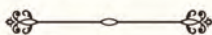


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Stories of Love and Healing from a Farm Animal Sanctuary



# WHAT THE ANIMALS TAUGHT ME



**STEPHANIE MAROHN**



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## The Winged Horse

The first to arrive was a horse. I was gazing out the kitchen window in a dishwashing reverie one morning when a tiny mare, half the size of a regular horse, pranced into view. Pure white, with a long white mane and tail, she looked like a unicorn, minus the horn. I watched in wonderment as she tossed her head and danced away. Was she really there?

I got outside in time to see her trot up to the gate over which the two full-size horses who lived on the property were craning their necks, eyes wide at the sight of her. The visitor touched noses with the gray gelding. The chestnut mare next to him promptly bit the little one on the head. The white horse squealed and leapt back but wasn't truly perturbed. She was overflowing with the ecstasy of freedom.

I moved forward and she walked to meet me, nosed my outstretched hand, and gazed at me from jet-black eyes rimmed endearingly with long white eyelashes. The top of her head reached no higher than my chest. Later I learned that she is a miniature horse, which is bred differently from a pony. After greeting me, the little horse danced off again, back to the gate, where she got in another touch on the gelding's nose before ducking away from the mare's reach. Gabriel, the wild desert donkey, approached tentatively to



see what the commotion was about. He was at the bottom of the herd's hierarchy (the mare was at the top), which meant he couldn't push into the others' space, so he hung back, but his eyes were riveted on the new arrival.

I watched the little white mare tossing her head and prancing before them. She held herself as if she had no weight, like a dancer does, which in equestrian circles is called "collection." The ability to do this is a regal trait of horses and it is thrilling to see. When horses are collected, they seem to float, their feet hardly touching the ground. They are complete grace and utterly, fully present.

How had this little horse gotten onto the property? The eight acres were fenced. But rather than question the marvelous gift, I went to fill a bucket of water for her.

That afternoon, a teenage girl came looking for the horse, who it turned out had broken her tether a few houses away. The little mare raised her head to look at the girl, but lowered it again to the bounty of the grass. We stood watching her graze and speculated about how she had ended up here. We concluded that someone must have come across her on the road, seen the sign on my driveway gate requesting those who entered to close the gate after them because horses were loose on the property, and figured this was where she belonged. Rural Sonoma County, where I live, still operates in the old farm way: passersby take responsibility if they see a cow, horse, sheep, goat, or pig loose and take the time to herd the animal to safety.

The little mare must have slipped her halter to get free of the tether because she was wearing no sign of ownership or bondage—a fairy horse, entirely her own being. That's the vision of her I still carry, and my memory blurs when I recall the girl putting a rope around the little one's neck and leading her away. With the deep connection I have to this



horse now, I can't believe I let the girl take her with no discussion of other options, knowing she would end up back on a tether, with no horse companions. Horses are herd animals and they pine in loneliness when they are forced to live without other horses. I knew all this and I loved animals dearly, but at that time my heart would open only so far; my mind could still persuade me not to follow my heart's promptings. "Adopting a horse would tie you down," my mind told me. "You already have a cat and that's enough of a commitment. Better just to enjoy other people's animals." So I let the little white horse be led away.

I didn't think I would see her again. But one morning a few weeks later, when I sat down at my computer to write and looked out over the expanse of summer-golden grass that stretched from the windows before me to the neighboring field, there she was. Tethered in the field beyond the fence line, with about fifteen feet of rope tied to a stake, she could only go endlessly round in a circle. Tethering is a terrible thing to do to any animal. It alters their minds to have their world limited to what they can reach at the end of a rope, just as it would the mind of a human kept that way.

The horse was out there all day, and the next day too. On the third morning, I saw that she had knocked over her water bucket. As the day wore on, nobody came to refill it. I could stand it no longer. The girl had told me where she lived, and I walked down the street to talk to her and her mother. After the usual neighborly exchange of who has lived where and for how long, I broached the subject of the little horse, asking if they were looking for a good home for her, gently suggesting that she might be happier where she could roam free and be with other horses. The mother said they actually would like to find a new home for her, that they had thought they could set up a fence—she knew what



horses needed (there was a touch of guilt in this and a need to explain that she was aware the tether was a bad idea)—but they only rented the place and had had work setbacks recently, so they couldn't afford it. When I asked where the horse had come from, the woman said that a guy who owed her husband money for work he had done for him hadn't been able to pay and had given the horse in lieu of payment.

Before I knew it, I was walking the horse out to the road and heading for home. Looking down at her, I couldn't stop smiling at the thought that I would be seeing this magical creature every day. She went willingly with me, stepping along patiently at my side on her pearly hooves. I assumed she was used to being led where humans chose to take her. Now, looking back, I think she knew there was a grander plan. At the time, I thought I was merely rescuing a horse. She knew better.

As soon as we were inside the driveway gate, I took off her halter and stood back. She gazed at me for a moment with those beautiful black eyes, then flew up the gravel drive, heading for the herd. My heart lifted at the sight of her set free. Her true name came to me then: Pegasus. Her old name didn't make it past the gate.

Pegasus's new home was eight acres of pasture and brush. I rented the house on the property, worked at home as a writer and editor, and took care of the owner's two horses and donkey. A "no-climb" fence, a sturdy wire-mesh and wood-post construction designed for the safety of livestock, ran around the perimeter of the property and sectioned off three pastures, with gates to separate animals as needed. I closed the gate between the new arrival and the others for a few days until I was sure the large horses wouldn't hurt her. I wasn't worried about Gabriel. It was clear from their exchanges through the fence that they were already friends.





Pegasus

I hadn't planned on being the guardian of large animals. I'd come into the role after a long process of settling down that had begun for me eight years before when I left the city for the country. I had lived in one city or another, mostly



San Francisco, for seventeen years when one day I could no longer stand the sound of footsteps overhead. Auspiciously, the mother of a friend of mine had an unoccupied house in the remote hills above the Russian River in Sonoma County, the land of vineyards and wineries north of San Francisco.

My plan was to spend a month finishing a novel I was writing. The house was a perfect writing retreat—quiet, isolated, with a gorgeous view of rolling hills and few houses in sight. The day after I moved in, a wild cat showed up. He was starving, rail-thin, and had the hunched look of illness. I had grown up with cats and dogs in my rural childhood in Ohio and Pennsylvania, loving them ardently, but as an adult I also loved to travel and was reluctant to be tied down. I couldn't deny an animal in need, though. Within three days, the cat was sleeping in my bed. Recovery of his health took longer, but together we managed it. When I moved a year later to the eight-acre property where Pegasus arrived, the once-wild cat, now named Pooka, went with me.

The two horses who lived on this property were well-trained elders. That was a good thing because I had little experience with horses. They took a halter and submitted with no fuss to hoof trimmings and whatever veterinary care they needed; they just wanted to graze and be left alone. Donkeys are known as easy keepers, so Gabriel didn't require much either, at least at first. With Pegasus's arrival, I was introduced to all my shortcomings.

I let her run free, which was fine as long as I didn't need her to do anything, but then she stopped taking the halter and would run away when I approached her to put it on. I had no idea what to do. I was aware that an experienced horsewoman could solve this problem in two seconds, but I didn't have those skills. What I did have was an innate connection with animals and a belief in the path of love to



achieve cooperation. I was sure we could work this out, and when she tossed her head and took off to avoid the halter, I had enough sense to see that it was my failing, not hers.

There is nothing quite like the proving ground of the pasture. You can't hide inadequacy out there. And since I lived alone, the responsibility fell entirely on me. Butterflies of anxiety fluttered in my stomach. I was afraid of doing it all wrong, and worried that in my ignorance I might cause Pegasus some psychological damage, though all I was doing was following her around with the halter.

One night I went out to round her up because I was leaving the next morning for a week and didn't want her loose on the property without me there. Like the tyro I was, I waited until late at night to do this. An experienced horse person wouldn't wait until after dark, much less ten p.m., and would have established a routine of roundup around dinnertime. I had always hated schedules and hadn't yet learned that everything goes much easier with animals when there is a consistent routine. In avoidance of the halter confrontation, I had been hoping Pegasus would put herself to bed. Sometimes she did.



Pegasus and helper



By the time I went outside, it was stormy. Wind tends to make horses wild. Again, at the first sign of a pending storm, a pasture veteran would have rounded her up immediately.

But there I was, walking the fields in the rainy dark, calling her name, which was more for me than for her. The wind took my voice, and it was unlikely that she would have come even if she had heard—free life was way more compelling at that point. I was thoroughly soaked when I finally saw her ghostly white form in the lower field, not far from the house. Rain and wind whipped around us as I approached. When she turned to look at me, her eyes were wild, the whites showing. When I tried to put on the halter, she wheeled and kicked up her heels, catching me on one thigh, and then raced off into the dark.

I didn't think she had aimed for me; the wheeling and kicking was her dramatic exit. I burst into tears, not so much because it hurt, though it did (a hefty bruise would serve for weeks as a reminder of just where ignorance can get you), but out of frustration and an overwhelming sense of failure. What did I think I was doing? I didn't know anything about horses. I was probably making all kinds of other mistakes in the way I was taking care of her. What kind of rescue was this—deliverance from a tether into the hands of someone who didn't know what the hell she was doing?

I stood there in the dark field in the rain and wind and cried. Suddenly, Pegasus was there, nudging at my arm. I stroked her neck and apologized through my tears for inflicting my lack of experience on her. She nudged me again and I realized she was inviting me to put the halter on her. She stood patiently while I did and then docilely allowed me to lead her to the other animals. It was obvious



that Pegasus was comforting me, and she was willing to put aside her wildness to do it. I was in awe of the largeness of this little horse's heart.

In the synchrony of the universe, a woman who works with horses contacted me not long after that night about doing some editing for her. Christine's approach with horses fit my belief system (inexperienced as I was, I had a belief system). Rather than using equipment (halters and ropes) and training the horse to bow to the human's wishes, her focus is on horse and person establishing a relationship through companion walking without equipment. This is known as liberty work, or liberty training. We agreed on a trade of our skills.

Christine is a lifetime horsewoman who, after discovering the companion way, regretted her earlier unquestioning acceptance of conventional methods of training horses. Being a no-nonsense cowgirl, however, she didn't spend time bemoaning the fact, instead concentrating on becoming ever better at the companion work and expanding it into her own approach to the human-horse relationship.



Pegasus and me



As Pegasus and I walked side by side in the pasture during our first session with Christine, Pegasus kept turning her head to me, wanting to interact, touch, nestle. We were supposed to walk, eyes ahead but being watchful of each other out of the sides of our eyes as horses do, and match our pace. I had to keep gently pushing Pegasus's head away. When we walked for a time as we were supposed to, Christine instructed me to stop and give her a reward. First it was a bit of carrot or apple, but Pegasus glowed when I touched her, so from then on, the reward was a hug, a pat, or a rub.

After brief observation of us together, Christine informed me that she could see an unusually strong connection between us, but Pegasus was in charge. I didn't need an expert to tell me that Pegasus had me wrapped around her pearly little hoof. Whereas some people tend to project an ulterior or manipulative motivation onto a horse behaving in this way, Christine said simply that for the safety of the herd someone has to be in charge; since I hadn't taken the lead in our interactions, Pegasus had stepped into the void. (In the herd as it was forming on this property, the chestnut mare was the lead, but, for my own safety, I was supposed to be the leader of them all.) Pegasus had no ego attachment or investment in being the leader. This wasn't a power struggle. It was simply the way it was: someone needed to lead. I learned that the main way I was communicating my non-leadership to Pegasus was by walking in front of her or at her head instead of at her shoulder or slightly behind it. Contrary to the human way, the one in front is not the leader. The leader chooses the direction of movement and impels the other forward from behind. This is horse 101.

Another way I was signaling non-leadership was by allowing Pegasus to move me off my position. No horse in



the herd moves the lead mare from where she stands (and no horse in the herd would kick the lead mare, even by accident!). Christine used an incident with a plastic bucket as a demonstration of this. Pegasus and I had progressed in our companion walking to navigating an obstacle course side by side. This was also to make it more interesting since we had both gotten bored with just walking around the pasture. We were weaving our way through the assortment of farm objects I had used to create the obstacle course, from a rusty wheelbarrow to a toolbox to a wooden crate to an empty industrial plastic paint bucket. Suddenly, a gust of wind whipped a tarp around the side of the barn and Pegasus spooked. She wheeled and took off, charging over the plastic bucket and shattering it.

“If you aren’t the leader, you could be that bucket,” said Christine. She explained that even when horses spook, they never invade the lead mare’s space. They may turn and run in panic, but they automatically veer around the lead mare if she is in their path. For their own safety, people, being so outsized by horses in most cases, need to establish themselves as leaders. It’s important even with horses the size of Pegasus, Christine continued, because if in her panic to escape the scary tarp she had run into me instead of the bucket, she could have really hurt me. I looked at Pegasus, now happily grazing, and was glad I was learning the Way of the Horse with a miniature. I had new appreciation for a friend of mine who works with stallions.

In one of our walking sessions, Christine handed me a riding crop, which had a leather cord attached to it. It looked like a whip and I hated it on sight. She assured me that I would only be using it like a tail. Since I don’t have a tail and tails are an essential part of horse language, I needed some equipment to be able to communicate.



Pegasus and I walked around the pasture again, me holding the crop down at my side, the cord end behind me. When her attention wandered, I flicked my “tail” at her flank as the lead mare would do if a horse were dawdling or otherwise in need of direction. I did it only a few times and then stood still. Christine asked what I was doing; it took me a moment to answer because I was trying not to cry.

“I can’t use this thing,” I said finally, and burst into tears. I dropped the crop in the grass and moved away from it. I couldn’t even stand to be near it. Pegasus, who had taken the opportunity to graze, came over then and gently nuzzled me, as she had when I was crying on that rainy night.

What was going on here? First, the crop was made of leather, which I avoided in clothes and animal equipment such as halters, using nylon or rope halters instead. I didn’t want to use around the animals any products made from another animal’s skin—what kind of message did that send? But second, what had really brought the tears was that the crop seemed to hold all the dark energy from the centuries of use of crops as a means to inflict pain on horses. I couldn’t bear to walk at the side of my precious, pure-hearted horse and flick her with it. Though it didn’t hurt her, it still felt like a violation. I knew I would never do it again.

“Okay, we’ll come up with something else,” said Christine matter-of-factly when I told her this.

I appreciated her accepting my very un-cowgirl-like behavior. I guessed we were in the process of reinventing what it means to be a cowgirl.

After that, I used a stalk of pampas grass. It felt clean in my hand and its plume was far more like a horse’s tail anyway. But even that I didn’t use for long. Pegasus got my



messages, tail or no tail, and I didn't like flicking her with anything. I ought to be able to communicate in a more sophisticated way with her, I thought. And it was true. We began to develop a telepathic relationship, and the stalk of pampas grass only brought us back to a coarser form of communication.



The muse

We continued our sessions with Christine, though Pegasus had turned over the leadership to me after the first session and easily took the halter from then on. I saw clearly how my halter difficulties had been a communication issue. When I learned how to speak her language, even rudimentarily, the problem evaporated. My instinct had proven right. Exerting control is not the path to harmony. There is another way.



## UNCONDITIONAL LOVE LESSON #1:

### Letting Go of Control

It was twelve years ago that Pegasus began my training in the Way of the Horse and she is still my daily companion on that path. With her, I have learned how to walk the line between confidence and dominance. Like many animal lovers, I had always been reluctant to exert my wishes on the animals under my care. *Who am I to decide what they need to do?* I would say. You might be able to get away with that approach when it comes to a cat or a small dog. So the cat gets up on the table. So the dog doesn't always come right away when called. No big deal when safety isn't involved. But out in the pasture, with large animals who can hurt you, unintentionally or not, you have to step firmly into the leadership role.

With animals, what I had to learn was the difference between domination and wise guidance so I could be comfortable stepping up to the leadership plate. With Pegasus, I discovered that truly wise leadership operates through cooperation and harmony. Over time, I deepened my ability to create this with all the animals in my care.

Sadly, the concept of leading through cooperation and harmony is rare in the equestrian world. Many horse people are all about dominance and rule when it comes to their horses. Recently, I was walking with a friend on a forest trail when a woman in the saddle on an obviously distressed horse came down the trail toward us. The horse was wide-eyed, neighing, dancing sideways, turning, and otherwise attempting to escape the tightly reined-in hold the rider was trying to maintain. As they passed us, the rider whipped the



horse's neck with a riding crop. I have always hated cruelty toward animals, and seeing it can send me into fierce rage.

In past years, before the animals opened my heart to all beings, I would probably have yelled at the woman, hotly berating her for her abusive treatment of the horse. In my righteous anger, I failed to see the irony of such a reaction—a person mistreating an animal, me mistreating that person. My heart was as closed to the person as the person's was to the animal. In my deep upset over abuse of animals, I withdrew all caring for the human involved. I didn't feel such a person deserved to be treated with respect.

But it was different on the trail that day. As the rider passed us, I sent love to the mare with the fervent prayer that the situation would change for her. I also sent love to the rider because I knew she was the one who needed to change. I have the animals to thank for this being my first and instinctual response. I had fully taken in what they had taught me about unconditional love.

Then the rider pulled the horse up just past us, forced the horse around, and struggled to keep her in place.

I approached slowly and asked if I could greet the horse. She nodded and I put a hand out to the mare. The mare was too agitated to interact and I could see her anxiety rising. She was nearly out of her head with it.

I began to talk quietly with the woman. In the conversation that followed, she expressed her frustration that the mare just wanted to get back to the barn and her herd and that she often resisted the woman's commands. The woman was forcing the horse to stand facing back up the trail. She was determined that the horse would give in and relax before she turned her around and let her head for home. There was no way that horse was going to relax under all that anger flowing from the person astride her.



I could see the situation was escalating as the angry rider continued to try to regain control and the horse became more upset.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your ultimate goal here?” I inquired, keeping my voice calm with no note of criticism.

“I win, win, win,” she said, without hesitation.

And there is the problem, I thought. But I said, “Have you considered that cooperation might be a better basis for a relationship?”

The woman must have taken that in some, because when I suggested that the situation might change if she dismounted and helped the mare calm down, she did. I was thinking how awful it must be for a horse to have on her back a rider whose motivation is to win, win, win, with no thought of what is good for the horse or how distressing that angry, controlling energy must feel coming through the saddle, the stirrups, the reins, and the riding crop into the horse’s body with no means for the horse to escape it aside from throwing the rider. The horse either cared enough about her rider not to do that or had been severely punished for it in the past.

When the woman dismounted, I saw the utter relief in the horse’s body. She began to calm immediately. Soon the woman allowed the horse to turn for the walk back to the barn.

Before the woman went, I thanked her for letting me talk with her. I was truly grateful for how open she had been. She didn’t know me, but yet she had been willing to listen, even in her own obvious distress. I think she was willing to listen to me because I approached her with caring and compassion, rather than with the need to teach her or berate her. What I felt toward her was real and she



could feel it; it wouldn't have worked if I had had rage in my heart, but I had put on a show of compassion. I wanted her to stop sending all that angry energy into the horse, but it would work no better with her than with the horse to get angry and yell at her, be fakely nice, or otherwise alienate her with attempts at control. I had to try to elicit her cooperation.

I succeeded to a point, but that woman and her horse stayed on my mind for the rest of that day and days afterward. I thought of all that I could have said, should have said to help her see another way of being with her horse.

This is what I wish I had said: Can any relationship with anybody—animal or human—work when the motivation of one of the members in the relationship is to win, win, win? That motivation is all about controlling the other, rather than considering what is in the other's best interests. How can we feel good about a relationship when we know that the other just wants to win? That kind of win means someone has to lose. For a relationship to thrive, there must be a way for both members to win. And that winning can simply be defined as having found a way to work beautifully together. Cooperation and harmony, not control, is the motivation and the goal.

As I see it, humans' attempts to control arise out of fear and pain or, more accurately, the desire to keep from feeling fear and pain. In the case of the rider on the trail, perhaps she did not know how afraid she was, trying and failing to control this large animal. Anger often covers fear. But the attempt to control another only makes us feel worse, as it further closes our hearts. To open our hearts, we must let go of control, of trying to control others and our circumstances. When we do this, we have taken the first step toward being able to love unconditionally, the ultimate in



harmonious relationships. When we love unconditionally, everything just works better.

Loving unconditionally doesn't mean, however, that we have no requirements in our relationships. I needed Pegasus to accept the halter so I could maintain her safety and her health. I needed to find another way besides force to reach that goal. Eliciting her cooperation by learning to speak her language, being clear in my objectives, and coming from a place of love and an open heart was that way. Getting angry at her seeming lack of acquiescence would only have entrenched us in a negative cycle that would have closed both our hearts and created years of problems (the woman on the trail was in such a negative cycle with her horse). At the same time, continuing to cry in the pasture, to fold before the task of building cooperation, would also have stalled (sorry!) our relationship.

Developing cooperation requires creativity. When I visited an animal sanctuary in New Zealand, I looked with wonder at all the animals accompanying the director and me as she showed me around—dogs, cats, chickens, baby goats, even rabbits. I asked how she had gotten the dogs not to chase the other animals. “I made what I was doing much more interesting,” she said.

Developing cooperation requires more time than ruling by coercion does, but the rewards are great and ever expanding. You may be quickly able to bend an animal to your will using fear and force, but once you see what horses (or dogs or any other beings) who exist in cooperation with humans rather than under their dominion are like, you will never be tempted to go back to the old way of control. (And after my experience with the rider on the trail, I also can't imagine going back to my old way of raging at someone who is mistreating an animal.)



Letting go of the need to dominate allows trust and love to blossom. It is a basic lesson in learning to open the heart and love unconditionally. Loving unconditionally means we do not predicate our love on the other doing what we want. Loving unconditionally means we work together for the highest good of both of us. To enter the realm of unconditional love, we let go of our desire to control, and focus instead on our desire to connect and communicate. And soon, a whole field of flowers is blooming before us.

