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plus A UNIQUE FORM OF EQUINE THERAPY HELPS HEAL TRAUMA, PG. 14

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# THE HORSE AS healer

A unique equine therapy program provides a special form of healing.

BY LAURA KLEIN

**H**aving several therapists over a 15-year period brought me immense healing from a childhood filled with trauma, but I still felt stuck. I tried energy healing in England and a shaman in Mexico. Nothing seemed to give me the peace I longed for. It felt like trauma was literally trapped in my body, in my cells and nervous system.

## EQUINE GUIDANCE

At the time, I wasn't familiar with the intersection between equine therapy and body-centric healing. I just knew I needed a release from the lingering emotional pain. After months of reading extensively online, I found a therapist with a herd of horses that I felt drawn to: Belle Shook and her horses of Equine Guidance.

I've spent time with horses on and off throughout my life, and they've fostered a deep emotional connection on my end. I was the young girl who played horse owner by opening pretend paddock gates and filling up real water buckets for my imaginary herd. Every few years an opportunity would come up for me to be in their presence. Horses give me immense joy as much as they offer peace.

In contemplating my upcoming session with Belle and the herd, I anticipated this peaceful feeling, but I also felt unease. I dug into the literature confirming what I felt; horses have an effect on our bodies that is measurable by science. I feared what they might sense deep within me. What if the horses discovered that I was irrevocably messed up? What if they rejected me?

## MEETING THE HERD

Putting every one of my fears down in my journal, I took a deep breath and drove the seven hours from Los Angeles, Calif., to Verde Valley, Ariz. Belle met me at her property on a warm morning in September. The surrounding Verde Valley, stretching toward Sedona, was the foreground to the stunning Red Rocks range in the distance.

Equine Guidance is Belle and a herd of three American Bashkir Curly horses: Salsa, Penny and Mimi. They are as beautiful as they are cute; intense as they are innocent.

All three casually looked up when Belle and I settled ourselves into camping chairs in the middle of their open-air stable for the first part of my session. The horses comfortably moved around us while Belle and I talked, licking salt or nimbly plucking leftover breakfast hay from crevices.

I felt welcomed as much as I felt insignificant. Both concepts would have an equal place in my experience, as I would come to understand.

Admittedly, I became emotional very quickly. It was overwhelming to have Belle and the horses hold such an incredibly safe space for me. Belle's voice is incredibly calming.

I mentioned perhaps she should take to YouTube with meditation recordings. I think she'd have a million followers in no time, but Belle's only mission is to bring more people within the healing capabilities of her herd. Her eyes still sparkle in awe of the horses, even after 14 years of witnessing and experiencing their connecting and healing powers.

As a clinical therapist and Somatic Experiencing practitioner, Belle's engagement with my feelings and thoughts was not only professional, but invoked my own intense curiosity into a deeper part of myself. My sharing flowed easily as realizations continually arose within me. Belle wasn't arbitrarily guiding or leading in any direction, yet our talk therapy was already beginning to regulate my nervous system in a palpable way.

## AWAKENING GRIEF

When it was time to meet the herd, I followed Belle's instructions and chose a wall in one of the stalls to lean against. I waited. The horses were free to do as they wanted, so I wondered if they would voluntarily come to me.

First, Salsa came into the stall. He stood to my left facing me, his head very close to the left side of my chest. A strong sense of support emanated from him. Penny came to me next and began breathing rhythmically between the right side of my chest and my stomach.

Then Mimi entered. She gently touched my side with her nose. I began to cry, and Belle gently checked in with me. Mimi held her nose there for quite a long time as I settled into unfamiliar sensations.

This incredible horse was bringing intense grief to the surface in waves. It felt as if I was feeling the grief of my female ancestors mixed in with my own grief. Salsa held us all in comfort and strength until he eventually turned away first. Then Mimi turned and left the stall, followed by Penny. It was the very moment that I, too, felt ready to finish.

### **EACH HORSE'S GIFT**

After my time with the herd, Belle suggested I sit and write what I had experienced from each horse individually. I wrote vigorously, as the experience was so intense and tangible.

It wasn't until later that evening, reading through the packet that Belle had given me upon my arrival, that the full impact of what had occurred sunk in. I read Belle's description of each member of the herd and sat back in disbelief.

Mimi had given me an awakening of my grief so deep that it preceded my own birth. I stared down at Belle's words that spoke of Mimi having the "steadiness ready to face a hurricane of grief." I looked back and forth between my writing and Belle's description. She continues about Mimi. "She has the stamina to face any heartache with incredible courage."

Penny had awakened my breath. It felt as if she wanted me to stay present and convince me that I was ready for this healing. I wrote that Penny instilled trust in my own intuition and instincts. I read Penny's description: "Her breath sometimes sounds like a calming purr as she empowers others to be present with their intuition and more profound knowing."

From Salsa, I received the wise message that I was part of the whole. For the first time in my life, I felt permission in desiring to be part of the whole. As Salsa stood by my side, I had the sense that our galaxy was made up of parts of a whole and that earth was the womb. I wrote all of this down along with the words, "Salsa gave me cosmic ideas." Belle's printed words describing Salsa's work blurred with my tears: "Salsa has a shamanic quality to him where he



can see through the worlds, helping the conscious mind experience the compelling depth and create meaningful insight."

### **FEELING GROUNDED**

For me, a wounded human and stubborn skeptic, it was as if linear time ceased to have meaning in my life for that precious hour. I felt grounded for the first time in my life. I felt calm.

I carry this feeling with me even now. The healing I received from this herd of natural healers has sustained. This was not an experience that would weaken its healing properties over time. I continue to invoke this graciously gifted calm into my very cells.

Tears still occasionally flow, and I think back to the safe space that Belle and the horses provided. Where crying felt neither self-conscious nor awkward. Belle, Salsa, Mimi and Penny had given me the most healing space that I have ever received therapeutically.

I felt for the first time in my life that everything is just as it is, which is to say perfectly OK—nothing to blunder through or to make complicated. It's a healing like no other. ■

Belle Shook and her three American Bashkir Curly Horses offer a unique type of equine therapy.