



Bringing Zombie Horses Back to Life

By Lisa Ross-Williams

He seemed perfect, the 10-year-old sorrel gelding, about 14.5 hands, who seemed very calm and docile. Kenny rubbed him a bit, introduced himself and asked permission to swing up on his bareback with just a halter. The gelding didn't flinch, seemed calm and safe--perfect for Kenny's first horse. We paid the \$900 and came back with a trailer the next day to take him home.



This sorrel, named Smokie, took the short trip and home change very well. However, we started to notice he was very withdrawn. His ears were always back and there was no expression or emotion. When we walked up to him, he would turn his head away and close his wrinkled eyes as if to say "Please just leave me alone, I'm invisible." Being empathic, we both felt so much sorrow and grief from him and we wondered what had caused this.

In Arizona, there is owner registration system information available through the Department of Agriculture. My heart sank when I saw he had 12 homes in two years--that in itself is so unsettling to a horse. We questioned why this was and what had happened in the past. The scars on all four ankles, just below the fetlocks, and brand, 71L which had been crudely carved into his hip, gave us a bit of insight.

Smokie did not ever have his ears forward for six months and we remember Parelli instructor David Lichman saying "One of your goals should be getting those ears forward." Rebel, my Polish Arab, showed every emotion, voicing his opinion quite freely, while Smokie did not (except for his ears back). No emotion - no joy, no excitement, no concern about his environment, just a horse body with nothing inside. Later we termed this a "zombie" horse. Thankfully, even way back then, we were dabbling in alternative therapies and were well

started into natural horsemanship. We also had a deep compassion for all beings' suffering and knew we had our work cut out for us.

Why This Happens

When horses are in a bad situation like abuse, neglect, serious mishandling or even multiple moves, one of two things normally happen. One, the horse fights back, becoming aggressive and sometimes dangerous or they shut down on an emotional level, withdrawing into themselves. They become just a physical body with no horse-onality.

I often equate this to humans who survive a horrendous, traumatic event and retreat inside, into their own little world on an emotional level. For some it might be a one-time event like rape by a stranger, for others long-term abuse by a family member, or even for some, losing a loved one in a violent way.

According to Grant W. Johnson, Ph.D., a retired psychologist, "One commonality of horses and people is that according to Freudian principle, we gravitate toward pleasure and try to avoid pain. The notion of the 'zombie' is that of a dead being, one without soul, who wanders about without emotions. This sounds to me like your description of the zombie horse. I have many stories that reveal badly traumatized individuals who have retreated into what you might refer to as a 'zombie state'." He said most people fall into the following dynamic as do horses, but that the "major difference is the horse does not operate from the cognitive frontal brain structure as does the human. One might say the horse operates much more from the subconscious realm, also employed by humans."

Here is an understandable approach termed the "**Mads, Sads and Scares**" theory applying to both horses and people:

- (Mads) - something happens and the person or horse responds with anger, an aggressive, proactive stance designed to keep from getting sad.
- (Sads) - a sadness which is more repugnant than the anger, but often the aggressive anger does not bring about safety from the sadness so it deepens.
- (Scares) - extreme fear, which is the root or the basis for these three behaviors, all designed to protect the individual. When they have not worked it is quite natural for the being (horse or person) to completely withdraw, creating the zombie state of which we speak.

“While this is a reasonable explanation for successive behaviors leading to the zombie state,” he points out, “it is more important to find a means by which the individual can be helped. People can see a therapist whose skills with "talking out" the problem, role-playing, and even hypnosis can be quite effective, yet the horse is dependent upon the people with whom he lives, who hopefully are kind and sensitive. These folks may need the help of specialists who have had successful experience with the zombie horse. The horse has a different language system, so he is dependent upon humans who can access the release of painful memories within the horse. This, of course, relates very closely to the human subconscious.”

Dr. Johnson continues, “We must remember that in their evolution, horses were originally the prey of meat-eating animals. With domestication, horses have learned to trust the people who care for them, but when exposed to trauma, the original "**fight or flight** syndrome" operates. In addition, the horse has a very powerful memory, particularly when an untoward experience has been indelibly burned into the subconscious.”

Regardless of the exact reason, Kenny and I knew a couple of things. One, we would somehow assist Smokie with releasing himself from this prison. Two, Smokie would be with us the rest of his life.

A Time Bomb Waiting to Go Off

Although Smokie was very calm in everyday situations, he had a hidden fuse when certain instances arose. This included too much pressure on the lead rope or rope hackamore reins or when asked to execute very precise movements. Even things on the ground such as a ball or hose elicited an explosive response, which often included rearing up or striking out. Kenny said he could feel the buildup until it felt like Smokie was going to explode. Thankfully, while working through all of this, Kenny was never hurt.

The Journey and Our Tools

I want to stress, this was at a time when we were still very new to natural horse care. Yes, we were involved with Parelli Natural Horsemanship deeply and were dabbling in essential oils, flower essences, TTouch, but not homeopathy unfortunately. If we knew then what we know now, it might have taken less time. However, the key things we were able to use 100% were those things we had readily available and didn't need any special training or knowledge to use, so we started there.

* Unconditional love, understanding and empathy. Smokie became a member of our family and gave Rebel, our only horse at that time, a herd. We knew he would be an excellent horse and teacher for Kenny and would teach us about zombie horses and how we can help. We began telling him every day that we loved him and he would stay with us forever. We strived to always be consistent in our actions and emotions to give him a solid foundation he probably never had.

* Essential Oils. Essential oils are most often used by inhaling the scents (aromatherapy) which are quickly passed to the limbic system of the brain. Different oils invoke different feelings or emotions and therefore a great tool no matter what type of personality you or your horse may have.

Aromatherapy was something that was easy to use. Not having a big selection on hand, we started experimenting with Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), Chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*) and Patchouli (*Pogostemon cublin*). We would wear it on ourselves and also offered open bottles to him to smell. Although it varied as to which one he chose, a majority of the time it was Patchouli (my personal favorite). There was a visible, positive change in Smokie every time we did this.

* Flower Essences. Flower essences are a vibrational therapy that work on an emotional level and can be used in conjunction with other therapies. Again, being new to flower essences, we had only Bach Rescue Remedy, which is a blend of Cherry Plum, Clematis, Impatiens, Rock Rose and Star of Bethlehem. We placed 10 drops every day in his water trough. There is an amazing variety of Flower Essences available on the market, but Rescue Remedy is often easy to find in your local health food store.

* Touch, TTouch and bodywork. We used a kit about TTouch by Linda Tellington-Jones which included small pocket booklets outlining some of the main techniques. However, we also knew the power of touch. Just physically stroking him with the intent of love and security would help. We tried to find his favorite “itch” spots and it actually took two years before Smokie would give us a physical sign we had found those magic spots.

* Natural Horsemanship. We were heavily involved in the Parelli Natural Horsemanship program and thankfully as a coordinator for David Ellis, had extensive clinic opportunities and personal help. By learning timing, release and communication, Kenny was able to work

through the occasional blowups and learned how to take Smokie just to that point to find that “fuse” and be able to work through it without pushing so far as to cause Smokie to slip back into himself.

- **Honesty.** As stated before, we constantly told Smokie that we loved him and that he would be with us for the rest of his life. It took him over two years before he looked at us and projected “I finally believe you.” That instant, there was a spark that ignited in his eyes. If something we had to do that would be unpleasant such as taking his temperature, having his teeth done or vet care, we would tell him the truth. I believe this approach, out of all of them, played a huge role in Smokies’ healing.

Smokie Today

At 21 years old, Smokie is amazing. He has helped raise five equine youngsters, always being fair but firm. He became a companion for a badly foundered mare we tried to save, giving her support without pushing her. Kenny has ponied colts, worked cattle, rode amazing trails and learned to be an incredible horseman on Smokie. At our Talking Horse Ranch, Smokie has helped people release trapped emotional trauma during the Equine Enlightenment sessions. In fact, he seemed drawn to those people who had retreated into themselves and would calmly stand while someone burst out in tears and sobs, releasing some of their issues into his mane. He shows emotions, whether love, pleasure or frustration. His contribution to our well-being and journey into natural horse care, as well as to his herd, is invaluable.



Today, Smokie has total trust in Kenny while being trimmed at liberty.

Mother Nature offers many natural/ holistic tools to assist with emotional shutdown, and following a natural horsemanship approach gives you the principles to shape your behavior and handling. There are wonderful learning resources on all of these available. You can visit

our “links” page at www.naturalhorsetalk.com/links.html for a long list to get you started.

Although taking the challenge of helping an equine “Zombie” takes time, perseverance, effort and some hurt feelings, there is no feeling like assisting a sentient being to release himself from emotional shutdown.

For more information:

A great reference book for basics on complimentary therapy use is *A Healthy Horse, the Natural Way* by Catherine Bird.

About the author:

Lisa Ross-Williams is a natural horse care consultant and host of the “If Your Horse Could Talk” webcast available at www.naturalhorsetalk.com. She is a seasoned writer, former Senior Editor of *Equine Wellness Magazine* and currently the Associate Editor of *Natural Horse Magazine*. Along with her husband, Kenny, they share their Talking Horse Ranch Educational Center in Arizona with their beloved animals.

Lisa dedicated herself to extensive research, as well as an exploration of hands-on experiences which included clinics, seminars and courses covering natural horsemanship, hoof care, dentistry, bodywork, homeopathy, iridology, essential oils and nutrition. Since then, she has earned her degree in Environmental Plant Science and has completed the Basic Homeopathy Veterinary course through the British Institute of Homeopathy. She has completed the Reiki 1-Equine Reiki course with Kathleen Prasad. Lisa is an accomplished Natural Horsewoman who has studied extensively with many top horsemanship instructors for the past 12 years and now offers lessons as well as nutritional consultations.

Known to colleagues and friends as one who “walks her talk,” Lisa has positively influenced thousands of horse owners and grateful horses, sharing her knowledge of natural and holistic horse care. Her book on Natural Horse Care, *Down-To-Earth Natural Horse Care* will be published by Trafalgar Square in Spring 2010.