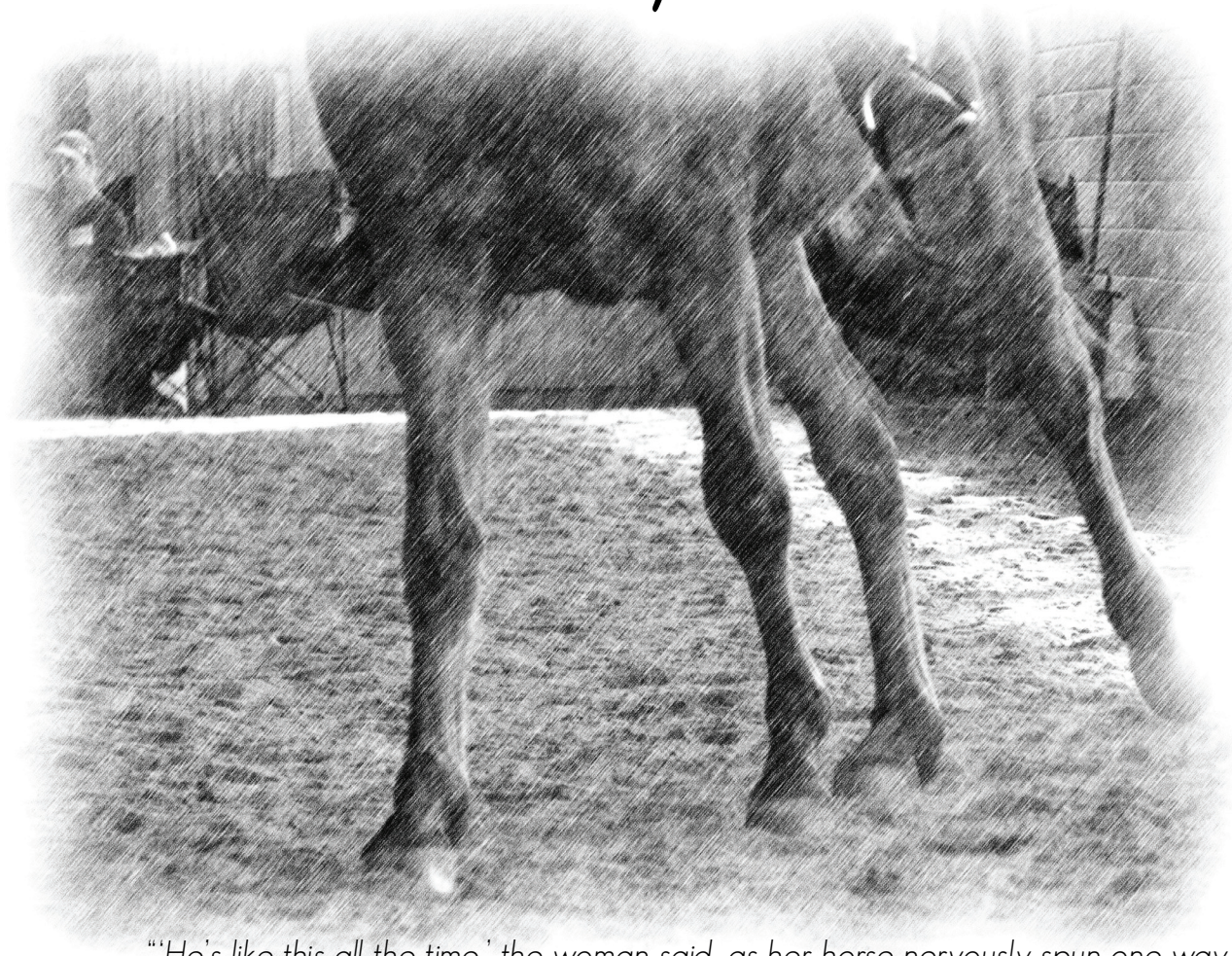


Chapter 4



“He’s like this all the time,” the woman said, as her horse nervously spun one way, stopped and called loudly, then spun the other.”

Information

There is a term in Japanese: *Misu no kokoro*. Translated: “A mind like still water.” It means that when you look out onto a completely still pond or other body of water, when there is no wind to create ripples or waves on its surface, the water takes on a mirror-like quality. Everything on the other shore reflects perfectly on the surface. You can see blades of grass, trees and bushes, and perhaps even a bird flying out of one of those trees or bushes.

Yet if we do something to disturb the water, such as toss rocks or even simply stick a finger in the water, ripples are immediately sent out, creating a distorted picture of what we are looking at. Of course, if we sit long enough and stop throwing rocks, the perfect image returns; we can once again see the reflection of those things

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on the other side for what they really are. Ultimately, the idea is to avoid any ripples in the first place.

In many martial arts, the goal through training over time is to develop *misu no kokoro*—a mind like still water. When the mind is still, like that body of water, everything that is presented to us is reflected clearly and for what it really is, instead of some distorted image. By having a truly clear image of a situation, we can make an informed and calm decision as to how it needs to be handled.

However, a mind that is busy thinking about this or that or making judgments about the situation that may or may not be accurate is like throwing rocks in the water, and we quickly get a distorted image of the situation. As such, the situation becomes increasingly more difficult to deal with, if we are able to deal with it at all.

Put simply, developing a quiet mind allows us to take in and process information in a true and correct manner and then respond appropriately, in a way suited to the situation, provided the situation even needs a response.

“He’s like this all the time,” the woman said. Her horse nervously spun one way, stopped and called loudly, then spun the other. She rode him well, easily staying with him as he did a perfect, albeit very energetic, turn on the haunches. Even so, however, it was clear she was more than just a little upset. “He’s worse when I take him somewhere new, like today.”

It was the first day of a three-day clinic. Although the weather was very pleasant, we were working inside the large indoor arena because the outdoor arena was being used for a local dressage show. As far as this horse was concerned, I don’t think it would have mattered if we were working in a shoebox, because his day had

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apparently started bad and was going downhill fast. At this point, one thing was painfully obvious: He wasn't going to feel better any time soon if we didn't start doing something quick.

"Let's see if we can give him a little direction," I suggested.

We started by having the woman circle the gelding, then go on to serpentines and figure eights to help give the horse some direction and hopefully calm and slow him down a little. The good news was after about twenty minutes or so, the work did seem to help; the bad news was it didn't help much. He continued to call and focus on the other end of the arena, where my assistant, Kathleen, was working with another horse and rider.

"Anytime we get in a situation like this," the woman continued, "this is what he does. He sees another horse and he loses his mind. He just can't seem to focus on anything else!"

"What do you usually do when he gets like this?" I asked as the two of them rushed past me.

"I normally just check him back, like this." She demonstrated by sharply pulling back on the reins several times, with small releases between each pull. "If that doesn't work, like today, I usually just do a one-rein stop." Again she demonstrated, pulling the horse's head around to the right, effectively disengaging his hindquarters and getting him to stop and stand still. He stood quietly only as long as she held his head around to her boot, but as soon as she released, he immediately straightened his body, threw his head up, and went to calling again.

"I just can't get anything done with him when he's like this," the woman said, pulling his head around in the other direction. "And I've tried everything."

"Have you tried taking him over by the horse he calls to?" I asked.

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“Of course not,” she replied. “Why would I do that? Of all the things I’ve tried, that’s the one thing I *never* do.”

“Well,” I shrugged. “Then I guess we haven’t tried *everything*.”

“Yeah,” she protested, and the gelding spun around yet again. “But if I do that, then he wins! He gets what he wants!”

“I understand,” I nodded. “But the one thing he wants is the one thing he never gets, so it’s the one thing he keeps wanting. Because he never gets that one thing, he can’t think about anything else, and you end up with this.”

The horse spun around again.

I suggested she ease her horse down to the other end of the arena, stop there long enough for Kathleen to pet him on his head, hang out for a minute or two near the other horse, then bring him back and see if he felt any better. The look on the woman’s face told me she *absolutely* did not think *that* was a good idea, and she even hesitated for several seconds, looking at me as if she wasn’t sure if I was joking or not.

“Humor me,” I smiled. “After all, what’s the worst that could happen . . . we get even *less* work done with him?”

As much as I knew she didn’t want to, the woman turned her horse and began to walk him to the other end of the arena. Almost as soon as they started in that direction, the gelding calmed down. He walked pretty quietly all the way to where Kathleen stood, where the woman asked him to stop, which he did.

They were far enough away to where I couldn’t hear what the woman said to Kathleen, but by the look on Kathleen’s face, it must have been good. Kathleen looked at me, smiled and waved, then petted the gelding’s head. She then turned and went back to work with her student while the woman and her horse continued to stand there for a few minutes.

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When the woman rode her horse back to where I was standing, much to everybody's surprise, the horse stood there quietly. With the exception of glancing back to the other end of the arena from time to time, he didn't seem all that interested in going back. In fact, for the next two days of the clinic, the horse called for other horses only a time or two, and he never offered the frantic behavior he had exhibited early on the first day.

Toward the end of the woman's last session, she mentioned that the way her horse had been acting, she would have thought taking him to the other horse would have only made him worse. Besides, everything she had ever been taught about horses told her not to give him what he wanted anyway. "How did you know that would work?" she asked after we had finished her session.

"I didn't." I smiled and shrugged.

She let out a little chuckle. "No, really," she repeated. "With him pitching a fit like he was, I would have never thought to take him where he wanted to go. How did you know that would work?"

"I didn't," I repeated. But the look on her face told me she really did want some kind of an answer, so I went ahead and elaborated as best I could.

"A lot of folks look at unwanted behavior like he was offering on that first day as *bad* behavior. But if we understand that horses can't separate the way they feel from the way they act, then we can start to see that unwanted behavior isn't *bad* behavior at all. More times than not, it's just the horse expressing the way he feels at that particular moment in time. He's just giving us information, that's all. How we perceive that information dictates how we respond to it."

The woman shifted slightly from one foot to the other, then slid the reins slowly through her hands and nodded.

"Most of the time," I continued, "we perceive the behavior as being bad, so we respond to it badly. If we see it as him just trying to tell us something, then it's just a matter of distinguishing the importance of what he's saying." I paused to see if what I was

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saying was making sense. “Do you understand?” I asked, not able to determine by her expression.

“Not really,” the woman admitted.

I explained that it was a matter of importance. The one thing the horse wanted to do was the single most important thing in his life at that given time. Not being able to do it and, in fact, not having *ever* been able to do it, was causing him so much stress he simply couldn’t function. Allowing him a little of what he wanted seemed like something worth trying.

While I wouldn’t necessarily advocate letting horses go and do whatever they want whenever they want while we’re on them, in this horse’s case he couldn’t seem to get his mind on anything else *but* what he wanted to do. As a result, giving him what he wanted for a short period of time was the way to go, because as soon as we did, he was ready and able to go to work.

“But the truth of the matter is,” I smiled, “I didn’t actually know if it would work or not until it did.”

“So in other words,” she said with a mischievous smirk, “it was an experiment?”

“I guess you could say that.” With a slight smirk of my own, I continued, “But at least now we know!”

Had it not been for the wind, the day would have actually been very pleasant, especially for that time of year. Of course, the weather in late fall on the Front Range of Colorado can always be a little hit-or-miss anyway. One minute eighty degrees and sunny, the next it could be snowing. It was just the luck of the draw and always had been.

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The good news, I thought as I bounced along the rutted and washboarded gravel road north of Windsor, was at least the sun was out. The sun would keep the air somewhat warm, even with the wind. Even with that, however, thirty-mile-an-hour winds were probably going to make this a pretty short visit.

I was on my way to see a horse I was thinking of buying. I had seen an ad for him in a little ag paper about two months before, and the ad had been in there every week since:

THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD GRADE QUARTER HORSE GELDING.

FIFTEEN HANDS, 1150 POUNDS.

WORKED IN A FEEDLOT AND ON TRAILS IN THE MOUNTAINS. \$3500.

I had been looking for a little project horse I could take on the road with me. You see, during the previous summer I had been working with a woman at one of our clinics who was struggling with her horse. She had owned the mare for only a short time and was having a number of problems with her. I was having a little trouble trying to convey to the woman that the slower she went with the mare, the more success she was likely to have in rectifying the unwanted behavior she was experiencing.

“Patience is the key,” I had said to her when she was in a moment of sheer frustration.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she blurted back. “You raised the horse you’re sittin’ on. I *bought* this set of problems.”

At first I was a little taken aback by her response. I had never really had anybody say something like that to me in a clinic before. But then as I gave her statement more thought, I realized she was right. I *was* sitting on a horse I raised, one with very few, if any, behavioral issues—a stark contrast to the whirling dervish she was working with. It *was* easy for me to tell a student to be patient; after all, I didn’t have to deal with those kinds of problems with *my* horse day in and day out. Even though I had spent a good deal

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of time (five years, in fact) working almost exclusively with troubled horses, that had been a long time ago.

The woman's statement about it being easy for me to tell her to be patient got me to thinking. Maybe it was time for me to find a horse with a few issues, the kind I was helping folks with in clinics, and work with the horse while I was teaching. That way folks could see I was working on the same issues with my horse that they were with theirs. It would also give me an opportunity to practice what I preached.

Seeing the ad for this horse, I just had a hunch he might be the one I was looking for. Each week I was seeing the same ad for the same horse, but each week the price dropped. Over two months, the price for the gelding had gone from \$3,500 to \$3,200 to \$2,800 to \$2,500 to \$1,800 and finally to \$1,200. It was then that I placed the call to take a look at him.

The directions to the ranch were easy enough to follow. With the gate being at the end of a very long, dead-end road, it would be near impossible to miss. As I pulled into the yard, a small heavyset man in a cowboy hat that had seen more miles than the pickup truck I was driving met me. His hands were shoved down deep in the pockets of his well-worn Carhartt coveralls, and his hat was pulled down so tight on his head his ears were mashed straight out by its brim. He had a few days growth on his salt-and-pepper beard and a pair of dirty eyeglasses perched on his nose. "You the one here ta see the geldin'?" he asked, in a surprisingly high-pitched voice.

"Yes, sir," I nodded, climbing from my truck. I started to introduce myself, but before I could, he turned and walked toward the barn. I noticed that while I needed to lean my hat into the wind, which seemed stronger than the thirty-mile-per-hour gusts that were predicted for the day, he didn't have to.

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“The daughter’ll show ’im ta ya,” he squeaked. “I got some chores. She’ll be in the barn there.” He motioned his head in the direction of the barn door, keeping his hands in his pockets.

“Thanks,” I said as I walked past him in the direction he had nodded.

“If’n ya want ’im,” he added, “better buy ’im today, cuz Wednesday he’s goin’ ta the sale in Fort Collins.” With that, he turned and walked toward a shed that stood off by itself, not far from where my truck was parked.

I quickly made my way into the barn and out of the wind. The daughter, a girl in her late teens with a kind face, was inside brushing the gelding I had come to see. He was a stout enough horse, standing the fifteen hands described in the ad, with a thick chest and big hip on top of good-boned legs and feet that matched his size (although they were much longer than they should have been).

“Hi,” the daughter said, walking toward me and extending her hand. “Here to see the horse?”

“I am.” I shook her hand. “My name is Mark.”

“I’m Lennie.” She turned back toward the horse. “And this is Bill.”

“What can you tell me about him?” I asked, following her to where the horse was standing.

“Well,” she started, “he’s a real nice horse. We’ve had him about six or seven years, I guess. I used him for 4-H, did a lot of trail riding with him, and my brother used him for a couple years in the feedlot.” She ran the brush under his belly, then once quickly over his back, even though he was pretty clean already. “He’s quiet enough most of the time,” she continued. “But other times he can be a handful, especially when he’s coming home from a trail ride. Going out . . . not so bad, but once he knows he’s coming back . . . well, let’s just say it’s best if you have a deep seat. We’d keep him, but to be honest, none of us around here really want to ride him anymore. We’ve got plenty of project horses right now. What we need is a couple quiet ones, so he needs to go.”

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Lennie threw an old threadbare saddle blanket on his back and followed it with a well-worn stock saddle. Even with the tin roof overhead making a hellacious racket from the wind, the gelding stood stock still, as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on. She then slipped an old, dried-out headstall with an inexpensive curb bit on the gelding without protest and led him outside.

Behind the barn was a five-rail, sixty-foot round pen built from lodge pole pine. The barn blocked a little of the wind, but not much. Lennie took Bill inside the pen, tightened the cinch, and in one smooth movement slid her foot in the stirrup and swung effortlessly into the saddle. Almost as if someone had flipped a switch, the gelding that had been quiet as a church mouse up til now, woke up.

No sooner had Lennie's backside hit leather than Bill took off like he'd been shot out of a gun. The two of them made a quick half lap before Lennie rolled him back over his haunches, and he took off in the other direction. They made another half lap in world-record time before she rolled him back the other way. They did this several times before he slowed himself down a little, enough to where Lennie could cut him through the middle of the pen instead of just zipping around the rail.

"This is what he does sometimes," she said as the two loped past me. Bill may have slowed down some, but his breathing sounded like a freight train, and his eye, which just a few minutes ago was soft as a Bambi's, was now wide as a saucer and showing quite a bit of white.

Lennie slid him to a stop a few times, then whipped him back the other direction before doing a few little lateral moves, first one way, then the other. After about five minutes, she asked him to stop and stand still in the middle of the pen. He stood in one place, but while he did, all four feet never touched the ground at the same time.

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Over the years I had been around a lot of horses that had worked feedlots, and one thing I knew for sure was a horse that acted like this one wouldn't have lasted two years on that job. Not that I thought Lennie wasn't being honest about the horse's background, because I believe she was. It's just that he was expending an awful lot of energy in a very short period of time, with plenty more where that came from, or so it appeared. A feedlot cowboy that needed to get a job done would get pretty tired of sorting that out every day before being able to start on his day's work.

"How long did you say your brother worked the feedlot with him?" I asked.

"Two years," she replied, while the gelding still danced in place.

"And he was acting like this then?"

"Oh, no." She turned him around again. "This stuff just started about a year or so ago. Before that, we never had a lick of trouble with him. We just haven't had time to work it out of him. Probably after a few wet saddle blankets, he'd be back to his old self." What Lennie meant by that was if Bill got rode hard enough for long enough, this behavior would go away. I didn't agree, but I didn't say so.

Rather, I was wondering if the behavior might be because the gullet of the old stock saddle Bill was wearing was sitting down tight on his withers, and the saddle itself was way too narrow for his back. Or that every time he moved, Lennie accidentally jabbed him with her spurs, or the fact that his lower back was swollen, which I noticed before she saddled him, and probably plenty sore.

It could also have been that his feet were twice as long as they should have been, or that he was very stiff in his hips, which caused him to short-stride with his left hind leg every time he took a step, or even that the saddle's back cinch wasn't hobbled to the front, which caused it to slide back and make contact with his flank area, which would be enough to unnerve even some of the most seasoned horses.

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At any rate, there seemed to be enough negative “outside” factors that could have been causing the behavior that I guessed with a little time and effort they could all be rectified. If that was indeed the case, perhaps the “real nice horse” Lennie said Bill was at one time might just come back out.

“Are you pretty firm on the price?” I asked, trying not to sound too interested.

“To be honest,” she said, trying to get the gelding to stand still, “my dad is going to take him to the sale on Wednesday and will settle for killer price for him there. I think if you made him an offer above that he’d probably take it just to get him off our feed bill.” She finally got Bill stopped by nearly crashing him headlong into the fence.

“You want to ride him?” she asked, after he finally stood for a few seconds.

“Naw,” I replied. “I believe I’ve seen all I need to. Let’s get out of this wind, and I’ll see what your dad has to say about the price.”

Getting Lennie’s father to come off the advertised \$1,200 price wasn’t hard. He did dicker a little, but it was half-hearted at best. It was clear right from the start he definitely wanted to get rid of the gelding, and, in fact, I’m not so sure that if I’d have spent a little time at it, I might have even gotten him to pay me just to take him off his hands.

As soon as I had Bill home, I called my longtime friend and equine chiropractor Dr. Dave Siemens to come up and have a look at him. Dave adjusted him three times in two weeks and all but eliminated most of the gelding’s stiffness, which was more involved than I had originally thought. Not only was Bill extremely stiff and sore in his pelvis and lower back but also in both hocks and his neck, withers, and left shoulder.

My farrier needed to take care of Bill’s feet, which took three visits over a total of six months. I also put him in a saddle that fit properly. I was amazed at

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the transformation just those things alone had made in the horse's attitude and demeanor. When I finally started riding him about a month and a half after I bought him, very little of the behavior I had seen with Lennie remained.

Even so, Bill still braced pretty hard into the bit, and any time I asked him to stop, turn, or back up, my request was met with a heavy push that felt like it started at his tail and traveled all the way up through his body and finally ended up in his mouth. I spent a few weeks working with him on softening that push, which was only moderately successful, before taking Bill on the road for the first time.

In our first clinic together, I used him to teach off of, work a couple colts, and pony a two-year-old filly. We even moved a few head of cattle that had jumped the neighbor's fence and ended up in the parking lot of the venue. Our second clinic together was much the same, with the exception of moving cattle, and so was our third. I quickly found Bill to be a real nice horse that seemed willing and, for the most part, easy to get along with.

Now when I say "for the most part," what I mean is even though he worked well when I needed him to, there always appeared to be an underlying "issue" that we never seemed to be able to resolve and that I was never able to put my finger on. It wasn't necessarily something that he did or didn't do, but more of a *feel* that came off him from time to time. It was a feeling that if I gave him half a chance he might just lose his mind, although he never really offered any behavior that made me think that he actually would. Strange . . .

About a month after I started traveling with Bill, we did a three-day clinic in southern Arizona, put on by a friend I had done some ranch work with years before who had recently moved to the Tucson area.

Just like at the other clinics, Bill worked well and without any problems whatsoever for each of the three days. At the end of the third day, my friend asked

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if I wanted to take a quick trail ride in the desert before dinner. Out on the trail, Bill was no different than he had been in the arena . . . quiet, willing, and relatively responsive (although still maintaining a little of the brace we had been working on resolving since the first time I rode him).

In the warmth of the late afternoon, my friend and I took turns leading and following on the narrow trails that crisscrossed the desert landscape. As we wound our way through the saguaro cactus and in and out of the sand washes, Bill showed absolutely no sign of what was about to come. We had gone about two miles, I guess, when we decided to turn around and go back to the barn to get ready for the dinner we were supposed to attend with all the clinic participants.

No sooner had we turned than the little underlying issue I couldn't put my finger on—the one I had been feeling coming off Bill since I first started riding him—suddenly and unexpectedly came to the surface. He let out a loud snort, then shot himself into the air, leaping a good twenty feet down the trail and nearly landing in the saddle with my friend, who was out in front of us.

My first thought was something had either scared Bill from behind or bit him, because the behavior seemingly came out of absolutely nowhere. But when the erratic and explosive behavior didn't get any better after five minutes of riding, I realized we were dealing with something else. As we alternated spinning in place with bolting, side passing, jiggling, and leaping in the air, I remembered something Lennie had said when I went to look at him on that windy day a few months before. "He can be a handful," she had told me. "Especially when he's coming home from a trail ride. Going out . . . not so bad, but once he knows he's coming back . . . well, let's just say it's best if you have a deep seat."

Well, she was right. He was definitely a handful, and no matter what I tried to do to help calm him down, nothing worked. For two miles back to the barn the

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behavior continued unabated, and even after we got back, he seemed more upset than when we were on the trail. That led me to believe he wasn't acting up because he was "barn sour" and just wanted to get back to the barn. If that had been the case, he would more than likely have calmed down by the time we got there.

I cooled Bill out, as he had gotten himself into a pretty good lather on our trip home, then put him up and went to dinner. When I checked on him in his pen later that evening, he still seemed a little agitated, but by morning he appeared to be back to his old self.

The trip to our next set of clinics, just north of Dallas, Texas, was uneventful, and so was the first clinic we did, although the sense that the underlying issue I had been feeling had not been resolved, even though (just like before) nothing in Bill's actions pointed to a problem.

The one physical issue Bill had that I wasn't able to get taken care of when I was home was having his teeth looked at. We had a day off between the first and second four-day clinics. In a little town near the clinic, there was a vet I had used in the past when we were passing through the area. Doc Browne was an older fellow, with years of experience and a folksy way about him. In his later years, he had gone to school to become an equine dentist and was pretty darn good at it.

According to the old vet, Bill really needed to have his teeth done. We discussed the possibility of his bad teeth having caused the unwanted and unexpected behavior I had experienced.

"As you know, teeth problems can cause behavioral problems," Doc said in his West Texas drawl. "But they're usually pretty minor problems like head tossing. Seldom will a horse just get all 'Western' like he did if it's just teeth."

While we were visiting and the gelding was still under sedation and standing in the stocks the old vet had put him in to do the procedure, Doc went to cleaning

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Bill's sheath, something he did as a matter of course with all geldings he did teeth work on. "I don't think his teeth were the problem," he said digging around in Bill's sheath with his rubber-gloved fingers. "But this might have been." With some effort, he pulled a "bean"—a relatively round, rock-hard object composed of dirt and other substances that can form over time in a horse's unclean sheath—from Bill's sheath that was an inch and a half in diameter!

"I only seen pictures of 'em *that* big in books," he said, placing the bean on a white towel over on a nearby bench. "I reckon that could make him a little grumpy from time to time."

Doc went back to cleaning the sheath, and much to our surprise, pulled out another bean about the same size. "Dang," he said, placing that one on the towel next to the other. "Poor bugger." On his third try, he pulled out three more, much smaller beans and placed them on the towel as well.

"Looks like that's about it." He pulled the rubber gloves off his hands. "I bet he starts feelin' a might better now!"

While Bill was coming out of sedation, Doc called his staff in to see the giant beans. There were a lot of oohs and ahhs as they filed by to have a look. He then had his front desk gal bring his camera. He arranged the beans just so on the towel, then he set different objects next to them such as a quarter, a coffee cup, and a golf ball, to give perspective.

I guess those beans were one of the biggest things to happen in that small town for a while, because before long, a few of the neighbors stopped by to have a look, along with a couple ranchers who had brought in a bull to get an abscess tended to. Even the fellow from the lumber yard across the street came by.

At any rate, once the sedation had worn off, I loaded Bill in the trailer and headed back to the clinic venue. It was amazing how much difference there was

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in the gelding following the extractions. Overnight he had become soft as butter, extremely willing to do anything I asked. The underlying issue I had been feeling from him was completely gone, never to resurface.

I rode Bill in clinics for another three months, then I used him as a horse that visiting students could ride during our weeklong clinics throughout the summer. He had become so quiet and trustworthy we could literally put anybody on him, from absolute beginner riders to the most advanced riders. In fact, he had become so quiet I eventually sold him to a friend who runs a large dude operation near where we live. Bill quickly became one of the most trusted horses in his string and never once offered to act up or exhibited any of the unwanted behavior his previous owners and I had seen when going back to the barn.

I have been witness to an interesting phenomenon over the years when it comes to how a lot of folks perceive different kinds of horse behavior. In short, people seem to lump most behavior into three categories: good behavior (the kind of behavior we like), bad behavior (the kind we don't like), and worrisome behavior (the kind that causes us to worry but we don't do anything about).

An example of good behavior is a horse that is content in his work, understands his job, is happy to perform it, and seldom, if ever, gives the owner any trouble. An example of bad behavior might be something like Bill was offering up—when the horse exhibits unpredictable, explosive, and/or seemingly dangerous behavior. Worrisome behavior is when a horse does most everything that's asked of him but may also chomp on the bit, shake its head, paw the ground, wring its tail, or offer

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up any number of other relatively minor, yet annoying, behaviors when ridden or worked on the ground.

Now the interesting thing is while some folks, perhaps unconsciously, compartmentalize these behaviors as separate things and thus respond to them differently, to me they are actually all one thing. Put simply, all these behaviors are nothing more or less than information the horse is offering. A horse that offers us “good” behavior is simply telling us he’s okay with what’s going on at that particular moment in his life. A horse that’s offering up “bad” behavior is telling us there’s a problem, sometimes a major one, such as in Bill’s case, that needs to be addressed. A horse that is offering up “worrisome” behavior is telling us he doesn’t understand something and is struggling with it.

We humans have a tendency to take advantage of good behavior; in other words, we don’t give the good things horses do much thought because it’s what we expect. Conversely, we have a tendency to look at “bad” behavior in a relatively adversarial way, primarily because “bad” behavior scares us, so we often deal with it in a defensive manner and without really giving much thought to the cause. When it comes to “worrisome” behavior, we have a tendency to completely overthink it, which often causes us to become ineffective in dealing with it in the first place.

One of the primary ways horses communicate with us is through their behavior. Again, it is my belief horses don’t distinguish between how they feel and how they act. So if they act a certain way, their actions are reflecting the way they feel. A horse’s body then becomes a mirror for their emotions. So the body informs us of what is truly going on internally.

If this is the case, then *any* behavior a horse offers, good, bad, or indifferent, falls under one category: the horse supplying information about how he feels. So if we can replace the word “behavior” with the word “information,”

WHOLE HEART, WHOLE HORSE

then we're talking about the horse offering *good* information, *bad* information, or *indifferent* information.

In human terms, *good* information is usually information we see as being beneficial to us. Somebody telling us about a great restaurant they went to might be considered good information. *Bad* information is information that we see as being harmful to us; for instance, if someone gives us incorrect directions to get to that great restaurant, causing us to be late for our reservation, that might be considered bad information. *Indifferent* information is information we could take or leave and may or may not be beneficial to us. Somebody telling us the great restaurant serves wonderful vegetarian meals when we aren't vegetarian could be considered indifferent information.

However, when we take a step back and look at all the information as a whole, what we see is that the only thing that really makes the information good, bad, or indifferent is the perceptions and importance we put on it. Someone tells us about a great restaurant, but it is our choice to either go to it or not. Someone gives us directions, but it is our choice to follow them or not. Someone tells us about the menu, but it is up to us to order off it or not. You see, it is all just information until we place a value on it. That's the point at which it becomes good, bad, or indifferent.

It's the same with horse behavior. The behavior a horse offers up is just information until we put a value on it. The horse, on the other hand, has no stake in its behavior or how we perceive it. It is simply supplying us with feedback. The woman's horse that needed to get to the other end of the arena before he could go to work was simply supplying us with information. Bill's acting up on the trail was supplying us with information. A horse that wrings its tail, shakes his head, or paws at the ground is offering information. How we perceive that information—the value we put on it—will create our response.

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Of course, the good news in all this is that in the end, the choice is entirely up to us. We can either look at the behavior with a quiet mind and see it for what it is without judgment, or we can see it as something else. Either way, we will end up responding accordingly, and either way, it will dictate the level of success we will ultimately have.