

Horses Healing Human Grief

by Judy Weston-Thompson, M.A., MFT, CEFIP-MH

This has been my year for learning how horses experience grief and the many ways in which they facilitate the healing of our human grief. Several months ago, while I was leading an Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy Group for Mental Health Practitioners, I was simultaneously grieving the decline and then the loss of my beloved father. During one particular group I began noticing the ways in which Caesar and Star, two of my equine co-facilitators, were reflecting all the wonderful things which my dad had given me. I felt, more strongly than ever, their embodiment of protectiveness, stability, respect, solidity, containment and strength--all of my father's attributes. I felt my dad's strength through them and I came to the realization that I, too, embodied these qualities. This was my father's gift to me.

In this particular group the participants were also dealing with their own grief issues. One had a sudden death in the family. I knew that Caesar sensed the loss, and I observed that he was more "fatherly" towards her than he normally is. His ability to be nonjudgmental, present and free of expectations made him an excellent grief counselor. Caesar knew intuitively exactly what this woman needed at the deepest level.

After my father's passing, I coped by continuing my work while tending to my own grief. The trip back to Dad's home after his death was a good one. I was proud of my eulogy and, thanks to the horses, in touch with my own strength. Then, a few weeks after his death, I offered a one day workshop entitled "Coping With Grief and Loss with Horses". The goal was to utilize the power of the horse in coping with loss.

In my many years of work with horses, I have learned that they are excellent facilitators for teaching us how to relinquish our attachments. For example, when Molly, one of the elderly lesson horses, died quickly and suddenly in the pasture, all the other horses gathered around her in acknowledgment. Then they let go. They don't cling to their losses. They don't fear death. I've heard, and I believe, that they leave their bodies quickly and are happy to go on to the next part of their journey.

This one-day workshop on coping with grief began with each of the participants speaking of their loss in the presence of the horses and myself, my Dapple Dachshund Shanti and each other. Most of the group began as strangers to me and to one another. As we talked about multiple losses and a wide range of losses, the

horses were simply hanging out--creating a safe environment and allowing people to explore the depths of their grief.

From the very beginning, the depth and connection experienced was amazing. The participants spent time observing the horses and individually relating to Caesar, Star or Calysta. We talked about which horse each person was drawn to and why--all relative to their grief issues. The group members tuned in to their somatic experiences, while I noticed any projections they might be having.

Included in the group were two co-facilitators besides the three horses. In the next part of the workshop, we organically broke down into small groups of one facilitator and one horse for each two or three people so that we could do more profound, in-depth work.

Vince, who was working on trauma, began walking Star. Suddenly Star stopped and froze in position. In interpreting this interaction, it was clear to me that Star was mirroring Vince's internal immobility. His engagement with Star led to the acknowledgment that he needed to move forward in life. Elaine, who had chosen Calysta, had come to work on the loss of her pet cat. In looking into Calysta's face, Elaine saw not only her cat, but her mother. The interaction between Elaine and Calysta was visibly calming and soothing, allowing Elaine to complete the grieving of her mother--

--a process she had needed, but not expected. Linda, who had lost trust in her own horse after a fall, was drawn to Caesar's old leg injury, massaging his leg in a way that facilitated her own healing. She gained much needed comfort and reassurance through her connection with Caesar.

Then there was Avery, who was dealing with the loss of a limb and had no prior experience with horses. With Avery, Caesar was very relaxed, his eyes half closed. She, therefore, experienced deep contact leading to her own calmness. It was clear that Caesar comforted, soothed and reassured Avery with his presence and his calm, centered state.

After these small group meetings, the entire class reassembled to process what we had learned. A heaviness lifted as each person reported having an amazing shift! Each felt that the healing process was speeded up after the individual horse experience. Horses can reach what you are holding on to--whether you consciously want to work on it or not--and part of coping with grief is recognizing when you are still carrying it. We discussed the fact that people grieve for years, but horses relinquish. It was helpful to the group to learn that horses don't linger in their feelings.

My dog, Shanti, was not supposed to be part of this workshop because she can be a distraction, but on this day, she came, and was

consistently making her presence known. At the end of the group Shanti was curled up, fast asleep, in the lap of my intern Holly.

Four days after the workshop I was struck by another sudden and shocking loss. My dear Shanti suffered a violent attack by two coyotes and subsequently died. With my heart broken at the loss of my little soul mate, I went to Caesar for comfort and healing. But, interestingly, my expectation was not met. I was perplexed by his seeming indifference to my deep grief until I came to realize that his acceptance and lack of reactivity was the message itself. He mirrored a way of letting go--a lesson I didn't expect.

A few months have now passed and all three horses--Caesar, Star and Calysta--continue to help me and my students cope with loss by their quiet strength and their ability to move through and let go. I'm continuing to grieve both my father and Shanti, but if I didn't have the horses, I would be in a much more painful place. Relinquishment, trust in the process and acceptance of these unacceptable losses has been greatly strengthened by my profoundly insightful equine teachers.