

Picket Line Chatter

If horses could talk, would you listen?

This conversation was overheard one evening at an overnight trail ride. Apparently after the horses had some hay they kind of relaxed and started gossiping. I didn't hear it myself so I can't verify it but here it is as it was told to me. This is an exchange between an Appaloosa and an Arabian.

Appy: In the beginning of my relationship with my owners there was some tough going. My personal outlook on life is that there really isn't much to get very excited about. It's quite obvious that there aren't any predators around anymore. There isn't anything to be afraid of. I know there are horses on this ride that don't see it that way. Why, I've seen some horses shy at rocks. Can you believe it? Rocks — common, ordinary rocks — and they act like the rock is stalking them. Absolutely amazing. They need to get a life.

Arab: Now, wait a minute. I've seen faces on some rocks and they just glare and you know how some of us are about eye contact.

Appy: Those were just marks on the rock. You're reading way too much into it.

Arab: Yeah, you're right. I really don't have that problem anymore, but when I was younger, I was sure that some of those rocks moved.

Appy: So what's going on with you now?

Arab: My owners have been going to some clinics, and since then things have been going a lot better. The way they deal with me is not as frustrating as it used to be. Before, they could never get a step ahead of me. They were constantly playing catch up and it was really tough to figure out what they were up to. When they confused me, I would get frustrated. I guess because of the way I acted they thought I was goofy. Well, I thought they were goofy. We were getting along like a match and a gas can. I was the gas can and they were the matches. Now that we're getting in sync, I don't dread these rides anymore.

Appy: Well, I have a different view of those clinics. My people went to them too, but it didn't do much good. I think I know what was the matter. You see, I don't get excited about much. It takes too much energy and, really, what's the point? I think they learned some good things at the clinics but they didn't know

how to motivate me. They thought I was dumb and couldn't catch on. This whole thing was never my idea so I figured they owed me a good reason to take them seriously. By the way they acted, I think I know what the problem was. They were afraid to hurt my feelings. They would say things like, "Be very careful, we can't make a mistake because it'll ruin him forever." They made it so easy to ignore them and because I ignored them, they thought I was dumb. They finally sent me to a trainer. Wow, was that an experience! I tried to ignore him but that was a big mistake. Let's just say that I've got a new outlook on life. He must've taught my owners something because they picked up where he left off and everything is going pretty well.

Arab: Was he mean and did he hurt you?

Appy: Let me put it this way. The boss mare at my farm is not too hard to get along with, but I have to tell you, I ignored her one time and I never did it again. It took a couple of months for the hair to grow back where she got me. This trainer didn't do anything as bad as she did, but he let me know immediately that he and I were going to be transacting some important business and ignoring him wasn't going to be part of it. Now, don't jump to conclusions. He didn't force me to do anything. He gave me choices and then let me choose on my own. His clear and consistent responses to my choices made getting along with him easy.

Arab: It's all so confusing. On the ride today I heard some of the people talking about a farrier who, according to them, had a lot of pent-up anger. They said he would hit or kick a horse at the drop of a hat. I'm really glad he doesn't do my hooves. It scares me just thinking about it. I like a farrier who considers my feelings.

Appy: Yeah, I heard that conversation, too. I know the guy. He came to our farm once. He promptly let me know that I was going to behave myself and listen to him. I challenged him, he gave me one slap with his rasp, and it was over. He wasn't angry with me so I realized he just wanted me to behave. I settled down, let him do his job, and he immediately let me know that he liked me and there was nothing personal. I heard him tell my owners that some horses

need a good slap, while some horses should not be slapped. It all depends on the horse. It was actually a relief to be around somebody I could respect and I very quickly started to trust him. But get this. After he left, my owners said they would never let that guy on the place again. I guess they read somewhere that a horse should never be hit for any reason. They were mad. I couldn't believe my ears! If that is the case, then the boss horse in our herd must have a lot of pent-up anger because she tore out a patch of my hair. People seem to think the clock makes the sun come up. I wonder if people have always been this way or if there was a time when they had horse sense. Well, enough of that. There's nothing I can do about it. One more thing, if that farrier ever comes to your farm, just remember, all you have to do to get him to behave himself is to behave yourself. He's really easy to control.

Arab: I'm pretty touchy-feely. Do you think he and I could get along?

Appy: He is more touchy-feely than anyone I ever met. You'll get along fine. Don't let those people scare you. They don't understand and probably never will. So what else do you know?

Arab: See that Paint over there? She was telling me today that the guy who owns her is a real jerk. He doesn't make himself clear at all and then gets mad because she doesn't respond to his confusing signals. Being a bully seems to make him feel important. It seems like his idea of being a cowboy is to be tough and macho. Whatever. I guess it takes all kinds. I've noticed that people who try to fit some image or act like somebody else are phony, and phoniness is really hard to respect. The bay next to that Paint apparently really respects his owner. I guess this gal has only had horses a couple of years but she just gets it. She doesn't put up with any nonsense but is reasonable and fair. A horse really can't ask for much more than that.

Appy: Say, I've got a question for you. Why do you think humans are so different?

Arab: Well, we are horses and they aren't.

Appy: No, that's not what I mean. Why are they so different from each other? For example, some farriers have a short fuse and some don't.

Arab: I've wondered the same thing. Some people seem awfully skittish. Some of those people talk about us Arabians being skittish. I'll bet all this skit-

tishness comes from us not understanding each other.

Appy: I don't think they understand what we have to go through to really get acquainted with their ways. It certainly can be done but it takes time and some explanation from them. What really gets me is when people get frustrated, scared, confused, angry, bull-headed and otherwise lose control. I'm not sure what to expect from people when they act like that. But like I said, since my owners went to those clinics and I went out for training, it keeps getting better.

Arab: I agree, it's really scary if the people I'm supposed to trust and respect are subject to crazy ideas and emotions. Fortunately for me, my people really want to learn and they are learning. I don't know if they realize it or not, but I've been learning a lot more since they have taken a serious interest in learning. It's a lot easier to follow if somebody is actually leading.

Appy: In a way all this learning has been a setback for me. I had my people convinced I was dumb so they didn't expect much from me. Now that they know the truth, I can't use the dumb excuse anymore. Have you noticed that some people at this ride do a lot of talking about famous trainers, new techniques and stuff they read about in books? What's scary about some of these people is that you can tell they still don't get it. What's up with that?

Arab: I don't know. Maybe it's in the breeding. At any rate, it's out of our control so all we can do is hope for the best. One more thing. A couple of years ago some people at the barn where I live were talking about us. One of them read out loud an article in the May 2006 issue of *Horse & Family*. I was able to hear the whole thing. It was about these trail riders sitting around the campfire discussing farriers. They were all bragging about their own farrier and criticizing each other's farriers. Get this. They eventually discovered they all had the same farrier! I laughed so hard I started to colic. As far as the people were concerned, it was the same old story: some get it and some don't. Some chuckled but some didn't think it was very funny. Why do you think it's so hard for humans to think outside the box? Oh well. You can lead a human to water but you can't make him drink. It's sure been fun chatting with you. Sometimes I feel all alone in my struggles and it's just good to visit with someone who understands.

Appy: I feel the same way. By the way, did the vet

ever figure out why you colicked? Anyway, I've been thinking about a couple of issues that are a little confusing. You asked me if the trainer I went to was mean and did he hurt me. That's really the wrong question. Whether or not a human is said to be mean is conjecture and opinion. If you listen to people long enough you'll discover that they don't agree concerning the whole concept of meanness. The way I see it — and I think most horses would agree — is that meanness is an attitude, not an action. That farrier we were talking about slapped me with his rasp but there was nothing mean about him. I wonder if people are thinking of what it would feel like if they got hit like that. They forget that we horses have bodies that can absorb such a hit, and that kind of discipline is familiar to us. What many people don't get is that horses are not nearly as concerned about what is done to them as they are about why it was done. When that guy slapped me, he did it so quickly that I knew what it was for. He did it hard enough that I knew he meant business and then he instantly dropped the matter. It was obvious that he wasn't out to get me. Because I knew that, I quickly dismissed what he did because I knew why he did it. After it was over, the thing I appreciated was that he gave me credit for having intelligence and being capable of making a decision. I respected him for that and very quickly learned that I could trust him. When my owners got mad at him, all I could do was shrug and roll my eyes. I wanted to tell them what happened but they can't hear me. I don't think they'd believe me anyway. Now, to be fair with them, I have to tell you that one time I heard them talking about a friend of theirs who had a very bad farrier experience. He had a guy out who lost his temper and kicked and hit the horse in a way that made no sense except that it was obvious he was out for revenge. See, there you go — that's that boxy human thinking. The guy who slapped me was nothing like the guy they heard about, but because the two farriers took similar actions, my people assumed they were birds of a feather. I think humans do a lot of rationalizing and draw conclusions without thinking it through.

Arab: That's confusing. How do you rationalize without thinking, or think without rationalizing?

Appy: Good point. What I mean is, one is a knee-jerk reaction based on one's feelings of the moment; the other is a more deliberate thought process that is guided by one's world view. That's the way I see it. So what else do you want to talk about?

Arab: I've got one for you. Have you ever noticed some of the strange ways dogs act? They just hang around people, wag their tails and lick people's faces. What's up with that?

Appy: Well, I'm not sure but I'll make a stab at it. You realize, don't you, that we have some significant similarities? We are both pack/herd animals. We both have order in our respective societies and that order is enforced from the top down. Because social standing matters to us, people are able to manipulate us into doing their bidding. (The reason they can't train cats is that cats don't need anybody and have no interest in social standing.) But there is one thing that sets dogs and horses apart. Dogs are predators and we are prey animals. Our survival depends on our need to look over our shoulder and be suspicious of anything we are not sure about. Dogs don't have that problem in the same way we do. Dogs don't worry about prey the way we worry about predators. Even though most of us horses become quite trusting of our people, some of us never completely let down our guard. Generally speaking, wagging our tails, licking people's faces and having a desire to hang out with them is simply not in our DNA.

Arab: I don't know about that. The dog on our farm is a good friend of mine — and I kind of like our people.

Appy: You asked me a general question and I gave you a general answer. Of course, with all the variables involved, there are going to be exceptions and some will be very significant.

Arab: I didn't think it through, did I? Do you ever wonder why people say whoa when all they want is for us to slow down? If they want us to take them seriously, shouldn't their words have specific and clear meanings? Otherwise we have to guess what they mean and that often leads to trouble.

Appy: I couldn't agree more. When people's communication is not clear I have a tendency to start ignoring them. They seem to think that because their intentions are good that we can read their minds.

Arab: My owner thinks I can read his mind but I'm simply keying on his movements and shifts that he doesn't even know he is doing.

Appy: That's interesting. I guess I don't pay enough attention to catch any of that stuff. That way I don't make mistakes by assuming and get in trouble. By the way, what do you know about bits?

Arab: Well, I have heard other horses talk about bits. It seems like the most common complaint is that the way the bit is used is more of a problem than the type of bit. Personally, I like some bits better than others but the real problem lies with who is holding the reins. I could probably do OK with any type of bit if the rider knew how to use it properly.

Appy: I suppose it's like a lot of things involving people. It's not always easy to know what they mean by what they say. That's probably because they read books and go to clinics and learn some very good stuff. They get acquainted with one-liners, phrases and ideas but don't grasp the depth and scope of the concept. They fool themselves into thinking that knowing the words is the same as understanding the concept.

Arab: I've noticed the same problem with their actions — it's not always easy to tell what they mean. Sometimes it seems humans have more actions than they need. When that happens, it's tough to tell which actions have any real meaning at all. It's as if they are trying too hard. If they would just relax, it would help a lot.

Appy: Yeah, I see some people looking right at their horses and leading them with a stiff arm like they are afraid of being stepped on. Boy, that would get old really fast. I would always be wondering what the problem was. When people act like there is a problem, one can only assume that there is one.

Arab: That is the one thing I dislike the most in relating to people. I hate wondering. My mind takes off in all directions trying to figure out what's going on. The more confusing people's actions are, the longer it takes to figure them out. The thing is, I'm never quite sure if they know what they're doing. I know I'm supposed to be listening to them and responding but I'd really like some assurance from them that they've got it together.

Appy: You get too worked up about stuff. When I'm around confused people I just tune them out and keep eating and pulling them around with a lead rope.

Arab: Have you noticed that some people and their horses get along so well that it looks like they are on the same page? They aren't worried and second guessing each other.

Appy: Yeah, I wonder how that happens. My guess is that something happened that eliminated the

doubt they had about each other. It's pretty easy to see that they have a stress-free relationship.

Arab: When I was just a foal, I heard a couple of old geldings talking about their past lives. The thing I remember is that one of them said that people don't have the common sense they used to have and they could see a lot of problems coming.

Appy: We're getting along pretty well with our owners and it seems to keep getting better. You can tell they really want to learn.

Arab: That reminds me of something last winter after snow had been on the ground for a while. The little girl at our farm brought a little box out to the barn. It was wrapped in red and green paper, with a bow. She brought it over to my stall and showed it to me. I sniffed it but wasn't impressed. Then she started to unwrap it. Some nice smells started coming out of that box and aroused my curiosity. She opened it and showed it to me again. There were some really delicious treats in there and she made it obvious that I was free to accept the gift. After that I kept my eye open for small, pretty boxes but none ever showed up again. Now, if that is something people do at this time of year, maybe she'll do it again soon. You know how people are. They read a lot of books. I'll bet they learned about pretty boxes with treats from some book. I wish I could read — I'd like to know where that gift idea comes from. There's probably quite a story behind it. I wonder if it's another one of the ideas people get from reading or going to a seminar. Do they just learn the right words, or do they really know the depth and scope of what started this pretty box idea? If horse clinics are an indication, then we can guess there is more talk about pretty boxes than there is understanding of what happened and why it happened. I wonder what the first gift was that started this whole thing.

Appy: They have a special book that holds the answer to that. Unfortunately, we can't read books so we just have to go by what our people say about it. The scary part is, do they know the true meaning of the story? Do they really know who the story is about?

Arab: I have a feeling that if all they do is make pretty boxes, they maybe missed the whole point. I wonder what that point might have been?

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson