

## CHAPTER 18

# THE 1000-POUND MIRROR

BY ALYSSA AUBREY

In the classic children's fairy tale, *Snow White*, the beautiful but fatally-flawed Queen stands before her mirror and asks "Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?" Each time her faithful mirror replied, "Thou O Queen, art the fairest in the land." But, the day came when the mirror gave the Queen a very different answer, as the mirror never lies. In real life, those of us privileged to own or spend time around horses find ourselves in the company of just such an honest and mystical reflection.

Tizzy, a beautiful 34-year old Appaloosa mare has been retired in my care for several years. You can usually spot her dappled body on the pasture's periphery. A seasoned, shy, sentinel member of the herd with a beautiful face that looks at you with one blue and one brown eye.

From the very beginning, Tizzy's owner wanted her to have a job participating in my youth classes, but Tizzy never seemed interested in joining up. Then one day, Tizzy began banging her hoof on the metal gate that separated her from the paddock as I was readying for the soon to arrive class. Obliging the request, I opened the gate and watched her trot by me, the first one in the paddock. Several of my regular and seasoned program horses joined her a few minutes later.

The bus arrived with a group from a local non-profit, all teen girls who had survived family violence. The last to step off the bus was a 14-year old African-American girl named Jaden. As I greeted her, I noticed that

she had one blue eye and one brown eye.

Tizzy let out a call from thirty feet away and came galloping towards the fence where the young girl stood in amazement. Their connection was so apparent, it felt like electricity in the air.

The youth director confided, the girl's mother had been murdered in front of her and she had not spoken a word since that day, almost two years ago. Jaden has been in therapy and regularly participating in this violence prevention group but through it all had remained silent.

Our first activity was a grooming exercise with the horses, (which I use as a metaphor for self-care). Jaden and Tizzy paired up and she began to slowly brush the horse. Tizzy wrapped her neck around the young woman's shoulder, much like horses do with their young.

Moments later we could hear the young girls muffled sobs. Tizzy stood quietly, gently holding Jaden against her warm body, arms wrapped around the horse's neck, her faced buried in the mare's thick mane.

The activities now complete, I asked everyone to gather in a circle and share their experience of grooming the horses. After several comments by both staff and participants, I asked if anyone else in the group had reflections before we moved on.

"I want to say something," the voice stammered. It was Jaden, who hadn't spoken a word in more than two years. She told the group that while Tizzy was holding her, she had remembered being with her mom at her Grandfather's horse ranch in Mexico.

They were celebrating his birthday and Jaden sang Happy Birthday to him. He had put his arms around her and whispered in her ear..."your voice is a gift from God, promise me you will never lose it." Until today she had forgotten her promise. Tizzy, she explained softly...had helped her remember.

I am often asked, what do you do with horses, if you don't ride them? It's true, in the 6500+ clients I've worked with, every bit of horse power has happened from the ground. The story of Tizzy and Jaden underscores the horse's remarkable brilliance and generosity of spirit that can mirror

our stories, mend what has been broken and encourage new possibilities for healing and transformative outcomes.

My work for the last 15 years has been in partnership with horses. Together we support developing personal life skills that encourage taking a deeper look at ourselves, our beliefs, our relationships, desire to expand careers, to feel more joy, peace, confidence, serenity, and true purpose.

My clients run the gamut from youth at risk and recovery clients to CEO's and coaches seeking leadership development, companies tracking innovative team building, and organizations facing challenges that often impede successful outcomes.

Each workshop begins by gathering in a circle, our routine for grounding and centering on our day's intention. After a review of housekeeping and agenda for the day, each participant introduces himself or herself and agrees to the Safety/Responsibility Agreement:\*

*My name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I agree to be responsible for myself today, which includes my thoughts, my feelings, my behavior, my projections, my assumptions and my actions, thus contributing to the safety of the group.*

People are often surprised to learn that in addition to physical or body position around horses, authentic expression is the number one safety rule. It is highly disconcerting for horses (and humans for that matter) to be in the space of incongruent human energy. An example of this might be feeling afraid or confused, or bored, but pretending all is well with a big smile on our face. Humans are the only species on the planet capable of thinking one thing, feeling another and acting still another. It is impossible for horses (or any other animal) to pretend. Horses immediately reflect this "split" by becoming restive, anxious and in extreme cases of suppressed energy (PTSD), horses can become aggressive. The safety agreement reminds us to be congruent, our first cornerstone lesson in being a trusted leader for self and others.

*\* The AIA (Adventures in Awareness) safety/responsibility agreement was authored by Barbara K Rector, MA, CEIP-ED. Barbara is credited globally with development practice of psychotherapy with the help of horses (Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy EFP) in clinical setting of a residential hospital in early 1990.*

Kim is a team leader employed by the largest health care provider in California. She is asked to introduce herself to Charlie Blue Eyes, a black and white paint horse. Kim approached the horse as though she was hailing a cab on the streets of Manhattan during rush hour. The more Kim tried to approach, the further the horse moved away. When asked what the scenario reminded her of, she began to talk about how disconnected she felt from her team. Kim's position required constant email communications, meetings and project deadlines, the workload was daunting. Kim had developed a coping mechanism of moving faster and faster in an effort to stay on top her impossible to-do list. In reality, just like the situation with Charlie, the harder Kim worked, the further away progress seemed to be. As Kim continued to speak about her life in an honest way, Charlie began to walk towards her. Then Charlie took a deep sigh, licked his lips (a sign of relaxation) and moved closer to Kim. In that moment Kim experienced the reward of being present. She was able to connect with herself and Charlie in an authentic way in the midst of being honest and open with her true feelings, something she had not known how to express in her work environment.

In an email follow up, Kim wrote:

*“Three weeks out and I continue to process my experience while still trying to wrap my mind around those few moments with Charlie. What became immediately clear was my need to slow down and connect to me. I am happy to report work life and home life are much improved. I’m moving through my days mindfully, remembering to breathe and noticing how my energy affects the people around me. I’ve made time to connect to each member of my team. Our conversations have been illuminating and productive. Thank you and Charlie so much for a life-changing and life-affirming experience.”*

My equine coaching and development programs aim at engaging participants in deeply transformative experiences that stimulate powerful insights and ignite sustained growth and leadership effectiveness. In a horse herd, leadership is shared. The lead mare sets the direction and pace for the herd. The stallion protects the herd from predators. Each and every member of the herd is valued; every individual's contribution is essential to the safety, harmony, unity and survival of its members. Horses are highly sensitive to changes in the environment and they are able to give immediate, clear signals when need arises to take action. Trust among the herd members is earned, and tested constantly. It is

not a static state. Human teams can draw upon many similarities and experience a new model for effective leadership, collaborative practices and cooperation by studying horses in their natural herd environment.

The white Arabian horse strolls over to Bill, the only participant who expressed a fear of horses in the morning check in. Bill is the chair for a local non-profit. He gives direction to Toyota to move forward, Toyota plants his feet and begins to push into Bill's arm. Bill responds by petting Toyota and telling him what a nice horse he is. Soon after Toyota starts nibbling on Bill's jacket zipper. Bill quickly made the connection that his leadership style is ineffective, often absent of good boundaries, which often includes rewarding unwanted behavior. Bill is not unaware of his habits, he states, "but I've never witnessed the negative impact of my actions before today." Once Bill stopped giving a "mixed message" to Toyota and simply asked him to move, the horse complied willingly.

Since the beginning of recorded history, horses have danced through our dreams, shared our mythology and contributed to our civilization in ways unequalled by any other animal. Together we have ridden into battle, tilled the soil of new lands, explored uncharted territories and engaged in great contests. Kings and commoners have both ridden into history on the back of a horse.

Our Industrial Revolution changed the need for horses as transportation, but up until about 50 years ago, horses were an everyday feature in our human lives. The modern horse signals the emergence of teacher, healer, mentor, guide, coach and mediator at the very forefront of human self-development. The size and power of a horse can be intimidating to many of us. Accomplishing a task such as leading a horse on a walk around the arena in spite of fear, creates an instant and residual sense of confidence, while providing metaphors when dealing with other life-challenging situations. A woman in recovery from cancer will describe the disease itself as a 1000-pound animal. By partnering with a horse (which initially seemed out of the question), the same woman successfully leads the horse over an obstacle marked CANCER! In this process, a troubled spirit is lifted and set free again.

Today thousands of people are learning to clarify purpose and bring authentic expression into work environments and family situations that include corporate leadership training, troubled veterans returning from

war, at-risk teens learning to navigate new choices, parenting skills, divorce, recovery from illness, grief and loss, addiction, and even literacy programs. It is an enormous privilege to witness first-hand the horses healing influence.

I deeply believe the lifelong task of our human evolution is to recover the essence of who we are, while simultaneously “shedding the skin” of that which no longer serves our highest expression. These jeweled moments of clarity arrive when our inner thoughts, feelings and stories align with our external experiences. Horses access the wide-open spaces in our human hearts, engage our willingness to rediscover the best parts of ourselves, peel away our masks, our fears and traumas, and unreal expectations by quickening the return to our fullest expression and potential.

This is the ultimate goal of all personal and professional development, therapy and education, and the deeper meaning of success. The lessons of my own life continue to take shape as I experience moments in which thinking, feeling and knowing are all the same, reflected in the 1000-pound mirror of this silent teacher.



## About Alyssa

Executive Director Alyssa Aubrey, CEGE, is the Founder and Program Director of Medicine Horse Ranch, an educational experiential learning center incorporating horses in human self-development. Alyssa is a writer, teacher, facilitator, empowerment speaker, money coach, and business consultant with over 30 years of experience as both educator and entrepreneur. She is a Certified Equine Guided Educator (CEGE) and a Certified Money Coach through the Financial Recovery Institute.

Alyssa is a seasoned facilitator with broad experiences that arise from coaching over 6500 clients in equine-guided learning processes. She is compassionate and tenacious with a genuine passion for supporting others as they embark on new directions for discovery, recovery and transformation. She considers the herd of Medicine Horse program horses to be partners, healers, teachers and guides in this powerfully transformative, often spiritually-awakening experience.

Alyssa's current focus is developing eligible candidates to become successful in the field of horse and human interaction. She has developed a nationally-recognized curriculum that includes best practices and core principles for the field, providing hands-on training and development through intern and apprenticeship participation.

After attending Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, Alyssa finished her postgraduate training from Writtle College (U.K.) in Horse Behavior and Psychology, Barn and Stable Management, Equine Feeding and Nutrition and Equitation. Alyssa currently serves on the CBEIP (Certification Board for Equine Interaction Professionals) Board of Directors. She is the 2016 co-chair for WAAT (Women's Association for Addiction Treatment). Alyssa is the US License holder for Horse Dream® and an active member of the EAHAE (International Association for Horse Assisted Education), NAWBO (North American Women's Business Organization) and ICF (International Coaches Federation). She was awarded the AIA Meritus Certification in 2016 for her project of excellence: Medicine Horse Ranch Field Studies Program.

Inspired by colleague Jan Butler Loveless and the success of Jan's Horse and Reader program, Alyssa launched Horse Sense for Readers™, a literacy pilot program in 2011. She received a \$30,000.00 grant from the Marin Community Foundation for the project that included nine 6th Grade Latino boys and girls (reading at a 3rd grade level). The goal of the program is academic intervention integrating equine-guided experiential learning, cultural enrichment, expressive arts, career exposure, and horsemanship, riding and family involvement. In only four short months there were dramatic and positive changes in reading comprehension, reading fluency, in writing

and academic performance, in self-esteem and confidence, in socio-emotional skills and in handling frustration. These boys and girls also learned horse handling and riding at the walk and jog trot.

Medicine Horse clients include: Leadership Consortium, Apex Leadership, IMPACT Leadership Coaching, Inspiring Success/ Executive Coaching, Five Sisters Ranch, Muir Wood Adolescent Treatment Center for Boys, Alta Mira (IOP), North Bay Recovery, Olympia House, Living Reflections, Reflections (IOP), Willow Tree Counseling, Sutter Health, Marin General, Kaiser Permanente, Women's Cancer Awareness Group, Shambhala International, Kohl's Dept. Store, Wells Fargo Bank, Marin Curiosity Club, CASA, The United Way, A Home Away from Homelessness, Boy Scouts and Girls Scouts of America and the Novato Pregnancy Prevention Program.