

Horses need us to be better.

by Chris Irwin

This is the time of year when so many people are struggling with keeping their New Year's resolutions. And that's ironic when you consider that according to Natural Laws, the only constant in the universe is change.

Last year was the Year of the Horse and indeed it was wonderfully encouraging to see a clear shift in the horse industry. The data coming in from 2014 indicates our beloved sport is moving away from breeding, training and competitive horse shows to more interest in recreation, physical therapy, mental health, alternative learning, healing and personal and professional development.

In other words, the horse industry is evolving from win-lose competition into a psycho-spiritual social experience for the body mind and spirit. And at the heart of this movement the common denominator is the horses being handled and trained in a way, an ethos, so many now refer to as "natural horsemanship."

It's ironic, the only constant in the universe is change and yet so many of us resist change. And it's also ironic that there is nothing "natural" about human beings training horses and expecting them to play games with us and carry us around on their backs. But the term "natural" does sound nice and at least convey an intention to be more user-friendly with our horses.



Of course, we also know that all too often the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Unfortunately, if good intentions were enough then a lot less horses and dogs would be sacrificed due to behavior issues and lots more people would be able to keep their New Year's resolutions. It's beyond sad that in our enlightened age the World Horse Welfare organization estimates that over 400,000 horses lose their lives annually due to behavior issues. And we don't want to know how many millions of dogs disappear.

The Challenge

My New Year's resolution is to do something about it. And at age 54, with more than 35 years as a "pro" in the horse industry, I know this sounds naive. But, like John Lennon said, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one."

The challenge is not that there are not enough people who want to truly connect with their horses and be able to offer them a better quality of life. The challenge is time, money, and what pop-psychology now refers to as Nature Deficit Disorder.

NDD refers to the fact that the greater the population density and more technology used within a culture – the more mental health issues appear. We've gotten very savvy with technology. We can email, skype, snapchat, text and tweet, but not nearly enough people know how to minimize the stress of a reluctant horse while calmly and successfully loading it into a trailer.

Before playing games with our horses we need to truly be able to understand and communicate with them. There is just too big of a gap between the needs of the horses and the abilities and understanding of so many well- center only to find some of the horses with ears flat back in anger, biting at the special needs person being placed on their back for a "feel good, natural experience."

Change is the only constant in life but it is not always easy to accept or apply. If we do not have enough support, resources and inspiration, we are more likely to stay stuck and eventually slide back into our old ways. If there is to be an authentic wave of change that will truly affect the

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well-being of horses for the better it will need to begin with those of us who coach and teach and we will need to structure and support this change.

We are the facilitators of change and we need to become more like the horses. Horses don't lie and we must become much more honest with ourselves, with each other and with our students, about the depth and scope of the challenges of teaching and practicing quality horsemanship.

Please don't shoot the messenger. I'm not trying to be negative, I'm just saying the first step in real change is the awareness of and the acceptance for the truth. And the truth is, the horses need us to be better.

Over the New Year I have expanded my mission statement beyond just simply "being of service to the horse industry." Now my focus is to translate the insights of horse sense for individuals seeking authentic experiences with horses for their personal development in the spirit of leadership. I am determined to see the horse industry shift in how people relate and connect through horses to evolve our awareness, empathy and accountability.

So over the coming year within each issue of California Riding Magazine, I'll be sharing my insights on how I believe we the coaches, teachers, trainers and facilitators of the horse industry can make authentic changes for the better in how we help our students help their horses be the best that they can be.

Stay tuned, ride the waves, and always expect better!

Author Chris Irwin is an internationally renowned horseman, best-selling author and a leading pioneer in the equine assisted movement. It was discovering how to transform BLM wild Mustangs into 18 calm and collected U.S. National Champions in english, western and driving competitions, that first showed Chris his greatest insights into learning how to learn. To connect with Chris Irwin visit his website at www.chrisirwin.com.