appreciate and trust just how smart, generous, and willing horses really are, things would go better almost immediately. Taking the time and patience to help horses understand our guidance engenders them to respond willingly and eliminates the need for the concept of obedience. This approach puts the burden of success squarely where it belongs: on us riders.

**The power of playfulness**  
Horses are not very fond of overly serious attitudes. Though it is obviously good to be serious about wanting to improve our riding skills, we must avoid telling the horse about it. It might be surprising to note how well we can progress when we approach riding a bit more light-heartedly. Horses love to play! (They don't call it 'horsing around' for nothing!).

When we learn to have a bit more fun and make up games, the horse will catch on in no time. He will try to show us how smart he is and be offering his energies ever more eagerly to our 'fun-and-games' purposes : OK, Pegasus, let's play the 'double serpentine!' game; let's play the 'circle increase!' game; let's play the 'lengthen the stride across the diagonal' game. If it helps (serves) the horse, it will always help the rider and result in a wonderful, positive cycle of events.

**A clear goal**  
Our mind - our spirit - is a fine and powerful instrument. It is the only thing we have over the horses, who are obviously far stronger and quicker than we are. It is therefore vital to make a habit of using positive, constructive thoughts and words at all times: wholeheartedly believing and trusting in how wonderful horses really are, thinking of them as our friends and partners, not an adversaries. Only through unwavering kindness of heart genuineness of spirit can we succeed to raise our riding from a more or less crude handicraft to a finer level of worthy, dignified horsemanship - and ultimately a beautiful art form.

A wonderfully enriching aspect of life encompasses experiencing ourselves as our thoughts, words and actions are reflected in our environment and in our relationships with the people and creatures with whom we swim through time and space. When we see horsemanship in this light, it inspires us to want to listen ever more intently to the creature's childlike honesty about his perception of our influence on him. If we dare to be open, we will of course at times experience his disapproval of some of our attitudes or actions. But, if we take heed of the horse's 'words', we will be able to experience the joy of the his eloquent, wordless accolade, ratifying his acceptance of our influence. He shows this by his contentment, exuberance, and willing cooperation.

Feeling a horse's 'yes' vote is by far the finest tribute a rider can experience, unequaled by any form of human recognition or honour. It happens when the horse intuitively senses that his rider is worthy to follow - if we ride with a pure heart, that is. A horse's talent, beauty, strength, agility, his generous exuberance, when harmoniously merged with our finest human attributes, form a glorious, magical dance. It is a gift we return to our Maker, and one that we give ourselves when we sincerely aspire to nurture the horse's willing participation.

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Erik Herbermann was born in Amsterdam in 1945. At an early age, he moved with his family to Johannesburg and ten years later moved to Canada. His initial equestrian training was with Patricia Salt FBHS, herself a pupil of Richard Watjen and Oberbereiter Lindenbauer at the Spanish Riding School. Subsequently, he studied under the celebrated classical riding master, Egon von Neindorff.

Now residing in the USA, Herbermann devotes much of his time to lecturing, teaching, and conducting clinics internationally. Since 1980, he has produced four editions of his perennial best seller Dressage Formula of which he also narrated a CD audio version (2008). In 2011 the fourth edition of Dressage Formula was published in Spanish (Ediciones Tutor, Madrid). Further, Herbermann authored another book A Horseman's Notes (2003); and has written numerous articles for equestrian publications in the United States, Holland and Canada.

Erik Herbermann is a staunch advocate of classical ideals, and his ideology is based on an objective study of the horse's nature, which seeks the depth of understanding and quality of work perceived in the greatest of Renaissance Masters. In common with these luminaries he views equitation as a self-improving art, rooted in the utmost of affection and respect for the horse.