

# Knowing or Living

*Horsemanship is a way of life but you need to know some things in order to live it successfully.*

**H**orsemanship is a life to be lived, not just knowledge to be gained. While knowing and living are not the same, they cannot exist without each other. We don't travel by gasoline, we travel by car but the car isn't going anywhere without gas. It is not possible to live this horsemanship life without knowledge but it is possible to have knowledge and not live that life.

Knowledge informs us of what we should do. Understanding tell us when, how and why we should do it. When knowledge, understanding, tough love, confidence, a desire to learn, our past experience and our vision for the future all find the right ratio and mixture, horsemanship will begin to come alive for us and in us.

We cannot deal with this topic without a look at the relatively rare and often misunderstood issue of tough love. Love alone is emotional and squishy. Tough alone is harsh and brittle. Tough love is strong yet pliable and joins empathy with accountability.

Tough love is the heart and soul of the horseman's life. It is the driving force behind the concept of being as kind and gentle as possible and as tough and forceful as necessary. It is the perfect counter balance in horsemanship. It assures that consequences will not be vindictive and corrections will not be condescending. It is the clearest and quickest way to develop good character in a horse. It will help him become trustworthy and dependable.

The knowledge we have enables us to teach and train a horse. Teaching is giving a horse information. Training is making sure that information is acted on. When teaching and training are energized by understanding and tough love, a horse will become skillful and have good manners.

So how do we know where we are at and how much of this horsemanship life we are living? When we can hear our horses ask their three questions and are quick and clear in our answers, then we are probably beginning to live the life and walk the talk. Those three questions are: 1. What do I need to be

afraid of? 2. What can I get away with? 3. What do you want?

Now, it is possible for horses to be so confused about us that they aren't sure which question to ask first. We then need to help them form the question in their minds so they can ask it. When those questions have been answered clearly, we will have a horse that will do what we want, when we want, how we want and do it quietly and deliberately.

That is not to say that a horse can be expected to be perfect. We are not perfect so how can we expect a horse to be perfect. However, if we are living that life, the difficulties that arise will be brief and resolved clearly. The fruits of that life will give horse and human a real sense of unity and partnership.

The problem with knowledge is that it is a realm so vast that we cannot, in one lifetime, learn it all. How much do we know compared to what can be known? That is impossible to determine. So to be proud of what we know or to be ashamed of what we don't know are exercises in futility at best and distractions at worst.

How much gas does it take to start your car? Not much. The amount of gas in the tank will determine how far you will go but has nothing to do with whether or not the engine will start.

The amount of knowledge we have does not determine whether or not we can enter into this life. It does matter how far we can go but if we are hungry to learn, our tank will never run dry and how far we can go will never have a limit.

So, if you are new to horses and find yourself intimidated and confused and the mountain looks impossible to climb, I have good news for you. If you are willing to put one foot in front of the other, the mountain is yours. Because this mountain has no top we will realize that the destination is the journey.

The length of time we have owned horses has little to do with how high we have climbed. Many horse owners have chosen to make permanent camp at a pleasant spot on the mountain and there they

stay. They can say they are on the mountain but have cheated themselves out of the mountain that is left to be discovered.

Novice horse owner, take heart, the climb is not only possible but it will provide its own energy and motivation for the climb that is just ahead. Don't worry about the climb that somebody else is on. Enjoy your own climb. Those ahead of you can encourage and teach you but only you can do your own climbing. Only you can learn from your mistakes because only you know the context and the real reasons regarding those mistakes.

We will make camp many times on this journey but we must never make permanent camp. If you come across somebody who has made permanent camp, greet them and be cordial, but for goodness sake, keep climbing. It is possible that the people you meet will be influenced by your example, break camp and keep on climbing. They may not but that is not your concern.

There are people who go to mountain climbing school and read mountain climbing books but they don't climb. There are people who have mountain climbing catalogs and can tell you all about the right equipment for the various conditions on the mountain but they don't climb. Lessons and equipment are essential but you still gotta climb. Arm-chair mountain climbers can give you a lot of information but because they have never known the challenges and joys of the mountain, their knowledge is not their own, it is hearsay.

So, to the novice horse owner I say, learn all you can and don't get in over your head. Ride horses that fit your ability. Ride in places that fit your ability. Give this life of horsemanship a chance to take root and grow. There will be enough surprises and struggles without asking for them. It is impossible to explore new territory without surprises. Dealt with and resolved, surprises are unexpected opportunities to learn.

If you are not at ease and are not enjoying your horse, find out why and resolve it or get a different horse. You can't learn and advance if you are scared. A mountain doesn't care if you are scared but a horse does. The horse and rider are two living beings that are more similar than they are different. They both

need the confidence that comes with continual success. Being at ease with each other is essential to a horse-human partnership.

However, partnership does not mean equality in its truest sense. The human must be the leader and the horse the follower. It is a master-servant relationship. A master (boss) can direct his or her servant (employee) without being condescending or mean spirited. That would take the life out of horsemanship and make it clinical and sterile. Knowledge alone can never turn a horse owner into a horseman.

What do all horse owners have in common? We are all on the mountain. Some have set up permanent camp and some keep climbing. Some are climbing without excess baggage. Some are carrying the extra weight of fear and confusion. They are weights that only make our climb difficult and sometimes discouraging.

Horses struggle with this baggage too. They didn't volunteer for this relationship so it is our responsibility to make their load lighter. We do that by answering their three questions. They can't give their attention and focus on the climb when carrying that excess weight. If we are carrying that excess weight it will keep us off balance, making us tentative and unable to focus on climbing our mountain. We all have or have had those struggles. The struggles are not the problem. Our view of them and what we do about them is what matters. Our horse-human relationship succeeds or fails on the basis of how we regard and what we do with baggage.

When a horse discovers that we will lighten his load, he will be willing to climb this mountain with us. So I must ask myself, "Is my horse's load getting lighter? If not, is it because my load is not getting lighter?" Let's get rid of the weights that hinder us so we can be free to lighten the load our horses are carrying. Baggage will choke the life out of horsemanship. When the life is gone we will be stuck with our knowledge and have no idea what to do with it.

We do not create the horsemanship life. It is already there waiting for us to acknowledge it, partake of it, submit to it and enjoy it.

For what it's worth,

— Warren Bengtson