

the quarterly journal of wholistic equine care

Natural HORSE

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Biggest Human Mistakes

by Barbra Ann King



Anything can be accomplished with love and understanding.
Photo by Emile Scott

As you arrive at the barn, grabbing your halter and lunge whip, making your way to your horse in the pasture, you are suddenly bombarded with questions in your mind about what you are going to do with your horse today. “What shall I do with my horse today? Will I be able to catch my horse easily today? Should I be firmer, stronger without being aggressive? Should I back off? Maybe I’m scary and that’s why he always runs away from me. What am I doing wrong? Why is my horse good one day and not the next? I think I’ll ride today. Well, maybe not, we’ll see how he is.” Do you recognize yourself here? If so, you are committing one of the biggest human mistakes when dealing with horses.

Mistake #1: Ambiguity

Horses do not understand ambiguity. Ambiguity equals confusion. When we try to convince our horses that we are great leaders and we simultaneously question ourselves in their presence, do you really think they can take us seriously? While you are dealing with everything going on in your head, your horse will turn around and leave. We must *have a clear mind* before undertaking anything with our horses.

Mistake # 2: Not Being in the Present Moment

Horses live in the present moment. It is a question of survival for them. If a horse living in the wild, surrounded by predators, started questioning the reason and purpose behind why his leader is asking him to move now, he wouldn’t live long enough to get an answer. You can’t do anything about the past and you can’t do much about the future either. The only thing that really matters is the present moment. Although past and future ideas are useless to horses, they do have “triggers”. By this I mean they are able to associate a certain situation with pain and/or danger because it has caused it before. They may not have a concept of the future like humans do, but a halter may trigger a reaction in them because they associate it

with what comes next, simply because they have experienced it in the past. All this still happens in the present moment. Their minds and bodies are reacting to what is happening in the present. We should try to adopt the same way of thinking, at least when we are interacting with them. If we wish to attain a close understanding and clear communication with our horses, we must *be in the present moment with them*.

Mistake #3: Being Dominant

Whether we wonder what we are going to do with our horse today, or have it all planned out to the exact detail, it all takes place in our conscious mind. We may want to believe that we are not being dominant with our horses, but if we have a plan, no matter how big or small it may be, and we carry it out without even “asking” our horses how they feel about it, then we are being dominant, expecting them to be subservient. You do not have to be a psychic to know how your horse is feeling. Instinctively, I believe that every horse guardian who truly loves her horse has either heard his voice or knew how he felt in a precise moment. That is because he was letting her know. For those of you who were brave enough to listen and reply back, you probably took your relationship to a higher level. For those who thought “Humbug! I’ll call the shots here,” you have probably been thrown off, kicked and/or bitten, and left in the dust more times than others.

Whether you are a professional trainer or someone who keeps your horse in your backyard, you will avoid accidents if you *listen to how your horse feels*. We must learn to leave our agendas behind. I do not teach colt starting clinics over a weekend, where participants come in with unbroken horses and leave two days later riding them. First of all, I refuse to start riding horses who are younger than 4 years of age simply because their bones are immature, too soft, not fully developed, and it practically guarantees they will have

premature ailments down the road (i.e. arthritis, separation of dorsal vertebrae, bowed tendons, etc.) This eliminates a lot of potential participants wanting to attend such a clinic. Secondly, no two horses will learn at the same rhythm, so to push them to follow the group is unfair. The third reason is the same as the second except it applies to humans. Clinics can be somewhat embarrassing when the clinician picks on you because you are the only one whose horse is not doing what everybody else's is.



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When I start or re-start a horse, I rarely experience any bucking or erratic behaviour. If it does happen, then I need to back off and apologize to that horse for pushing him too hard. That usually ends the training session and my leadership has to be established all over again because I created pain, fear and/or discomfort to that horse with no apparent reason to him. I spend a lot of time making it up to the horse by grooming him, rubbing him in his favourite spot, making sure I am still a good leader by protecting my personal space and respecting his. In Relationship Riding, we refer to this as True Equine Leadership. This is when humans learn to become leaders based on equine rules. A True Equine Leader does not push his or her herd mates into a state of panic and fear based on dominance and expectations.

Mistake #4: Assuming Horses Don't Know What You Are Thinking

The biggest human mistake is to assume that our horses don't know what we are thinking. Because they don't always comply with our demands, and some have very good reasons not to, we think they need to be taught how to move, how to use their bodies, how to live, etc. We presume they need to wear clothes, shoes and live in houses because we do. I've heard many people say that we should never give horses an opportunity to discover that they are stronger than we are. That being said, many people hurt horses and scare them to make sure they have control over them (dominance). Think about that last sentence; isn't it ironic?

Horses don't have to speak English in order to know what we are thinking. They know simply by reading our minds using telepathy. When we enter a field with the goal of catching that *?!*#! horse, he will leave and stay away from us. Why in the world would he come up and be friendly to someone who thinks *that* of him?

Try this:

If your horse is difficult to catch, then here's a challenge for you. Go to the field without any intentions of catching your horse, but do bring your halter with you. As you are walking towards him, use your mind to send him some love and to apologize for not listening to him in the past, for calling him names, and for losing your patience with him. Let him know that you just want to come up and say "Hi", to give him some love and touch his soft body. If he starts to walk away as you are approaching, stop and ask him permission

to come close. Tell him again that you apologize and that you love him dearly, that you only want to get close to touch him and love him. Keep in mind that your horse can read your mind and your heart. If you are not sincere or authentic, this will not work. So don't blame your horse (or me!) if you don't succeed. Instead, look at your inner-self to see if you are in the present moment, patient and being real. The goal of this exercise is to ask your horse if it's okay to approach and pet him.



Barbra Ann enjoying some "freedom" with her mare Angelica.

Photo by Jazhart Studio

If you start getting impatient and frustrated, walk away, because you obviously have an agenda and your expectations are not being met. That being said, you do want your horse to acknowledge you before you walk away. Even if you can't walk up to him and touch him, if your horse has stopped and faced you, he has acknowledged you and it's now okay to leave and try again later. You will be leaving the horse some food for thought along with the idea that you respected his wishes. That alone builds a very strong bond and relationship between the two of you.

If you only succeed in getting close and petting him, that's great. If your horse trusts you and allows or invites you to halter him, that's wonderful. If not, it doesn't matter. The point of this exercise is to have no agenda, to be in the moment, and to let the situation unfold as it needs to.

Know who you are and be who you are. We are the spirit of love ... that is at the heart of each lesson that we offer. ~ As told by a horse to Margrit Coates, author of "Connecting With Horses"

This made me realize that horses want to not only offer lessons of love, but also lessons of self-love. By pushing our personal space on a regular basis, horses want us to realize that by keeping strong personal boundaries, we are respecting who we are, thus loving ourselves.

I can tell you without a doubt that every single horse guardian out there is standing in front of a special teacher. Horses pick their guardians. They also choose to live or die. They understand that death doesn't exist, they only leave their bodies and move on. I believe that horses' biggest wish is for humans to start listening to them telepathically, like they used to many, many years ago, and believe in the "magic" that is happening right before our eyes. 🐾

Enjoy the journey!

About the author:

Barbra Ann King is an internationally known horse behaviourist, founder of the Relationship Riding method and a published author living in Alberta, Canada. She travels year-round sharing her passion with like-minded horse owners. She also offers video consultations for troubleshooting through her website: www.relationshipriding.com