

Why I'm Grateful to Have Horses in My Life

By Terri Haynie

As we approach the Thanksgiving holiday, what better time to reflect on the gifts that horses bring to our lives? My 44 years have been divided into “before” and “after” horses, allowing a contrast in perspectives that illustrates how much richer my “after” life is. (Wait....maybe “richer” is not quite the right word—at least not with hay at \$5+ a bale). Every day brings new insight, lessons learned, a quiet joy in observing the comings and goings of the seasons in our tricolored pony’s dapples, and a renewed appreciation for this lifestyle.

Like most little girls with a love of horses that sprung from an undetermined source and began before I could walk, I pestered my parents continually for a horse. I suppose they thought like a childhood illness, horse craziness would run its course...yet it remained, grew, ached, and sadly, remained unfulfilled. It wasn't that my parents didn't want me to have a horse. But it was too unfamiliar and expensive to consider in our solidly suburban lives.

When I was ten, my parents bought five acres of land on which they planned build a home, including a barn and pasture; within a year of that purchase, they decided to move from Washington state back to the east coast to be near family. Soon I was 3,000 miles away and starting over in Hampton, Virginia. My entire knowledge of the state resided between the pages of Margaret Henry's *Misty of Chincoteague* and the phrase, “Virginia is for lovers.” It was back to suburbia and a continued longing for a horse.

Thirty-odd years later, I've learned that the windswept barrier islands of Chincoteague and Assateague were worth the wait, and that Virginia is for HORSE lovers (and my parents finally realized that horse fever is a terminal illness). I began riding regularly about eight years ago, and bought our family's first horse in 1998. Since then, seven days a week, I've been privileged to wake at the crack of dawn and walk out to the barn with a cup of coffee and a sleepy smile to take care of our two horses. Some folks think coffee smells better than anything else at that time of day. But *we* know it's that “horsey smell,” savored with your face buried in your horse's neck...what a pick-me-up!

In honor of the season, I've listed several reasons I'm grateful to have horses in my life. They're not in order, and not unabridged. While making this list, the thought crossed my mind that if I were able to converse with my two geldings, I hoped they'd tell me they were thankful to be a part of our family too.

I am thankful to have horses for all of the following reasons (and many more too numerous to list!):

1. Horses make us better people.

Not better as in superior, but better as in well-rounded, less subject to the pull of depression, more likely to be young at heart, flexible, spontaneous, adventurous, sensitive. How can we state empirically that horses make us better people? Yet we know

it's true. Owning horses is like being let in on a good secret, having keys to a mythical kingdom, living an exciting double life amidst our pedestrian office mates who go home to HBO and house cats and scrupulously clean homes and tightly run schedules. Is it just me, or don't other "horsey" families benefit from crockpot or impromptu cooking, elastic schedules, fat barn cats, a "lived-in" house, and a constant awareness of what the weather holds for the next week? Horses demand that we sort our priorities differently: a little mud on our shoes keeps us grounded. I find that many horse people work to pay the bills as opposed to identifying themselves through their careers. We find satisfaction, pleasure, and our sense of self in the row of ribbons on our son or daughter's wall, trail riding on a cool fall day, watching our healthy horses romp, mucking stalls, learning to handle a colic crisis, or defeating thrush in wet winters. We thrive on providing the absolute best care possible for our horses—and this high standard of care and caring translates to our family, friends, and acquaintances.

2. Horses Teach Us Patience.

"If you don't have much time, it's best to not start working with a horse," (Bill Dorrance, *True Horsemanship Through Feel*). Whether we're improving our riding, starting a young horse, or nursing one through a long-term injury, doing things right takes an enormous amount of time. Some situations in which we don't anticipate problems, such as trailer loading a normally agreeable horse, can quickly make patience an extremely limited commodity. Yet if we manage to hold onto it, the results are deeper knowledge and greater trust. A wonderful example of patience with a long-term injury and uncertain outcome is Cindy Thomas, a 20-year-old full-time Christopher Newport University student who is rehabbing Eternal Tune, a 4-year-old Thoroughbred racehorse she was given with a suspensory ligament injury; a full recovery could take up to four months. Every day she drives to the barn, wraps his legs, handwalks, bathes and grooms him, and cleans his stall, all of which takes about two hours. In addition to a full college schedule, she has two other horses and works part time. Cindy hopes Tune will race again, but if that's not possible, she'll find him another productive job. Despite the unknowns, time, and expense, Cindy is thankful for Tune and the great learning opportunities he provides her.

3. Horses Make Us Better Communicators.

Of all the items on my list, this is possibly the most meaningful in terms of my own relationships, both with people and my own horses. I'm not the only one who feels that learning to communicate with horses has many crossovers in human relationships. A few examples: prisoner programs in which inmates learn and implement basic training techniques; therapeutic riding for handicapped children; teaching troubled teens to train horses; and even corporate seminars that illustrate communication techniques based on natural horsemanship principles. Communicating effectively with horses teaches us to be direct, consistent, and black and white. I am truly thankful this year to Deb Bull of Rein Dance Performance Horses in King William County, who is helping my daughter to connect and have a respectful partnership with her three-year-old gelding through clear language and small steps that have led to successively bigger ones. That vital, elusive quality of "feel" between horse and human is difficult to "teach." Yet I see that transfer

of knowledge during each session. Those same lessons have great value in our own personal relationships.

4. Horses Provide a Never Ending Learning Experience.

I remember sitting in a college English class many years ago and realizing with sudden clarity the vastness of what I *didn't* know; becoming an educated horse owner has given me the same type of cathartic “aha!” moment. Every new experience shows me just how much I don't know! But that's what makes it so exciting. For lifelong learners, pursuing a “degree” in horsemanship never ends.

5. Horse People Are Members of a Very Special Community.

Of the thousands of stories that will eventually emerge from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, here is just one that illustrates the kindness of strangers within the horse community. Brian and Alisa Slater live in Anacoca, LA, near Lake Charles. As hurricane Rita rapidly approached, they decided to evacuate and began seeking a refuge that would also accept their two horses, dogs, and cats. After a quick internet search, Alisa and Brian found an offer from an Arkansas couple stating they could house two horses and the owners too, if needed. They called, made the arrangements, and took off for Arkansas in their mini-Noah's Ark. You could write the rest of this story, couldn't you? The hosting couple was warm and welcoming and opened their home for a long weekend without question. Brian and Alisa left Arkansas with many thanks, new friends, and the feeling that they'd been on vacation instead of a harrowing flight from disaster.

6. Horses Give Children and Teens Focus, Center, and Identity.

My teenaged daughter has been taking riding lessons off and on since she was five. She got her first horse at age eight. Growing up with horses has given her confidence, goals, a sense of achievement, purpose, and focus. Though she's drifted away from horses from time to time, she always finds her way back with a renewed interest. She's not an overachiever and she doesn't show in anything other than small, local venues. Yet horses are who she is...and in a world of negative temptations, I am blessed to be able to give her this anchor. It allows her to be independent and has been an insulator against peer pressure. Sharing horses and trail rides, driving her to lessons, and talking about her future with horses has provided a common ground sometimes absent with teens and their parents.

7. Horses Are a Constant Source of Beauty and Joie de Vivre in Our Lives.

“There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man.”

~Winston Churchill

The horse's natural beauty through the ages has inspired countless poets, is described in the bible, and figures prominently through centuries of artwork from cave wall etchings to canvas masterpieces...there is an indefinable quality in the arch of a neck or the flagged tail of a galloping Arab that literally causes a catch in our throat. Seeing this on a daily basis doesn't dull our appreciation, and that is something rare. The beauty of horses is good for our souls and instills a sense of balance in our lives. The feelings we experience during an especially breathtaking ride, seeing our kids on their first pony, watching a great dressage performance, or hearing warm nickers on a cold winter

morning bring a joy that can best be described as the wonder and joie de vivre we took for granted as children.

I hope to never lose it. Happy Thanksgiving!