

Dressage

From the Heart

Book One



Nahshon Cook

#1

I'm learning that correct rein contact has absolutely nothing to do with my hand in relation to my horse's mouth,, but rather in my horse's knowing they always have a safe place to go when I'm at the helm.

#2

I got Nova for free! We've been homies going on five years. He was given to me because he was such a rouge. Before I'd gotten him, he'd gone through eight trainers in six years.

I talked to one of the trainers that had him who told me she hated him because he didn't follow rules. He's not papered, so the vet's best guesstimate of how old he is 16, according to his teeth.

He's shown me how to take horses apart, find the missing pieces, and put them all back together in their proper place. This is the core of my practice as a trainer, and teacher, and student of the classical art of training horses.

Nuno Oliveira wrote, "Difficult horses are for the person who wants to go into equestrian art in depth."

To that I'll add good training takes the time it takes and should be healing. It's a great lesson on the journey to wholeness that comes with seeing things as they are. It's meditation.

I think the greatest lesson Nova has taught me is this: The more control I have in my mind, the more power I have in my body.

I'm thankful to be a part of the place in the world he's claimed for himself. I'm thankful to him for being such a wonderful friend and brother to me.

One night, soon after I'd acquired him, he came to me in dream and told me he was tired of sharing a mucky paddock and that he wanted his own stall. He also told me I was his person.

I'd just come back into the country after my few years of travel in Asia, and didn't have a car or a job.

I told him he'd have to help me make it all work if he wanted me to stay with him.

And he has. He's kept his promise.

#3

To find balance in the saddle we must come back to the breath. When we come back to the breath, we find out where we're locked in our bodies. Where we're locked lets us know where our fear is. And our fear is always, always of losing our confidence, which is a wide, wide spectrum (in my personal experience as a teacher) that ranges from anxiety around imperfection, to falling off (again), to getting on for the first time. Regardless, it is a result of reality boxes we've put up that don't allow us to continue growing into ourselves because it's scary.

The horses I've worked with who struggle with these anxiety issues in training, it's always a result of methods that glorify coarsen over cognizance. The horses, in turn, put up the same walls people do. And like people, depending on how those expectations are internalized, some can forgive life and move on, others can't. That said, we all have everything we need to get as far as we can go, regardless of how far we get. All of our bests are different and the same all at once.

Good or bad, horses and people pass on what they know. Expectation without an explanation equals evasion. The process of training lies in the art of establishing the language to explain why we are doing what we're doing before doing it: the basics. This is why the breath is so vital for progress in riding: it shows us how to be with what is instead of what we hope for or imagine. What a beautiful beginning.

#4

It's not just about riding well, but everything else trying to ride more beautifully encompasses. It changes your life because it makes you pay very, very close attention in a much more meaningful way. Which is what rider feel is, I think: deep listening, outside of emotion. It also makes you responsible for what you feel and, even more so, how you respond. The correct seat blossoms out of trust, not time.

#5

Contact starts in the heart, not the rein.

#6

All I know for sure when it comes to horses is the slowest way is usually the fastest, and that they deserve more consideration than they usually get. These two things, when given excessively, are the makers of miracles.

#7

Every time your horses sees you, they should expect good things.

#8

A correct position in the saddle allows the rider to live in the stillness of a horse's movement. It's exemplified by attentive hands, an erect torso, a flexibly following pelvis and spine, and breathing legs. But how is this rootedness into the horse's heart achieved? The answer: relax and feel!

In every tradition of classical dressage, the three-point seat is the conductor in the orchestra of independent aids. It's what makes it possible for a person's spine to soak up the energy from the horse's hind legs so the person has hands that are kind enough for the horse's mouth to want to be friends with them. It's a little magic triangle made up of the seat bones and the pubic bone.

I've found it's best achieved by pressing the perineum into the seat of the saddle. This is only possible when the breath is allowed to go deep down in the abdominal region to relax the involuntary muscles on the pelvic floor. To relax the glutes, soften your toes into the soles of your boots, let them lay flat, then try gently turning the heels out, away from the horse's sides. This softens the lower back, the backs of the knees, the hamstrings, and unlocks the hip-flexors. You'll sit deeper. You'll begin feeling your hips move up one at a time when one of the horse's hind legs is under your seat bone, preparing to push off. It's a beautiful rocking motion.

With the seat bones moving in isolation like this, three of our gaits are perfectly paired with the horse's. When we walk in our hips, they walk. When we jog in our hips (for sitting trot), they trot. When we skip, with either one or the other leg leading, they canter.

When dressage isn't a competition, it's a meditation. So, please, be kind to yourself. If the mind is just too busy to be calm, try this: breathe in deeply on the inhale and gently hum out on the exhale until it quiets down. It will help you relax and feel!

#9

Every day I'm learning, more and more, such as how to check in with the horse to see where my balance is.

#10

Because horses are what they are for me, I think a lot about how they're handled, particularly when it comes to training. One place of great consideration is the horse's mouth in relation to my hands when I'm riding.

As soon as I take up the reins, I don't consider my hands my own anymore. It's taken me a while to trust that space. Otherwise, giving too much becomes as addictive as taking too much, and despite of my best efforts, confusion and frustration and enmeshment result. That said, every way is a way for sure, and at the end of the day it's up to each of us to find our own. For me, the purpose of the teacher is to teach us how to do that.

On my own journey for a more balanced balance, I've learned everything works better when I remember to breathe and feel, and to let the horses lead. The present moment is all possibility.

#11

A correctly schooled dressage horse's education takes a long time. Sometimes, it feels like watching paint dry. But, more and more, I'm finding beauty in the boredom. It's a place of silence, and observation, and intention, and praise, and really teeny-tiny glories of try blossoming, so long as the environment is conducive.

#12

It's mind blowing how bio-mechanically the body doesn't move as beautifully when bones are out of joint. Today, Remi saw the chiropractor.

So here's what happened: Tuesday, I was lunging him to the left on twenty meter circle over three cavaletti poles, (with the inside end lifted to encourage a bend by engaging the inside hind leg) when out of the blue he kicked out to the right and just took off running. And he ran, and he ran, and ran. I tried to talk him down, but he wasn't having it. I didn't want pull him into a really tight circle because tight circles with young horses that are gigantor makes me quite uncomfortable, and he wasn't in any immediate danger. So, for better or worse, I let him decide when he was ready stop Se-cratarating around the riding hall.

While this was happening, I watched and wondered if maybe this behavior was related to some traumatic thinking-feeling loop from one of his past lives on the track or as a jumper.

After he finished, he turned and looked at me with beautiful eyes that said in a voice as clear as crystal, "My body hurts." I did the thing I do when I'm confronted with an issue like this. I touched his body, listened to where the pain was palpable, and thought, "What would Baucher do?"

Francois Baucher is a genius whom I love because he's helped me help some horses feel better with flexions, posture, and alignment when injections, bare feet, and chiro didn't—kind of like what B.K.S Iyengar did for people with asana and pranayama. Needless to say, this was not one of those moments.

By the time the doc was done, Remi was realigned in his occiput, his SI, his left pastern, his hips, his left scapula, his pelvis, and his first three ribs on the right side.

None of my other horses have ever needed the chiropractor. This was a first for me. But also, he was right. Remi's an incredibly quiet horse by nature. He closes his eyes and starts to drool while his feet are being picked.

#13

“Saddle pads are like insoles. Some people like a lot of support, some people don't.” That's what my friend, Jen, said this morning while we were out helping a horse who was having back issues and was presenting really dangerous behaviors when ridden because of discomfort, which was on full display two lessons ago. The last lesson we had, she was quite comfortable until we got on her. She wasn't dangerous, but she wasn't comfortable. This was after having her teeth checked, chiro, acupuncture, and dietary changes among many other official inquiries into her irritation.

A little background: First, the mare's name is Diva. Second: She's every bit of her name. Third: The mare's back is asymmetrical. Fourth: She's a Thoroughbred, and I love Thoroughbreds very, very much.

That said, Jen, who is a saddle-fitting wonder, had me lunge Diva in both directions, first with a saddle (with a thin saddle pad and gel pad for support). More interestingly than how Diva moved (which was very tight-backed) was how she stood when halted. She was standing in a left counter bend with right fore-leg leading, right toe turned in, and right elbow turned out.

She didn't do it as pronounced without the saddle, and so Jen suggested a surcingle. The mare's person brought back a surcingle with a surcingle pad. When we put it on, the mare blinked deeply, licked, chewed, and lowered her head. We sent her both directions on the lunge. She softened to the right in what was the beginning of suppleness. I suggested a thick western saddle pad, which we put on, first under the surcingle, then under her jumping saddle. The mare softened in the lower back. Then I rode her. And oh my goodness, her back opened up like a lotus to the morning. When I halted her, she stood square with forward-tilted pelvis, whole-body breaths, and beautifully soft mouth.

Saddle pads are like insoles, indeed. And saddles are like shoes.

#14

I have a young horse in my stable like none I've ever met before. More times than not, when I work with him, it feels like he's been sent from the heavens to see where I'm weak in my meditation practice and make it stronger—like an avatar. He came to me full of the hope from his person that he wasn't hopeless. He was angry, anxious, and unpredictable (sometimes dangerously so). There were times when we'd be doing nice, calm work under saddle when out of nowhere he would just explode, threatening to flip over. It was nuts. But instead of getting mad at him, and punish him, and cuss him out, I'd sing "You Are My Sunshine". That made him even more upset (and he'd throw these big fights for no reason that I had to respond to carefully because he's still quite young at four and I didn't want to hurt him). We'd checked tack, there was nothing medical, etc. He's tough. He's also hypnotically beautiful, and mysterious, and a difficult horse that is reserved for people interested in the equestrian art which Oliveira wrote about in his *Reflections on the Equestrian Art*. But, honestly, he made me feel like I was a crook because he wasn't getting better. I must admit I fell into a bit of depression because the answer to this enigma didn't show up until it did.

Well, a few weeks ago, I was having a challenging day. I was horribly behind on my schedule, and I wasn't able to get to his lesson until 9 pm. I took him into the arena and didn't turn the lights on because the moon had filled the space up with its glow. Bad poetics aside, the horse didn't explode at all. I was dumbfounded as to how to train his eyes; he was on sensory overload visually. But love doesn't lie when it is true. So I put him in his stall and remembered reading how the great American Saddlebred trainer, Tom Bass, said a horse has to be able to see to be hostile. So the next day, I put a pair of race horse blinkers on him, and he relaxed and was kind and calm in his eyes, and heart, and body. I called his person and shared how first, nothing was wrong. And second, that I think I found

an answer. Two days later she came and saw him and the same thing. Calm. That evening, while I was feeding him dinner, he put his forehead in my chest and let out a deep long sigh. I put my hands around his neck, hugging him back, and thanked him for showing the way. The great Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, once said something to the effect of how people are only able to hurt that which they're unable to imagine. A lot of forgiveness, self-reflection, and self-criticism has helped me see when I'm able to become less human and more horse, the horse will help me understand how to make their lives a little easier with people, much like flies tell me how good a job's been done cleaning the stalls. I'm thankful for my life.

#15

Many training traditions are based on people being the peak of the mountain. These traditions inflict pain better than they take it. Horses that don't submit are broken (or stigmatized) and thrown away. These traditions of training are not discipline specific and are very old. But for me, horses are the mountain peak. They are more deserving of that place. If you look into their eyes and know how to see, you can see a horse's whole life up to the present moment. I am in awe of their ability to keep giving us another chance to get it right. It's heartbreaking, and humbling, and beautiful. I'm so thankful.

#16

So far, in my work with horses, I've learned feeling is understanding, belief is endurance, emotion is stress, relaxation is love, and correct work is peace and health. The heart of this partnership of dressage is kept beating by the mental development of the horse preceding greater physical demands. There's no place for bullying, chasing, or aggression. Rather time and trust, resulting in a rider whose practice of riding more aware blossoms into his or her ability to listen to the horse deeply, outside of emotion, which is what working with horses through feel is, I think. A quiet mind and de-stressed body are the root from which a correct position sprouts into beautiful florets of alignment, relaxation, and suppleness. Balance.

Alignment is a language of biomechanics and energy in which all movement has its anatomical formula. How a rider sits on his or her horse inevitably affects how the horse moves. Ideally, your head would rest comfortably above your neck and spine; your pelvis would buttress the weight of the upper body. The pelvis would be tilted gently forward allowing the support from the saddle to be evenly distributed between the two seat bones and the pubic bone. Thus, it is understood that we strive for a more beautiful position on the horse not only to "just stay on", but rather to be in better harmony. That said, the horse's mind comes after whatever mind the rider leads with. By offering our best intentions in friendship to the horse, the horse offers his or her body for the rider's body to follow.

Relaxation is surrendering to an energy that is much more powerful than your own. Relaxation is peace. In the art of equitation, the rider gives mind-body, the horse gives body-mind. It's the understanding between horse and rider that the more accepting they are of each other, the more they feel. Relaxation is what allows the body to elongate and stretch with slow, deep breaths, and for the mind

to quiet down enough to hear and see with greater clarity. Relaxation allows the rider to feel how the aids he or she gives to the horse makes the horse feel, accept the response, and proceed accordingly. It enables us to understand that in our work with horses excitement is as counterproductive as anger. Every time we ride horses are trying to teach us how they want to be ridden. We ride them well when we're willing to learn.

The secret to suppleness—as it pertains to riding horses correctly—lies in the rider's ability to sit in their body and not in their brain. It is the stillness in motion. Correctly practiced and experienced, a quality of observational neutrality hatches into the rider's ability to leave the horse alone when things are going well and aid accordingly when the horse needs help getting back to where things are going well. Accept everything, hold nothing, and do not force: this is how suppleness trains the rider to cease insisting on being external so as to be a safe space for the horse at ease. This surrendering to motion allows the rider to continue to let go of tension and yield to new areas of awareness that continue to reveal themselves to the body. Comfort is key. When incorrectly practiced, physical holding and hardening happen, and are usually a result of a mind galloping around with thoughts of fear and judgements of “not good enough”. Holding in body, holding in mind. But progress is life.

A quiet mind and de-stressed body are the root from which a correct position sprouts into beautiful florets of alignment, relaxation, and suppleness. When these three things are all in accord, balance is the result (and balance is everything). Balance is what allows rider and horse, and horse and rider to follow each other's body and mind all at the same time, which is the goal of this partnership of dressage: oneness willingly maintained by two. Balance is beautiful. Balance is creation training you. Balance is artist serving art. Balance is honesty. Balance is kindness and sincerity. Balance is brave. Balance is freedom. Balance is being present. Balance is being the moment. Balance is returning to the

ancients and becoming new. Balance is honoring voice. Balance is honoring intuition. Balance is the discipline of transformation teaching us how to save of ourselves from future incarnations of wasted time. Balance is beauty. Beauty is truth. In the partnership of dressage, truth is the rider sit-standing in a light, springy seat that is easy on the horse. This is a forever journey full of discoveries that are bigger than our definitions. Be gentle with yourself.

#17

When practiced from the heart, dressage is our deepest, unarmored bond of love expressed. It is gentle, disciplined, and present. It's taught me all tension is due to inattention. And when I do pay attention, my seat becomes a conduit through which I'm able to listen to and hear my horse. It's taught me that the correct seat is heart-centered energy. It's taught me my hands should work to be a friend the horse's mouth wants to have a conversation with. It's taught me my legs should always speak as softly as possible when asking the horse a question. It's taught me my time with horses is a precious blessing I must never forget to take care of.

Sometimes, I don't come to my practice with all of the respect it deserves. But most of the time I do.

#18

I think traumatized people and traumatized horses are hurt the most when they are most vulnerable. Sometimes the perpetrator of the offense doesn't, and probably never will, know the damage they have done to a heart that was so open to them. We all have our pain. For me, I learned the first step in being healed is wanting to be healed. There's been more than one occasion I've tried to stop training horses because people scared me. I didn't know how to effectively communicate with people. I'm most at home in my heart when I'm with horses because, for me, horses are heaven. But horses come with people, and so I had to learn to love people too. People are also windows through which we can see ourselves. I think it was Beaudant who said, "I am convinced that the requirements of training are: to observe the horse at liberty, and strive to perfect oneself rather than to blame the horse's unwillingness or imperfection." For training people, those requirements for me are: inner-silence, empathy, honesty, clarity, kindness, and ridiculous amounts of study.

#19

A student I've been working with for nearly five years came to her lesson today and said, "Today, I need you to teach me how to teach.", and then just wept. She'll be moving away with her family, and we won't be able to work together much anymore.

I told her no one had ever asked me to teach them how to do that before, and I'm not sure I can, but I'd try.

So I did like I always do when I'm supposed to begin, but don't know how. I started asking questions. (The way someone answers lets me know what it is they are really asking.)

I told her I'm always afraid at the beginning of my lessons because I never know what to expect, which is true. People come to me and pay me good money to help them see what they can't, and the hardest part about that is trusting the truth of the moment enough to be honest.

I told her when I try to be perfect, I forget to breathe and can't find the words I need to teach with.

I told her the challenges horses have in training are never the horse's fault, and I've not been called back to work with some people because I told them the wall they'd run into was either because their horse wasn't mentally or physically able, or it didn't understand what was being asked. But punishment to get their point across was neither warranted nor supported as a solution by me.

I told her her responsibility to people is to teach them how to feel more than how to ride. As long as she stays courageous enough to be present, and open, and vulnerable, the horses will show her how

to help people do that. The answer to horse training challenges is always where horses are. This is a healing art.

I told her she could always call me whenever she needed, and I'd help the best I know how.

Body to light, light to world.

That was my last lesson for today—and one of the hardest ever.

#20

If I were my horse and my horse were me, my love for him would grow when he sat well and communicated clearly with his aids so I could use the correct muscles, and we'd both stay as possible for as long as we possibly could. This respect for the horse's sentience is the essence of the classical concepts and theories of dressage correctly applied. It is the pure gift of a horse's dutifulness to the rider embodying a rider's compassion for the horse.

One of the ways we as riders most clearly mirror back how beautifully a horse makes us feel when we ride him or her is in how our hands handle their heads with the reins—whose purpose, when correctly employed, simply lie in creating a safe space for the horse to go, like guardrails.

When alive, a rider's hands, like a horse's whiskers, are antenna detecting and interpreting information. They are the holders of the horse's hind leg energy flow. The rider's hands mirror their seat like a horse's hind legs reflects its neck. When the rider's hands are correct, they follow the horse's neck forward and back in a soft heart-centered rein contact, sculpting subtle signs of movement from one moment to the next.

The rider's dressage outside of this poetic meter of motion is usually symptomatic of their location on the path to mind-quieting relaxation and trust. It is a journey worthy of every employed effort, and with an end when one learns to focus only on the breath as one rides—that's where feel is found. Then oneness begins.

#21

This weekend during a clinic, I worked with a newly arrived six-year-old horse who had learned how to stop responding to the driving aids for trot. He'd been hand-ridden by his previous people into a frame that made it near mentally impossible for him to move forward off of the calf and heel. So we rode him from the seat instead.

I asked the rider to use her bones to ride instead of her muscles. I asked her to relax her belly out, instead of contract it in so her spine could keep its natural s-shape and her lower back could better absorb the energy of the hind legs. I also had her soften her elbows away from her obliques a little so her back could better enable her body to follow the horse's movement with her seat.

When we were able to get the youngin' to trot, he would dive into the hand and fizzle back down into a walk. So we flipped the reins over the index finger causing any leverage he felt to encourage him up into a more correct working frame, instead of a false long and low one.

As the lesson progressed, the young horse began to develop the courage to trot and not dive, but the idea of him having soft contact with the hand was still causing him considerable worry. So I asked the rider to halt the horse and put him on a semi-slack rein. I, then, held a treat far enough out in front of him to ask him to take a soft contact with the bit and to gently take the slack out of the rein. When he did those two things, I patted him on the neck, then gave him a treat. I walked to the other end of the arena with a treat held out to encourage him to do the same exercise in walk and then trot with proper impulsion, which he did. That was the end of the lesson.

How we ask a horse to do something impacts their health and life much more than what we ask, most of the time. Basic horse psychology tells us that when horses eat, they feel safe. If we can change how a horse feels about work, we can change how a horse works. The promise of a pat on the neck and a treat in return for a desired response helped the young one gain a healthier understanding of the bit, the rein, and the hand without triggering any negative emotions. That's a good space to start the next lesson in, I think.

#22

Dressage done correctly doesn't harm horses. The goal and proof of its application is as seamless a horse and rider pair as possible. The half-halt is the master key to this goal. Simply stated, the half-halt is the intentional channeling of the driving force within the horse's body, traveling through a conscious, isolated, and momentary clutch-like muscular contraction of his or her rider, resulting in the horse being helped to reallocate more weight towards the tail end of its body, and stay evermore functionally well-balanced beneath the well-positioned person above his or her back. When correctly brought to bear, the half-halt is much more than a physical rebalancing technique, but a psychological and an emotional one as well—much like a knowingly slowing, and thus deepening, of the breath is for people.

The purpose of the half-halt as a physical technique is fundamental to developing the horse's hind limb strength by engaging the iliopsoas muscle group as the lumbosacral junction flexes. It is a conversation of feeling through which the rider is able to listen to the horse's balance and offer small suggestions, or ask questions, that trigger rearrangements in the horse's footfall when necessary. It is a momentary containment and reshaping of the horse's somatic energy by the rider, who, after taking and holding, releases (all in appropriate measure and time) to see whether the horse begins to properly carry itself with greater elasticity and direct-able, positive, impulsion due to slowing down some, engaging its hind legs a little farther under its body, and lightening the forehand. Aside from merely rebalancing a horse within a gait, the half-halt serves as good preparation for both upward and downward transitions.

I, personally, don't rush to train movements from the saddle. There's no real point for me. I'm a huge proponent for going slow and allowing our equine friends time to make sense and move forward at a pace that's palpable for them. I think it's because I have a majority of horses on my line come to me with much training trauma, be it mental, or physical, or both. These often times ignored and forgotten horses have taught me the value of training with much more acceptance than correction, and they should always comprehend and be untroubled by one lesson before moving on to the next. This is how I gain the trust of the horses I work with: by acknowledging and alleviating anxiety—resulting in a shared, mutual calm of partners agreeably alive together. That said, I try to introduce as much new information to my horses from the ground as possible. It allows me to show them, in a step-by-step process, what efforts the correct response to my requests consists of. The half-halt as a psychological rebalancing technique suggests my need for the horse to slow down and concentrate on my questions.

The half-halt as an emotional rebalancing technique is a temporary stop, a space between, a pause, like a comma in a sentence clause. In the process of training a horse correctly, pauses are important. They help horses to stay relaxed and teach trainers the catalyst to keeping horses happy in work is clear intention before clear asking, the least amount of pressure possible, and much praise for right effort. I'm learning more and more that when we open heart-space for horses to truly learn during a training session, horses open heart-space for us to truly heal our hidden hurts. What a beautiful gift. That said, too often one sees horses who've been reduced to humiliated moats of learned helplessness—be they hot with confusion or cold with apathy—by riders asking too many questions and leaving their horses no room to answer. Practiced well, this space between our requests of the horse is a happy horse working hard to make you happy because he or she feels your love for them.

I'm almost certain there will be someone who disagrees with what I've written here, and that's okay. I only share what I know, and it works wonderfully for me, but I'm also always open to helpful insights. That said, I'm only interested in a dressage that helps horses feel good and happy that I'm with them for however long that I am. The half-halt in the above presented triptych has been the way in which horses have helped me understand the space between the requests is as important as the requests themselves. That's everything, almost!

#23

The half-halt, as I understand it, consists of the rider's weight, the horse's legs, and the ground. The goal being a horse with arched back by way of a croup lowered to the extent that its level of development gives the green light to. In its simplest and most profound consideration, dressage is a meditation on rhythmic clarity. This rhythmic clarity is the result of a horse ridden patiently forward, and for whom, by way of correctly carried out exercises, is allowed to progressively work towards collection from the very first lesson of its formal education.

This aforementioned rhythmical clarity is a result of good posture, which can be defined as the body spending the least amount of energy to stay balanced. Good posture is individually functional, even if it's not ideal. The ideal is usually the result of a habitual pattern of causing and holding unnecessary tension, and is based on the oft times very old traditions of countries and men inflicting pain better than they take it. Horses that don't submit are broken (or stigmatized) and thrown away. As stated previously, the majority of horses I work with are the rehabs and rescues. When you look into their eyes, if you know how to see, you can see their whole life up to the present moment. When you watch them move, you can usually tell where in their previous lives the training ended and trauma began because (first) their breathing becomes irregular and then their gaits deteriorate. When medical issues have been ruled out, reinforced rhythm problems are a lack of basics. A lack of basics is not dressage, proof of basics is. The basics are magic. I am in awe of the horse's ability to keep giving people another chance to get it right. It's heartbreaking, and humbling, and beautiful.

One of the greatest gifts horses, as teachers, give riders, as students, is the ability to feel how our movements affect theirs. That said, there are other types of half-halts aside from those that consists

of the slight checking back of the rein or stirrup-stepping (both of which are most effective when applied over the horse's leg that's most under its body, thus lightening the leg with the farthest distance to travel), and each with a corresponding hind end joint and section of the horse's spine they influence. The rider's chin rounds and lifts the horse's cervical spine and flexes the hocks; the pit of the rider's stomach rounds and lifts the horse's thoracic spine and flexes the hips; the rider's buttocks rounds and lifts the horse's lumbar spine and flexes the stifles. These half-halts work well for horses who are sensitive-mouthed or have a tendency to get neck-stuck, either in or up. The key to these half-halts' effectiveness lies in the practice of not holding if they don't work. If they don't work, throw the last attempt away and give another try!

One last thing, never minimize love—it's the most powerful space to teach, and train, and be helpful from because it's big enough to have the courage to be small. Love is the beauty in patience. In my work, I've found horses answer the question they hear us ask, which is why things usually go the way they do. But when the outcome isn't what we want, if we're willing to learn how horses learn, they'll teach us. Salvation is when you find an answer that's better than the one you have. For me, it's a monumental gift to know a horse will give his or her best if I just sit down and listen. A good relationship is the best tool we have to train our horses in a healthy way. Trust.

#24

Fear is as real as it is, but the power we give it is learned. Being afraid steals the peace of where we are with the threat of where we've been. It's true for horses and people who stay stuck at ten rather than risk going to eleven. I often run into this challenge while teaching and am always left feeling like I wish I could just take all of my student's speed bumps to progress away. Then I realize the purpose of speed bumps is to slow us down when we're going too fast for our place and space in time. So I take another deep breath and return to my work of digging in the dirt to make the bricks to build the bridge for them to cross, one step at a time, again and again and again. It gets us a mighty long way in the end. Life is what we're chasing. What a beautiful mercy.

#25

So this is what my lessons with students has brought me to the understanding of, as it pertains to my role as a teacher:

Me to my student: "I give you permission to give yourself permission to try'n do what I ask you to do. If you do it, great. If not, great. But if you don't, let's stay there—that's where the lesson is."

This, in-turn, teaches the student how to hold the same space for their horse that I hold for them, and strangely enough, empathy begins to blossom, and the horses don't feel so misunderstood because their riders don't feel so misunderstood. The journey. This is as far as I've gotten.

#26

Sometimes those parts of our past we've buried (way down in the bottom of the deep where light does not reach and leftover voices occur) bubble up into the lives we bring to our horses and change how we see what we see when we see. Last week, at the end of a lesson with one of the people who studies with me, I brought up the fact that every time I asked what she felt, she answered with what she thought and began to explain the reason why. In the midst of her voice I interrupted (gently) and asked if she thought the reason was worth sharing that she please write it down and give it to me next week.

Today, after our lesson, I went into the hay barn, sat on the tractor, read what she wrote, and wept as I made my way across the page, one word after the other up to the end. It began: "When you asked me what I was afraid of, I suddenly knew what it was, but there is no way I could voice it." When I finished, I went for a walk, dried my tears, and thought about how the space trainers hold for students is invisible until it isn't, and how that space can only do one of two things: help or hurt.

I returned to the stable, brought Remi out of his stall, took him to the wash bay to prepare him for his piaffe lesson in-hand, while I described what I'd just read, then asked him what it meant. He looked at me with his beautiful eyes and said, "You heal what you forgive."

I once read that help is when you find an answer that's better than the one you have. I'm thankful for my horses.

#27

So today the vet came to give my horses their fall shots, and when we got to Remi, I told the vet how we'd just made a video of him yesterday about using the piaffe as a tool for relaxation and how it was the movement I taught him first to start building his body up.

He said, "Piaffe, You started at the back door, didn't you? How did you know to go there first?"

"I listened to him," I said.

"And how did you know what he was saying?"

"I don't know," I said. "He just relaxed. That was the space he was willing to let me into."

"You met him where he was at," the vet said. "Like Jesus."

I looked at him a bit bemused.

"I'm a Christian," he continued. "Jesus meets us where we're at."

"I don't know much about Jesus," I said. "Except that he was a gentleman most of the time and he thought religion was for people and not people for religion. That's how I feel about dressage," I said. "It's for horses, not the other way around. And what it has allowed me to do, effectively, is isolate parts of the body to set off a chain reaction of engagement in the horse. So I lifted his thoracic spine, which flexed the hips. When the hips flexed, the lumbar spine lifted. When the lumbar spine

lifted, the stifles flexed. When the stifles flexed, the cervical spine softened. When the neck softened, the hocks flexed. When the hocks flexed, the jaw flexed. When the jaw flexed, the poll softened. That's how I unlocked this horse.”

#28

My mare Mohawk is miraculous—a kill pen OTTB who created a new life for herself because she never gave up on the possibility that there are good people in the world, even if those people weren't always present at the moment. Her story (as I understand it) unfolds like this: She was born in Kentucky in 2012 to race but ended up with CANTER from whom she was adopted by a lady in Nebraska for her daughter, who it turns out hated her. And so the mare was turned out to pasture for a year, then taken to an auction where a kill buyer was the bidder and allowed the sale to happen.

Somehow she ended up with the angel lady, Lanya Clinard, who has Safe Landing Horse Rescue. I met Lanya in February of 2017 while doing a clinic down in Fountain at Triple S Ranch, which is also where I first met Mohawk later—and when I did, I was in love.

I remember it was a Friday, because I drove down there once a week to teach on Fridays, and it was after my lessons had ended. Mohawk was in the barn on stall rest, on the home stretch of a long recovery from a skull fracture after having been kicked in the head by one of her friends in the field.

One of the trainers there brought her out for me to see and get my opinion on how to start her back to work. She was leggy, and tall, and all fire, and just rude. A rude, already many-times rejected, five-year-old young one who had almost completely concluded humans were hopeless, and rightfully so. I told the trainer there what I thought, and offered to help anyway I could, and suggested she adopt her because I thought the mare was dazzlingly talented and would blossom beautifully with love, and patience, and a well thought-out training program into something magnificent.

After that I thought nothing of it. Eventually, Mohawk was moved to another place, put in a huge field with some other friends, all of whom were heart-healing in some way from people they'd grown to love that didn't, or couldn't, love them back anymore. While there, she was sunbathing in the hay when she was trampled by some of the other horses who were running around, injuring her shoulder, her hip, and fracturing her pelvis. It's about this time I reached out to Lanya, inquiring about her. I was farm shopping, and when I found one that would work, I'd be able to have another horse. I told Lanya I'd take Mohawk if Mohawk wanted to be mine, and I'd come down for a visit to ask the mare personally.

When I got there a few days later, she was out eating her grain from a bucket. She was quite content and nearly all healed up. But still, her heart was super guarded. When she saw me, she shot me a look of snow. I reached in my pocket and pulled out a treat that I gave to her, and told her if she wanted to be my horse, I would give her a loving home forever, but there'd be no hard feelings on my part if she wanted to stay where she was. I just needed her to let me know. Then I gave her another treat, patted her on the neck, got in my truck, and drove away.

#29

When you don't give your anxiety a hope-filled expression, it has to be turned into something useful.

I think that it's important because it creates the boundary for the world not to come into your time on your horse's back. Silence is very loud. This is how energy creates being.

#30

The thing in training horses is the schools and methods of in-hand work are numerous. They are so numerous because there are things that help some horses that don't help others. When working with horses that question, we must always ask ourselves before teaching something new is this: Outside of thinking it could be fun, do you think it could be helpful. If the answer is yes, give it a shot. But it's also important to ask yourself, "How does this help me?"

It's a really good exercise in feeling the horse's mouth in our hands, and how much we really don't have to do with our hands. What you want to be able to do is turn them with the shoulder. So inside shoulder back to turn them to the inside. Outside shoulder back to turn them to the out outside, just like if you were riding.

Find your breath. Look where you're going. Keep it very simple.

This is good because one of the things that really helps you understand how to mitigate the work is being able to see how the horse is instead of feeling it. Practice just feeling it: look straight ahead to where you're going and listen to what your body says and what the horse is saying.

Try to find a rhythm in your steps. If the horse keeps wanting to slow down, you speed up.

This is the thing, we don't want to use in-hand work to distract them. We want to keep everything simple and clear so they know what to expect.

It's a very effective method of schooling horses. You can school all the collected movements from here, up to the high school.

#31

Correct impulsion should give you the feeling of holding the horse's hind legs in your hands, not pulling the horse's chin into your lap.

#32

Yesterday, I was talking to a friend about Nova and about how his lead changes under saddle are so much worse than his changes on the long lines, which is where I went to try and fix the changes. He's so much happier doing his dressage with me on the ground still. My friend suggested I find a good rider I could have ride Nova while I give him the cues from the ground to help get the changes more polished under saddle. Some challenges can't be overcome. Acceptance of limits is a hard practice.

I said, "There really is no point. He's come further in his work than I thought possible—just not in the way that's common. He's a long rein horse. I'm not going to push him in a direction he doesn't want to go just because I want him to be in a place other than where he is."

He has all of the enigmas of a good teacher with the answers to secrets he won't reveal until he feels the student is ready. I feel so incredibly small when he and I work together, like I don't know anything at all. Which is, I suppose, his purpose: to remind me how much he knows I don't know until I do. I'm incredibly thankful for that. Despite his inconsistencies and aloofness some times, and his unpredictability at others, he's always there ready to ask a question in such a way that opens me up to possibilities of being more tactful, and compassionate, and beautiful that I didn't know were possible previously.

When look at him through selfish eyes and wish he was something other than what he is, I'm forced to conclude that because he's my master teacher, he will never be the horse with which I'll be able to present to people and show as an example of what I know. When I look at him through the eyes of an apprentice, I realize he's the angel guiding me through this phase of my journey: a truly amazing grace.

#33

One of the differences between classical and modern, competitive dressage is that classical dressage uses the movements as tools whereas competitive dressage uses the movements as goals. Classical dressage uses the movements to build happy, healthy horses, instead of using them as a point of judgment.

#34

My goal as a trainer is to learn how to help horses, first and foremost.. That's where people need help, in seeing that none of my finished horses started that way and it's OK. No horse starts finished. That misbelief is the reason why so many horses are getting hurt by our training methods.

#35

This is what happens: we allow horses to have confidence when we don't pressure them into something they're not ready for. Instead of force we let them to explore it, and we let them experience it, and we let them ask questions of it, and we give them time.

#36

When you get them to a soft spot and add something more: horse as a tool. When you get them to a soft spot and allow them to rest, and let them think about what they've just achieved in balance and quiet: work as a tool. What rest during work sessions teaches horses is they will never be pushed further than they can go, and because they won't be pushed beyond what they can give, they learn their relaxation is safe with you. From work as a tool, we begin to see the value of try again instead of punishment. If they make a mistake, we stop and try again. If they make a mistake and we punish them, we never stop. I once heard a trainer said, "Today I taught a horse how to take punishment." He believed we had to break horses to make horses good. It just doesn't make sense to me to force a horse into learned-helplessness and call it training.

#37

It's important to know that whatever is happening is happening because your horse is giving to the extent that you are. If you want your horse to drop his guard, you have to have the courage to drop yours first. What's going to happen when you do is fear will show up. But you're going to have the choice about whether you should be afraid or not because the being afraid part is a learned behavior. The fear is there, but the fear is the teacher showing you where to find your freedom if you have the courage to keep walking. So this is now a question of what are you willing to give up to grow and is it worth it. And if it's not, it's not a big thing. But the important thing is that you know you've made the choice that this is where you stop. That's power. Freedom: choosing what you want to be responsible for.

#38

Maybe the whole purpose of life is to try and figure out a healthy solution to a pressing problem which has yet to be solved because that's when we're most useful. Unfortunately, we give all our attention trying to avoid it. Here in lies the value of the mistake when the intention is understood—you don't pay attention to the mistake. This is the space of choosing observation or judgement. If we judge, the mistakes are punishable. If we observe, we try to clarify and try again. One of the most important things about working with horses when stuff goes wrong is to see what you can change first before we ask them to try again. Because if something is going wrong when they respond to what we're asking, if we can change the way we ask, we can usually see what's causing the problem. And this changing the way we ask to get the answer we want when we try again is the practice of allowing the horse to teach us how to teach them what we're asking them to learn—that's everything.

#39

I'm learning more each day about how important it is to offer our aids in a way that allows the horse space to think about what I'm asking by sending one invitation at time and seeing how and if the horse responds, instead of going to theory. Instead of going to tradition. Instead of going to belief, we're going to use empirical evidence: what does the horse hear you saying? That's all I care about. Consequently, the only tension you want when offering the horse an aid is intentional tension, which means isolation. If you're not in control of the tension, you're not giving a correct aid. It's like asking a question whose answer you're not prepared to handle. That's how sensitive horses fall into being hot as a learned-helplessness behavior, and cold horses fall into apathy. As you focus on the aids you're giving and to the horse's response to those aids, the horse will begin to answer the question he/she hears you ask. Then we come to the logical conclusion: When I learn to control myself, I have control of my horse. But when I try to control my horse, I have no control over anything.

#40

Regardless of what we want, we have to start with where the horse is at. We can't expect a horse to give us what we want if we don't know how to ask for what we want, and we can't ask a horse for anything we haven't prepared it for. To expect they are in the balance and frame of a horse with more experience by osmosis is not fair. When horses are allowed to be honest with where they're at in their understanding of what we're asking, they are calm, and calmness is the place from which we can get the horse to where we want them to be. It doesn't matter what we want if they don't know how to give it to us.

#41

More and more, I'm beginning to see I am the relationship between me and my horse when I don't stretch my own fear-muscles beyond the boundary of them knowing they are safe in my hands.

When a horse knows your love for them is this deep, they try really hard to make you happy.

#42

If we take behavior as communication where the horse says you doing this makes me comfortable and this doesn't, and we change something to allow the horse to respond better, we know all the horse is doing is asking us to change. The majority of horses live in a very quiet inner space, and for the volume to get so high they feel they have to explode and scream, it takes a lot to get them to the point of feeling like they are not being heard. But if we hear them and do change, instead of blaming them for the behavior, we begin to understand the horse is hearing us say something we may not realize we're saying. For me, proof of correct training is the horse feeling like they have a voice they know I'll listen to. That's what a healthy relationship is, right? Knowing what buttons to push and not pushing them. Trust is what happens when we respect the fact they have intelligence enough to speak back to us, and when they do—and we give them the benefit of the doubt enough to respond in a way that's worthy of their effort—we find the courage to try something new and change if they let us know there's a better way.

#43

What is the work? To respond in a way that is productive.

Sometimes, the lesson is to get the horse calm enough to dismount safely. I've had a lot of those with Remi; soliciting the acknowledgement that relaxation exists and we build from there. Horses don't have trauma without us in their lives. Remi's resistance was the result of past-life people schooling him in a way in which pain was all he had to look forward to. So he learned to put all of his efforts into force-fielding himself from any questions he thought a person could possibly ask him ever again. When I realized I couldn't help him relax unless I got inside of his tension, I asked him what would happen if I didn't cause him pain during lesson time? Eventually the worry-lines above his eyes started to disappear, and his breath started to become soft and deep, and his body slowly began to open and supple.

And what is the work? To learn to move the energy.

When you feel your horse start to breathe fire, become rain.

And what is the work? To be in a place where you can just be.

When I realized my time with my horses isn't a competition about whose steps are bigger, and I'm doing the best I can with what I have and that's enough, then I began making healthy progress.

And what is the work? To observe the breath.

When you don't resort to war as an answer, you realize the answer is everything else.

#44

One morning a while back when I was coming up the driveway to the barn, one of our cats, Ginger, was after a mouse that had taken refuge under one of the cones. She had one of her front legs wrapped around it and was pulling the cone, and the mouse was moving with it, staying under it to try and stay safe— until Ginger realized what she was doing was too much work. So she stopped pulling the cone and laid down, and her sister Sweetness and her mother Beauty also came and laid down around the cone. They all just waited until, eventually, the mouse felt safe enough to come out, and Ginger caught it, and the mouse died.

That got me thinking about trying to teach relaxation to a traumatized or anxiety-riddled, high strung horses, and how you prepare. And how, if what you're prepared for isn't ready to share itself with you, you just sit and wait until they trust you enough to try. If you stay patient, they will.

#45

Look at the horses who've broken down because they were trained with methods designed for quick results. I've learned health-giving work with them is only possible when they guide us to where their hurt is hiding. Their guidance is help. Help is understanding more clearly that love is working for each of us much harder than we are working for ourselves. And this is what I've learned about love: it'll teach, and change, and grow you for the better if you trust it.

#46

What do you need to do for you to be what your horse needs you to be?

#47

One part I really love about training is the hunt for the answer to a question I didn't have before. I think that's a really wonderful, fun thing. That's why I enjoy working with demanding horses because it's like a treasure hunt for me to find the answer that helps the most. But I've had to learn to catch myself when the answer comes and be satisfied that it came, instead of pushing the horse so something else can be wrong. When you get into the space of always trying to fix a problem you never find the happiness of the experience; the happiness of the progress correct methodology brings to fruition.

#48

I know a lot of trainers like always having people around, but I also know a lot of trainers are burned out. I'm learning how not to do that because I love the work too much, and its setting boundaries for myself. Boundaries that have nothing to do with anyone else but me understanding I can't make everyone happy all the time, and I'm not going to try. I've learned people have to make themselves happy. I can't make anybody happy. And I've learned—the work with the horses has taught me this—that healthy progress isn't about happiness. But rather clear communication and understanding, and people then deciding if they can deal with you on that level. All we can do is move on the best we can toward creating a place where we can be.

If we're constantly giving-giving-giving we won't have anything left to give. And very rarely do people give anything back. I'm not even going to let the idea blossom that I'm an endless giver of the best of myself to everyone who wants me to. I give to the people who are healthy for me, and no one is entitled to that. This is how I stay productive for people I work for. Everyone deserves unconditional love, but everyone doesn't deserve mine. This is how I help make progress.

#49

I've trained my eyes to trust what the horse's body tells me and to solicit the feel from a student because I can dictate the time. All of this starts from awareness—me breathing deeply in my body and trusting the feelings and the thoughts that come up in that moment. It's a co-creation between the horse, me, and the rider—that's what a lesson is. And the only way for progress to happen is if the teacher gives the student his or her presence. If I do that for you, then you learn to do that for your horse, and then your horse learns to do that for you. If I do my job correctly, then I stop being your teacher, and the horse starts being the teacher because you trust what they say. That's my job. I figure it's better job security to teach people how to do that than to keep them dependent on me because that's the only way I can help people grow, and hopefully help horses' lives be a little bit easier.

#50

When we are able to approach the work in, and with, softness, we are always kind. Even more importantly, our expectations are fair. What is fairness when it comes to training horses? It's knowing they don't do anything they haven't learned.

#51

The heart of everything there is to make real progress in practice lies in finding a way to be a little bit more free in yourself. Everything we ask our horses to do is determined by the space we ask from. A way to create safe spaces for our horses to move into during their schooling sessions is by slowing our bodies down enough for the minds to follow the breath.

#52

Horses can only answer the question they hear us ask, but if we're not speaking to them in way they understand, then their answer is never the one we want. Horses don't work from pressure, they work from intention, biomechanics, and energy. That is how we build the horse we want, by listening to how they hear us. Therein lies the question, and therein lies the journey—the horse is our bridge to the other side. If it's going to be a comfortable and safe crossing, we can't protect ourselves from them, because our lives are in their hands. If we don't trust them with that, how do we expect them to perform well?

It's so much more than getting a horse to do this or that because everything we ask them to do comes from a place. If it's not coming from a place where they are, all we're talking to at that moment, they're not able to give us the best they can because they can't—there's no room. This is the fruit of mindfulness.

#53

If the horse's body is closed in a way that's not conducive for our purposes at the moment, we have open that part of the body up.

#54

As you continue to give aids whose effects you understand, the horse blossoms into softness. That understanding is meditation: setting boundaries for yourself into which the world is not allowed when you don't want it. That only happens if you give yourself permission for it to happen. And as you understand more, less is wrong with horse, because your heart blossoms open, and you realize the horse is taking its lead from you. If we take feedback in the right way, we build something beautiful. If we don't, we blame.

#55

It's the most beautiful feeling in the world when a horse engages with you from a place of understanding and not submission, where they're not just pressured in to it. The more we allow them to teach us, the more we realize it's us that has to change to make the progress we need to make.

#56

If you continue to ride, you'll be able to decide how to ride your horses and not be afraid. And this is the magic of being afraid; it's a learned behavior. This is also the magic of being afraid; it can be unlearned.

The confidence part is the tricky part because that's the part to find if you either are courageous or stupid. Those are our two options. The difference between those two options is how we face being afraid. If we face being afraid to conquer it, that's stupid, and we oft times hurt ourselves in the process. If we have the courage to not be afraid to face what we're afraid, we come up on something very magical and incredibly deceptive. Fear—daring us to take our next step. If we have the courage to take that next step, we realize we're taking the next step, and that there is this wall Fear is daring you not to cross.

There's something really, really magic when you say, "Fear, I respect your wisdom, but right now it's no longer necessary." If you go beyond that wall, you find something super magical. You find your Self waiting for yourself. You find a lost piece of your Self waiting for you to claim it. That's confidence: having the courage to not be afraid to face what you're afraid of and realize that Fear is the most brilliant teacher in the world—if you're not afraid.

That is the key to building a partnership with your horse. All the time, I'm like, "Try'n listen to your horse! Try'n listen to your horse!" Sometimes you hear a voice, but most times you don't. They tell us how they feel, and they speak by what they do. We can't really touch that space of communion with them if our hearts are not open. And our hearts can't be open if we don't trust the breath to stretch us to that place.

It's a beautiful poem, a well-ridden horse. It's a magnificent poem, it really is. The thing that feels so good about it is when you can get past the mind. And when you get past the excitement that comes from asking the right question, it just feels good. That in itself is the whole world—that you had a moment, and it could just be one moment in the whole lesson, and it was just right. If heaven is real, I hope it feels like that when I get there. It doesn't matter what you're doing, you can be on a trail ride, where you just realize everything in this moment is okay.

#57

When you relax and you're riding properly, you move so much it almost feels tacky. But it doesn't look that way. If you're moving correctly when a horse is in motion, you're always going forward-back-up-down-side-to-side all at once no matter what gait you're in. You have to be free enough in yourself to know this is what stillness feels like. You will never find it if you try to create it. You will only find it if you follow.

#58

The only way you can ever make progress with any horse is to start following them from the place they're at, then they'll start teaching you how they learn, so you can learn how to start asking for what you want. The struggle in this method of working with horses lies in understanding when something's not right. Everything doesn't have to be wrong, it's just not going right. If you listen to them, they'll start to tell you why.

#59

It may not even be the wrong question you're asking; you may just be asking it at the wrong time. That's why we follow, so we can learn how to listen.

#60

Yesterday, I was picking stalls when I began to think about how I spend a lot of my life listening to horses (mostly horses with trauma) and what the most important thing I've learned so far has been. It is this: How to sit with deeply felt feelings and not run away.

One thing my work with those horses' people has taught me is this: Sometimes truth equals loss. But in truth that loss is gain.

#61

When I'm able to be in the mind-space where I can see myself inside the mystery from which questions come, my demeanor determines conclusion.

Hot horses become calm and quiet. Broken horses learn to piece themselves back together again, one full-body breath at a time.

Why is this valuable? Because horses are my friends, and I love them dearly. They're helping me love people better. I want to live with my whole heart.

#62

Horses are heaven for me. The other day, I re-read the story of the brothers Florus and Laurus, who were taught the language of horses and the art of horsemanship by the archangel Michael. What a beautiful prayer. Amen.

I work with horses with all of my heart, and I love teaching people almost equally as much. Therein, I've learned that the greatest gift a horse trainer can be given is clients they don't feel they have to safeguard themselves against. I have that. I'm very thankful.

When I opened Lung Ta, my dad said I should warn against ill will and spite in my space by making a sign that says, "Only horse shit is allowed." And even then, not for long, because Waste Management comes and empties the two dumpsters three times per week. For me, in all relationships, horse and human, boundaries are the work because they are what I need to keep those relationships healthy. Peaceful places must be protected and cared for with love.

This morning, as I walked towards the hay barn to start feeding breakfast to my angels, I asked them to continue teaching me the language of horses and the art of horsemanship. Amen.

#63

The thing I love more than anything else in the world is piecing fragmented horses together (be it mental or physical, and for whatever reason). It brings me so much joy that sometimes I can hardly contain it. Earlier this week, a horse who I've been working with since April came to my barn with his person for their weekly lesson, during which time his person shared how both his occupational therapist and chiropractor commented on how the work we've been doing has had a positive impact on his body, which is a wonderful thing because he has stringhalt and very mild kissing spine. That made me happy. His person proceeded with the story. She mentioned how one of the ladies at her barn (who mainly competes) saw her riding one day and mentioned how the horse needed to have more impulsion, needed his neck to be more round. That made me sad I almost cried because that's the system of work that has brought this particular horse's physical challenges to birth.

I've been thinking about that story all week and have decided instead of just preaching from the middle of the arena, trying to affect positive change from my home, and in an attempt to continue growing in relevance and usefulness, I'm going to plan on lightly competing some of my pieced together horses next year in dressage, or jumping, or both if they'd like and are ready. Ideally, I'd like to hopefully just try and contribute to the conversation. We'll see what happens. Maybe I won't feel so brave tomorrow.

#64

This past week has been beautiful and busy, very busy. I'm thankful for the life my horses are helping me build for us to live in and share. The heart of good dressage is non-violence and love ever blossoming into a strong, soft, and beautiful friendship with the horse. It's in this space horses teach us how to listen by telling us how to better help them learn.

#65

A good relationship--that's the best tool we have to train our horses with in a healthy way.

#66

Today's lesson from my young horse, Remi: "Sometimes when I am upset, the emotions get too big and I shut down, and it takes a moment for me to open up again."

#67

When riding our horses, we often block what we want, which is usually why things don't work, when they don't work.

#68

In riding, when we find our breath and learn to truly relax, we don't punish the horse for being a horse when the horse gets scared. Quite the opposite, we prepare by staying as balanced as we can, then deal with things as they come--just like in meditation. The better we get, the less we do.

#69

The other day, I received a message from a lady on the Western Slope asking if I'd accept her as a student. She'd seen the videos of Remi and said, "I'm pretty sure you're on the path I want to be on."

Throughout the course of our correspondence, I asked, "What path is it you see I'm on that you want to be on too?" Since it's the only way I know to work with horses.

This is her reply (I'm also thankful that this is what she sees in my work):

"See? I love that you ask that question. So many dressage instructors would not think to ask that. So you sent me on a thought journey about what is the path? And here is what I ended up with:

What is the path?

Clarity

Having clarity of mind, of purpose, of connection with the horse.

What is the path?

Power of intention

Understanding that intention is the main aid, not hands or feet or other body parts.

What is the path?

Lightheartedness, kindness, compassion, curiosity

Having a sense of humor around the relationship with the horse, with other people around horses.

Having a sense of kindness and compassion for the horse. Being curious about why things are going the way they are. Understanding that generally the horse is not 'resisting', more likely he doesn't understand, or physically cannot do it, or is fearful of consequences.

What is the path?

Choices

Allowing the horse to have choices. Letting him choose!

What is the path?

Deep knowledge and excellent physical skills

Having a large toolbox of techniques and the knowledge to know when to use each. Listening to the horse to determine what might be the best tool to use in the moment.

What is the path?

Self-carriage

Self-carriage from the beginning, not as a result of years of pushing and pulling the horse around to 'make' him get into balance and submission. Self-carriage at the halt! At the walk, trot, canter. At the stretch, at collection.

What is the path?

Partnership

Karen Rohlf says this pretty well: ‘In developing my horses, I focus on finding what I call the Sweet Spot. The Sweet Spot is that lovely place where both horse and human share a balance that each can agree on, and that neither can experience without the other. It is a place where human and horse merge mentally, emotionally, and physically.’

What is the path?

To achieve the Object of Dressage

The Object of Dressage: The development of the horse into a happy athlete through harmonious education resulting in a horse who is calm, loose, supple, and flexible but also confident, attentive, and keen, thus achieving perfect understanding with his rider. (FEI rule book). Look at this! Calm! Loose! Supple and flexible! Confident! Attentive and KEEN! Perfect understanding with the rider! If you really read this, and embrace it, it is the path.”

#70

I was working in-hand piaffe work with Remi yesterday; it was beautiful work. There was some stiffness induced anxiety, but not much. As it unfolded, and he made the choice to let it go, I witnessed my heart's unfolding in gratitude for this young one's willingness to be changed—to be proven wrong about what he was taught people are, and how here—in my hands (his home)—those beliefs are no longer helpful. He's accepting that I'm aware of and listening to him, and that we move together, and that we grow together, and that we change more and more into the help, and life, and hope, and grace for each other, always in each moment. I'm thankful for this young one. He's teaching me so much.

#71

When I was a kiddo and was just learning about the magic that is dressage, I took lessons with my maestra Cynthia Spalding. She once told me that once I've trained a few horses to do upper level work, I'd begin to find holes where the basics were lacking, and I would have the choice to either stay where I was at with that horse in its training or go back and try to find where I'd made the mistake, possibly fix it, and then see if the horse's limitation was truly that or just a result of my ignorance.

Oliveira also shared this sentiment when, in his *Reflections on Equestrian Art* he says, "I have made countless errors in the training of literally thousands of horses. Luckily, I am aware of these faults, for otherwise I would have never made further progress. I know that I still have much to learn, and will go on learning until my dying day, not only by riding, but by studying, thinking deeply, and observing."

That said, Nova is my daemon in this art. I was watching him in the field the other day, playing with his friends, and every lead change he did at the canter was clean. The quality of the canter was superb. That, I realized, was what I was missing—his back lifted more by way of a more astute engagement of his hind legs.

In working towards correcting it, I set aside the masters who I'd normally go to for peer pressure from mostly dead people, and instead read the appropriate sections of *Posture and Performance* by Gillian Higgins to figure out what was missing in his training program that could help. He does hills, has rest days, and variety, but not enough. In comes *Cavaletti* by Ingrid Klimke!

I lunged him over cavaletti with side reins on Tuesday for trot work and rode him today for canter work, and I was able to observe where water was seeping through the holes. There were two, both had to do with the hand. 1) My hands were too far apart, which allowed him to be super wiggly in his shoulders, but locked in his poll. 2) The angulation of the rein needed to be changed so that the snaffle bit was affecting his cheek/jaw more than just his jaw, thus encouraging him to stretch more forward-down into the hand and more through his back, instead of his chin being back and his neck being up.

All that to say the canter improved beautifully. I'm going to loosely incorporate Klimke's training schedule into my horses' culture to help build them into as beautiful, whole, relaxed, supple, and balanced things as best I can.

The journey continues.

#72

When you ride, find the space you can be in and ride in that space. So first, what I'd like you to do: find the breath and from the breath find the movement, then follow the movement and observe the worry because it is there—and it will be there until it isn't. But don't let it distract you because the goal of a distraction is to not allow you to become who'd you'd like to be. What we don't want to do is mistake worry for compassion, and the only thing that will allow that not to happen is you giving yourself permission to not allow that to happen.

In riding and in life, nothing, good or bad, happens without our human imperfection. Nothing. And that's the only thing that really gives us the power to move into finding ourselves more is not judging where we're, but rather in finding an effective way forward. Just like we have to allow young horses to find their confidence, I have to do the same thing with you. I have to respect where you're at, and we work from there. The power of progress lies in not sticking to an expectation. When we take the schooling of the horses moment by moment, we allow them to change and make the right choice, and we allow ourselves to respond and not react. Every moment with our horses is a conversation between nature and nurture. If we give them a better alternative to feel safe, they'll take it. They are present moment creatures practicing peace. We all play our roles until they change, and then we grow.

#73

The more real life we allow these moments to be, the more they make sense.

#74

Students thrive when their teachers believe they are possible.

#75

when you're just holding on
your toes are clenched
when your toes are clenched
your hips are closed
when hips are closed
your back is locked
when your back is locked
your hands are hard
when your hands are hard
there's nowhere for the seat to go
and so you bounce in the saddle
and the horse drops its back
this is not what we want



Nahshon Cook was thirteen years old when he took his first riding lesson on an old professor named Willy at the Urban Farm in Denver, Colorado at Stapleton, where he was a student in their Embracing Horses riding program for five years. During that time he was introduced to the art of Classical Dressage: a scientific system of equitation based on the mental development of the saddle horse proceeding greater physical demands. He has since been a devoted practitioner to this method of building partnerships with horses.

Nahshon holds the adage “Follow the horse and find heaven in every step.” as the golden rule to approach to teaching and training.

He can be reached on Facebook at Nahshon Cook Horsemanship, and on his website, NahshonCook.com. He is the owner of Lungta Stables in Parker, Colorado

