

# Do I have the right?

*"It doesn't matter how much time passes, because these moments are not measured in time. As a matter of fact they are not measured at all, since measuring in some way would hint that I have goals or expectations for this horse. Goals and expectations only spoil a perfect moment, and then how could the moment be perfect anymore? So now I simply wait and see what life brings and what this black mare has to teach me."*

**Text: Katariina Alongi**  
**Photos: From the album of Katariina Alongi**

Seven years ago I had to send my horse Designer Socks to greener pastures. Although I knew it was the only option, the decision to euthanize the horse was not easy. The cancer growing in Socks's intestines had spread so far that nothing could be done. After four amazing years together it felt bad to send my friend on his last journey. When I stroked Socks's neck for the last time at the horse clinic, I thought back to his brilliant career in competitions.

At well over 17 hands Sock was the main vaulting horse of my California team. Before his career in vaulting Socks had been destined to become a dressage horse, but his unpredictable and feisty nature had made him unsuitable for the competition arena. Despite his nature, however, Socks became one of the most successful vaulting horses in the United States, carrying my team twice to the finals of the world championship qualifications. In 2004, his last year, my team won every possible competition from the world championship qualifications to the national championships, and finally even secured that important spot in the world championships, where we eventually won a bronze medal. We had our incredible horse, Socks, to thank for all of these victories, since without his contribution we would never have won a thing. Without the contribution of our incredible horse Socks, we would never have won anything. Socks was literally the most important member of our team.

But at what cost? When I laid Socks to rest, I could only marvel at his persistence and stamina. Despite the cancer ravaging inside him for months, Socks had not displayed any signs of suffering. On the contrary, we thought our beloved Socks was in better shape than ever. It wasn't until after the last competition that we found out the harsh truth: Socks had very little time left.

I took comfort in the thought that Socks had at least had a good life with us. Certainly his years as a vaulting horse had been happy. After all, he had been malnourished, unsound and difficult to handle when he came to us, but became astonishingly more balanced as the center of children's attention. Still, I felt a nagging inside me. Socks had sacrificed himself for the sake of human happiness, but had he been happy? Can horses, in fact, be happy? Is the "happiness" of horses like Socks only imagined joy; joy by human standards?

## The path to change

Years passed, I moved to Europe and gave up coaching vaulting, but Socks stayed in my heart. While competing a young horse in dressage in Switzerland, I thought of my earlier competitions with Socks in California and felt a certain kind of ache. I travelled to the World Equestrian Games in Aachen for the first time as a spectator, not a competitor. As I watched the vaulting world championships from afar, I felt like an outsider, as if I no longer belonged. I celebrated the achievements of my former vaulters, but could not shake the nagging feeling inside; something felt wrong.

I had tickets for the dressage finals as well, but in the mid-

dle of the competition I walked out from the fully packed stadium. I was looking for something, but what? I found myself standing next to the warm-up arena. Suddenly I noticed I was no longer admiring the skill of the riders nor the movements of the horses, but really seeing deep into the horses for first time. And what I saw no longer felt right.

For the first time I understood that something inside me had changed. I hadn't wanted this change nor had I consciously sought it; it had crept inside me, out of the blue. The seed that had been planted on that day at the clinic with Socks had taken root.

I sought information everywhere; from books, online, and in discussion forums. I discovered that many others had also set out on this same path, for various reasons. I participated in many courses and studied methods that were different from the mainstream, but also from each other. I stopped riding my students' horses, because it felt wrong. I believed it was important to approach each horse from the ground as an individual, and to form a relationship before I could ask for permission to mount.

I concentrated my efforts on one single horse, a horse that I imagined I'd picked from among all the horses I was riding. In reality, the mare, which had been labeled impossible, had picked me. And for a reason; I had a lot to learn, after all.

This mare made me question myself on a daily basis, and soon everything I had learned about horsemanship throughout the decades was put to the test. I started questioning things such as the necessity of horse shoes and riding with a bit. I wondered, for the first time, why horses lived in stalls and stood in paddocks alone. In addition, I found myself completely at a loss when reflecting on my own role with horses. Does the human always have to be the leader? Is it alright to force an animal? What is the difference between forcing and asking? Can humans and animals ever be equal in their relationship?

I lay awake many nights contemplating these questions. To make matters worse, the mare lived at a large, commercial stable, which only a few years ago had seemed like paradise. Now I found faults everywhere. It was as if my ears were hearing and my eyes opening for the first time. The people and horses around me had not changed, but I had, and it scared me.

I thought of Socks and understood that happiness for a horse may mean something different than happiness for a human. Instead of seeking happiness for himself, Socks had fulfilled our human dreams. He had been part of our team, but nobody had ever asked him if he wanted to be a member.

The horse as an athlete is a widespread concept, but no horse can choose that role for himself; we make the decision, often before the horse has even been born.

## The ethics of equitation

In their book *Equitation Science*, published last year, animal behaviorists Paul McGreevy and Andrew McLean examine these same things from a scientific viewpoint. They have analyzed equitation from the basis of learning theory and have discovered significant flaws in the handling and training of horses. Although the training of other animals through positive reinforcement has been studied for years, this research is of little use in training horses, which happens almost exclusively through negative reinforcement. How does negative reinforcement affect the animal's psyche? What happens when the trainer and the rider don't know learning theory? Is the concept of a 'happy horse' even justified, and what must we do to ensure the wellbeing of horses?

Ethical equitation is a theme which comes up often in McGreevy and McLean's book. Although both believe that horses can be ridden and trained ethically without stress and pressure, they write at the end of the book: "equitation offers a novel motivation for the use of animals, namely, the drive of some people to use horses in pursuit of a particular psychological satisfaction: 'winning'. The desire to win appears to go beyond the notion of pleasure or even success because it requires that we outperform other people. Does this make it the ultimate exercise in human pride, vanity and individualism? And if so, does this provide a justifiable motivation for the use of animals even when pain and suffering may be involved?"

## The horse and emotions

*Equitation Science* approaches equestrianism from a purely scientific view point, merely touching the surface without delving deeper into the horses' feelings and emotions. This doesn't mean horses don't have feelings. Anyone who has ever taken the time to listen to their horse knows that horses have an incredible capacity to meet the human on an emotional level. Two years ago, when attending an Epona clinic for emotional learning, I had a concrete experience with this. During the three-day course, the horses at the clinic brought me to face to face with my innermost self. It was a very emotional moment when, for the last time, I walked to a personal meeting with the horse that the psychologist had carefully selected for me.

When I walked to the round pen where Geo, a young paint gelding, was already waiting for me my heart was racing with

anxiety. It had been a long weekend, and I'd seen many people break down emotionally. I'd also seen how the horses at the course had helped these people piece together the fragments of their soul and rebuild their self-image. There were so many participants in the course whose personal problems exceeded mine and I felt out of place.

The leader of the course, a long-time mental health care professional, asked me what I was looking to gain from this last exercise. I gave an honest answer; that, because of my relatively stable past, I didn't feel like I belonged.

"So you feel like you don't deserve this moment with this horse?"

I nodded. That's how it was. So many others were in real need of help.

"But this is your moment," the psychologist said. "And we all deserve to have a moment".

I opened the gate to the round pen, and realized my hands were shaking. I was used to training horses, riding them, doing

things with them that others around me did not know how to do. I'd always been gifted that way. But this was not about doing, this was about simply being authentic. I was afraid I'd fail, afraid that I no longer knew the right way of being with a horse. All of a sudden, I started crying. I couldn't even say why I was crying, but there was a tidal wave of sorrow inside me, flowing uncontrollably.

Caught in this surge of emotion, I stopped a few feet away from Geo. He focused on eating grass. I made no effort to wipe away the tears that were flowing down my cheeks. It felt as if I was offering my confession to all horses and I was offering with a guilty conscience. I wanted to turn and run away, but just then Geo

lifted his head and looked at me. He walked over slowly and stopped in front of me. The pain in my chest grew almost unbearable and I felt like my head was about to explode from all the emotional, but I stood in front of this horse without trying to hide my emotions.

Geo lifted his muzzle and pressed it against my chest, against my heart. I could feel the horse's breath through my t-shirt. I felt something else as well, a strange sense of weightlessness in my chest, as if the horse was sucking all the inexplicable sorrow from me like a living vacuum. Next, Geo pressed his muzzle against my forehead and took a deep breath, sucking all my sorrow into himself, and then releasing out into the void. I stopped crying and looked into the eyes of this amazing horse, who had been ready to help me and selflessly support me. Geo pulled his muzzle away and his expression was playful. He took hold of my shirt with his lips and pulled gently, as to say "come on, let's not be sad anymore".

There has been only little research into the emotions of animals, but it is a growing field of science. Many claim that admitting to animals' feelings is anthropomorphizing them.



Katariina and Little Love, a 14-year-old Oldenburg mare getting acquainted.

But should humans alone have the right to emotions? Who gave us the monopoly on feeling? We believe that since animals cannot talk like we can, they have no capacity for other things either. However, Geo and other horses at the Epona course showed me that horses are sentient animals, too. When we originally catch the horse bug, whether as a child or an adult, perhaps it is their ability to communicate through emotions that draws us to them in the first place.

Admitting the existence of animal emotions is difficult for us humans, because it brings us once again face to face with ethical questions. It's easier not to think about these things and to believe that because we are happy, our horse is happy, too. If we admit that horses also have rich emotional lives, separate from our own, it might lead to too many difficult questions.

## Closing the circle

Seven years ago I unknowingly set upon a path that ultimately brought me to confront life's fundamental questions. Do humans - do I - have the right to use horses as a vehicle to my own dreams? My journey has surprised many people, but also infuriated and shocked. How can someone who rides, coaches, competes and trains horses and horse-minded people for decades suddenly stop believing in what she is doing? There is no simple answer to this question, but all I can do is follow the voice of my conscience and my heart.

Three months ago I became the owner of the above mentioned mare. Now, for the first time in my life, I really have a real opportunity to listen to the animal and to find the right path together. Before, as a new horse owner, I would have asked what this particular horse could do for me, I now ask what I can do for the horse.

I have my share of regrets. I've done things that I can now admit were hurtful to horses, even violent. Most of all, however, I regret that it took me so long to see deep into horses. I know Socks was offering this knowledge to me long ago, but I was not ready to receive yet. Now my mare continues in the same hoof prints, and if nothing else, I hope I have learned to be a better listener. My journey continues, and many questions still unanswered. These are questions I can only answer for myself and not for anyone else. Everyone travels their own path and I travel mine, wherever it may take me next. 🐾

<http://equineinsanity.blogspot.com/>

Katariina and the 16-year-old Socks training in his last season, before the world championships, in California, Willow Pond Ranch.

