

THE
QUIET
PRACTICE

*A Companion for Students
of Equine Bodywork*

KAREN KATZMARK

A dark horse is grazing in a grassy field at sunset. The background features a line of trees, a fence, and a body of water in the distance under a warm, golden sky.

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Cover photograph: Lovee, therapy horse at Healing Pastures.

Disclaimer

The information presented in this book is intended for educational purposes only and reflects the author's experiences in equine bodywork.

Equine bodywork is not a substitute for veterinary diagnosis, treatment, or care.

Horses experiencing illness, injury, lameness, or other medical concerns should be evaluated by a licensed veterinarian.

Practitioners should work within the scope of their training and experience.

Dedication

For the horses who taught the lessons.

For the people who shared the journey.

And for every student willing to slow down long enough to listen.

Author's Note

The lessons in this book were gathered over many years spent with horses, students, teachers, and fellow practitioners.

They are not presented as rules or formulas.

They are observations, reflections, and experiences that shaped the way I approach equine bodywork today.

Every horse is different.

Every practitioner develops their own understanding through experience.

My hope is simply that these pages encourage you to slow down, pay attention, and remain curious.

The horses have been my greatest teachers.

Perhaps they will teach you something different.

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Opening

Before Touch

There is a moment before you touch a horse when everything that matters is already happening.

The horse is observing you.

They notice your pace as you approach, your breathing, and whether your attention is focused on them or somewhere else entirely. They notice the tension you carry and the energy you bring into the space.

Long before our hands make contact, a conversation has already begun.

Many students enter equine bodywork eager to learn techniques.

They want to know where to place their hands, how much pressure to use, and how to recognize when something has changed.

These questions are important.

Technique, knowledge, and experience all have value. But none of them matter as much as learning to pay attention.

The horse does not experience our technique first.

The horse experiences us.

They experience our presence.

They experience our intention.

They experience whether we are arriving with curiosity or arriving with an agenda.

When I first began working with horses, I believed the most important part of bodywork happened through my hands.

I thought success depended on finding restrictions, improving movement, and creating change.

While those things remain important, the horses gradually taught me something deeper.

The quality of our work is often determined before we ever begin.

It is determined by our willingness to observe before acting.

To listen before deciding.

To understand before intervening.

Over the years, I have learned that slowing down is not the absence of action.

It is part of the work.

Observation is not passive.

Listening is not doing nothing.

These are skills that become more important with experience, not less.

As students, we often want answers.

As practitioners, we eventually learn to value questions.

What is this horse telling me?

What am I noticing?

What might I be missing?

What does this horse need from me today?

These questions create space for understanding.

The horses have been my greatest teachers in this regard.

Some taught me through cooperation.

Some taught me through resistance.

Some taught me through recovery.

Others taught me through conditions that never fully changed.

Each offered a lesson.

Each revealed something about the horse, about the work, and about myself.

This book is not a collection of techniques.

It is not a manual for fixing horses.

It is a reflection on the lessons horses have taught me over years of practice.

Lessons about observation, listening, assessment, discernment, acceptance, and lifelong learning.

Most of all, lessons about learning to see what is already there.

The horses are always communicating.

The question is whether we are listening.

The work begins long before touch.

Chapter One

Learning to See

Before I learned bodywork, I thought helping a horse meant doing something.

Applying a technique.

Finding a restriction.

Creating a change.

I believed the value of a session was measured by what happened after my hands made contact.

The horses taught me otherwise.

The longer I worked around horses, the more I realized that some of the most important information is available before we ever touch them. Long before we begin assessing tissue quality, range of motion, or compensation patterns, the horse is already telling us a story.

We simply have to learn how to see it.

Most students arrive eager to learn techniques. I understand that excitement. I felt it myself. Techniques provide structure. They give us something tangible to practice. They help us feel useful.

The challenge is that technique can sometimes distract us from observation.

When we become focused on what we plan to do, we can miss what is already happening.

Observation begins before touch.

It begins the moment we see the horse.

How are they standing?

Where is their weight distributed?

Do they appear comfortable?

Are they resting a limb?

Are they alert, relaxed, guarded, or withdrawn?

What is their breathing telling us?

How are they interacting with their environment?

What changes when we enter the space?

These questions may seem simple, but they are often where the most valuable information is found.

A horse does not exist as an isolated body part. They exist within a body, an environment, a history, and a set of circumstances that influence everything we observe.

Learning to see takes practice.

At first, we notice obvious things: a swollen leg, a shortened stride, a horse that refuses to stand still.

Over time, we begin noticing smaller details: a shift in weight, a change in breathing, a subtle expression around the eye, a protective posture that appears long before the horse moves away.

These observations become the foundation of our decision-making.

Without them, we are guessing.

With them, we begin understanding.

The Mare

Early in my experience with horses, I entered a mare's stall convinced I was there to help.

I had my routine.

I had my plan.

I had already decided what the session was going to look like.

The mare had other ideas.

As soon as I entered the stall, she moved away from me.

At the time, I interpreted her response as hesitation. I believed that if I simply gave her a little more time, she would settle in and accept what I had come to do.

Instead of listening, I followed her.

Not aggressively.

Not forcefully.

But persistently.

I continued trying to engage because I wanted the session to happen.

I wanted to practice.

I wanted to feel productive.

Most of all, I wanted to help.

My intentions were good.

My observation skills were not.

As the interaction continued, I became frustrated. Not because the mare was doing anything wrong, but because she was not responding the way I expected.

Then something shifted. I remember standing quietly in the stall, realizing I had spent more time trying to help than trying to understand.

I stopped long enough to actually watch her.

Not the behavior I wanted.

The behavior she was offering.

Her posture was telling a story.

Her movement was telling a story.

Her distance was telling a story.

The mare was not asking for bodywork.

She was asking for space.

What I had interpreted as resistance was communication.

The moment I recognized that, everything changed.

I stepped back.

The pressure disappeared.

So did my need to make something happen.

What surprised me most was how obvious it seemed once I stopped trying to make the session happen.

The mare had been communicating the entire time.

I was the one who wasn't listening.

That experience taught me one of the most important lessons of my career.

Good intentions do not replace observation.

The horse still gets a vote.

What I Missed

Looking back, I can think of many times when I missed obvious clues because I was focused on technique.

I was so busy searching for restrictions that I overlooked posture.

So focused on tissue quality that I overlooked breathing.

So eager to apply what I had learned that I forgot to ask whether it was appropriate for that horse on that particular day.

Experience has taught me that observation often answers questions before our hands ever do.

A horse that is standing protectively may be telling us where to look.

A horse that avoids turning in one direction may reveal a pattern before we ever begin an assessment.

A horse that softens simply because we stop asking for something may teach us more than an hour of hands-on work.

The challenge is not that horses fail to communicate.

The challenge is that we often arrive with our attention somewhere else.

Learning to see requires us to slow down enough to notice what is already present.

Not what we expect.

Not what we hope.

What is actually there.

The more horses I worked with, the more I realized that observation is not separate from the work.

It shapes every decision that follows.

A Different Way of Looking

Today, when I approach a horse, I try to begin with questions rather than answers.

What do I see?

What is this horse showing me?

What has changed since the last time I saw them?

What might I be missing?

The goal is not to find something wrong.

The goal is to understand what is in front of me.

Sometimes the most important thing I discover has nothing to do with muscles, fascia, or movement patterns.

Sometimes the most important thing I discover is that the horse needs something different than I expected.

That lesson continues to humble me.

The horses have reminded me again and again that observation is a skill.

It develops through experience.

It deepens through curiosity.

And it asks us to remain open, even when we think we already know the answer.

Because we cannot help what we have not learned to see.

Chapter Two

Listening Before Touch

Learning to see changes the way we approach a horse.

Learning to listen changes the way we work with them.

Many students believe listening begins when their hands make contact. In reality, listening begins much earlier.

It begins before the session.

It begins before the assessment.

It begins before touch.

Horses are constantly gathering information about the world around them. As prey animals, their survival has depended on noticing subtle changes in their environment. They pay attention to movement, tension, breathing, posture, and intention long before most people realize they are being observed.

When we walk toward a horse, they are already gathering information.

Are we calm, distracted, rushing, or truly present?

The horse may not understand our plans for the session, but they understand how we arrive.

That understanding shapes everything that follows.

The Conversation Before Touch

One of the most valuable lessons horses have taught me is that a session does not begin when my hands make contact.

It begins when I enter their space.

Long before I touch a horse, I pay attention to my own state.

Am I rushing from the previous task?

Am I distracted by something that happened earlier in the day?

Am I already thinking about what I want to accomplish?

Or am I truly available for the horse standing in front of me?

These questions matter because horses often respond to what we bring into the space.

There have been days when I arrived carrying stress that had nothing to do with the horse. My attention was divided. My breathing was shallow. My mind was focused somewhere else.

The horse noticed.

Sometimes they became restless, disengaged, or simply unavailable.

Years ago, I might have assumed the horse was having a difficult day.

Now I ask myself a different question:

What am I bringing into this interaction?

Listening begins there.

Grounding Before Action

When students first begin learning bodywork, they are often eager to start.

They want to place their hands.

They want to assess.

They want to do something.

I understand the feeling.

For many years, I believed action was where value was created.

The horses gradually taught me that presence often matters more than speed.

Before beginning a session, I take a moment to settle.

I notice my breathing, my posture, and whether I feel hurried or grounded.

This is not a ritual.

It is preparation.

A practitioner who is disconnected from their own nervous system will often struggle to recognize what is happening in the horse's.

The more aware we become of ourselves, the more available we become to what the horse is communicating.

Permission

One of the most misunderstood concepts in bodywork is permission.

Permission is not something we assume because we have experience.

It is not something we assume because we have good intentions.

And it is not something we assume because we are trying to help.

Permission is part of an ongoing conversation.

The horse is constantly communicating their level of comfort, curiosity, concern, and engagement.

Sometimes permission looks obvious.

A horse may approach.

They may soften.

They may remain present and interested.

Other times, the answer is less clear.

The horse may move away.

They may become distracted.

They may brace.

They may increase distance.

These responses are not obstacles.

They are information.

They tell us something about how the horse is experiencing the interaction.

Listening means being willing to hear the answer, even when it is different from the one we hoped for.

The Horse Is Participating

One of the greatest shifts in my understanding came when I stopped viewing bodywork as something I was doing to a horse.

Instead, I began seeing it as something we were doing together.

The difference is subtle.

But it changes everything.

When we believe the horse is a passive recipient, we focus primarily on our own actions.

When we recognize the horse as an active participant, we begin paying attention to their responses.

We notice when they engage, withdraw, become curious, or become uncertain.

The horse becomes part of the decision-making process.

Their responses help guide the session.

Their feedback shapes our choices and influences the direction of the work.

The horse is not simply receiving the session.

The horse is helping create it.

A Quiet Conversation

One afternoon, I found myself standing beside a horse who offered very little response to the work.

No obvious release.

No dramatic reaction.

No visible change.

Earlier in my career, I might have assumed nothing meaningful was happening.

Instead, I stayed with the horse and continued paying attention.

Gradually, I noticed small changes.

The tension around the eye softened.

The breathing became slower.

The horse remained present.

Nothing about the moment would have impressed an observer.

Yet it changed the way I thought about progress.

Not every meaningful response is dramatic.

Not every conversation is obvious.

Sometimes the horse is simply telling us they feel safe enough to stay.

That communication deserves our attention.

Listening as a Practice

The longer I work with horses, the more I appreciate how much communication happens in quiet moments.

Not through dramatic releases.

Not through impressive techniques.

But through attention.

The horses continue teaching this lesson every day.

Some remind us gently.

Others remind us clearly.

All of them communicate.

The question is not whether the horse is speaking.

The question is whether we are listening.

Because the horse is not simply receiving the session.

The horse is participating in it.

Chapter Three

Assessment, Strategy, and Decision Making

The longer I practice, the less I believe bodywork is about techniques.

Techniques matter.

Knowledge matters.

Experience matters.

But what separates an experienced practitioner from a beginner is often not what they do with their hands.

It is how they think.

Every horse arrives with a story.

Some stories are obvious.

Others are hidden beneath layers of compensation, adaptation, habit, and time.

The practitioner's job is not simply to find tension.

The practitioner's job is to understand why it is there.

This requires observation.

It requires listening.

And it requires patience.

The horses taught me that assessment is not a single event that happens at the beginning of a session.

Assessment is ongoing.

Every response, every movement, and every change in posture provides information that helps guide the next decision.

Gathering Information

When I approach a horse, I am not immediately looking for a problem.

I am looking for a pattern.

How are they standing?

How do they move?

Where do they carry tension?

What appears easy?

What appears difficult?

What has changed since the last time I saw them?

The answers rarely come all at once.

Sometimes the first thing we notice turns out to be the least important.

Sometimes the obvious restriction is simply the result of something happening elsewhere.

The body is always adapting.

Compensation is one of the ways it does that.

For many years, I viewed compensation as something that needed to be corrected.

If I found tightness, I wanted to release it.

If I found restriction, I wanted to improve it.

The horses gradually taught me to be more careful.

Not every compensation pattern is a problem.

Sometimes it is a solution.

Rellana

Rellana arrived at the stables shortly after the loss of her owner.

She was a beautiful chestnut Quarter Horse who was expected to become part of the lesson program once she settled into her new home.

Not long after arriving, she developed a bowed tendon.

The injury changed the plan.

Instead of beginning work as a lesson horse, she was placed on stall rest while her body began the long process of recovery.

Because her activity was limited, I started spending time with her regularly. I hand-walked her, observed her movement, and provided bodywork where it seemed appropriate.

As I worked with her, I began noticing tension throughout other areas of her body.

Her shoulders were working differently.

Her back was working differently.

Her hindquarters were adapting to protect the injured leg.

At first, I saw restriction.

Then I realized I was looking at compensation.

Like many practitioners, my first instinct was to help the areas that felt tight.

After all, tension often attracts our attention.

But something made me pause. The longer I looked, the less certain I became that tension was the problem.

The tension I was finding was serving a purpose.

Her body was protecting the injured tendon.

The compensation patterns were helping her redistribute weight and move through the healing process.

If I released everything simply because I found it, I might remove support that her body still needed.

That realization changed my approach.

Instead of trying to eliminate every restriction, I focused on supporting her recovery.

I worked with the areas that were available.

I monitored how her body adapted over time.

I adjusted the work as her needs changed.

As the tendon healed, the compensation patterns gradually changed as well.

What had once been protective became unnecessary.

The body no longer needed the same strategies.

The timing mattered.

Looking back, I realize Rellana taught me something that went far beyond tendon injuries.

Not everything that looks wrong is wrong.

Sometimes the body is doing exactly what it needs to do.

Our job is not to react to every finding.

Our job is to understand what we are seeing before deciding what to do.

Nearly a year later, Rellana returned to work as a lesson horse.

She went on to spend years teaching riders in the arena.

Looking back, Rellana taught me something I continue to carry into every session.

Not every restriction is asking to be released.

Sometimes the body is protecting something important.

When the First Answer Is Wrong

One of the most humbling parts of practice is discovering how often our first assumption is incomplete.

Experience does not eliminate mistakes.

If anything, it teaches us to become more cautious about certainty.

There have been horses whose movement suggested one problem while the actual source was somewhere entirely different.

There have been horses whose tension appeared significant but resolved naturally once another issue improved.

There have been horses whose bodies seemed resistant to change when they were simply not ready.

The longer I worked with horses, the more comfortable I became with changing my mind.

Assessment is not about proving that our first impression was correct.

It is about remaining open to new information.

The horse does not care whether our original theory was right.

The horse cares whether we are paying attention.

Treatment Planning

Students often ask what technique should be used for a particular condition.

The longer I practice, the more difficult that question becomes to answer.

Not because there are no answers.

Because there are rarely simple answers.

Every horse is different.

Every history is different.

Every body adapts differently.

Two horses with the same diagnosis may require entirely different approaches.

One horse may need support.

Another may need challenge.

One may benefit from direct work.

Another may need time.

A treatment plan is not a fixed set of steps.

It is a conversation that evolves over time.

The horse helps determine where that conversation goes.

Adapting Over Time

Some of the greatest lessons in bodywork happen over months rather than minutes.

A single session can teach us a great deal.

A year teaches us even more.

Watching a horse recover, adapt, regress, improve, compensate, and reorganize offers a perspective that cannot be gained from a single appointment.

The horses have taught me to think beyond the moment.

To consider not only what is happening today, but what may be happening next month.

Or next season.

Or next year.

Good decision-making requires patience.

It requires us to recognize patterns rather than chase immediate results.

It requires us to remain curious.

Most importantly, it requires us to remember that our understanding is always incomplete.

Our responsibility is to keep learning.

Thinking Like a Practitioner

With experience, assessment becomes less about finding problems and more about understanding relationships.

How one area influences another.

How compensation develops.

How healing unfolds.

How the body protects itself.

How the horse communicates its needs.

The goal is not to fix everything we find.

The goal is to understand what we are seeing before deciding what to do.

That understanding shapes every decision that follows.

Because not every restriction is a problem.

Sometimes the body is protecting something important.

Chapter Four

When to Wait and When to Work

One of the most challenging lessons in equine bodywork is learning that listening and action are not opposites.

Early in my development, I often viewed them that way.

If a horse seemed uncertain, I backed away.

If a horse appeared resistant, I stopped.

If I found tension, I wanted to release it.

Over time, the horses taught me that the answers are rarely that simple.

Some horses need us to wait while others need us to proceed. Some need support while others need challenge.

The difficulty lies in knowing the difference.

This is where discernment begins.

Discernment is not a technique.

It is the ability to recognize what the horse is asking for in the present moment.

Not what we expected.

Not what worked with another horse.

What this horse needs today.

Readiness and Resistance

One of the easiest mistakes a practitioner can make is confusing readiness with resistance.

At first glance, they can look very similar.

A horse may move away.

A horse may brace.

A horse may become distracted.

A horse may shift their weight or reposition themselves.

The question is not whether the horse responded.

The question is why.

Sometimes the horse is communicating discomfort.

Sometimes they are communicating uncertainty.

Sometimes they are communicating that they need more time.

And sometimes they are responding because they are working through something difficult.

Not all movement away means stop.

Not all stillness means continue.

The horse is constantly providing information.

The challenge is learning how to interpret it.

This takes experience, observation, and a willingness to remain curious rather than reactive.

The Temptation to Choose One Side

Many practitioners eventually drift toward one extreme or the other.

Some become overly forceful.

They push through every response.

They view hesitation as resistance.

They believe more pressure creates more change.

Others become overly cautious.

They stop at the first sign of discomfort.

They avoid challenge entirely.

They become hesitant to ask the horse for anything.

Neither approach serves the horse well.

Healing often requires a balance between support and challenge.

The body grows through adaptation.

Sometimes that adaptation requires rest.

Sometimes it requires movement.

Sometimes it requires waiting.

Sometimes it requires carefully applied pressure that encourages the body to move beyond an old pattern.

The horses taught me that discernment lives between these extremes.

The Horse Who Needed More

There have been horses whose bodies were holding patterns that had become deeply familiar.

Protective habits.

Compensation patterns.

Restrictions that had existed for years.

In some of these cases, gentle contact alone was not enough.

The horse was ready for more.

Not force.

Not aggression.

More engagement.

More challenge.

More intentional work.

The key was not increasing pressure because I wanted a result.

The key was recognizing that the horse was available for the conversation.

The body was ready.

The tissue was ready.

The nervous system was ready.

The horse was participating.

Early in my career, I often believed that if a horse moved away, I had done something wrong.

Later, I learned that movement itself was not the problem.

Sometimes a horse moves because they are uncomfortable.

Sometimes they move because they are processing.

Sometimes they move because they are deciding whether they trust us.

The more horses I worked with, the less interested I became in the reaction itself and the more interested I became in what the reaction was telling me.

Those sessions taught me that challenge is not the opposite of listening.

Challenge can be part of listening.

When offered thoughtfully and respectfully, it can support change that the horse is prepared to make.

The Horse Who Needed Less

Other horses taught the opposite lesson.

I remember working with older horses whose bodies had spent years adapting to age, arthritis, injury, and life experience.

Some arrived carrying limitations that were unlikely to disappear.

In those moments, doing more was not always doing better.

The horse did not need additional pressure.

The horse needed comfort.

The horse needed support.

The horse needed someone willing to meet them where they were.

These horses taught me that less is not the same as giving up.

Less can be a deliberate choice.

Less can be wisdom.

Less can be exactly what the horse needs.

Boundaries

The horses have taught me that boundaries are not obstacles.

Boundaries are information.

A horse that moves away may be telling us something.

A horse that braces may be telling us something.

A horse that disengages may be telling us something.

The goal is not to eliminate boundaries.

The goal is to understand them.

Sometimes a boundary needs to be respected.

Sometimes it needs to be explored carefully.

Sometimes it changes over time.

The answer is rarely found by forcing our way through it.

The answer is found by paying attention.

Progression

One of the advantages of working with horses over weeks, months, and years is that we begin to recognize progression.

What was unavailable last month may be available today.

What was difficult last year may be easy now.

What once required protection may no longer need it.

This is where observation, assessment, and experience come together.

The horses are constantly changing.

The practitioner must be willing to change with them.

A successful session is not always the one that accomplishes the most.

Sometimes it is the one that accurately recognizes what is appropriate for that horse at that moment in time.

Staying in the Conversation

There have been moments when I needed to stop.

There have been moments when I needed to continue.

There have been moments when I softened.

And there have been moments when I increased pressure and engagement.

The decision was never based on a rule.

It was based on the horse.

The more years I spend with horses, the more I appreciate that bodywork is not about choosing one philosophy over another.

It is not about always doing less.

It is not about always doing more.

It is about remaining present long enough to recognize which response serves the horse best.

The horses continue teaching this lesson.

Session after session, they remind me that listening does not always mean backing away.

Sometimes listening tells us the horse is ready for more.

And knowing the difference is one of the most important skills a practitioner can develop.

Chapter Five

The Limits of Our Hands

One of the most difficult lessons horses have taught me is that effort does not guarantee outcome.

When we first begin working with horses, it is natural to believe that enough knowledge, enough skill, and enough dedication will eventually solve every problem we encounter.

We study, practice, attend workshops, refine our techniques, and search for better answers.

And often, those efforts help.

Horses improve.

Movement improves.

Comfort improves.

Relationships improve.

Those successes encourage us to keep learning.

But eventually every practitioner encounters a horse that refuses to fit neatly into that story.

A horse whose condition does not change despite our best efforts.

A horse whose body has adapted to years of injury, age, disease, or circumstance.

A horse who reminds us that healing and fixing are not always the same thing.

Those horses often become our greatest teachers.

Black Colonel

Black Colonel was one of those teachers.

When I met him, he was already carrying the weight of many years. By the time our journey together ended, he had reached the remarkable age of thirty-seven.

He also had longstanding lymphedema in his left hind leg.

The swelling had been present for years.

The tissue was firm.

The contours of the leg had changed.

The condition had become part of his normal landscape.

Like many practitioners, I believed there had to be something I could do.

I researched, studied, asked questions, and explored different approaches.

Week after week, I continued showing up.

I wanted to help.

More honestly, I wanted to see improvement.

I wanted evidence that the work was making a difference.

I measured.

I observed.

I compared.

I hoped.

The leg did not change.

Not in the way I wanted it to.

The swelling remained.

The measurements remained largely unchanged.

The condition persisted.

At first, I became frustrated.

Not with the horse.

With myself.

I questioned my assessment.

I questioned my techniques.

I questioned my knowledge.

I wondered whether someone else would have achieved better results.

Those questions followed me for a long time.

The longer I worked with him, the more I realized that my struggle was not really about the leg.

It was about expectation.

I believed effort should produce visible results.

I believed dedication should be rewarded with progress.

I believed that if I worked hard enough, I could eventually change the outcome.

Black Colonel quietly challenged those beliefs.

He never seemed concerned about whether his leg changed.

That concern belonged to me.

He simply continued being himself.

Showing up each day exactly as he was.

Looking back, I think he accepted his condition long before I did.

What Did Not Change

His lymphedema remained.

The years continued to accumulate.

His body continued aging.

Some limitations never disappeared.

No breakthrough arrived.

No dramatic transformation occurred.

The story did not end the way I had hoped it would.

At least not in the way I originally imagined.

What Did Change

Black Colonel remained comfortable.

He remained engaged with life.

He remained interested in his surroundings.

He continued enjoying attention.

He continued enjoying connection.

Most importantly, my understanding changed.

I began to recognize that success is not always measured by elimination of symptoms.

Sometimes success looks like comfort.

Sometimes it looks like quality of life.

Sometimes it looks like helping a horse navigate aging with dignity.

Sometimes it looks like simply showing up consistently for a horse who can no longer be fixed.

Black Colonel taught me that support has value even when change is difficult to measure.

The horse did not need me to conquer a condition.

He needed me to be present.

He needed me to be realistic.

He needed me to meet him where he was.

Not where I wished he could be.

The Aging Horse

Older horses have taught me lessons that younger horses rarely can.

Young horses often recover.

Their bodies adapt quickly.

Their tissues respond.

Their futures feel open.

Aging horses invite us into a different conversation.

The conversation shifts from improvement to comfort.

From correction to support.

From possibility to acceptance.

That shift can be difficult for practitioners.

We enter this work because we want to help.

Watching age place limitations on a horse we care about can leave us feeling powerless.

Yet aging horses remind us that value is not measured solely by progress.

There is value in comfort.

There is value in companionship.

There is value in preserving dignity.

There is value in helping a horse feel seen during the final chapters of their life.

The Horses We Cannot Fix

Throughout my years of practice, I have worked with horses carrying chronic conditions.

Arthritis.

Old injuries.

Neurological challenges.

Compensation patterns developed over decades.

Some improved significantly.

Others improved only slightly.

A few did not appear to change at all.

Each challenged my understanding of what it means to help.

The horses who improved taught me about possibility.

The horses who did not improve taught me about humility.

Both lessons were necessary.

End-of-Life Lessons

Some of the most meaningful work I have ever done happened near the end of a horse's life.

At that stage, goals become simpler.

No one is asking for peak performance.

No one is preparing for competition.

The focus becomes comfort.

Presence.

Relationship.

Respect.

Those sessions often feel different.

The urgency disappears.

The need to achieve disappears.

What remains is a quiet recognition that our role is not always to change the outcome.

Sometimes our role is simply to walk beside the horse for a portion of the journey.

There is profound value in that.

Acceptance

Acceptance is often misunderstood.

It is not giving up.

It is not losing hope.

It is not abandoning the horse.

Acceptance is seeing clearly.

It is recognizing what can be changed and what cannot.

It is offering support without demanding a particular outcome.

It is remaining present even when the results are uncertain.

The horses have taught me that acceptance and compassion often travel together.

The moment we stop fighting reality, we become more available to the horse standing in front of us.

Not the horse we wish they were.

The horse they are.

The Limits of Our Hands

There is wisdom in knowing what our hands can do.

There is equal wisdom in knowing what they cannot.

Our hands can offer comfort.

They can encourage movement.

They can support healing.

They can improve function.

They can strengthen relationships.

They can reduce suffering.

But they cannot stop time.

They cannot erase every injury.

They cannot guarantee every outcome.

Learning this was not discouraging.

It was freeing.

The horses taught me that my responsibility is not to control the outcome.

My responsibility is to show up honestly, bring the best of what I know, continue learning, and offer what is appropriate in that moment.

Some horses improve.

Some horses teach us acceptance.

Both leave us better practitioners.

And both deserve our gratitude.

Chapter Six

Lessons That Never End

Many people begin working with horses because they love horses.

Some are drawn to movement.

Some are fascinated by anatomy.

Some are searching for a way to help.

Most arrive believing that knowledge alone will make them better practitioners.

I know I did.

I believed that the next class, the next certification, or the next technique would finally provide the answer I was looking for.

Over time, I discovered that becoming a practitioner is less about collecting information and more about learning how to apply it.

Knowledge matters.

Education matters.

Continuing education matters.

But experience is what teaches us how those pieces fit together.

Experience is where information becomes understanding.

The horses have always been my greatest teachers.

But they have never been my only teachers.

Learning Bodywork

My path into bodywork did not happen all at once.

Like many practitioners, I learned a little at a time.

One class, one horse, one experience, then another and another.

Each new piece of information felt important.

Every course introduced a different way of looking at the body.

Every instructor offered a different perspective.

Every horse seemed to challenge what I thought I knew.

At times it was exciting.

At times it was overwhelming.

The more I learned, the more I realized how much I did not know.

What once felt simple became more complex.

What once felt certain became less certain.

Oddly enough, that uncertainty became one of my greatest teachers.

The horses rarely fit neatly into theories.

They taught me to remain curious.

They taught me to keep learning.

Ortega

Some of my most important lessons happened during my years at Ortega Equestrian Center.

The horses there became my classroom.

Not because they made learning easy.

Because they made learning necessary.

Each horse arrived with a different history, a different body, and a different set of challenges.

There were lesson horses, retired horses, new horses, young horses, aging horses, horses recovering from injury, and horses carrying stories I would never fully know.

No two horses responded exactly the same way.

One horse might welcome touch immediately.

Another might require weeks or months before trust began to develop.

One horse might improve quickly.

Another might change so gradually that progress was difficult to measure.

I often arrived believing I had finally figured something out.

Then the next horse would challenge that understanding completely.

What worked beautifully one day might be ineffective the next.

The horses humbled me quickly.

They taught me that confidence is valuable, but certainty can be dangerous.

The moment I assumed I already knew the answer was often the moment I stopped paying attention.

Shea Center

My time at the Shea Center expanded my understanding of horses in a different way.

There, horses partnered with riders facing physical, emotional, and developmental challenges.

The focus was not on performance.

The focus was on relationship.

The horses showed up day after day, carrying people who often asked a great deal of them.

Watching those horses taught me something important.

Service has a cost.

The horses were generous.

Patient.

Reliable.

But they were still horses.

They had good days and difficult days.

They carried tension.

They carried responsibilities.

They deserved to be seen as individuals rather than simply providers of a service.

That lesson continues to influence the way I approach bodywork.

The horse is never just a treatment plan.

The horse is never simply a means to an end.

The horse is a partner.

An individual with their own experience of the world.

Watching those horses also changed the way I viewed service.

For many years, I measured my value by what I could provide for others.

The horses reminded me that giving has limits.

Even the most generous horse needs rest, support, and care.

Their willingness to serve did not eliminate their own needs.

That lesson reached far beyond the arena.

Arizona

Years later, an opportunity unexpectedly broadened my understanding once again.

When the resort where I worked transitioned to new ownership, several of us were invited to Arizona for additional training.

I went expecting to learn new skills.

And I did.

I studied Naga Thai massage and spent time immersed in learning opportunities that expanded my perspective beyond technique.

One experience, in particular, stayed with me.

I attended an equestrian immersion program led by Wyatt Webb.

The experience was different from anything I had previously encountered.

The focus was not on fixing horses.

It was not about performance.

It was not even about bodywork.

It was about awareness.

Presence.

Relationship.

The horses reflected what people brought into the interaction.

The lessons often had little to do with the horse and everything to do with the human standing beside them.

What surprised me most was how often the lesson had little to do with the horse.

I arrived expecting to learn about equine behavior.

Instead, I found myself learning about my own habits, assumptions, and ways of relating to the world.

The horses reflected things I had not yet recognized in myself.

More than once, I left thinking about myself long after I stopped thinking about the horse.

It was uncomfortable at times.

It was also impossible to ignore.

The experience reinforced something I continue learning today:

We do not leave ourselves outside the arena.

Whatever we carry eventually enters the conversation.

The quality of our presence matters.

Not as a philosophy.

As a practical skill.

The horse experiences who we are long before they experience what we know.

The Humbling Nature of Experience

One of the greatest surprises of practice is discovering that experience does not eliminate mistakes.

If anything, it makes us more aware of them.

There are horses I misunderstood.

Assessments I would approach differently today.

Opportunities I missed because I was focused on the wrong thing.

Moments when I believed I had the answer, only to discover I was asking the wrong question.

For a long time, mistakes felt uncomfortable.

Now I see them differently.

Mistakes are often where learning begins.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is awareness.

The willingness to recognize what happened, learn from it, and continue moving forward.

Humility grows from that process.

Not the humility of self-doubt.

The humility of understanding that there is always more to learn.

Lessons from Teaching

Teaching students has reinforced this lesson in unexpected ways.

Every year I watch students begin the same journey.

At first they want answers.

They want certainty.

They want to know exactly what to do.

I understand that desire.

Most of us begin there.

Teaching has also revealed my own insecurities.

There are still days when I question whether I know enough, especially when standing in front of a classroom trying to simplify something that once confused me too.

Days when I feel more experienced than knowledgeable.

Days when I am certain my students will discover something I have missed.

Yet those moments have taught me something important.

Good teaching is not about having every answer.

It is about remaining willing to learn alongside the people we serve.

In many ways, my students continue teaching me just as much as the horses do.

Over time, the strongest students become less focused on finding the right answer and more focused on asking better questions.

They become observers.

They become curious.

They become comfortable with uncertainty.

The horses teach them.

The clients teach them.

Experience teaches them.

And in the process, they begin developing their own understanding of the work.

Watching that transformation has reminded me that learning never truly ends.

Becoming the Practitioner

Looking back, I can see that becoming a practitioner was never about acquiring enough knowledge.

It was about learning how to pay attention.

The classes mattered.

The teachers mattered.

The certifications mattered.

The techniques mattered.

But what shaped me most were the thousands of small moments spent with horses.

Moments of observation.

Moments of uncertainty.

Moments of failure.

Moments of growth.

Moments of understanding.

Each one added something to the practitioner I was becoming.

Not all at once.

Slowly.

Over years.

Over horses.

Over experiences.

For a long time, I believed experience was measured by time.

Now I think it is measured by attention.

Two people can spend the same number of years with horses and learn very different lessons.

The difference is often found in what they notice.

The horses have taught me that learning never really ends.

A new horse arrives.

A new challenge appears.

A familiar situation unfolds in an unfamiliar way.

And once again, we are invited to learn.

Perhaps that is one of the greatest gifts horses offer.

They keep us curious.

They keep us honest.

They remind us that mastery is not a destination.

It is a practice.

The more I learned, the less interested I became in appearing knowledgeable.

I became more interested in staying curious.

Curiosity leaves room for the horse to teach us something we do not yet know.

Certainty often closes that door.

And after all these years, I still consider myself a student.

Chapter Seven

When the Horse Meets You

Mo

I once worked with a large horse named Mo.

He was powerful, strong-bodied, intelligent, and for much of his life, defensive.

He had a history of aggression and had spent considerable time working with a behaviorist who was helping him learn new ways to respond to the world around him.

The changes were not dramatic.

They rarely are.

He was simply becoming steadier.

More regulated.

Less reactive.

That day, I had already finished working with the horses assigned to me.

My work was done.

There was no reason to return.

Yet as I prepared to leave, I felt a quiet pull toward Mo's stall.

Not urgency.

Not obligation.

Just a simple feeling that I should go say goodbye.

When I approached him, he was standing quietly.

Nothing unusual.

Nothing remarkable.

I stepped inside and wrapped my arms gently around his shoulder and side.

Not as a technique.

Not as an exercise.

Just a moment of affection.

At first, he seemed surprised.

Then he turned his head toward me.

Slowly.

Softly.

He lowered his muzzle and rested it against my shoulder.

For a few moments, we simply stood there.

Neither of us asking for anything.

Neither of us trying to accomplish anything.

There was only stillness.

A quiet exchange that required no words.

No agenda.

No expectation.

Just presence.

When I eventually stepped away, Mo remained where he was.

Calm.

Relaxed.

Content to simply share the space.

As I walked back toward the gate, I found myself unexpectedly emotional.

Not because something dramatic had happened.

No one watching from a distance would have thought much of the interaction.

To an outside observer, it may have looked like nothing at all.

But those who spend enough time with horses learn to recognize moments that carry a deeper meaning.

This was one of them.

Years later, I still remember that moment clearly.

Not because it was extraordinary.

But because it was honest.

Nothing was being asked of either of us.

Nothing needed to be fixed.

Nothing needed to be accomplished.

For a brief moment, we simply met each other where we were.

What Trust Looks Like

For much of my life, I believed trust was something that could be earned through effort.

If I worked hard enough, showed enough consistency, or learned enough skills, trust would naturally follow.

Horses taught me otherwise.

Trust is never something we take.

It is never something we deserve.

It is never guaranteed.

Trust remains the horse's choice.

Always.

That is what makes it so meaningful.

Mo did not lower his guard because I asked him to.

He did not soften because I had the right technique.

He did not offer connection because I wanted it.

He offered it because, in that moment, he felt safe enough to do so.

The gift belonged entirely to him.

Reciprocity

One of the most remarkable things about horses is their honesty.

They do not pretend.

They do not offer affection out of obligation.

They do not perform connection simply because we hope for it.

They respond to what they experience.

Nothing more.

Nothing less.

Because of this, every relationship with a horse is built on reciprocity.

We influence them.

They influence us.

We learn to read them.

They learn to read us.

Each interaction becomes part of an ongoing conversation.

A conversation built not through words but through experience.

The longer I worked with horses, the more I realized that trust grows through countless small moments.

Showing up.

Listening.

Respecting boundaries.

Paying attention.

Being consistent.

Not because these actions force trust to appear.

But because they create the conditions in which trust may choose to grow.

The Horses Who Meet Us

Many horses allow us to work around them.

Some allow us to work with them.

A few truly meet us.

Not because they become attached.

Not because they stop being horses.

But because something in the relationship becomes mutual.

The horse recognizes us.

Responds to us.

Chooses engagement with us.

Those moments are impossible to manufacture.

They arrive when they arrive.

And when they do, they often leave a lasting impression.

Mo was one of those horses for me.

Not because of a single moment.

Not because of a hug.

But because over time he taught me something I continue to carry with me.

Connection cannot be forced.

Trust cannot be demanded.

Relationship cannot be rushed.

A Gift

Looking back, I do not remember the techniques I used that day.

I do not remember what tasks I completed before leaving.

What I remember is Mo.

I remember standing quietly beside a horse who had spent much of his life protecting himself from the world.

I remember the softness in his expression.

I remember the weight of his muzzle resting against my shoulder.

Most of all, I remember what that moment represented.

Not achievement.

Not success.

Not proof of anything.

Simply trust.

Freely offered.

And that may be one of the greatest lessons horses teach us.

Trust is not a reward.

It is a gift.

And gifts are meant to be received with gratitude.

Epilogue

Returning to the Practice

When I first began working with horses, I thought the goal was to learn techniques.

I wanted to know where to place my hands.

I wanted to understand anatomy.

I wanted to identify restrictions and help horses feel better.

Those things matter.

They are important parts of the work.

But over time, I discovered that the most valuable lessons were not found in techniques alone.

They were found in the horses themselves.

Each horse became a teacher.

Each horse revealed something different.

Some lessons were obvious.

Others took years to understand.

Many are still unfolding.

The longer I practice, the more I appreciate the simple foundations that support everything else.

Learn to see.

Before we can help a horse, we must learn to observe.

To notice posture.

Movement.

Expression.

Breathing.

Patterns that tell a story before our hands ever make contact.

Learn to listen.

Not only with our hands, but with our attention.

To recognize what the horse is communicating.

To understand that every interaction is a conversation.

To remember that the horse is participating in the process.

Learn to assess.

To gather information before making decisions.

To ask questions before reaching conclusions.

To understand that every horse is unique and every situation deserves thoughtful consideration.

Learn to discern.

To know when to wait.

To know when to proceed.

To recognize the difference between resistance and readiness.

To understand that listening does not always mean backing away, nor does helping always mean doing more.

Accept your limits.

Some horses improve.

Some horses maintain.

Some horses decline despite our best efforts.

The work is not always about fixing.

Sometimes it is about supporting.

Sometimes it is about comfort.

Sometimes it is simply about being present.

Continue practicing.

Because none of these lessons are learned once.

They are learned again and again.

With every horse.

Every experience.

Every success.

Every mistake.

Practice is not a destination.

It is a lifelong process of learning to notice.

As I reflect on the horses who have shaped my journey, I am reminded that no single horse taught me everything.

Rellana taught me to look deeper before acting.

Black Colonel taught me acceptance when outcomes could not be changed.

Mo taught me that trust is a gift.

And Demi walked beside me through much of the journey itself.

She appeared at unexpected moments.

Returned when I least anticipated it.

And continued teaching long after I thought I understood the lesson.

Some horses teach us through a season of life.

Others quietly become part of the story.

Long after the work is finished, they remain part of who we are.

Demi taught me that growth is rarely linear.

That relationships can shape us across years and circumstances.

That sometimes the greatest teachers are not the horses who change our lives in a single moment, but the ones who quietly accompany us as we change ourselves.

Looking back, I realize that horses have never simply taught me about horses.

They have taught me about attention.

Patience.

Humility.

Trust.

Presence.

And perhaps most importantly, they have taught me how to remain a student.

The horse will not teach all of these lessons at once.

One horse may teach observation, another patience, another humility, and another trust.

If we are fortunate, and willing to keep showing up, they will teach us all of them.

One lesson at a time.

One horse at a time.

One quiet practice at a time.

About the Author

Karen Katzmark is an equine bodywork practitioner, educator, and lifelong student of horses. Through years of work with horses, students, and clients, she has developed a deep appreciation for the lessons found in observation, patience, and relationship. She currently teaches massage therapy at the National Holistic Institute and volunteers with Healing Pastures.