

Horses & Valuable Life Discoveries ~ A Conversation With My Teacher

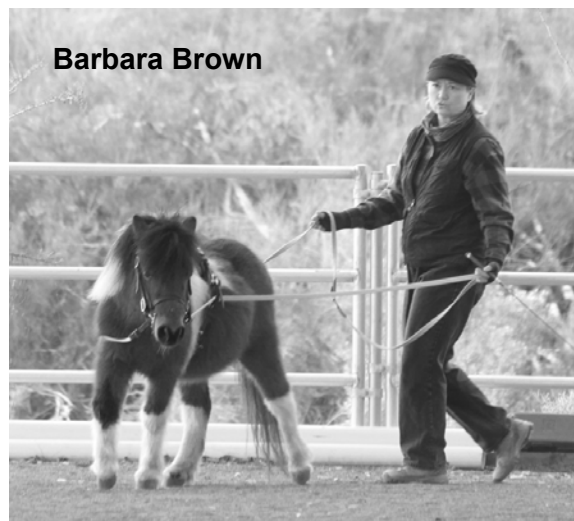
By Barbara J. Brown (BB), in dialogue with Sally Green (SG)

Photos by Jim & Bobbi Eral

B.B. I'm relatively new to horses and Lake Co. and I'm learning about horses because I find my life feels better when I'm around them. I've seen there are many ways people enjoy their horses here. Your teaching makes sense to me and has changed my perception. What guides your approach?

S.G. There has to be a deep regard for the wellbeing of the horse. It means we put the horse's health and happiness before our own agenda. This really becomes a way of life. We try to provide the best environment for the horse, preferably at pasture with other equines, natural diet, hoof care, and so on. If they are raised from a young age in a herd, they learn to understand hierarchy and are comfortable putting their trust in a leader. I try to help people develop a relationship of trust and communication through exercises in body language. Horses communicate through body language, and they have an uncanny ability to know us through our own body language. They will respect a leader who shows clarity and decisiveness and who also remains calm and benign. We often "chatter" unknowingly with our bodies, sending very confusing messages.

B.B. From the class you teach with horses I've sensed greater calmness and clarity in myself and I feel more confident with the horse because of it. I've heard you say that this body language work also helps keep humans safe...how so?



S.G.

We teach the horse to respect our space, not crowd or step on us, and if something startles the horse, it will look to us for leadership...do we need to be frightened, or is it okay? It won't feel it needs to take charge by bolting off and the training will progress much more easily if the horse feels comfortable and trusts us.

B.B. In my lessons on the lunge line, you've helped me appreciate the importance of developing an independent and effective seat. By not relying on the reins for balance, I'm having more sensitive contact with the mouth and clearer communication with the horse. I'm feeling less tense and it's been really enjoyable to learn how to ride.

S.G. You're developing a soft feel on the reins and here's why it's useful: when we first start training a horse, its natural tendency is to raise its head and hollow its back out of apprehension and/or lack of strength. So by enticing the horse through this soft contact to telescope its neck out and down, we enable it to release the tension in the back, rounding it up slightly, and engaging the hind quarters, largely through activating the abdominal muscles. It's important for the horse to have complete freedom of its head and neck, so we don't use any sort of restrictive gadgets. The horse "coils its loins," which means it lowers the croup and flexes all the joints of the hindquarters, reaching under itself increasingly. The untrained horse naturally carries more of its weight on the forehand and this is exacerbated by adding weight to its back or hooking it to a cart, so by engaging the hindquarters, we ask it to carry more of its weight on the hind end. As it engages the hind end, the front end lightens in proportion. This is called longitudinal balance and it's what true lightness is about. Many people confuse a delicate contact with the bit with lightness, but that's not actually the same thing.*

B.B. Your instruction seems based on sound principles of bio-mechanics and, if I'm not aware of the biomechanics, it seems I risk harming the horse by asking it to do something it may not be supple or strong enough to do. You've also mentioned lateral balance. What does that mean?

S.G. Like humans, horses are either right- or left-hand dominant. This causes them to overload the dominant front leg and the diagonal hind leg, putting unnecessary stress on their joints. In order to balance them, we do a lot of exercises in-hand and on the lunge, trying to get them to bend the spine as they work on a curved line and stay upright rather than lean in like a motorcycle on a turn. With the horse able to weight all its feet evenly, the stress on the joints and muscles is minimized. With both longitudinal and lateral balance, a horse has a much better chance of staying sound.**

B.B. Can horses get injured by not working in balance?

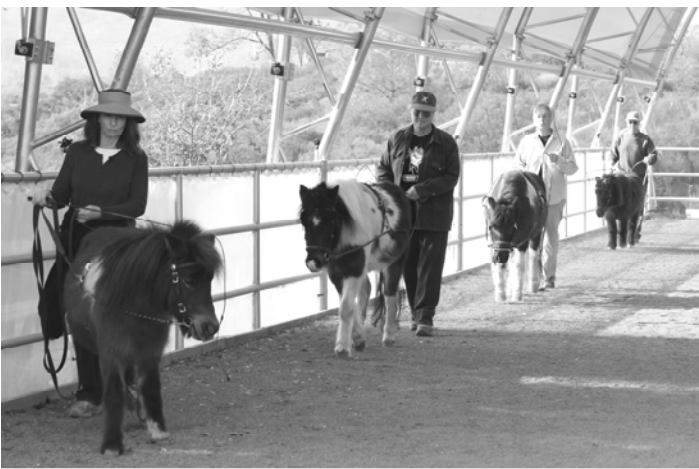
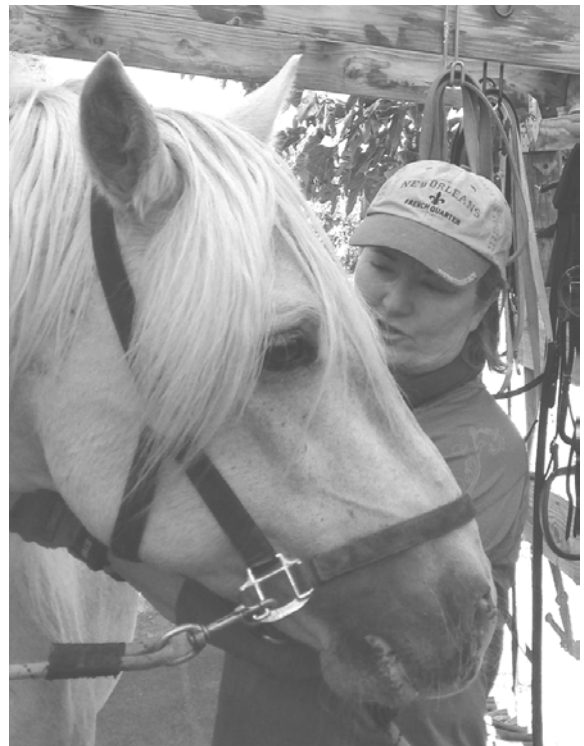
S.G. Well yes, they actually can, and do, and I think that's why the horse supply catalogs are so full of joint medications. Horses get joy out of movement; but if they are stiff and in pain, moving is not such a joyful experience. That's why it's so important to help the horse relax and move fluidly without tension. Tension causes pain which, in turn, leads to unsoundness.

B.B. How can I tell if a horse has tension?

S.G. It will be hard for you to feel it at this stage, but you will. You can see when you lunge a horse if his back is undulating loosely. For now, it would be easiest to look at photos. At the trot, is the hind cannon bone parallel to the diagonal front forearm? Tension causes exaggerated front end movement, leg throwing or toe flipping.

B.B. You've mentioned that this method of training is referred to as dressage. Can you elaborate?

S.G. The word dressage is French, meaning "training." It's really just the basic gymnastic preparation of a horse for any discipline we wish to participate in. The dressage exercises are designed to develop balance, suppleness and straightness and this can be pursued to the Grand Prix level, or, simply applied to whatever activity you ask your horse to do in daily life. Dressage allows the horse to develop its full expression, to become beautiful and proud. If we fail them in this, if we use them only to fulfill our own desires, we shortchange not only our horses, but ourselves as well. By honoring and bringing out the best in our horses, we open ourselves to receiving a gift of tremendous value from them.



Students in one of Sally's driving classes

B.B. Sally, thank you for being here. Your graceful and kind manner has helped me to trust and develop my own inner strength of calm awareness that I can rely on when I'm with horses and that has felt good. Also, thank you for letting me share what I'm learning here in this journal. I'm just beginning to appreciate valuable life discoveries through dressage - the beauty of which, I'm finding, only horses can reveal.

* A good article about this is Dr. Deb Bennett's "Ring of Muscles Revisited" which you can download at www.equinestudies.org/ring_revisted_2008/ring_of_muscles_2008_pdf.pdf

**An excellent book on laterality is "Straightening the Crooked Horse" by Klaus Schoneich and Gabriele Rachen-Schoneich.