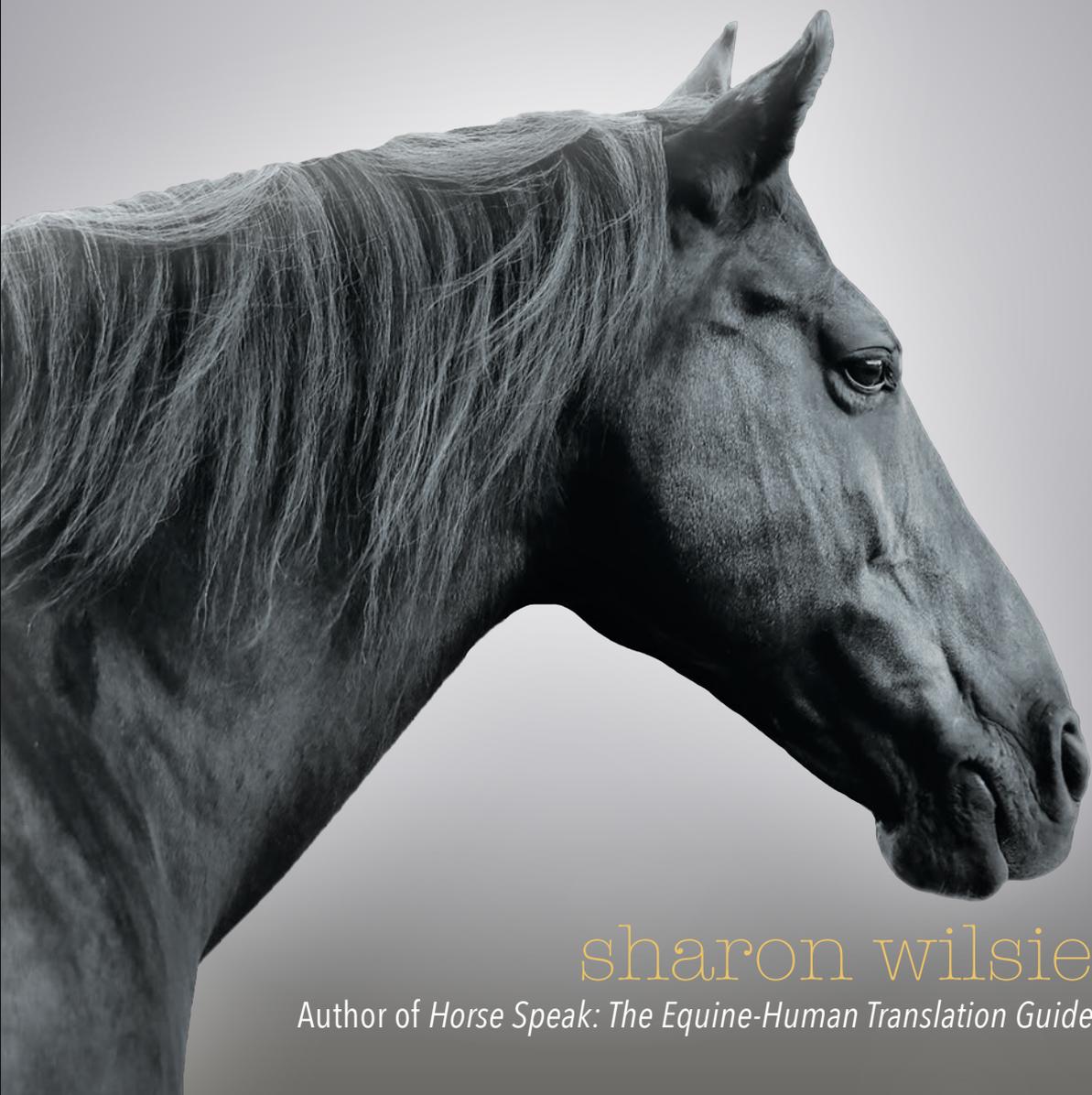


horses in translation

Essential Lessons in Horse Speak:
Learn to "Listen" and "Talk" in Their Language



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Chapter 7

The Truth Is Out There

Puppy Pile

We all know horses are not dogs. Many of us wish they were. You've surely seen a "puppy pile" at some point, but have you ever seen a pile of foals? The inherent difference between dogs and horses is that dogs get right into each other's and our space, usually in the most pleasing of ways. Horses do not do this amongst themselves, so when a horse is acting like a puppy, he has adopted the behavior as an adaptation to accidental mixed messages people are often sending. Horses have no idea how to crawl into your lap like a dog and so a little space invasion can cause a lot of harm.

An upbeat, warm-hearted man had trailered a horse to my clinic. He had a Mustang and had worked diligently with this horse for a few years. This man—I'll call him Dave—had a very respected trainer that he brought the horse to from time to time to get "tune-ups."

Within a month or so after a tune-up, however, many of this horse's "problems" would start to re-emerge.

The Mustang, who I'll call Timmy, lived with an older mare that normally kept him calm. Without this mare with him at the clinic, Timmy found it hard to settle down.

I watched Dave's cheery face as he chuckled uncomfortably, shaking his head and mumbling, "There goes my Timmy.... He just does that!"

I asked Dave how much round penning he did with his horse, and he replied that although he would get Timmy to move out in the pen at the beginning of time they spent together, his instructions from his trainer were to only ask for a few changes of direction and a couple of trot and canter circles. He explained that if he didn't "get Timmy's bucks out," the horse was often nippy and too

uptight to ride. He wouldn't even bother to ride Timmy some days because it seemed like he would never settle down.

Dave told me that his trainer was careful to keep Dave calm and had him practice deep breathing when they worked together. Dave was sure that he was following these instructions, and so he was simply baffled that Timmy was still, after so many years, acting out in this way.

On the surface, this heartbreaking situation would seem to most people to be truly the case of an unruly horse that was “just that way.” Dave obviously adored his horse, and the trainer they went to was well-known for his thoughtful approach to horsemanship. No one was beating the Mustang, or rushing him, or trying to scare him into submission. It sounded like even the mare that lived with him back home was very patient and kind.

I needed to use the Greeting Ritual to see if I could diagnose what Timmy's issues really were.

The Barn Is on Fire

At my clinics, I always begin by talking about a few things before we get started. When everyone is packed into a small space together, sitting in chairs, I will often comment that although people may be seated close together, no one is touching. Even married couples and best friends are not sitting on each other's laps. As a species, we are keenly aware of our personal space, and so are horses. If dogs access the side of our nature that likes closeness, then horses access the side of our nature that needs security through personal space.

Furthermore, not only do horses and humans need personal space defined and respected, we also both need the environment we are in to be secure.

If the barn suddenly caught fire during a clinic, we would not be continuing to have a conversation. Instead, everyone would scramble to get out, possibly even knocking each other over. When horses scramble to escape what they deem a dangerous situation, they try to avoid knocking each other down. To make sure they can do this whenever and wherever they need, preserving the herd, horses practice navigating each other's personal space all day long.

The need for the environment to be secure is so strong in horses that if nothing is done to prove their world is safe, most of them will remain skeptical of their surroundings.

Remember what we learned in chapter 2: Humans walk into a new barn and instantly identify all the objects in the space—doors, brushes, floor mats, halters, lead ropes, electrical cords. We name all the things, claiming “ownership” over anything in our environment, thus deeming them non-threatening since we know what they are. Horses do not objectify the world in this way. They express ownership over objects once they have inspected them (by feeling free to touch or manipulate the object) but they do not generalize objects for the most part or until they have had enough experience with similar objects to warrant generalized learning. In other words, one horse trailer is not *any* horse trailer. One brush is not *any* brush.

Horses have a direct experience of the world, so their thoughts are more likely to flow out: “This wiggly thing [lead rope] smells like me and my person...this is mine...” Or, “The water in this bucket tastes *good*. Water in that bucket does not smell the same. It is a pleasure drinking good water.”

Horses cannot have a direct relationship with us until they have confirmed that their immediate environment is safe. If they are led in and out of a barn every day for a year but never get to explore the environment and touch any items in the area, they will never be entirely certain those items are safe.

Before she told him to go ahead and run, a horse’s mother would have touched everything as she inspected a new pasture with her tiny baby at her side. If you turn a horse loose in a new pen or paddock, he will usually walk around and sniff and inspect each post, rock, and tree before he has decided the area is safe. This behavior is so predictable, in fact, that simply copying it is the surest way to tell a horse that you—like his mother—have inspected the area and determined all is well.

If the barn is on fire in the horse’s mind, it is going to be tough to say hello. Simply ignoring a horse for a few minutes while he is in his stall and banging around outside, inspecting the items in the aisle and hanging from the doors, is the fastest way to impress him. If you act like you own the place, he will find you very interesting, and you will have the upper hand in convincing him you are a benevolent leader who is looking out for any bogeyman that might want to harass him. While escorting a horse into a new environment, you can take the time to lead him around and let him see and smell posts, signs or racks on the wall, buckets, trunks, and so on. As you kick and manipulate the objects with a determined demeanor, your horse will watch you closely to see what else you “own.” If you invite him to

“own” those things, too, he will begin to “buddy up” with you (seeing as you have such power over these objects!).

I know several people who now bring their horses on walks around show-grounds early, just to give them time to literally “kick some posts” in front of their horses while no one is looking! They all agree their horses are much calmer during competition when they do this.

Timmy’s Round Pen Is on Fire

This is where I began with our friend Timmy the Mustang. Ignoring his wild antics as he ran, scooted, and paced in the round pen, I remained outside the panels and huffed three soft breaths toward him as a general greeting. Timmy became irate, and pinned his ears, moving away from me.

Interesting.

So, I went to work, kicking the round pen panels, banging on the bark of a nearby tree, and tossing some rocks into the surrounding bushes. After about three minutes, Timmy stopped running and stood perfectly still, staring at me. I looked at him, and offered three huffing breaths again (soft, huffing breaths are an invitation to connect—see p. 40 to revisit *Breath Messages*).

Timmy flattened his ears again—but also looked away. In *Horse Speak*, looking away is considered very polite. Remember, horses use space like money; if they give a little space they are giving it *to you*. I acknowledged his gift of head space by taking one step back, and turning my own head away. This said, “Thank you for the room. Here is some for you.”

Then I went back to tossing stones and ignoring him. In this way, I was not making the relationship with him primary. I was making the safeness of the environment primary and Timmy’s presence in it secondary. I was “in charge” simply through my focus of attention on security.

It worked. Timmy dropped his head to the ground, sniffing the dirt in “Aw-Shucks.” This meant “I want to take the pressure off,” or it was a respectful request to get closer. Once again, I offered three huffing breaths and adopted an “O” posture with my arms in front of my body as I lightly bent forward. I was giving him the universal sign of welcome.

Timmy sauntered over to the edge of the round pen with soft eyes, but they were tented in worry. His chin was puckered with tension, but his

nostrils were flaring, breathing me in. I held out my closed fist, knuckles up, toward his muzzle.

Horses greet each other in sets of three. The characteristics of the set of three can vary, depending on the horses involved. Timmy wanted to do fast, breathy touches on my knuckles, which I found to be typical for an uptight gelding. Males who have more of a “rough-housing” attitude will do three fast nostril flares upon reaching each other’s muzzles. Horses who know each other well will do their greeting touches slowly, taking time between each one. Horses who are sorting out hierarchy may extend the process and perform three sets of three.

I wanted to act like a Mentor to Timmy, so I did one touch with my knuckles to his nose, but I requested we proceed from there more slowly than he wanted to. I didn’t want to let him control the speed of our greeting, so I slowed it way down. Occasionally, when a horse is a bit uptight or anxious, I will allow a much faster greeting to happen at first, but I will return to it again later to have a nice, slow discussion.

Between each touch to Timmy’s nose, I looked away as though some bogeyman had appeared on the horizon. I learned to do this by watching Sentry horses schooling younger or nervous herdmates: The Sentry would “scan the horizon” for danger to help calm them down. The methods the Mentor horse uses in this situation are pretty much the same, and that remains true whether the Mentor is a mare, gelding, or even a stallion.

Rule number one for Horse Speak: Go slowly; breathe a lot.

After I touched Timmy for the second muzzle greeting, he stepped away. In the three touches horses use to complete their conversation about hierarchy, leadership, safety, and connection, each stage is a chance to size the other horse up. The one who scans the horizon for bogeymen is the one who offers to lead. If a horse steps away on the second touch, he is not ready for a more intimate connection. Touch number three is a commitment, and Timmy was not ready for that.

I stepped back as well, and blew out a long sigh. I looked down at the ground, and Timmy lowered his head. I gazed at his tense eyes and blinked. Mentors use blinking to convince nervous horses there is nothing scary to stare at. Blinking can also indicate inner Zero, and horses use this to say they are so content and comfortable they wish to take a nap (a favorite discussion!).

After blinking back at me, Timmy blew out a long sigh and cleared his nose. This meant he was making a fresh start. He came right over to me and touched my hand for the third time, lingering and lipping my knuckles affectionately.

Lipping means the horse wants closeness. Given that Timmy was so volatile, I was not going to offer touch in return. As previously discussed, horses do not groom each other until all is safe, the relationship is on an even keel, their bellies are full, and nothing could be better than a little scratch. Touch is not high on *their* list of priorities—it is high on *our* list. Timmy knew this and was telling me I could go ahead and “invade” his space now. But I wanted to show him that I was not going to invade his space. By doing so I was able to tell him he couldn’t invade mine, either. Establishing this mutual respect would go further than anything else I could do.

To emphasize our space negotiation, I aimed my pointer finger at his “Go Away Face” Button (under the eye on the round part of his cheek—see p. 42). I did not put my hand through the fence to touch this Button directly—I only needed to hold my pointer finger in position, aiming at the Button, for 30 seconds or so before he politely moved his face to the side.

Now I really had his attention.

Timmy came back and wanted what I call a “Check-In” knuckle touch right away. The Check-In is a soft, muzzle-to-knuckle touch that horses use on each other to simply connect. They can touch muzzle to muzzle or along any part of the body, or even just aim the muzzle from a distance. Between humans and horses, the muzzle-to-knuckle Check-In is reassuring and inspires bonding while still respecting personal space.

As soon as he did a Check-In, I asked Timmy for Go Away Face again. He gladly complied. We did this all over again, three more times. On the fourth time, he moved his whole head and neck away, and left it to the side while watching me out the corner of his eye. He was motionless. I complimented him out loud and softly stepped to the side as well, giving him the biggest “YES” I could: space and breath.

Timmy commenced then to yawn repeatedly. He released so much tension that his eyes rolled up in his head. I nodded my head at him to agree, and then lightly wiggled my lips while shaking my head side to side. He shook his head side to side, too, and wiggled his lips back. This meant he also felt like he was having a nice day. We no longer needed to be on edge with each other, and as his new leader, I requested we take a nap.

We stood still for about a full minute, and then I told Dave to walk away from the round pen with me as we allowed Timmy to soak up all that had taken place.

I had all the information I needed about what was troubling the Mustang.

It's All About Your Face

If you are not sure what your horse is saying through his facial expressions, copy his expression! Horses and humans have prehensile lips and many muscles in our faces. We, in fact, make similar expressions for similar reasons.

Humans often have tense faces around horses. When you concentrate, your mouth gets tight, your chin puckers, your eyes bulge, and you hold your breath. In Horse Speak, these same characteristics can be seen when one horse is displeased and is saying he might bite if the other horse doesn't get a move on.

Humans look like "biters" most of the time, so horses must look for other clues as to what we want. As soon as humans start softening up their lips, eyes, and expressions, horses become interested, and feel much more comfortable.

"X," "O," and Thought Control

Since it is not always possible to monitor all our thoughts, developing the habit of softening our eyes, lips, and posture (creating the physical "O" that helps create the internal Zero) is a shortcut to making certain we are able to express and maintain a peaceful demeanor.

Horses do, at times, require an "X" posture. In an "X," our arms and legs move out firmly and our intensity becomes higher. We make an "X" to create motivation to move, to block against movement, or to simply signal intention. Horses are not intrinsically afraid of an "X" posture, but they do fear a person who is stuck in "X." Many people find it difficult to modulate their own intensity, and what should simply be assertive often becomes aggressive. In an effort to help make this clear, I usually teach people to think of levels of intensity in five layers: *Zero, intention, asking, telling, and finally insisting.*

- Level One intensity occurs simply by looking with purpose at a Button, as opposed to casually blinking your eyes while at Zero.

- Level Two is the first request for a Button to do something (this could be a request to hold still, come to you, or move away from you). This level of intensity is about as much pressure as you would use while holding the hand of a toddler: not much and very gentle.
- Level Three happens when you really need a horse to “do the thing,” and he doesn’t seem to desire to. This can include sliding your hand down a lead rope and giving it a “scoop,” or using a bit more pressure in your touch, or adding a little noise like snapping fingers or clucking. (I find people cluck way too often and too much, so I like to use finger snapping, because you have to be deliberate to do it.)
- Level Four intensity happens when you really, really need a horse to “do the thing,” and he really, really doesn’t want to. However, this level of intensity also occurs when horses show off for each other, like during a big play session. To avoid going overboard, I have come up with strategies to help people develop a safe and sane Level Four that horses believe, and better still, that will not offend them. In fact, at the very beginning of working with a new horse when I “scan the horizon” or “secure the environment,” I am at a Level Four *for the horse’s sake*. I am showing him that I can mean business about the big, scary world. I do not want to get confrontational with a horse, so by acting like a strong Leader (based on the model of the Mother), and checking out all the bogeymen, I am less likely to need to go beyond a Level Three when we start working more closely with each other. I have already psychologically established myself as capable of a Level Four. Horses sometimes *want* to see our Level Four because it makes them feel secure; ironically, this is especially true for horses that have had poor handling. The mistake people most often make is that we can perpetuate their fear by reacting with aggression rather than assertiveness. I have specific exercises to help students learn the difference, because in our culture, the two are often confused. (In the horse world, assertive can be at a high intensity, but as soon as it’s over, it’s over...and everyone takes a nap!)

Most people do not want to live aggressively with their horses, and so in the effort to avoid this complication, they undercut their “X” energy. In other

words, a person may be saying, “Go,” or “Stop,” and making the right noises or motions, yet underneath it all she doesn’t really want the horse to feel offended, or she is afraid to accidentally ruin the connection she feels she has with her horse.

“Boundary” is not a four-letter word. It does not imply punishment, restriction of authenticity, or rigidity.

Horses need sane, healthy boundaries much like the two sides of a river. If the shores of a river are too muddy, the river merges with the land and it all becomes swamp. Horses thrive on clear boundaries amongst themselves. The cohesiveness of their life together depends upon their ability to move their large bodies deftly around each other. In the case of a crisis, this ability means all the horses can run at top speed and not trip each other up. Roads have lines so we do not drive across them and into each other. For a prey animal, boundaries are the edges of their private and personal space—the line in the road to be crossed with care.

To maintain healthy assertiveness, we need to think of the edges of our boundaries like the bowl we would pour soup into. If the bowl has cracks in it, the soup will run out. If the soup represents the nourishing parts of your relationship with your horse, then you can see it is imperative to have clean, healthy boundaries so that both horse and human have the nourishment they need.

Healthy horses thrive on tidy assertiveness that does not take much time or energy. I call this “low calorie conversation.” If a horse raises his head, puts his ears back, and tightens his lips while aiming his eyes at the “Go Away Face” button on another horse’s cheek, he only needs the other horse to move his face away a bit. Horses have long necks and heads, and it is considered polite to simply move a head away from the space of a higher herd member. Moving the feet may not be required, unless the higher-ranked member wants to take over the space the lower member is currently in.

Keeping this in mind, you can begin to see that maintaining an “O” posture and a level Zero internally is the basis for maintaining the peace between requests. Horses make requests of each other all the time, and by keeping their head lowered, ears sideways, eyes soft, lips and chin relaxed, they are using the horse version of “O” posture and maintaining a Zero inner energy. Starting at Zero, you might ask for Go Away Face, then return to Zero when it is complied with. If the horse is confused by this, thinking that your Zero is also

an “O” that is welcoming him to return, he may quickly come back into your space. In this case, you may need to establish that boundary: hold a constant “X” posture, but the secret is to never leave Zero internally. Your goal is to clear up confusion, not adopt a negative attitude.

By having the foundation be Zero, it is easier and easier for smaller and smaller versions of “X” to serve as boundaries. Horses are actually masters at the lowest level “X” messages. Most of us have seen a lead horse that rarely even lifts his head—his eyes alone are his “X.”

Because humans tend to merge their “Xs” and “Os” unconsciously, horses learn to tune us out. Then, we find ourselves having to amplify our “X” energy to a ridiculous level to be heard.

This was, unfortunately, Timmy’s problem.

Timmy Finds His Zero

I asked Dave to halter Timmy and show me some of the groundwork he was doing with his horse. Although on the surface Dave and Timmy certainly knew the exercises they were doing together, a few things became clear to me.

After watching Dave catch, halter, and lead Timmy, I could see that he was a cheery, light-hearted guy who loved his horse...but became stiff and defensive around him. This was understandable, because the moment Dave began leading the Mustang, Timmy began to attempt to chew on Dave. The horse wasn’t being completely offensive or dangerous in his behavior—instead it came across like a game that went kind of like this:

Timmy: “I want to chew on your arm.”

Dave: “No, Timmy.... No, Timmy.... C’mon, Timmy. Cut it out, Timmy.... NO, TIMMY!”

Timmy: “Hmmpf! FINE!!!”

Timmy then pouted with wrinkled eyes and a tense mouth for about a minute, before sneaking in another attempt to chew on Dave.

What I could see was that while Dave certainly didn’t want his horse nibbling on him, he didn’t *entirely* mind that his horse wanted to play. His “X” and “O” were blurred, and the soup was leaking from the bowl.

What I had gathered in my earlier conversation with Dave was that at some point in their round pen sessions, Timmy tended to settle down. This told me Dave eventually became enough of a believable “X” that Timmy felt

reassured about where his place was. When Dave's "X" was strong enough, Timmy's behavior improved. I now needed to ask Dave a question.

"Dave, you don't really like having to constantly tell him to cut it out, do you?" I asked bluntly.

"No," he admitted. And then, "But I don't want to hurt his feelings. I have had this guy since he was a few months old, and sometimes when I put him in his place, it seems like then he won't even come to me after. I want him to trust me. I need him to know that I would never hurt him. My trainer tells me I must get tougher with him—but not angry. Honestly, I don't see the difference between 'tough' and 'angry.' And sometimes Timmy is so much to handle that I *do* get angry; then I really feel bad."

AHA MOMENT

It was a swamp, all right. Timmy was acting out the same way a human toddler does who needs both boundaries and enough room to say, "I can do it *myself*."

One side of Timmy's river was allowing him to be responsible for holding down his own set of healthy boundaries. The other side of the river was Dave's ability to find the delicate balance between friendship with his buddy and mentorship with his student.

I said to Dave, "Do you think Timmy's mother would have allowed him to chew on her whenever he wanted?"

Dave's eyes brightened as he replied, "I got to see him with his mom for a few days at the auction. She was cool as a cucumber with him, and he did *not* chew on her. I did see her licking his head, though. Come to think of it, it always made me feel sad that he was taken away from her, and I think I felt like I had to make up for that loss. But...that's just how things were done at the Mustang auction."

It was now pretty darn clear to me as to how and why this relationship got so muddy.

I told Dave that I was going to work with him to learn to feel the difference in his body between "aggressive" or "angry energy" and simple, assertive, clear, "X" energy." I explained that Timmy's mom had been clear and simple with

him, and that is why she was able to give her baby affection and not have him get out of control. I also told Dave that it was time to give Timmy the right to grow up instead of remaining the baby in Dave's sad memory.

Dave wanted Timmy to behave himself, but his baggage had weighed down the relationship. Dave and I worked on some exercises to help him find the power of assertiveness without any baggage. I made different levels of "X" postures and gestures toward Dave, and he told me which ones were aggressive and which ones were polite but assertive. I explained that since he was offering to be his horse's leader, he needed to be the model of behavior he would like the horse to copy. If we are flailing and inconsistent, then that is what we tell the horse to be, too. If we are rigid and inflexible, then that is the message.

I helped Dave find and maintain his Zero and "O" posture, then do something engaging like throw a stone, but coming right back to Zero. Dave was surprised at how hard it was to return to Zero after raising up his adrenaline when he aimed and threw a rock toward a nearby tree. I explained that this was how he found himself in the "never-ending 'X'" that horses find difficult—there wasn't a "real" Zero for Dave to rely on. I believed that since Dave didn't want to come across like a bully and was afraid of hurting his horse's feelings, he was too passive, *but* his passive energy was not Zero, either! He needed to solve the riddle of how to stay firm on one hand, but loving and open on the other.

Suddenly, it dawned on Dave that he might have his own solution. He had studied martial arts for many years, and he told me about how he'd learned to make a "Ki-aye!" sound when hitting a board, for instance. His teacher had said this released all the stored power into the punch and freed the person from residual tension so that he returned to a state of calm.

Ki-Aye

A big smile widened across my face.

"Dave, you are going to 'Ki-aye' near Timmy so that he can hear and see you."

At first, Dave was concerned that this would upset Timmy. I assured him that this demonstration of power *with immediate return to Zero* was exactly what his horse was looking for.