

A Deadly Mixture

The combination of naiveté, sincerity and enthusiasm can be a real problem.

The beginning stages of any enterprise that has captivated our interest are filled with uncertainty, curiosity and naiveté. We have hopes and visions of how this new journey will bring fulfillment to our lives.

Naiveté can go in several different directions, singly or both at once. First, it can be a complete inability to comprehend the vastness of our newfound interest. Second, it can be the illusion of having knowledge and understanding of something we know almost nothing about.

The first one is often unavoidable. The second one is scary. Throwing horses into this mix complicates things very quickly. The young, green horse is naive (doesn't really know what is going on). He is sincere (believes that his present point of view is legitimate). When powered by enthusiasm, we have a real challenge on our hands.

When the green horse owner is in the exact same condition, we have explosive possibilities. Sincerity and enthusiasm have the potential to turn naivete into a monster. Sincerity can be very deceptive. Both horse and humans can assume that because they are so sincere they must be right. Youth is frequently bewitched by an idealism that is charged with sincerity and enthusiasm. (Don't ask me how I know that.) That might be OK if it were not for naiveté. A small view of a big world is OK if we understand that is just what it is. Then we will be open to help, advice and education.

We need to realize that a young horse has those same issues to contend with. Look at what happens when a new horse owner has a young, untrained horse. We have a naive and insecure horse who desperately needs strong and confident leadership. We also have a naive, insecure, sincere, enthusiastic and thoroughly confused horse owner. What a mess! Somebody is going to get hurt.

So what can be done about naiveté if it is so bad? It is a universal problem that is incredibly subtle and difficult to discover in one's own mind. Maybe simply acknowledging that it is real and probably exists in me is a good start. At least then I won't be so sure of myself. I will at least be able to acknowledge that I don't have the big picture yet. If I settle that in my mind I can dedicate my energy and attention to learning and growing.

My confidence must be flexible. Stereotyping has no place in horse handling or training. I can be certain of sound philosophy but never stuck in my opinions of how that philosophy should be acted upon and enforced.

Naiveté influences both knowledge and understanding. Because it is so definable, we know that a grasp of simple arithmetic does not mean we can do higher algebra. The knowledge of horses is not so definable, leaving us plenty of room to kid ourselves. Now, we can't know what we don't know but we can at least admit that there is something to be known that we don't know.

Understanding what we know is a whole different kettle of fish. The best formula for learning to understand what we know is the combination of a hungry mind, time, experience and common sense. The hungry mind learns what it can, when it can and from whom or what it can. The simmering influence of time helps us sort things out. Practical application gives us experience, which also helps us sort things out. Experience will include mistakes, disappointments and setbacks. Common sense will help us categorize our information and experience.

If I love my naiveté I will snort, stand on my hind legs and then run full speed with my mane and tail flowing in the wind. I will pity my brothers who have submitted to rope and pen. I may be impressive in a wild sort of way but I will be absolutely useless to humanity. I will keep from myself the joy that some kind and caring human could share with me. After all, I am the center of the universe and am all that really matters. Naiveté is my partner, my counselor and my guide in life. What the two of us don't know can't be know anyway. So get out of my way and let me run. I am sincere and full of enthusiasm, therefore I know I am right.

OK, let's look at sincerity. It is a very slippery commodity. It is absolutely essential for any endeavor. It helps us to stay focused and probably supplies us with some perseverance. Without it we are going nowhere. However, many of us humans have gone to the grave being sincerely wrong. We can spend our lives climbing the ladder only to find it was on the wrong wall.

The reason sincerity is so slippery is the false sense of validation it can give. "I'm sincere, so how could I be wrong?" Sincerity can very easily blind us to our naiveté. It can justify some pretty foolish thinking. "I want to be a good horse owner" is a claim that most of us will admit to. Obviously, that desire or determination alone will not benefit our horse. We seek and receive advice but we don't inquire any further, naively believing every piece of advice offered. Our desire to learn was there to some degree. We were sincere in accepting the advice.

This may be a good place to give some personal experience with naiveté. Hindsight tells me that naiveté can be first cousin to stupidity. That is my own conclusion. I didn't say that naiveté is stupidity—just don't bet on it. At least we should be suspicious and tread lightly. If nothing else, we don't have to be willfully and stubbornly naive. If we are, sincerity will not bail us out and in that condition enthusiasm will seal our doom.

Enthusiasm is really scary. It is a wonderful characteristic and a joy to behold (unless it is the enthusiasm of a religious fanatic who thinks your head should be cut off). I realize that's pretty extreme but you get my drift. Enthusiasm is like gasoline. It can power us on a wonder-

ful and enjoyable trip or it can explode and do great damage.

If enthusiasm is separated from common sense, all will be fine until trouble or tough times come. Then it will drain away quicker than it came and we will be left with our sincerity and our naiveté. Without enthusiasm they will be of little use to us, kind of like a tire without air.

Enthusiasm will find its fullest expression and value when naiveté starts to disintegrate. Knowledge is no longer second hand. Understanding is beginning to blossom. Confidence is growing at a steady pace. Confusion is disappearing. We are beginning to experience contact and connection with our horse. The horse is more relaxed in our presence. We are more relaxed. Trust and respect are growing. Now our enthusiasm is not giddy and silly. It begins to look more like anticipation as we build on what we have learned. The honeymoon is over and we are settling into a solid horse-human relationship.

If we have learned self-control, it will be easier to teach our horse self-control. If in our childhood we were carelessly and foolishly told “No,” we probably did not abandon our agenda. If, on the other hand, we were wisely and firmly told “No” and taught to deal with it, we found it to be the doorway to “Yes” in life. No is foundational to yes.

Telling our horse “No” may be somewhat negative but it will give the structure and stability in which “Yes” can find its proper level and value. A constant green light leads to the horse sooner or later running red lights and thinking nothing of it. The naive horse owner won’t know the difference and is heading for a wreck. Red is foundational to green.

Consider Papa Fish instructing his son. “Son, when you see a big, juicy worm dangling in front of you, always take a good look at it. If there is a string attached to it, leave it alone no matter how good it looks or how hungry you are. Never, never, never bite into that worm. You don’t know it, but there is a hook in it and it is designed to get you. See this scar on the side of my mouth? I was fortunate enough to get away but it was close. Some strange looking creatures were floating on what looked like a great big log. They were pulling me out of the water but I fought hard enough to get away.

“The old fish used to say that terrible things happened to any fish that was foolish enough to take a worm with a string attached. I do remember some strange sounds those creatures made. It sounded like frying pan, whatever that is.

“Now, I know you’re a sincere young fish and I remember the enthusiasm I had when I took that big worm. The problem was that I didn’t know that what I saw wasn’t all that was there. I had heard the old fish talk about it but I thought, “They’re just old fish. What can they know, anyway?”

“So, Son, avoid any deal with strings attached—you don’t ever want to find out what frying pan means. It is always wise to be skeptical and suspicious. I remember

seeing one of my friends floating by that big log, with an odd, shiny thing in his mouth. He had a look in his eye that I had never seen before and don’t want to ever see again. And by the way, I never saw him again.”

The message to the horse owner is this: Naiveté will convince us that the worm is good, sincerity will convince us to bite and enthusiasm will set the hook.

That brings us to the questions we all need to ask ourselves: If I do this with or to my horse, what could happen? If it did happen, how bad could it get? Those are questions we must keep in mind at all times, in all places and under all circumstances. To refuse to be cautious could send us from the frying pan into the fire.

We need to classify the information we receive in the file cabinets of our minds. The labels on the various drawers should read something like “that makes sense,” “there might be something to it,” “that makes no sense whatsoever,” etc., etc.

We will occasionally discover that we need to reclassify some things. If we are willing to reclassify information, it is probably a sign that naiveté is disappearing. Then sincerity will work for our good and enthusiasm will take us where we want to go.

Knowledge alone does not help us. Modern higher education continually produces people with lots of knowledge but nearly void of common sense. The university professor is not bashful about classifying old-fashioned common sense as simply outdated thinking.

The family farm was the last stronghold of common sense and stable thinking. Kids grew up working hard, seeing animals born and die, and they actually knew where milk, meat and produce came from. They knew what was involved in the production of those things. To be fair and balanced, we must also admit that some farmers used their kids as slaves and treated their livestock without concern for their basic well-being. That does not mean that they should have carpeted the barnyard or hired masseuses for the livestock. So common sense should include care and concern but reject a compassion that has been defiled with a sloppy mind-set.

It is of interest to note that most of those who are so concerned about saving owls and seals and improving the living conditions of farm animals think nothing of killing the youngest and most defenseless humans, the unborn. That is naiveté of the most foul and reprehensible sort. They send future surgeons and scientists into the trash can where they won’t be in our way—or have a chance to pursue their calling in life. Naiveté is far too kind a word for such sincere and enthusiastic slaughter. For that potential surgeon or scientist, naiveté, sincerity and enthusiasm are indeed a very deadly mixture. If people are concerned about over-population, there is always the option of suicide. Of course, it does depend on whose life is at stake—demonstrating a sinister naiveté, a deluded sincerity and an enthusiasm inspired by evil.

Just my opinion,

— Warren Bengtson