

CALM & COLLECTED

by Chris Irwin

I believe that the phrase "natural horsemanship" is a dangerous oxymoron. It suggests that horses are fine as they are, that humans just screw them up and the trainer's job is to return the animal to its original state of grace. The problem here is that there is nothing natural about what we are doing. We are not only trying to convince a prey animal to allow a human being, a predator in the eyes of the horse, on its back and control its every movement, we are trying to get them to like it. Trying to pass this off as "natural" causes confusion that results in real physical consequences for both horse and rider. The natural conformation of a horse's back is inverted, not rounded. Some breeds are more naturally rounded than others, and alpha stallions and mares in the wild achieve that state for brief moments, but you will never see a consistently rounded and collected horse cantering around in the wild. It emphatically is *not* natural. While it is vital to understand a horse's natural behaviour, too much emphasis on the "natural" results in riders sitting atop inverted horses. That's bad for a horse because its back then has less strength to carry the rider and is drastically inhibited from achieving maximum forward impulsion from its hindquarters. And it's bad for the rider, too.

Let me reiterate: We are not trying to create something natural here, or allow our horses to behave as they do out in the pasture. I don't want a natural horse, I want a *super*-natural horse. What we can and should do is tap into the natural psychology and etiquette of the herd. That allows us to pursue our own ends while keeping the horse's best interests in the forefront. That's quite different. We're saying, "I know you don't normally stay in this shape, but that's what I want you to do because if you try it you'll find out how much better you can move and feel with me up here on your back. It's the best use of your mental and physical potential and it'll allow you to carry me comfortably and confidently." We're using natural means, but to artificial ends. And as long as we keep the horse's best interests in the forefront, I believe that's how it should be. As Oscar Wilde once said, "Nature is what we are put on earth to rise above."

What a collected horse and rider should be aiming to do is create a unit in which the body, mind and spirit of both creatures are balanced and working together towards achieving maximum potential. The rider becomes a sort of benevolent shepherd to the horse and has its complete trust, while the horse becomes an agile and powerful companion, willing to help out with what the rider can't do for himself. Our ultimate goal is to resolve the predator and prey polarity. We have to understand it, embrace it, and we have to use it, but eventually we want to evolve beyond it. We want to create a new thing – a two-headed entity that has balanced its predator focus, drive and aggression with the awareness and group-oriented mindset of prey consciousness.

Of course, whatever we do to the horse we must first create within ourselves. If we're going to be in that kind of partnership within the riding arena, we need to carry that kind of mental balance around with us everywhere we go. It's not something you can turn on and off – although I can't see why you'd want to. I think the world is desperate for people who can compete with each other without victimizing the loser, for people who can see past their own immediate needs, who can lead with the best interests of the herd at heart. In fact, I think this is the next step in human evolution.

The human-horse partnership, however, is not an equal one. Make no mistake about it, our horses need far more from us than our dogs and cats. You can be a big softy and be pals with your dog or cat and let them run up and jump on you, bump into you, or ignore your commands and basically do whatever they want. You can even do this with your kids if you want. But keep in mind that first of all dogs and cats are predators and are much more naturally aligned with our innate behaviour and body language. Secondly, our dogs and cats are a fraction of the size of our horses and we don't risk our lives by climbing on their backs and expecting them to let us control their direction. In short, the realities between horses and humans are worlds apart but we ask far more of them than any other animals because we like to ride them. We assume more risks with horses than with any other animal on the planet. Just look at what happened to poor Christopher Reeves. Horses are magnificent creatures who offer us a unique window into our souls

and an opportunity to develop them, but we can't ever lose sight of the fact that, ultimately, they are potentially very volatile and dangerous and they look to us for leadership. That means that while we may ride them into collection and travel a long way with them on the journey, there's one more step the human has to take. If we want the type of leadership I've been talking about, there's only one way to convince the horse to give it to us. Restraints won't do it, spurs and big, punishing bits won't do it, bribing them with carrots won't do it and trying to communicate with them from the heart on some sort of psychic level won't do it. There's only one pillar this kind of leadership can rest on: the rider's own integrity.

Becoming a truly well-balanced rider in order to develop the kind of integrity a horse will respond to will eventually require us to come to grips with our own deepest contradictions. There's no other way. It's like the old joke about what you have to know to teach school: one thing more than the students. Just as we've balanced out predator and prey, we now have to look within and discover how to find balance between our outward selves and personalities with our inner self, our shadow side. To bring out the very best in our horses we first need to step into our own inner-round pen and dance with the dark horse that hides deep within us.