

## THE HORSES THAT GUIDE US HOME: BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HUMAN LIFE AND THE NATURAL WORLD

By: Carla Ervin, LCSW, Equine Facilitated Psychotherapist

As I sit bareback on my mare, Juno, I feel her breath beneath me. It's slow, it's soft, and it's rhythmic. All of which I need to slow down my own breath, and allow her to guide me back into the present moment.

I look out into the trees with Juno, and we spot a couple of deer, neither of which seem to fascinate Juno as much as they do me, but it's like I'm being transported into a different world, and a different time. A time when my ancestors partnered with Juno's ancestors to survive, and thrive in this world. I begin to orient more to my surroundings, and really take in the beauty that envelops us. The tall shade trees, the birds that have made the shade trees their homes, nearby flowers, as well as a couple of Juno's herd members that followed us along for the ride. While I feel a deep sense of connection and appreciation for the moment that is unfolding, I can't help but wonder how we, as humans, have gotten so far away from nature that moments like this seem to be few and far between, or go completely unnoticed.

Anyone who has felt a sense of connection with a horse has connected back to our ancestral lineage. Whatever that lineage may be, at some point, our very survival as a human race depended on partnering with horses to explore, hunt, migrate, and build our homes on the vast terrains and landscapes. Eventually, we moved more towards industrialization, and only found pockets of nature around us. It seems more challenging to find places where we can be in nature without the interruptions of modern day life. Every day there is more urban development, which serves as a reminder of how we have distanced ourselves from the natural world. Horses help to take us back to what is so deeply encoded in our DNA as humans - our connection, dependence, and appreciation for nature. One of my favorite quotes by Gary Kowalski (2007) further explains just how crucial our relationship with the natural world is:

What will it mean for the human race if children come of age in a world bereft of other living creatures? Their growing years will be immeasurably less vivid and vibrant. Their connection with the Earth will be severed, and part of their inborn potential for amazement will go uncultivated. It is not just that animals make the world more scenic or picturesque. The lives of animals are woven into our very being - closer than our own breathing - and our soul will suffer when they are gone.

### Benefits of Nature

Yoshifumi Miyazaki, a retired Japanese researcher and professor, has extensively studied the impact of nature on mental and physical health. His work also incorporates aspects of the Biophilia Hypothesis, as developed by Edward O. Wilson, which states that peaceful elements of nature help us to have more cognitive clarity, empathy, and hope. In his studies, Miyazaki discovered that even just walking in nature can help to reduce our cortisol levels, decrease our sympathetic nervous system response (the fight-or-flight response), as well as our blood pressure, heart rate, and anxiety levels. It is Miyazaki's belief that because humans evolved in nature, it is where we feel most comfortable (Williams, 2017).

For some, it's challenging to picture a world in which nature is not a part of our everyday lives. It is the very essence of who we are. We may even feel more at home in nature with our equine partners than in cityscapes with our fellow humans. Horses have such a unique way of tapping into our hearts and souls that it can feel as though they can hear what we are thinking, and feel what we are feeling. In doing so, they offer what we as humans so desperately need, which is to slow down enough to notice how much our minds and bodies benefit when we take the time to connect with nature and its inhabitants.



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### The Practice of Slowing Down

One of the easiest ways we can begin to slow down our minds and bodies is by bringing our awareness and attention to our breath. When you notice your breath, is it slow and rhythmic or shallow and fast? Are you holding your breath, or fully expanding your inhale and exhale? If you softly place a hand on your horse, how are they breathing? Does their breath resonate with yours, or do you notice something different? When we breathe with the horse, it can help induce a more peaceful state that helps our own systems further expand feelings of relaxation (A. v. R. McCormick & M. D. McCormick, 1997). As you become more aware of your breath, you may also begin noticing more of your internal state, or may start taking in more of your surroundings. And as you do, what do your eyes see? What do your ears hear, or your nose smell? As you continue to explore with your senses, you will slowly be guided back into the present moment while in connection with your equine partner.

Ultimately, horses have a way of guiding us back to the very essence of who we are, in our relationship to nature. If we slow down enough, we will begin to feel the more sacred connection we have to our equine partners, as well as other beings we share our world with. While urban development continues, and we do our best to keep up with the demands of everyday life, it is our horses that call us back home, and there is no other place where I feel more connected to nature than on the back of a horse.

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### About the Author:

Carla Ervin is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker in the state of Texas, and is the owner of Sacred Being Wellness located in Pilot Point, Texas. As an Equine Facilitated Psychotherapist, Carla partners with a herd of 15 horses to provide psychotherapy services to individuals, eighteen and older, who are more sensitive to their internal and external experiences, or who have experienced trauma. It is Carla's belief that the most profound healing takes place in safe and supportive partnerships, whether it be humans, animals, or nature.

