

The power of forgiveness

By Kathryn Kincannon-Irwin

Dear Readers,

I just got home from hosting one of my women's workshops in Belgium, and try as I might, I can focus on nothing other than the profound lessons I learned from one of the mares we worked with in that enchanting West Flanders village of Dadizele. Hence the subject of this month's column.

We were eight women from all walks of life, from a wide range of ages and experiences, attitudes and beliefs. We were not all "horse women." Some indeed had grown up with horses; others feared the very thought of touching one. Still, we were all drawn to this powerful archetype — the archetype for power — specifically the balanced use or abuse of power. And it was one of the three mares that participated with us in the workshop that provided a huge dose of both reality and humility in the process of sharing her point of view.

Fanny is 23 years old and, I was told, has been the leader of every herd she's lived in for as long as anyone could remember. From the moment I saw her in action, I could see she personified the classic alpha mare — acutely alert, responsive and aware of the smallest detail, not allowing the drama of her herd's daily activities to get her worked up in the slightest. Instead she kept a level-headed eye on sibling squabbles, giving them plenty of free rein to sort out their petty differences for themselves. I was impressed with her self-sufficient dignity and no-nonsense demeanor.

She also showed absolutely no curiosity, interest or willingness to be with human beings. None in the slightest. While most of the horses would look up and size us up, some even walking to us when we entered their domain, Fanny kept to herself and almost imperceptibly positioned herself as far away from us as possible. Where we were, she wasn't. It was as simple as that. She made it clear that she meant no disrespect, but she wanted to be left alone.

I found this fascinating. I asked more about her, and was told she had been a trotter on the track, then changed hands a number of times before finding her way to her current life as a schooling horse for young novice riders. I sighed, and intuitively had the feeling she had

given up on humans ever being more than, at best, a source of discomfort and confusion.

I had no illusions about "saving" this mare or turning her life around — I was there for only three days — yet felt very strongly that a positive experience with a human being might change her for the better. That once she met a two-legged that not only knew her language, but could read and respond to her subtleties as an individual appropriately, it may lighten her emotional load. Truth was, I found myself very drawn to this mare and wanted to see what I could do to improve her soured-on-the-human-race state of mind. So I did a round pen session with her.

When I walked into the pen, Fanny had positioned herself on the far side of the 60-foot round pen with her hind end pointed to the gate — at me — which is a gesture of disrespect in horse language. But I could see that her tail was quite close to her bum, so the first "words" I "said" to her were, very gently, by pointing the whip level-headed to her bum, to please move her hind end away from me. Her response was to wheel around, head first into the pen throwing a double-barrelled kick in my direction (there was plenty of distance between us). She then trotted a few steps, wheeled again head first into the pen (a very awkward and physically stressful way of moving) and again kicked out with both hind legs towards me. Then she came to a stop and, with her hind end still in my direction, turned her head to look in at me, glaring.

I was not surprised. She was making it clear resentment ran deep. And her response spoke volumes. More importantly than her response, however, was my response back to her. By reading her, I could see very clearly that her kicking out was defensive not offensive. If I had misread this as her throwing rude, ignorant behaviour my way and punished her for it, we wouldn't have gone anywhere other than backwards. And I would have certainly reinforced her belief that human beings were clueless and a complete waste of her time.

The truth was, she felt she had no choice. It wasn't that she was throwing her hind in towards me. It was that she was protecting her front end from me. She was defending and protecting the sacred space around her head from being bullied and abused.

Clearly she had had people "in her face" her whole life — who knows to what degree of humiliation — and she was bound and determined to let me know she didn't want me to do it to her again. In her experience, people only deserved to see her hind end as she couldn't, not for a second, trust them with her front end.

Mamma mia. I had some delicate work cut out for me. So I watched very carefully every nuance of her tail, ears, eyes, body for messages. As she stood glaring, I saw, again, that her tail was still close to her bum, so I knew she was a bit frightened. I arced my body towards her hip, showing her my core, my push, was only at her hip, then slowly raised the whip level-headed towards her bum, gently asking her to move it away and walk on. She dropped her head and did just that. Then I asked her for a trot, and as we progressed, she quickly became level headed, and just as quickly bowed to my ability to move her forward, back to front, inside to out, as I made it clear I was not going to jeopardize her freedom of movement by compromising her head space. That I would leave her head alone and allow it to do its job to keep her balanced.

When she bowed, I backed away, opening my hip angle to encourage her to turn head first rather than bum first to make a lateral change of direction. She wasn't ready for this — couldn't trust that I wouldn't shine my core like a blazing spotlight on her head if she turned into my direction, so she turned her bum, stressing her body by buckling her back, throwing her head up to keep from hitting the fence and thereby shooting a jolt of adrenaline into her brain, and galloped off in the new direction. And it was my fault in her eyes. Although I hadn't asked her to do this, she had never found her head space respected by anyone, so why would I be any different? She would take care of herself and do unto me before I did unto her. I respected that, but I knew I wasn't causing her to do this, so was willing to stay in the game to hopefully change her mind.

Every horse is different in terms of how much consistency and fluency of a human's body language they need to see before they believe you are really saying what you are saying, and have earned the right to be asking. Although there are always exceptions, I have found that mares have an



uncanny ability to play this game to your breaking point. If they are going to give themselves into your care, they need to push your buttons and find out if you really will go the distance with them, or get mad, get frustrated or quit when the going gets tough. They tend to "hold out" until they find out you are who you say you are even when things aren't going your way. Impressive.

I could feel that Fanny's history gave her lots of good reasons for holding out and not giving in. What I didn't know was how much consistency from me would be enough for her to actually believe in me. Twenty three years of the wrong stuff was now being countered by one hour of someone finally making sense. So I didn't hold my breath that this would be easy. Or quick. But I knew it was worth my time, and that I would do my best for her. And it paid off. After a half dozen knee-jerk bum-first turns into the fence, she finally just stopped on the fence when I backed away. And looked at me. Not only looked at me, stared hard at me, as if wondering where the heck I had come from.

Then she gave me a present. She took a couple of small steps in my direction. It was just a couple of steps. But it was worthy of champagne in my mind. Just those two steps in my direction let me know she was starting to believe in my ability to leave her head alone so that she could trust me with her front end.

And I knew then what I had to do. I needed to show her praise. I needed to show her I appreciated how big a step those two little steps really were. I had to thank her, in her language, for her willingness to get over her legitimate reasons for not giving people a chance and see me for me. So I dropped the whip, and very quietly arced to her shoulder. She didn't move a muscle, but I could feel she was still braced. So I just stood at her shoulder and with the hand farthest away from her head, lightly stroked her shoulder and scratched her withers — the place on her body that she cannot scratch herself. And I felt her braced body let down. I felt her

soften and relax under my hand. I felt her release, and I heard her sigh. And I was moved to tears.

And then I backed away, again from her head, and she followed me, softly, sweetly, willingly, and we serpented around that pen like tango dancers, and I was flooded with joy and with the fluid grace and symmetry of it all. I was blown away.

Fanny showed me the power of forgiveness. She reminded me how willing so many horses are to shed their layers of fear, anger, sadness and anxiety — to let go of their negative past. Unlike we humans, they want to get over their stuff. They want to feel good and enjoy life. And if we can stop and praise their efforts when we see how hard they are trying, they'll get over it even quicker, and with more lasting results.

I didn't see Fanny again during the workshop — she was required as a school horse by the stable — but I did come see her the day before I left Belgium. I went out to the pasture where she was grazing with her herd, and when I approached her, she turned and looked at me, and I stopped moving forward and instead backed away a couple of steps, and she came to me. She came to me and I was filled with emotion and felt complete. And I could tell she felt good too. She was okay and she would be fine. She would take care of herself, as she always had. And I could leave her knowing that we had had a special moment in time together, and hopefully learn to forgive the way she had shown me she was able to forgive those who just didn't know what they didn't know. 🐾

Kathryn travels extensively with her husband, Chris Irwin, as a trainer and coach conducting clinics and Train The Trainer programs throughout North America and Europe. They are currently building their own Alberta-based equestrian centre at Riversong Ranch, west of Edmonton near Whitecourt, which will open for events in August of 2008. If you have a question you would like Kathryn to answer in a future column, please email her at alphamare@explornet.com

HORSES ALL