EPONAQUEST BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

Space is the Place ~ Merlin's Story

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It took a highly sensitive, formerly abused stallion to show us something important about the need that all horses---and humans---have for personal space.

Midnight Merlin, our black Arabian stallion, who lived at Eponaquest with two mares during his last years, was an especially gentle, thoughtful, respectful horse. But at one time, you couldn't even walk into his stall and put a halter on him without a serious fight. This horse couldn't stand to be touched. He would attack people and horses alike. When Linda took on the project of rehabilitating him, she realized that all the so-called enlightened training methods and therapeutic techniques involved some sort of touch (T-Touch, massage, acupuncture, etc.). Attempting to touch Merlin "for his own good" was not only dangerous for the human, but so offensive to the horse that it was counterproductive.

Linda decided to see how far away she needed to stand from Merlin in order for the horse to calm down. Her goal was to start from this place, and move closer, day by day, inch by inch, until she was finally touching him. Instead, she found that Merlin demanded that she stand in the same place day after day, about five feet from his body. If she even leaned in, he would pin his ears and begin to show the first signs of flight or fight. Thinking that perhaps she would have to stand there without an obvious goal until Merlin finally trusted her, she spent approximately ten minutes each day for a couple of weeks standing with the stallion five feet away from him in his corral.

One day, she felt a pulsing sensation against her shoulder as she stood near him. Absentmindedly, she reached up at pushed against this slight pressure in the air. Merlin gently stepped to the side, the same reaction you would expect from a horse who knows how to move away from pressure when you touch his body. Only it seemed that as far as Merlin was concerned, his body started five feet away from his hide. Linda thought this was perhaps a form of hyper-vigilance the horse had developed through his abusive treatment.

Curious, Linda performed some massage moves and T-Touches in the air five feet away from his body---when no one else was looking---and found that, sure enough, the horse lowered his head, licked, and chewed, the same relaxation responses you would expect from touching a horse directly in this way. Over time, Linda saw this same dynamic in horses she met on her workshops around the country. Horses who had to be muzzled to be groomed, for instance, seemed to have the same hyper-vigilance. By finding the horse's "spatial body" and treating that space as if this were indeed where his body started, she could quickly gain the animal's trust, and help his human caretakers do the same. Such horses would eventually allow the people in their lives step in and touch them, when *necessary*, as long as these people for the most part respected this spatial boundary.

Over time, everyone at Eponaquest began to notice that there were several layers of response with horses like Merlin. The innermost layer was consistent day by day. We began referring to it as the "layer of personal space."

Yet in approaching Merlin in a larger arena, we noticed that he seemed to have at least two other predictable places where he would have a physical response to our proximity. The outermost layer, quite a distance away, became known as the "environmental awareness layer." This was where Merlin would first lift up his head and take visible notice of us. The middle layer, about 20 feet away from his body, became known as the "layer of connection," because we found that if you stopped here and relaxed when Merlin lifted his head and looked directly at you, he would most likely be compelled to come to you.

Over time, we also noticed that all horses had more subtle responses to proximity in the same general layered pattern, and that we could actually train horses to come to us in a big pasture by working consciously with these spatial hot spots, as we'll show you how to do later this afternoon.

And finally, we began noticing that humans have the same sorts of involuntary physical responses to proximity, and that highly sensitive humans, like highly sensitive horses, feel safer, and become more responsive to others when their need for space is acknowledged.