

Once skeptical Buck Brannaman follower applies healing ideas to fictional horses and humans.

by Elizabeth Cain

The term horse whisperer conjures up visions of a person with magic hands and voice that can teach the horse to do “tricks” or “submit” with little effort. It’s true that some horsemen and women have better instincts and are more sensitive than others, but not only can the average, even uneducated, horse owner see what works with troubled horses, but anyone can see it and understand it.

About 35 years ago, I was attending my fourth or fifth Buck Brannaman clinic, and my 70-year-old mother came to observe this “cowboy” that I had been raving about. She watched for three days, didn’t say much, but at the end of the clinic, she approached Buck and said with tears in her eyes, “You make me wish I could raise my children all over again.” A seed was planted at that time about the ways Buck’s method might apply to troubled humans.

A little bit before my mother met him, I first met the young Buck at a local trainer’s barn; I was as skeptical as they come! I, along with my husband, had been riding, training, showing and breeding horses for a while and doubted anything “new” would impress me. I stood at the rail of a round pen and saw the first horse, who carried on with what might be called a temper tantrum. Slowly, it seemed that he began to turn his eye in toward the man in the center who did not threaten or beg or rush or restrain the animal, but merely asked the horse to move away and continue his tantrum, until at one point, the horse stopped and faced Buck. The tall cowboy stepped back from the horse, and the horse followed. There was a profoundly different look in the horse’s eyes. Only 10 minutes had passed! I was hooked.

Right then and there, I went home and loaded up my 3 year old 16hh Hanoverian that hadn’t had much but haltering and trailering done with him and joined the other skeptical, but now beginning-to-believe, riders and observers of this round pen way. At the end of five days, I was riding my big, “green” gelding with just a halter in a group of about 20 horses. He never bucked, bolted, balked or refused to do what I asked. Simply, I learned how to make the horse believe

that whatever we did together was his idea.

There's an old saying: Life is choice, and choice is loss. If the horse chooses poor behavior, ignores the human or refuses to work with the human, he loses a release of pressure, praise, petting, a certain kind of safety, a certain kind of partnership with the human that rewards his good choices. The good choices give him all the above things and more. It ultimately gives him and the human balance in the mind and in the body. It is definitely beyond a punishment-for-mistakes way of dealing with horses, especially when much of the time, the horse thinks he's doing what you want!

In many years of working with Buck's methods myself and observing others, I've learned how much more "power" the human can have to be safe and content around a horse that is "behaving badly." Not "physical strength" power but "feel" power, "timing" power, "partnership" power and "healing" power.

Potential With People?

I have always wondered if this healing power could work in a similar way when it came to human beings. Depending on the "trouble" the human is in, these round pen techniques may take weeks or months. Humans are generally a lot more troubled than horses and a lot more resistant. In this way, one of my hobbies transferred influence to the other passion I have—writing.

The human I wrote about in my novel *Almost Paradise* is the character Miranda Rose, who has an unusually violent form of schizophrenia. She has killed two horses and tried to kill her husband. She has escaped from a prison hospital and is wandering in the desert with a gun on the ranch of her estranged husband and his new love, the horse wrangler, Serena Skye. Nothing has worked with Miranda. Medications, punishment, lock-up, talk-therapy, the silent treatment and all attempts at healing have left the ill woman defensive and angry.

Enter Serena into her troubled life. Serena throws a lariat around Miranda and gets her to drop the gun after several moments of vague/slight cooperation by the woman, even just turning her head in Serena's direction! Serena can release the cinched down rope a little at time. The idea of healing, or at least controlling the bad behavior of some humans, is explored in this novel and

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in its sequel, *Dancing in the Red Snow*.

In the sequel to the original story in which most of the “round pen way” is used thematically, Serena’s son, Hank Rose, must deal with another “troubled” woman and draw on all he witnessed and learned from his mother to find a balance in his life after his four-year-old daughter is kidnapped and remains missing for eight years. Both books have sketches that parallel the experiences of the humans and the horses at the novels’ Rancho del Cielo Azul in northeastern Nevada.

I owe Buck all my insight into these round pen methods. And though the horse scenes in the books are fiction, the outcomes are real: equines searching for “balance” with humans and both discovering life-affirming qualities in themselves that they wouldn’t have found without each other or the profound effect of a “pressure and release” relationship.

*In addition to being a horsewoman and novelist, Elizabeth Cain is also cutting her teeth in politics, having just ran in a local election for the Montana State House Legislature. Cain was a secondary school teacher for 31 years in California. She has won numerous awards for her poetry, photography, and painting. Cain now lives in Montana with her husband, Jerry, and their menagerie of sled dogs, cats and horses. *Almost Paradise* and *Dancing in the Red Snow*, her fourth novel, are available to a California Riding Magazine reader for review in an upcoming issue. If you are interested, please e-mail alicia@ridingmagazine.com.*