

John J. Beckers

The Horse Meadow

IN PURSUIT OF EQUINE HAPPINESS

May 2020
First Edition

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ISBN 9789463985338

Note to the reader

This work depicts actual events in the life of the author as truthfully as recollection permits and/or can be verified by research. Occasionally, dialogue consistent with the character or nature of the person speaking has been supplemented. All persons within are actual individuals, there are no composite characters. The names of most individuals have been changed to respect their privacy. Some international horse trainers have been named by their true name for educational and inspirational purposes.

This work contains several sections on meadow and horse management. These sections are meant to inspire the reader to do more research on the subject. Handling horses always contains a certain risk to the welfare of the horse and the handler. The author accepts no responsibility for the consequences of readers actions acclaimed to be derived from this work.

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THE TRAIL

Horses are creatures of nature. They live in the present and as the present changes, the horses adapt. Most changes in nature are in essence cyclic. The sun rises, the sun sets, the moon rises, the moon wanes. Weather patterns develop into seasons and seasons keep on recurring. Though Western man has little patience with seasons, as they may hinder so called straightforward progress, there is abundant evidence that his life too is subjected to cyclical influences.

When man meets horse, a relation starts that is reciprocal and that may spiral into the deepest of depths of anger and anguish and may also be as uplifting as the wings of an eagle in order to arrive at the realm of the half gods. I have been around horses for the better part of my life and I have always felt attracted by their magnificent presence. Already as a child I felt a deep, undeniable urge to climb on its back and to make a journey together.

This story is about the trail I have followed, starting from the moment that I decided to rent a horse meadow and to take charge of the caretaking of my horse. When I took this step, I figured that it would take at least three years to complete a full circle of preparation, sowing and reaping the benefits of

having my own meadow. What started out as a journey to improve the living conditions of my horse, ultimately turned out to be a pursuit into its happiness and eventually into a learning path on how to become a better person myself.

I hope that the experiences and insights I have arrived at will be of some benefit to you and eventually to your loved ones, may they be equine or human.

John J. Beckers

May 2020

YEAR 1

FALL

STABLE FOR RENT

I could not take my eyes off the simple sign that said, "Stable for rent". The only other information it contained was a telephone number. I was looking at a rather dilapidated building with vines overcrowding the wall that I was facing. My friend Riana asked me once again what I thought about it and her eyes were shining. It took me a few seconds to understand that she was not talking about the stable but about the white bungalow next to it. I caught only the last of her sentence as she said: "And this is where I want to spend the rest of my life". She had felt cooped up in the tiny apartment she lived in for quite a while and the bungalow surrounded by trees and a big garden showed a lot of promise, especially for an outdoor person like her, who loved to be surrounded by dogs and horses. But my attention kept wandering as I kept thinking what it would be like to set up shop and move my horse to that stable.

I am a “one horse –one man” type of horse person, but in the past, I had always stabled my horse at a riding stable. But now I felt it was about time to start a new chapter in my book of life and to experiment with some of the ideas that I had picked up along the way.

My basic training had been to ride English style, but from my early childhood I knew I wanted to be a cowboy and ride western. At that time, I had no idea what the difference was, between the two styles, if any, but I surely knew the difference between an English saddle and a Western saddle. So, I ambled along, riding English style on my first and truly loved horse Tasja and for many years out in the woods I imagined to be a frontier man venturing into unknown country.

This could have gone on for ages if it had not been for a small ad promoting a three-day event “Natural Horsemanship”. I went to the event and I came back as a believer. I had always known, deep, deep down inside that it should be possible to create a bond between you and your horse that would not be based on force or meaningless techniques but on the exploration of a relation between two completely incompatible species, that only share an intrinsic drive to get to know each other better.

So, I waited until my friend suggested that we should go and find ourselves a nice terrace to celebrate her

decision and then I asked her the question: "Do you think the stable is still for rent?"

RIANA

I have known Riana for the better part of my life and she never ceases to amaze me. In another life, Riana would have been a Cossack. She is a very knowledgeable horse person, used to ride dressage at a high level but due to a very bad accident when her horse reared and fell on her, she only rides for pleasure nowadays. She is also a dog lady and every dog independent of breed or size or weight knows instantly that she is the leader of the pack.

It would go too far to call her a dog whisperer as she would not like that term. She prefers a hearty yell that gets the job done efficiently, to the whimpering as she calls it that some horse dog lovers use to please their animal.

Riana is very kind-hearted and compassionate which helps her in her job as a nurse, but when things need to be done, she becomes very resolute and hates to waste time dallying around.

THE MONTAIGNES

Riana had immediately contacted the owners of the stable, which was not too hard to do as they also were the owners of the bungalow. So here I sat facing two of the most intelligent eyes I have ever seen, that belonged to Mrs. Montaigne who on the surface appeared to be a nice, well dressed older lady, but underneath showed a character of steely determination.

Her husband was also present, clearly very devoted to his wife and quite willing to leave the negotiations to her. In no time we talked “horses” and it turned out that the stable used to harbour two big carriage horses and for many years father and son had competed regionally. The son was now living abroad, and the father had reached an age where he felt it was hard to start anew with another partner but “really, what a wonderful time it had been!”.

When I left them, we had come to an arrangement where we had settled the conditions of the lease and the Montaignes would support several rather needed repairs and improvements. When we said goodbye, Mrs. Montaigne face was radiant: “I so much like to meet new people, don’t you feel like that too?”

THE HORSE MEADOW

So now I was the proud renter of a stable and its bonus, the horse meadow. At the time I had no knowledge whatsoever about the maintenance of a horse meadow. But even with my untrained eye I could see upon closer inspection that the meadow consisted of large grassy like clumps of soil. The meadow measured 50 by 50 meters which I felt sure should be enough to feed two horses. The stable building and the meadow were surrounded by an array of small fields all containing small herds of grazing horses.

Riana told me that the field next to us belonged to a farmer who lived down the road, Farmer Josh. I found Farmer Josh in front of his house, pruning a hedge that was already immaculate and after I had introduced myself, I asked him if he could help me in restructuring the meadow.

Farmer Josh told me that he was seventy, retired and was aiming to work less, not more. He was not unfriendly, more factual like so I asked him if he knew of a farmer that could help me. He gave my question some thought and looking up at the sky he said softly, "You could try Ted".

And with that gift we parted after he had provided me with some minimal information about where Ted was located. It was not that Ted was hiding himself,

but he had a lot of family living around him, so after I had rung on several doors, I finally found him. Ted was young, in his thirties and already a widower. He had a boy and a girl, and he worked 24 hours, seven days a week milking cows, farming and at an administrative job with the city council.

They say that if you need a job well done, give it to a person who is in popular demand. Maybe the saying is right, but as a farmer's day is ruled by the weather and the needs of his animals, it's a tough job to get yourself slotted in. But Farmer Ted finally promised to help me and to come for a quick looksee.

FENCES

Horses are flight animals. The species has survived for millions of years adhering to the rule "Stay out of trouble". So, whenever it occurs to them that their life or the survival of the herd is threatened their most likely option is to put a fair distance between themselves and the object that poses the danger. In other words, when they hit the panic button, they will run away from the object with enormous speed, in disregard of any obstacles that lie between them and their venue of escape. These obstacles include barbed wire. Barbed wire was invented as a method to "protect" animals and to fence them in and the pain that was caused by the pointed iron barbs was

considered an effective way to keep animals “in their place”. In the United States in the late 19th century wars were fought on the grazing ranges, as the advocates of barbed wire used them to establish a visible claim to their property.

Grazing animals such as sheep and cows adapted soon to this type of fence but to horses the barbed wire was the worst invention man could have thought up. Horses survive because they can outrun their predators. So, predators will usually try to aim for the legs or the throat where the horse’s body is the most vulnerable for an attack.

Horses are also pushers by nature. They respond to pressure by counter pressure and depending on the circumstances they will try to push themselves through the obstacle instead of standing still or backing up.

So, when a horse gets his legs wrapped in a barbed wire, or it runs with its chest into a barbed fence it will try to push through the wire or pull itself loose. Ripped flesh wounds or maimed legs may be the result and may eventually lead to having to put down the horse.

In this century a more humane way of fencing animals in, is by use of a low voltage electric cord wire that produces an electric shock to the body when it touches the wire. Horses’ skins are very sensitive to these shocks. Their hairs on the muzzle

can detect easily whether the wire is “live” or switched of.

They experience the shock as very uncomfortable and few of them will go as far as to become habituated to the electric impulses. The problem that remains is the fact that the wires may get wrapped around their bodies, but given a certain thickness of the cord, the damage will be less than with the barbed wire.

The most horse friendly way nowadays is the use of wooden hedges, but these are again subjected to governmental regulations and they need to be of a certain height and construction to withstand the power of the horses, which makes it an expensive solution.

When Ted came and have his looksee, he had good news and bad news. The good news was that he could do the job but to do this properly all the fence posts had to be taken out to give him room to maneuver around with his tractor.

And he kindly suggested that it was maybe the right moment to replace the old posts as a lot of them had wood rot. And as an afterthought he mentioned that the wiring seemed old and needed reaffixing. Oops, there went the budget.

PADDOCK PARADISE

Jaime Jackson wrote a classic about the natural horse. His book "The Natural Horse: Lessons from the wild" is filled with many facts on the behaviour of the horse. One fact that for a long time has escaped attention is that wild horses will travel up to 48 kilometers a day to forage their food. To be able to travel these distances their bodies have evolved into locomotive organisms perfectly suited to eat small portions of forage-like grass, but also roots and twigs and these portions are digested in their stomach which is connected to a coiled system of intestines. The length of these intestines may be up to nine meters. In these intestines the food is heated up and broken down by a complicated chemical process. Internal temperatures may rise to 35 degrees Celsius.

So, a healthy horse is a horse that is in constant motion, not in the least because its swaying belly lessens the risk of having the intestines become knotted halting the digestive process. The latter is called "colic" and is one of the most feared for diseases. Once a knot has formed it is very difficult to undo it and if the knot does not get untangled by walking, surgery is the last option.

But modern stabling methods do hardly pay any attention to this vital fact. Horses are stabled in small boxes, are fed two or three times a day with grain

products and hardly any rough fibers such as hay. Many horses will never eat a fresh stalk of grass throughout their life, simply because they are not put out to pasture.

The most common excuse is that it takes up too much space to provide horses with the opportunity to move around freely and having them stabled is far more efficient and timesaving.

Jackson thought of a solution which is as simple as it is effective. He called this solution “Paddock Paradise”. In its most simple form one creates a walking path for the horses where food and water is located at different spots, preferably with as large a distance between them as is possible, so the animals have to move in order to meet their basic needs for food and water.

The idea of the walking path can be enlarged by providing the path with sections of different soil, including gravel and rocks to develop sturdy hooves and natural obstacles such as wooden posts lying on the ground to be crossed to exercise the muscles. Jackson even advocates a mud pool so horses can wet their hooves in the mud and prevent them from drying out and developing cracks.

Remember that my meadow only was an area of a quarter of an acre. At the time it felt like quite a sacrifice to set aside a part of the meadow to create a walking path. But it seemed to be the sensible thing