

Toni Lynn Chinoy

From the Mouth of a Horse

Lessons from Wanda

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From the Mouth of a Horse

Lessons from Wanda

Wanda is a very large, German athlete with an attitude. She is willful, stubborn, opinionated, and believe it or not, very female; a real girlie girl. She pretends that she does not understand English, but I believe that's an act. She is clever and manipulative.

So, why is Wanda important? She's symbolic. She represents a kind of Herculean struggle. She is a horse, but she is much more.

There are moments when I think I must walk away. She challenges me physically as well as mentally. I've been asked why I would want to struggle when this is my escape. Why not get a quiet, well behaved horse and have some fun? Why would I endanger myself?

Instead of making the common sense decision to move on, I swallow my trepidation, saddle her, say my prayers and climb on. All the while I am attempting to understand the journey she represents for me. In the back of my mind is the question, "Am I the right owner for this mare? Is she the right horse for me? Is it possible she needs a different kind of rider?"

Suddenly, she is all there, listening to every request. I am floating around the arena on a glorious, powerful creature that is actually cooperating with me instead of fighting me at every step. There is nothing better than feeling her power as a reflection of my own. And once again, for the moment, I remove the "For Sale by Owner" sign from her stall door.

Every one of us has a Wanda in our lives. We don't always recognize them for what they are. There is some symbolic struggle going on in every life which identifies most of what there is to know about our spirit. We don't always choose our WANDA. Sometimes, it chooses us.

Chapter I

She “Defines” Me

The meaning of struggle!

I have found that my experiences with horses have always paralleled my experience of life. Why? I suspect that it has something to do with the fact that if we are in a certain mode, we are in the mode in all aspects of our life. If we are acting the victim, we are too lost in ourselves to understand that we are giving away our power. And so, we give it away everywhere. If we are “kicking butt”, it is unlikely that we are going to let a little beastie get away with pushing us around.

Wanda is, for me, like the killer mountain for a mountain climber, the most sophisticated golf course for the ambitious golfer. She represents the sum total of all my visions and aspirations as a rider. Some days I win, and other days I feel like a fool.

I work with a trainer who is also my very best friend. Her name is Ingrid. Since the day I brought Wanda home, she has wondered what I was thinking. “Why would you get a young horse and a mare at that?” Meaning: why did you take on such a difficult project? Girl horses have a bit of a reputation for being difficult.

I really didn’t expect or seek a Wanda. A friend knew I was looking for my next horse and was horrified when she found out I was looking at “junk”. She had carefully bred this young horse who was GREEN; green, but clearly *not* JUNK.

This sweet young thing named Wansworth was getting older and my friend was simply too busy with her travel schedule to spend the appropriate amount of time and energy on her. She sold Wansworth to me for far less than she was worth. I felt LUCKY! I was sure it was meant to be.

And *that* it was!

I called her WANDA.

As the following pages will affirm, Wanda challenges all my assumptions about me, my riding skills, my life skills, my relationship skills, and my ability to trust myself. On any given day, based on the way the two of us interact, I can assess how I am doing---at life.

Wanda is a lot of work. She demands that I “prove it” before she does what I ask. Her demands are always powerful and often threatening. She is simply a 1200 pound athlete. I am five foot three and about 110 pounds. I am a bit “over-faced”. In other words, she is probably a bit too much horse for someone my size.

There are days that I am convinced that she is the devil, determined to own my soul. And other times, she is an angel, a gift, a blessing bestowed upon me by a higher power. The stress of being Wanda's "significant human" is enormous.

There are no "days off" with Wanda. I could obviously sell her or give her away, and get something easy and agreeable to play with.

Why do I put up with her? Those who know me *best*, and who also care about my well-being, answer the question for me. "You could, but you would be bored. "

Bored? I wonder?

They are absolutely right.

And so it occurs to me that Wanda is symbolic. She is the story of my life. I am never satisfied by what is easy. I attract what is hard, and if things get too comfortable, I find ways to increase the pressure. I take on the next job, the next project, the next move, just when I have mastered the one I am on. I don't know how to turn back, take it easy, or enjoy my accomplishments. I don't really know what it means to "rest on my laurels".

Wanda defines me. She is the constant stretching to reach higher than I am comfortable; the need to stretch the limits imposed on me by others, by circumstance, by culture. I simply cannot accept average, even when I am afraid.

Wanda defines my essence, my quest, my journey through this thing we call life.

What defines you?

Chapter II

Deal Breakers

When Expectations and Reality don't Measure up.

Wanda came into my life at an interesting moment. I was struggling within my marriage and was reaching the breaking point.

What could Wanda have to do with that?

Since I believe different parts of our lives reflect the same LIFE agenda, I have spent a lot of time thinking about that.

I was looking at a rather average mare to replace my older horse as my riding horse. Why “average”? The simple answer is because that was what I believed I could afford. The more complicated, and meaningful, version is because I somehow no longer believed that I deserved to have what I really wanted out of life.

Wanda fell from the sky. So did my husband. Literally. I met him on a United Airlines flight between Chicago and Washington DC. Wanda was unformed, a baby. And yet, her potential was enormous. I like to think that the potential of our marriage had also been enormous.

In a funny way, Wanda made me remember my dreams. I had always had big visions. I had always assumed I would make them reality. I was preparing to settle on an average horse with no forward potential.

Where did that “settling” thing come from? Age? Maturity? Disappointment?

Her coming caused me to realize that somewhere along my path I had forgotten that I had choice. I had learned to accept rather than to “expect”.

I began to assess my life, my work, my marriage in terms of the expectations I had had when I was much younger. I also remembered that I wasn't afraid to work for what I wanted. I had been willing to take risks. I did not expect effortless. I just needed to see progress toward my expectations.

My journey with Wanda was difficult from the beginning. I was starting over with simplest things. Even getting her to pick up a foot so I could clean it was a big deal. Did you ever think about what it would be like to ask an elephant to give you its foot if it had never done so?

At the beginning, it was even a challenge to my patience to walk her from one place to another if it was not part of her daily routine. She would stop and look around as if she had all the time in the world. (Think about taking a walk with a toddler). We would be walking toward a destination, and suddenly for no apparent reason, she would simply stop walking. Try to remember that this is a 1200 pound toddler!

Once I had her on a long line and something scared her. She took off. Suddenly, I was lying with my face in the dirt watching her run around in circles. The long rope, now trailing behind her on the ground, appeared as a giant snake that she simply could not shake. Older horses know better.

Another day, I let her loose in the arena. On the other side of the gate was a hill leading into the barn. She walked up to the gate with a curious expression. And then suddenly with no warning, from a standstill, she went over the gate.

I should say that she *almost* went over the gate. Her front feet went over, but her back legs were still on my side. She had underestimated the challenge. Part of being a baby was that she still didn't quite understand where all her parts were. As she scrambled like a kindergartner to climb over the gate, I was berating myself for ever letting her get into such a situation. It wasn't as if I could walk up to her and give her butt a little boost. I simply stood in horror and held my breath until she was on the other side, scraped and bruised but basically intact. A miracle.

All I could think was "Bad HUMAN."

There are so many things about "young" that you forget until you are dealing with it; so many ways that a big, seemingly strong animal can be vulnerable and fragile. When I got frustrated or overwhelmed, I would remind myself of how far we had come and how much we had both learned. We were growing.

Not true for my marriage. We got further and further apart. I was mature enough not to expect effortless, but this wasn't getting better. It became very clear that we were never going to realize its potential.

I had failed.

Wanda made me see that the hard work was always leading somewhere. Even if it did not work out, I was becoming a better horse person for the experience and she was becoming a better horse. I like to think that although I was scraped and bruised, I also became a better person for all the work that went into my failed marriage.

I believe our biggest challenge is to be able to recognize when we have to "let go".

The jury was still out on the horse, but the decisions around my marriage became clear.

Are you living your dream?

Chapter III

Get a Cowboy!

Do you know when and how to ask for help?

I am a confident person. At least, that is how I would have described myself before meeting WANDA.

It never occurred to me to question whether I was up to the task of raising and training a young horse. I had ridden horses since I was five. I had even had experience with working with young horses. But Wanda was at such a different level. The stakes were very high in my mind.

I could fail.

Never in my life had I considered failure before. Set backs had never seemed failures. They were journeys to get me to a new launching point.

The disappointing breakdown of my second marriage humbled me.

I had gone through many hard times in my life, and not only survived, but thrived. I was good at life. What I *was*, was cocky!

The catastrophe of my second marriage had robbed me of my cockiness. I missed it.

The incidents with the horse jumping the fence and getting stuck(my *fault*), my trips into the dirt (her fault, but she was young after all), and the many other reminders of my underestimating this journey with Wanda, were all very sobering. I no longer had my old optimistic, undefeatable self to fall back on.

I started “listening” to all the judgmental whispers I imagined from the other riders in the facility where I kept WANDA. I could hear them criticizing me and my ineptness. They didn’t say it out loud but we *always* know when we are being judged.

First response: “How dare they?”

Bad question. Very defensive. Not helpful at all.

I attempted not to be defensive. I started soliciting help. I started asking for opinions. Also a bad idea.

Why? It was a bad idea, because I was asking the wrong people, and I knew it. I was seeking approval and I was doing so with people who often treated me disrespectfully. Many of these people were incapable of acknowledging what I knew, even while they were going out of their way to show me what *they* knew. It was really more about competition as opposed to helping me with the horse. Secretly, I also believed that they did not feel I deserved such a nice animal. Ouch!

This was all just a symptom of a larger problem. By endlessly talking about how difficult she was, I suspect that I was trying to gain support. Predictably, it didn’t work out that way. What I was really

doing was allowing myself to be patronized by people whose skill level had never wowed me, and who had never indicated in any way that they *wanted* to support me. I had real friends. Why was I even a little concerned with people who did not care about me or my success?

It wasn't very complicated. I was where I was because I had lost my confidence.

So what do you do when you have a young horse, a deficit in confidence, and you want to survive? You find a cowboy!

Define Cowboy: fearless, tough, savvy, skilled, audacious, irreverent, stubborn, unyielding, and purposeful. Did I say audacious? That was an understatement as it applies to this particular cowboy!

When we arrived at his farm with Wanda in tow, he walked up to the truck wearing overalls (it was cold), and a big cowboy hat...of course! If it weren't for the cowboy hat, I would have wondered who he was.

As Wanda came off the trailer, he circled her three times, mumbling the whole time. I had no idea what he was thinking, but I was starting to get nervous.

Finally, he spoke. "Damn, that's a fine mare!"

My nervousness turned to glee. I was vindicated. "Aren't I just the smartest little horse person for picking this "damn fine mare"?"

And wasn't getting the help of a real cowboy just the smartest thing? This was not some wussy horse trainer all full of himself. Well, he was pretty full of himself, but didn't he deserve to be? He specialized in working with difficult horses. And the best part was that he was not the least bit afraid of my athletic elephant.

In this extraordinary cowboy's hands, Wanda became putty. I was thrilled. I could have watched him ride her endlessly. But then, he told me I had to get on.

Why? Why couldn't he just fix her and send her home, different? Unfortunately, he was in charge and he had no empathy for my weaknesses. He bullied me into getting on the horse with sarcastic humor, insults, and of course, initially, a boost. Later he capitulated just a little, and went hunting for his mounting block.

She was different. I wasn't afraid. She felt calm and relaxed underneath me.

I am still, two years later, trying to figure out how he did that. I would sometimes show up unannounced just to see if he was drugging her when he knew I was coming. Nope. It was for real, her new found calm. I guess she just likes guys.

When she came home, six weeks later, it did not take her long to become "WANDA" again.

At one point, when I talked him into coming to my location to give her a refresher, he actually told me that I was a very good rider. At that time, I simply was not yet ready to believe that. It took a few more years and a lot more trips into the dirt.

There is no substitute for confidence. Skill may be a prerequisite for whatever you are attempting, but confidence is the glue that holds it all in place.

Don't be afraid to ask for help. If you can't find your Confidence, get a cowboy!

Chapter IV

When in Doubt, Slow Down

When you are in over your head.

My experiences with Wanda taught me something very important about life. It's ok to slow down.

My friend Ingrid (the trainer) would come twice a year to work with me. The rest of the time, I was pretty much on my own.

Her visits were torture. She would spend about five minutes observing and then create a plan in her head of how we would spend the week. I was never consulted on those plans and I promise you, they were designed to create havoc in my carefully constructed détente with the horse.

Generally about 10 to 15 minutes into our first lesson, Wanda would start tossing her head in disgust. As Ingrid would escalate the pressure, the horse would escalate the resistance. Head tossing was accompanied with stopping suddenly, leaping sideways, twisting her flexible body into an S in order to unseat me and various other highly intimidating technique. Who was training who?

Ingrid, my friend (?) would simply smile and say in a calm, amused voice, "And so, we awake the sleeping tiger."

And that's funny? I don't think so!

There were times when the moves were so unexpected and fast that I would come off this very big horse and land on my feet with the reins in my hand. Envious if I had done it on purpose. The truth was that she was like a big cat. She was so fast and coordinated that it was like that cartoon where the waiter flips the table cloth out from under the dishes and they all land in place, back on the table. I was the dishes.

Since this was a magic trick that I was not trained for, I was certain that at some point, the dishes were sure to get broken!

Finally, after a week of terror, my dear friend would go home. I had mixed feelings about seeing her off, to be sure.

I would once again be on my own with sweet Wanda at last. Scared, but determined. I may be a coward, but I am also very stubborn.

There was only one thing to do. I had to get on her. Remember, I was afraid of failing. My marriage was enough failure for the decade. So I had to do this, but I had to do it my way.

In the eyes of my trainer, I was doing everything in slow motion. Coming off a horse in slow motion is much less painful than when all guns are blazing and you are in full forward.

I became very deliberate about not getting myself in a position which I could not control. I became a control freak. (How did you *think* they were created?)

I worked her hard on a long line before I would climb on her back. After ten or fifteen minutes of working her on a line, I would turn her loose and watch her buck and kick out and tear around for another five minutes. And then, I would carefully step into the stirrup and slide onto her big back. We did all the stuff, but in very slow motion. Any time she would start to get feisty, I slowed down. I made her do it all, but at a speed I could control.

I admit, in my frequent conversations with Ingrid, I felt guilt. Not enough to change my approach, but certainly a big dose of guilt. I knew that I would pay the price on her next visit, but in the meantime, just showing up every day had to be worth something!

I will acknowledge that in life, I am a bit of a rusher. People always fall into one category or the other under pressure. We are either rushers, or over-deliberators. I am a rusher. The consequence of rushing is a lot of re-work. The cause is usually a fear of missing something or having the option to do something taken away if you wait too long.

I was getting a big lesson in speed. The only way to survive Wanda was to slow down, become more deliberate, and methodically work through the tasks. This was a very different approach for me.

I want to make a point here. So I am going to fast forward a couple of years. Over those years there were more weeks of torture with Ingrid, and more regroupings and slow motion rides after she left. The fear never went away, but neither did the determination.

One day, Ingrid showed up for the next week of harassment. She used a long line, stood in the center of a circle, and asked the fabulous Wanda to trot over some poles that were spaced about two feet apart on the ground.

Wanda looked at those poles and thought. You could actually see her tiny brain frying up there. She wasn't sure how *not* to step on one of the poles. So she would hover in the air over each pole until she was sure about where to put her foot down. In between every stride, she hung suspended in the air. It was like watching a glorious dance.

It also meant something. It meant, that with all my secretive disregard of what I thought I was supposed to be doing, I had actually been bringing the horse along. They cannot do that hover 'thing' unless their muscles have developed appropriately.

Ingrid was pleased. Imagine that!

I was amazed. My subversive behavior had paid off.

Being afraid is not as uncommon as you might think. Dealing with it by simply slowing down, becoming deliberate, and not allowing anyone to rush you may be a way to get through it successfully. Of course, you can always quit.

Chapter V

Into the Corners

Details Matter!

Here is a funny thing about horses you might not know.

In terms of overall collaboration and cooperation, the little things are more important than you think.

For example, on days when my alpha mare “accidentally” steps into me or bumps me, I am going to have issues. Why?

She is so very clever about her body and where it is at any given moment. For example, if I am hosing her down with cool water, she hates it. She much prefers warm water. She will identify where the hose is and very carefully step on it until the spray stops. At first I thought it was accidental. Lucky accident! I would patiently move it out of her way. And then, very deliberately she would step on it again—with her back foot, without being able to see it.

Again and again I would move the hose out of her way. She would paw with a front foot until she connected with the hose and then drag it to where she could conveniently step fully on it in order to cut off the flow. It did not seem to matter which foot she used to stop the water. She was well aware of where the hose was and how to use her body effectively. Let me also note that she would stop doing so as soon as the water turned warm.

Here is my point. Wanda *never* accidentally bumps me or steps on me. She knows exactly what she is doing. I am aware that I make her seem diabolical. I assure you that there have been moments when I was sure that she was. Space issues are dominance issues. If she is asserting her space over mine, I am in trouble.

And so, the little things become big. If she steps on me or bumps me, I have to respond emphatically. How well I pay attention to the little things can make a big difference in terms of how any given day with her will unfold.

Did I mention that my life parallels my horse experience? If I get sloppy on the details with WANDA, I am sure to be careless on little things in my life. My driving becomes sloppy, my follow up on important matters slides, and over all, my life creeps out of control.

Assuming I have been careful and meticulous in the preparation for mounting, I still have a bunch of big hurdles in front of me. Details are even more important in the saddle than when I am working with her on the ground.

For example, Wanda likes to shy at mysterious monsters when I ride her. She will often pick something real that does not bother her even a little when she has no one on her back. She will then make a big

deal of leaping sideways faster than imaginable each and every time she crosses the path of this invisible troll. I have noticed she particularly likes doors for her gymnastic demonstrations, where something just might come through and surprise her. Wanda is a drama queen!

Over a period of time, I noticed that we were avoiding corners and doors and almost everything else in the indoor arena. How had that happened? I was riding in circles in the middle of the arena, changing directions frequently, continuing to practice my exercises. But I had somehow become relegated to the middle of the arena.

Clever beast. She had found a way to narrow the work area over weeks and months of gradual maneuvering. Patient and clever! Tell me that the word “diabolical” wouldn’t pop into *your* mind? Have you ever noticed that people who frequently have big dramatic melt downs have everyone tip toeing around them? That was WANDA. Trust me, it is deliberate. The dramatic melt downs are a form of control.

We had to fix this. Ingrid would never buy into my allowing Wanda to define the workspace... And so, I drilled deep into my history and remembered the emphatic emphasis my various trainers had placed on making the horses go deep into the corners on the turns. At a walk, where I had more control, I started making Wanda the Wonder Horse go all the way into the corners rather than the skimming motion we seemed to be practicing these days.

After fighting with her for a few days at the walk (and winning, I might add), I started taking her into the corners at the trot, and then eventually at a canter. Keep in mind that it is much easier for an athletic horse to leap sideways at the higher speeds because it is harder to assert yourself when they are in the air. Or, so I thought.

Over the next few weeks, after I realized I needed to be more disciplined about the corners, I found my body adjusting to the challenge. She had trained me by launching sideways when she was in the air. I turned the tables. I was equally able to use the moment when she was in the air to throw her back into the corner. I started using her weight against her, and with an appropriate thrust of my leg and hip at exactly the right moment in her lift off the ground, I had her in the corner where I wanted her.

I will note that I had to conquer my fear before using my body more appropriately occurred to me.

I stopped being baggage and started using my sense of timing and leverage to cause the right things to happen when I wanted them to happen. I started thinking of it as physics.

As I fought the battle of the corners, so many other things became easier. Little did I know that the corners were symbolic victories that she had been taking for months. When she stopped winning the corners, she stopped trying others. She became calmer, more settled, more cooperative and simply easier. Another cycle worked through. More cycles certainly to come.

I had learned another valuable lesson. Details matter.

Chapter VI

Make the Right Things Easy

Managing difficult people/difficult situations.

Here is another valuable lesson from the mouth of a horse.

For a number of years I was involved in clinics with a wonderful horseman. Today, he is in his nineties, and still riding and teaching dressage all over the world.

He had a saying that applies to horses and life equally. It was, “make the right things easy and the wrong things difficult.”

Whenever I get into trouble, I think of his saying. (I don’t just mean when I get into trouble with horses!)

Let me start with horses.

Suppose that my horse is leaping away from something that frightens her. Although we now know that it is a dominance game, her fear is real. She may be pretending to be frightened of something in the corner, but her real fear may be losing control. For the rider, a leap is a leap.

I think of my trainer and I ponder. What I *want* is for her to go past that pile of stones, easily. And so, I move away from the pile of stones and begin making very small circles. For a very large animal, small circles are very hard work. As she struggles with the small circles, I let her gradually move into larger and larger circles. Phew. By the time we get to the stones, she is so grateful to be on a big circle that she does not even look at them. TA DA! I made the right thing easier by using circles to convince her that she wanted to go by the pile of stones. In other words, since horses think in terms of evasion, she evaded the small circles by doing what I wanted her to do.

I have found the concept of making the right things easy and making the wrong things difficult is amazingly powerful on all sorts of things. For example, if I am dealing with a difficult person, I will often try to make the right things easy and the wrong things difficult. If someone is taking shortcuts, and potentially destructive shortcuts, I might try something like this: “I am certain that you too want the best possible outcome here. And so, that being said, you would never want to undermine the outcome by taking this short cut.”

Once it has been said out loud, if they choose to move forward on the shortcut, they are doing so knowing that everyone will know that they are willing to sacrifice the best outcome. Most people feel then obligated to do the right thing....

Back to Wanda. Because she is bigger and sometimes smarter than me, I choose to be manipulative whenever possible. I think of it as similar to using a lever to lift a boulder.

Whenever you are attempting to take on something bigger than you, get clever. Brute strength is usually the lesser option.

Chapter VII

Ah, the perfectionist

Recognizing insecurity!

One day I was working the glorious Miss Wanda on a lunge line over some poles. You attach a long line to the horse's bridle and sometimes you have equipment on their backs that you connect to the bridle with a leather strap. This helps the horse to bend and helps to keep it in a frame while it is working.

So, Miss Wanda, looking a bit like a circus horse, is traveling around me in a large circle and I have four poles on the ground, spaced about three feet apart. Every time she goes around, she kicks one of the poles. The objective of the exercise is to ask her to pay attention to where she is putting her feet down and to pick them up properly as she goes over the poles.

We already know that Miss Wanda is very aware of where her little tiny feet are landing. So, why was she kicking the poles?

Each time she went around, she knocked one or more of the poles with her feet. She started acting up on the end of the line. Her behavior became more and more emphatic after each pass over the poles.

There was a woman with me who knew nothing about horses. She stood against a wall at a distance and watched Wanda going over the poles, getting more rambunctious with each pass.

I slowed Wanda down, deciding that I needed to space the poles differently in order to fit her stride a little better. My friend laughed and made a comment. "I guess Wanda is a perfectionist," she said.

Light Bulb! I had never thought of Wanda in that way. It was true. The more she tried and could not do it right, the more upset she got. I suddenly was running reruns of so many of our run-ins, and seeing the same pattern. It was always when I was asking for something new or something really hard, that we would end up in a big fight.

I tried to rethink all of my training from that moment on. She was too much like me for my own good. We both liked to win, and hated being in situations where we might fail. She had less control over her situations than I did and I found myself becoming more empathetic.

My friend's observation changed my relationship with the horse. It also changed our relationship with Ingrid. We were able to understand why the horse had a melt down every time we worked together and we began to adjust. We started slower and worked up to the more difficult exercises.

When others are insecure, they too can benefit by you slowing down!

Chapter VIII

Control Freaks and the Quest for Dominance

Do you know how to play on a team?

Wanda is an alpha mare. In the herd, she rules. The other horses rarely challenge her. How silly am I? You would think I would take my clues from the animals that at least are in her weight class.

Recently someone suggested the concept of us as a “team”. I had never thought of us in that way. I tried to imagine what our relationship would be if we really were a team.

Immediately, I started to respond differently. I had to start by identifying and swallowing my fear of falling violently from a great height. I then concentrated on what she needed from me *instead of my fear*. When she would begin to assert herself, I would remind her *and myself* that we needed to be a team.

Everything is changing. When I think in terms of *team*, I ride with much more consideration for what support she needs from me. I find that I give her more leg (support) around the corners, I am less punishing when she acts afraid (I no longer see it as a contest for control), and at the same time, I am much clearer about my expectations of her. I somehow feel that I have a right to tell her what I need since I am now listening to what she needs.

When we finish, she is relaxed and playful instead of tense and insubordinate.

Do you have a control freak in your life? If so, imagine that you are a team. What would you do differently if that were so? Can you name your fear in this situation? Can you conquer your fear enough to imagine what support you would give if your objective was TEAM?

Again, can you conquer your fear in order to clarify what *you* need from this person more deliberately and less ambiguously than you are now? Can you tell when the other person is responding from fear? Do you act appropriately, or do you clutch and increase the other person’s fear inadvertently?

I simply cannot tell you how much I have learned from a horse named WANDA. Perhaps you can absorb the lessons of team without having to land in the dirt!

Dominance is over rated if “team” is the alternative.

Chapter IX

The “Hubble” Factor

Would you choose simple over complicated?

Recently I was watching an episode of Sex and the City. In this particular episode one of the main characters was lamenting the fact that a very serious love (for her) had just become engaged to another woman. This engagement took place only six or seven months after they had broken up. In his relationship with her, he had been acutely commitment phobic. He never wanted her things in his apartment, he didn't like to “stay over”, and he even had difficulty calling her his “girlfriend” in public.

So why had he so quickly stepped into the most committed of relationships with another woman?

As the women in the series attempted to figure it out, Miranda, who is one of my favorite characters, simply said “Hubble”.

Initially no one got it. And then, one by one, the other women understood. She was referring to the character played by Robert Redford in the movie “The Way We Were”. He had been in a relationship with Barbra Streisand, who played a complicated, brilliant character who fought for causes. Streisand was completely besotted with our friend Hubble and could hardly comprehend it when he had an affair with a beautiful, but vacuous friend.

At the time I first watched the movie, I couldn't figure it out either.

Now, I have a different perspective. Barbra's character was simply too complicated, too difficult. She wasn't easy to be with. She challenged people in her life to live up to their potential, their values, and their commitments, and she was incapable of understanding why they would choose not to.

Unfortunately, I have some of her issues.

As you watched the movie, you wondered how in the world Hubble could have preferred the empty headed substitute when he had, for a time, possessed Streisand's character.

So many times I have thought of a simple horse, easy to ride, that I could go out on trails with and relax. I have fantasized about a horse that was bomb proof and steady. So often I have posted the For SALE BY OWNER sign on Wanda's stall in a fit of frustration.

And yet, she is the most talented and breath-taking creature I have had the good fortune to come across, much less own.

I so understand “Hubble”.

And yet, I have chosen to stay with Wanda. (At least, so far.) I am actually proud of that. My friends are right. With a simple, uncomplicated horse, I would soon be bored. It also helps me to understand aspects of myself and my failed relationships.

The fact that Wanda often challenges me up to and past my limits does not mean that I am a bad rider.

Sometimes, we need to understand that rejection does not necessarily mean that we are not good enough. It often means that we are simply too much for the other person's sense of self. They go other places, simpler places, because it allows them to feel better about themselves.

Chapter X

After the Fall

Do you understand how your previous failures determine your current behaviors?

When I was in my early thirties and living in Europe, I wanted to learn how to ski. I tried multiple times, but I simply could not overcome my fear. Starting with the ski lift, I began to hyperventilate and it certainly did not get better. After one day hurting my knee on the slopes in Italy, I finally admitted it was not my sport.

Have you ever watched small children on the ski slopes? They zip around with total confidence. Unlike me, the youngsters I observed had no fear of falling. Of course, they are much lower to the ground.

It is an enormous “leg up” to start a sport in your childhood. You are so blissfully ignorant of all the things which might happen, and by the time you understand, you are already hooked.

I started riding when I was five. I did many crazy things with my ponies and horses as I was growing up. I was hurt many times, but I thought nothing of it. “Get back on the horse” was the simple, unbreakable rule.

The older I got, the more I noticed that each fall took longer and longer to recover from emotionally. Although, I rarely fell, I was much more thoughtful about the potential consequence. My mind was more likely to think about “what ifs?” for at least a month or more after I came off.

And then came Wanda. I tried to process my falls from Wanda the Wonder horse in a similar manner to the ones that came before. I would climb back on the horse and pick up where I left off. But mentally and emotionally, over a period of time, I became afraid.

Here’s the thing. I never really got hurt. As I said before, most of the time I landed on my feet. So why was I always thinking the worst when I got on my horse? Why was it so hard to simply ride her? Our issues had nothing to do with my capability. I was perfectly capable of riding this horse (most of the time). I had proven it again and again over years.

It was the “what ifs?” that were getting to me. What if I did get hurt? What if I broke something? What if this time I could not get up as though nothing had happened? What if I ended in a wheel chair and couldn’t continue to support myself?

Riding Wanda stopped being fun. I did it out of duty. It wasn’t working. Sound like any personal life experiences? I talk to so many people who feel this way about their jobs, relationships, or life in general. The “what ifs” are so pervasive that they stop enjoying the moment.

I had always wanted a horse like Wanda. I had spent my entire life riding more and more difficult horses. Each time I learned to ride a difficult horse, I came closer to having her. And then, apparently, the Universe decided I was ready. She fell out of the sky at a price I could afford.

I was disciplined and diligent even when it was all too much.

And what was my biggest fear? I realized my biggest fear wasn't whether I would get hurt. In a funny way, that would clarify things. If I got hurt, I would have my answer. Wanda would have to go.

As Wanda matured, it became more and more clear what a really nice animal she was. I was, even through my fear, proud. There were times when I wondered if I stuck with the challenge she represented out of that pride of ownership that seemed to almost make it all worthwhile.

No, my biggest fear was not about getting hurt. My biggest fear was whether I was worthy. I wonder how many of the things I desire remain elusive because of that fear.

Identify how many of the fears you live with today are due to previous failures. What are you really afraid of? Is it real, or are you amplifying your concern because of past experience? Sometimes the only immediate answer is to climb back on the horse and ride like you have never fallen.

Chapter XI

And Then Came Spring

When you are sure that you have earned a rest.

No one has ever said that life is easy. The problem is that when it becomes very difficult, for some reason, it always seems to take us by surprise.

I had owned Wanda for almost four years. Suddenly, she became easy. I started having fun. During the winter, she settled into a work ethic and for the first time, seemed to be reveling in her own prowess. She had developed the muscles and the abilities to do all I was asking.

I was coasting and I was loving it. I had broken through and Wanda was MINE. I bragged on the phone to Ingrid that I had finally figured her out, and life was good.

And then came Spring! Suddenly the battle was on again, more intense than ever before. Although it was easy to blame it on the hormones, it was not easy to understand how this wonderful, loving, cooperative animal had suddenly turned into such a monster. I had been certain that those days were now behind me.

She hurt me several times that significant Spring. She reared and hit me in the face two times in a week when I was riding her. I got a black eye and then as it was starting to fade, I got another black eye. I responded appropriately. I became more afraid of her than I had ever been. Somehow it was worse because I believed that I had conquered this battle. Why was it starting up again, and worse than ever before? What had I done to deserve this?

Whine, whine, whine....

After two months of trying to avoid battles with Miss Wanda by controlling my experience with her each and every day, I finally accepted that I was hardly finished. I would once again have to step up to the plate, or I would lose. There was no such thing as coasting with this horse. There were only little rest periods, because I had obviously not finished learning all there was to learn about this challenge.

I stepped up. I got a piece of equipment that restrained her so that she could not raise her head and hit me in the face and I went after her. I took her on. Each and every time she misbehaved, I went back to my basics. "Make the right things easy and the wrong things difficult".

I gave her no slack. Any time she even attempted to spook or act up, I put her in a small circle and went around and around until she gave in. Then we went forward. If she bent wrong by ignoring my leg, she went into a circle. At no time in our previous experience had I ever been as relentless or as intense.

It took about two weeks. BUT, I WON! She gave in. And I recognized that these fights would go on for the rest of my relationship with this magnificent animal. It would never be easy and I would never be allowed to coast for long because she was still teaching me how to ride.

Wanda defines me. She will not allow me to be complacent or rest on my laurels. She will make me grow, in spite of myself. The alternative is giving up, and I do not know how to do that.

Life is like that. We start to think that we have figured it out, and suddenly, we are back in the struggle again. You can try to fight it, deny it, or turn into a victim. The truth is that the struggles and the hard times are the moments when you define who you are. Don't even waste the time wondering why you are in the soup once again.

When the struggle reclaims your life, assume that you have more growing to do so that at some point, the issue you battle is no longer a struggle for you!

Chapter XII

Letting Go

When it is time to move on.

During that summer after THE Spring, I really did win again and again with Miss Wanda. The biggest win was that I was no longer afraid of her. She was still a project, but there was no fear. She was still Wanda and she would still never give in easily. But I was a different person. I stopped hyperventilating each time I climbed on her back. I stopped dreading my work with her. I became “consciously competent”.

I was elated. Our work became less about argument and more about progress. We really were becoming a team and I was having fun once again.

And then came Ingrid. Once again, we pushed past our comfort zone and once again, the arguments began. But this time, I was not affected in the same way. This time I was more annoyed with the trainer than the horse. I pushed through with the horse and battled her back to cooperation. But it wasn't done in the expedient way that Ingrid had in mind. Although she was pleased with how far the horse had come in the time since she was last there, she was not pleased with my technique, or my ability to quickly nip the bad behavior. My riding was simply “not good enough”.

My frustration reached an all time high. I had accomplished so much, and yet there was little respect or appreciation for the enormous struggle I had been through or the amazing amount I had accomplished. I did not know what to do. I wanted recognition, but it was clearly not going to come to me.

My option was to become a victim. I have taught leaders for years that they should not base their work on the recognition or rewards they would receive but instead on the satisfaction of the accomplishment itself. Here I was, needing recognition that would probably never come.

I had to dig deep for the answer to this one. Wanda was a source of pride and accomplishment. I was pleased. And yet, I was denying myself the sense of accomplishment because I could not get the other person, whose respect I coveted, to see how important inspiring me rather than denigrating might be to our future progress.

Guess what? This is life, once again, reasserting itself. I was asking the wrong questions. Why I never was acknowledged for what I had done was the wrong question. What I needed to ask was, what was next? I had broken through and whether it was acknowledged or not, could not take that away. The fact that I was no longer afraid was probably one of the biggest breakthroughs of my life.

While WANDA was happening, I was also breaking through my fears on a personal front. Wanda defines me and she symbolically had caused me to take on my biggest fears across the spectrum of my life. I was no longer worried about my financial security, whether I would spend my life lonely or alone, and

whether or not I had made mistakes in my life choices that would diminish the quality of my overall existence.

She had done her job, and I had done mine. I was not in a competition to be the BEST rider of all time. I was in a competition with myself to determine just how far I was willing to go to claim what I wanted out of LIFE.

It was time to hand her over to Ingrid. I decided to send her to her for a period of six months and let her do all the things to her that she was sure I could not do. This was another enormous challenge for me. How was I to know if it was time to move on? I had so much of my Ego involved in this decision. What if Ingrid took her and broke her of all the challenging and dominance games. Then it might mean that I had not been good enough and had been fooling myself all along. In other words, letting go of Wanda might prove me to be an imposter.

I wrestled with the decision for quite some time, even after she was on the trailer and on her way. I never thought letting go could be so very difficult. What comforted me each time I went down the path of wondering if I had made a mistake was the reality that I was no longer afraid of Wanda. It was exactly the right time to let go of the struggle.

I took on another horse as a project. She was like Wanda in personality, but half her size. I found that everything I had learned was being applied to this horse and it was easy. She came along fast and magnificently, and I was validated. Not by Ingrid, not by the owner, but by the horse. Others might never know the skill and the confidence that was creating the outcome with this new project, but I knew. For the moment, that was enough!

And Wanda? Well at the moment, she is putting Ingrid through the wringer that I have been going through for the last four years. It is not going easily or smoothly. She is now helping Ingrid define her life and her purpose. What a gift she is.

When you break through, it is never about whether other people notice. It is about how life changes for you as a result. You will let go of the struggle when you are good and ready to let go of the struggle and no one but you can pick the moment.

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