

Epiphanies and Wake-up Calls

When the light bulb comes on, take care where you go next.

We have all had and will have epiphanies or light-bulb moments. Sometimes they come out of nowhere but more commonly they come when we are concentrating on something and/or learning. For our purposes here we will put it in the context of horse training and handling.

We read, hear or watch something and the light bulb comes on. The problem is, we haven't learned anything yet, we just found out about it. It is like picking up a brochure describing a nice place to visit. It describes the place to some extent and gives some reasons to go there. If somebody asks you if you ever heard of that particular place, you can say yes but you can only describe what you read. After you have spent several vacations there, you are able to describe much more than the brochure tells about. Now you can enthusiastically recommend this place to others but they are going to have to experience it for themselves. Your enthusiastic description means little to them except for the excitement they see in you.

When horse people mistake the brochure for the campground, there is frustration at best and injury at worst. That is not the fault of the brochure but the brochure will often be blamed. The fault lies in the failure of the person to follow this new burst of light and explore the new territory that is made available. If we function on the level of what we read in the brochure, we have deceived ourselves into thinking that is all there is to it.

When we seek advice from other horse people, we need to determine, if possible, if they only read a brochure or if they have actually been there. One way to tell is if the answers they give are quick and simplistic—that should be a red flag. If, on the other hand, their responses are thoughtful, measured and allow for variables, it is very likely that they have been there. They may even give some disclaimers because they realize that the problem presented to them may have different reasons needing different responses.

Horses have epiphanies, too. As we interact with them, they have those moments when they “get it.”

However, if we aren't “getting it” at the same time, it will be possible for the horse to suddenly realize that we are confused. Then all of his epiphanies will work against the relationship as he discovers that he really doesn't need to respect us. Tentativeness on our part is the green light he is looking for because, if possible, he would like to dominate the relationship. Here are some of those green lights:

1. A horse is tied with a weak rope or halter, sits back and breaks loose. He made a discovery.
2. You start to lead your horse by his halter without a lead rope and he pulls out of your grasp. He has made an unfortunate discovery.
3. He threatens to bite or kick and then is consoled and given a treat. He has made a wonderful discovery.
4. He refuses to go in a particular direction, so rather than have a confrontation, he is allowed to go the other way. Another discovery.
5. Any time he is allowed to disobey us it is either a new epiphany or the confirmation of a prior one. More discoveries.
6. He now discovers that he is the only one making discoveries. He is now solidly in control of his people.

How do we make sure his epiphanies are parallel with our wishes and requirements? Here are responses to 1–6:

1. Tie high enough to avoid entanglement. Tie with something strong enough to prevent breakage.
2. Always snap a lead rope to the halter. It will keep your arm in its socket and prevent an escape by the horse.
3. Any aggressive threat must be met with an aggressive response—preferable a good hit or kick, swift and hard (but not in the eye).
4. If a resistance is a first-time offense, patient persistence will usually prevail. If it is a repeat

performance, your horse needs “motivational therapy.”

5. At absolutely no time should a horse be permitted to exercise his will over his handler. The secret is to keep him honest in the small stuff.
6. Something is drastically wrong with the way he is being handled. It is time for a philosophical inventory.

When our epiphanies are pursued, studied and implemented, we pretty well ensure lifelong occurrences of them. Our outlook will become optimistic and that in itself sets us up for a positive horse-human relationship.

Here are a few suggestions. If you are new to horses and are wondering where to start, there are a few epiphanies that should be part of your journey. Here is the list, but you'll have to have your own light-bulb moments:

1. It is not wise or even necessary to become your horse's friend. He needs leadership and authority. Whatever friendship your horse wants to have with you will come in its own time. I didn't say you and your horse shouldn't be friends. It's simply a matter of priorities. When people place a priority on being their horse's friend, they probably won't be willing or able to quickly get after the horse when needed. They are afraid that any sharp dominance will ruin their chances of being their horse's friend. That is a deception that keeps many horses from respecting their people.
2. If your horse bites or kicks you, he is merely establishing the authority you forfeited. He sees you as a subordinate and does not respect you.
3. If your horse threatens you and you hit or kick him, you will not warp his psyche. A physical response from you will make perfect sense to him. To horses, this is the ultimate “natural” horse handling.
4. The concept of positive reinforcement is totally foreign to the horse's world view. In his world the bad or undesirable is attacked and the good is simply ignored. Does the cop pay you for obeying the speed limit and ignore you when you speed? Check it out and think it over.

5. Verbally commanding your horse must be immediately followed by his compliance. Otherwise he is being taught that all those words mean nothing.
6. If your horse does kick or bite you, it doesn't necessarily mean that he dislikes you. He probably sees you as subordinate and is simply treating you as he would a pasture mate. Nothing personal—he just felt like it.
7. If your horse sees you as the alpha horse, he may kick out of fright or surprise but not deliberately.
8. When a wake-up call comes as the result of a mistake, do not write it off as unimportant.
9. All horses are wired to dominate if they can and submit if they must.
10. Riding, driving and handling horses can be very dangerous.
11. A horse is smart enough to be held accountable for his attitudes and behavior. Don't be condescending by regarding him as too dumb to behave himself.
12. A stream can rise no higher than its source. The horse will not and cannot follow a lost and confused leader.

Every “brochure” you find should be looked at carefully and investigated before you reserve vacation dates. Explore, examine and consider thoughtfully, cautiously and seriously.

Remember, all that glitters is not gold. Horse people are like everybody else. They have a tendency to lean in a particular direction. Politically and religiously there are conservatives, liberals and independents. My advice is to stand back far enough from the trees so you can see the forest, then blaze your own trail and march to your own drum. That doesn't mean that you throw away every “brochure” you find in order to maintain some kind of independence. It simply means that your journey can only be walked by you. If light-bulb moments are flashlights to shine on our pathway, then the acquisition of knowledge and understanding is the way we keep fresh batteries in our flashlight.

Just my opinion,

— Warren Bengtson