

## **Take the Reins** by Erin Dunigan March 5, 2020

It's a saying, of course – but the thing is, it's also true. Like so many sayings that have been separated from their original context, 'Take the reins' is not just a metaphor – it's actually a 'thing.' It applies to horseback riding. It applies to life.

When people ask me what I 'do' I often have a hard time answering – at least in any kind of brief or simple way. One of the things I 'do' and that takes up much of my day, is around horses. Sometimes it is working with them, sometimes it is taking people on rides. (More info at <http://www.horsesbyjose.com>). I find that through it all, I am constantly learning – both in my horsemanship, as well as in life.

One such example happened recently. It was on a ride. One of the riders, let's call him Jack, supposedly had quite a bit of riding experience and it was clear that he was comfortable around horses. But as we left the ranch and headed out onto the trails I saw that he was holding his reins not just loosely, but practically not at all. "Hey Jack," I said, "you need to hold your reins a bit tighter, not so loose. Otherwise the horse doesn't even know you are there." As we rode along I noticed that he still had his hand way back on the reins – and that the horse was going where he wanted, and not necessarily in the direction we were headed. "Hey Jack," I said again, "You really need to take the reins." To which he responded that he knew that, but that he didn't want to be mean to the horse, didn't want to be so assertive.

It was like I was hit in the face, the realization, and the parallel to my own life came at me, smack!

The thing is, when you are riding a horse, taking the reins is not 'mean' – it is part of the deal. If you are going to ride, you must assert control – it is your job to 'drive.' The horse needs you to be the leader. Taking the reins does not mean you have to be a jerk or mean – it just means that you need to be assertive. What I realized with Jack is that he was confusing the two. He thought being directive, being assertive, was being aggressive, dominating. But one of the things that I love about working with horses, and riding them, is that it is an invitation to find a gentle strength, an assertive firm, but not domineering hand.

Isn't it funny how it seems that things seem to appear just when we need to hear them, or learn them? Because what I saw clearly that day with Jack was my own tendency to associate being firm with being mean. And so, in an attempt to not be 'mean' I had essentially been riding my life with loose reins, letting it go wherever it might take me, avoiding anything in the realm of assertive. But that is not the way to ride a horse, and it is not the way to live your life. If you are going to get anywhere and not just meander, you need to take the reins. You need to have a sense of control, to even be comfortable with your own power, your own ability to influence the speed and direction of your journey.

I am so thankful for Jack, and for that day's ride, for in opening my eyes it gave me the opportunity to take the reins.

Erin Dunigan is founder of Not Church ([www.not-church.org](http://www.not-church.org)) and helps to lead horseback riding excursions in La Mision with Horses by Jose ([www.horsesbyjose.com](http://www.horsesbyjose.com)).