

An open-minded skeptic's venture into alternative healing and spirituality.

**OMWARD BOUND:
How alternative woo-woo, a messed-up relationship
and an introverted horse helped me become a
kinder, happier person**

by J. Tanner Jones PhD

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A photograph of a dirt path winding through a forest of tall, thin trees. The path is dappled with sunlight and shadows. In the foreground, the dark silhouette of a horse's head and ears is visible, looking towards the path.

Onward Bound

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J. Tanner Jones

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INTRODUCTION

On my first day as an official graduate student, a colorful professor, who wore an East Texas twang like a sheriff's badge of honor, began his lecture by telling us The Secret to achieving low limits of detection.

"It's not about making more and more sensitive detectors," he drawled. Then, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial tone and drawing us in for a closer listen, he continued. "It's all about lowering the background nise."

Background nise? Am I an idiot or did I miss that day in my undergraduate chemistry classes? What the hell is background nise? Oh! Noise! Background noise! Got it.

"You thank the stars go away in the daytime? No! They're still there. You just cayn't see them because of all the background nise. Take away the background nise, and I'll show you stars in the daytime."

It wasn't until many years later (19 to be precise) that the significance of his explanation hit me. I was a bit of a basket case at the time. I was stuck in yet another emotionally toxic relationship that would soon end in my fourth divorce before the age of 50. Despite an alphabet soup of degrees after my name and over a year of job hunting, I had been unable to find the right job. I had sacrificed most of my assets to my marriage and had no idea how I would survive on my own. I was so ashamed of my situation. I was desperately insecure, resentful, emotionally manipulative, judgmental – you name it.

I would like to say that this all was simply the result of the bad situation I found myself in, but if I were honest - also not my strong suit - I would have to admit that being unhappy and sometimes just plain mean was a persistent

pattern. I had been prone to bouts of depression and hopelessness since my early teens. I am a survivor of numerous periods of simply wanting to die, but being unable to find the courage to actually succeed (one example of a situation in which fear of failure is actually a good thing).

I could take an instant dislike to someone whom I didn't even know. I would be standing in a line, or waiting at the doctor's office, and the most awful dialogue would be playing in my head about the people around me. I recently read a story in the paper about a woman who was waiting in line at a department store during the busy pre-Christmas season, when someone added her items to the cart of a friend just in front of the woman. "[Expletive] [Racial Epithet]!" she yelled. "When you're in this country, you go by OUR rules. Lean to speak English! Go back to where you came from!" Of course, a bystander captured the incident on video and posted it on social media, where it went viral.

After my initial disgust and rush to judgment, I thought to myself, "Don't be so hard on her. The only difference between her and you at one time is that she said it out loud."

I, on the other hand, carefully hid my "soul full of gunk," as the Grinch called it, from even my closest friends and my family. Except for the unemployment - they got to hear all about that. By all appearances, though, I was funny, smart, almost always smiling. I was the last person anyone would ever suspect of being depressed or seriously pissed off. But in retrospect, I was like a human wrecking ball with a big yellow smiley face painted on it, swinging from one partner, one job, one home to the next and leaving hurt, destruction and destroyed bridges behind me.

So what was wrong with me? Was I, as I hoped, a fundamentally good person, whose dark side just got the upper hand sometimes? Or was I, as I feared, a horrible, crazy person who just managed to put on a good act most of the time? Would I ever just be happy? Would I ever just...be?

Then I remembered the professor's words about stars during the day. "Maybe I'm like the stars in the daytime," I thought. "Maybe I have this light within me, trying its hardest to be seen, but it's buried under so much crap, so much hurt and anger and frustration from trying to live up to my unrealistic expectations – so much *nise* – that no one gets to see it. Maybe all I need to do is find a way to reduce the background noise."

Later still, I would find that Eckhart Tolle had already described something similar. In his book "The Power of Now," he writes about occasionally being approached by people who ask him, "I want what you have. Can you give it to me, or show me how to get it?" And he replies, "You have it already. You just can't feel it because your mind is making too much noise."

So, this is my story of personal noise reduction, discovered by exploring and embracing so-called alternative approaches that I had been taught my entire life to doubt, ridicule and avoid. I share some stories interspersed with what I view as significant steps along the way, in the hope that these may help and encourage others who wonder whether they're crazy and/or hopeless. These steps weren't revealed to me in their entirety before I began. At the time, I more or less stumbled upon them (or as I now believe, was guided, but if you're not there yet, just stick with stumbled).

Never in a million years could I have guessed where this path would lead. I'm happy to now be able to say I barely recognize in myself the basket case I described. I do still remember her – very vividly. But instead of viewing her with contempt and shame, I now embrace her warmly, in awe and admiration of her strength, and with forgiveness.

Bottom line: If you can have an open mind (like scientists like myself are actually supposed to have), and take a little leap of faith (like the church is constantly encouraging us to do), and not be afraid to look or feel like a bit of an idiot at times, you might be surprised. Ask yourself: “Why *can't* that be true?” “What's the worst that can happen?” “What was *my* experience of that?” “Was it helpful to *me*?”

Again, this is my path. Yours will be different. And as an attorney, I feel obligated – compelled, even – to include the following:

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Chapter 5

15 Hands, 15 Years Old

Horses are God's apology for men.

~ Unknown

During this time of darkness, literally and figuratively, the few bright spots were my visits to the stables. My inexplicable love of all things horses, in remission since childhood, had been rekindled on the high mesas of New Mexico. Despite having willingly sacrificed my possessions, self-esteem and power on the altar of marriage, somehow this rekindled flame had survived the move to Indiana.

Those who nurture the horse-flame in their hearts understand the impact of simply walking into a barn. The calm, the otherworldliness, the smell. Oh, the smell! That indescribable, trade-secret-of-God mix of... what? Wood shavings, dirt, horse poop, horse sweat, and some other ingredient known only to Him. He then blessed the flame-nurturers with a patented special sensor that allows them to smell it, which in turn, triggers the release of endorphins and simultaneously registers the smell of horse poop as inoffensive. Because as any flame-nurturer will attest, horse poop does not stink.

By many twists of fate that seem miraculous in hindsight, I had found a barn where I was able to ride one or two days a week. The horse's owner was away at college, and I think both he and I were grateful for the diversion. But as I watched the other women building

relationships with their own horses, I began to wonder what that would be like. To not have to ask permission. To not have to worry that I would do something to confuse, or worse somehow harm, another person's beloved horse. To not have to remind myself not to become too attached, because one day he might be moved to be with his owner. Or worse, be sold.

And so it was one day that I told the barn owner that if her emails included the offer of a horse for sale that would be a good match for me, I would be open to it.

"What kind of horse are you looking for?" she asked.

"Uh, I dunno," I replied.

"Mare or gelding?"

"Yes," I said, laughing. "Definitely a mare or a gelding."

"O.k. You gotta give me something to go on other than four hooves, a mane and a tail."

Fair enough.

"I want a horse who is about 15 years old and about 15 hands tall. Old enough to know what he's doing, big enough that I won't feel guilty asking him to carry me, and not so big that I wouldn't be able to mount from the ground. But I'm not in a hurry. If it takes a year, that's fine."

"That's it?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"Well, it'd be nice if he likes me too."

Two weeks later, I was heading out to see a horse named Jefe. I knew that word from my time in New Mexico. Pronounced "Heh-fay," it means "Boss."

"I know this horse," the barn owner had told me. "And his owner. He brought him out here for a clinic once. I would have bought him on the spot if he were for sale. You'll have some issues to overcome, but nothing we can't handle."

I didn't ask what color he was, or how much he was asking. Just the phone number.

Oy, I'm so nervous! What do I ask? How do I not come across as someone who has never bought a horse before, when I've never bought a horse before? What if he isn't right for me, but I'm too embarrassed to say, and then I wind up buying him anyway because he looks at me with big brown eyes? Oh, my Achilles heel... big, soft, brown eyes. So unless he has blue eyes, I'm screwed. Oh, this was the worst idea ever. What am I doing? You know, I'll just keep borrowing horses. Maybe lease one. Yeah, that's it. Leasing will be fine.

As I entered the barn, there was no magical horse smell. Instead, the faint smell of urine permeated the air. Then I saw him. A strong, broad back with beautiful brown and white markings and a touch of black in his mane and tail.

Just like the pictures of horses I used to draw when I was a little girl. Brown and white with a black mane and tail. That way they had a little bit of every color and I didn't have to choose.

I watched him roll in his small paddock. "Yup, he likes to roll, all right," said his owner. "So you never have to groom him. He's self-grooming, that one."

I laughed, trying to choose between several witty replies that had popped into my head all at once. *Does he blanket himself too when it gets too cold out? Can he clean his own tack? How about shoes – do I need to call the farrier, or is he a self-shoer?* Then I realized the owner was serious.

And to think I was the one afraid of looking like an idiot.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Sixteen."

Off by a year, but close enough.

“Oh, wait,” he said, looking at his registration papers. “Nope, I did the math wrong. He’s fifteen.” I took the papers from him and checked the math. Foaled two days after my birthday. A fellow Taurus.

“Do you know how tall he is?” I asked.

“About 15 hands.”

And so it was that I broke the first rule of horse shopping, and bought the first horse I looked at. I also informed Jon of the cardinal rules of horse ownership:

1. There will always be something I need to buy.
2. I will never be home when I say I will be.

I felt as giddy as a schoolgirl who finds out that the boy she’s had a crush on for like, ever, happens to, you know, like her back. The first thing I fell in love with was his long mane, tangled and matted despite his valiant efforts at self-grooming. Next it was his pink, wrinkled muzzle that made him look like an old man.

Jefe was a kind horse, though as I came to know him and more about his past, I believe he would have been justified in becoming mean and bitter. Instead, he had learned to shut down. I suppose that to many people, he would have just seemed obedient. But to me, the unblinking eyes told me that his mind was somewhere else. “Do with me what you will,” he seemed to be saying, “but just get it over with as quickly and as painlessly as possible.”

I decided that this sensitive horse with the old soul and matted mane needed a new beginning. And so I called him Phoenix, after the beautiful bird that rises from the ashes

and whose tears are said to be healing. Looking back, I wonder whether he rose from his own ashes, or from mine.

As I untangled his mane, he began to untangle the loneliness and self-doubt I still carried after moving back to Indiana. I had the shoes removed that were restricting his feet, and he began to remove the hurt restricting my heart. And as I worked hard to gain his trust, he showed me that it has to go both ways. It's not enough for him to trust me. I have to trust him too. And trust myself. That was a whole lot of something that had never come easily to me.

He started teaching me this the first time I saw him run loose in the arena. I stood in the middle, watching him run, stick and attached string in hand, well aware that he could at any time turn and run toward me. Or even kick out at me. But he didn't. He trotted his beautiful, floating trot, broke into a canter, stopped suddenly, tossed his head, spun gracefully and changed direction as if he were cutting some invisible calf from a herd.

"Oh, wow," I whispered, breathless.

And then he stopped a short distance away, turning to face me. Again he tossed his head, blowing a giant snort, looking at me expectantly.

"What did you think of that?" he seemed to ask.

"Oh, Phoenix...that was beautiful. You are amazing!"

He lowered his head, and stood quietly, licking his lips. "May I?"

"Yes."

And with that, he approached slowly, hesitantly. I reached out and stroked his shoulder as he stood near me, blowing, breathing, being.

This was love. Horse love. I even had documented proof. It came in the form of an online quiz. I could never resist a good quiz.

According to psychologist Robert Sternberg, the three components of love are intimacy, passion and commitment. Three legs of a triangle, all three necessary for a strong, stable love. With a simple quiz, I could assess these three legs of my intimate relationship. The instructions were to rate each statement on a scale of 1 to 9, filling in each blank with the name of my significant other. Honestly, it looked like something from a magazine I would read while having my hair done, but it was on the internet and mentioned a well-known researcher, so it had to be valid, right?

Question: I would rather be with _____ than with anyone else. Would I rather be with Jon than anyone else? That depends (said the lawyer), on which Jon happened to show up. If Jon v.1, then absolutely. But Jon v.2, who put in his first appearance shortly after our wedding? In that case, I'd rather be with just about anyone else, though I might just as well be alone.

Yeah, well, you're pretty good at closing yourself off too.

That's enough, you. Remember our deal about no more talking smack. Even if you do have a point.

Phoenix, however, had only one version. So, actually, I believe I would rather be with Phoenix than with anyone else. Maybe I'm doing this all wrong and filling in the wrong name. Let's try again.

Question: Just seeing Phoenix excites me. Well, yes, seeing Phoenix does excite me. That little display in the arena? Nothing is more exciting or more beautiful to me than that.

Question: I find myself thinking about Phoenix during the day. Constantly. And when I do, I have to smile inside

like the cat who just ate the canary. He also provides the perfect antidote to spousal irritations.

Jon: "Sweetie, I'll be playing poker tonight with the boys."

Me: "Sounds good." *Stay out the whole stupid night for all I care. I'll be with my horse.*

Jon: "Sweetie, I want to buy [insert name of some expensive thing] for Jenna [that she doesn't need]."

Me: "Have fun shopping." *Remember Rule #1! And he deserves the best too!*

Jon: "Sweetie, I'm going to spend half the weekend watching [insert sport] on t.v."

Me: "Enjoy!" *Whatever. I'll be spending half my weekend with my horse.*

Question: I find Phoenix to be personally very attractive. Oh, yes! Every time I look at him, I think how handsome he is. How strong, how beautifully spotted, how his long mane flows like Fabio's. He's definitely attractive.

Question: I cannot imagine another person making me as happy as Phoenix does. Oh, that's a no-brainer. Have I been happier with Jon? Absolutely. But Phoenix ALWAYS makes me happy. I can be having the crappiest day, or be in the depths of despair, and he makes me happy. He never criticizes, never points out things I've done wrong, and all of his jokes are funny. He even likes my singing. I think.

Question: I especially like physical contact with Phoenix. Oh, definitely! I especially love riding him bareback, feeling every muscle, feeling stable and safe. I

love brushing his mane, kissing his nose, rubbing his tired neck and back muscles after a ride. Oh, I definitely love physical contact with Phoenix.

And finally: There is something “magical” about my relationship with Phoenix. Oh yes. One day, as he stood in his stall and I stood on the other side of the door, he looked at me. He looked right in my eye, and held the gaze. That moment was indescribable. There was a knowing, a connection, however brief, in which so much was said without a spoken word. THAT was magical.

When I added up the scores, it was clear: I was in love with my horse. Head-over-heels. After all, internet test scores don't lie. I guess that makes me strange, but my guess is that there are a lot of other weirdoes like me out there. And most of us are women.

Apology accepted. Thanks, God.

MORAL OF THE STORY FIVE: ASK FOR WHAT YOU WANT

Remember that personal support staff in the spirit world we talked about? The other members of your legal team? Turns out, they – along with the guardian angels that many of us learned about from a young age - really want to help us. They love nothing more than to be of assistance. But here's the catch: They can't do so unless we ask. Under the rules, our helpers cannot simply unilaterally decide one day to grant wishes we never made.

Actually, my understanding is that there are a number of rules surrounding the granting of requests which, if written in the form of a legal contract, I imagine might look something like this:

1. Higher Beings (hereinafter, "Grantors") shall be available at all times to receive Requests of any nature from an Earthly Being (hereinafter, "Requestor"), whether made orally, in writing, or by any other means.
2. Said Request shall be granted, unless:
 - i. The Request restricts the Free Will of another Being.
 - ii. The Request is likely to result in undue harm to the Requestor.
 - iii. The Request is in contradiction to the terms of the Agreement entered into between Requestor and Requestor's Support Staff prior to incarnation in the earth plane, otherwise known as "birth."
3. No Grants shall originate from a Grantor. As it is understood that Earthly Beings are in possession of Free Will, Grantors are expressly

prohibited from initiating action in support of a Requestor without receipt of an appropriate Request, as outlined in (1). This prohibition may not be overridden by good intentions of the Grantor.

4. Whereas receiving and granting Requests is mandatory, subject to the provisions outlined in Section 2 subsections i. – iii., no limitations are placed upon Grantors as to the manner or timeframe in which the Request is to be granted.

Translation:

1. All prayers will be heard.
2. Ask and you shall receive.
3. You have to ask in order to receive.
4. Exactly how and when your prayers/intentions are answered might be different than you had envisioned, so be careful what you ask for.

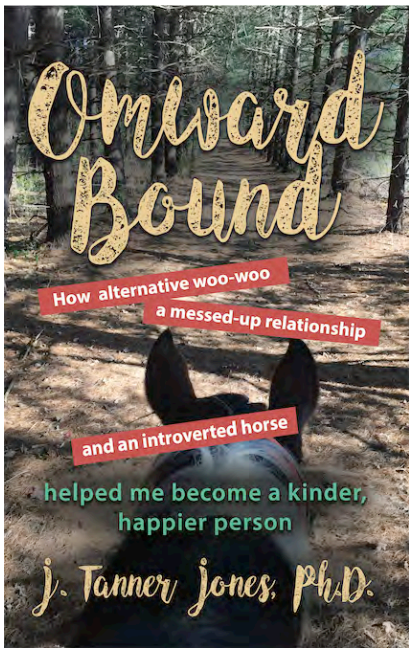
In regard to point 4, I personally believe that it's best to err on the side of vagueness in your requests. In other words, ask for the final result you want, and leave how it happens to those who are helping you. For example, when I was looking for a horse, my stated intention – my request – was simply “to find the perfect horse for me, preferably about 15 years old and about 15 hands tall.” Could I have asked for a brown and white gelding with a beautiful black and white mane? Sure. But what if the perfect horse for me wasn't a paint, or was a mare, or 16 hands tall? In the end, don't we just want the right one?

Therefore, a common intention or prayer that I use is to simply ask for the “highest good for all concerned.” For example, if I have a friend who is dealing with relationship

issues, I would ask that “the situation be resolved with the highest good and with blessings and comfort for all concerned.” Could I ask that the couple resolve their issues? Or that my friend finally see the light and dump the rat bastard? Sure. But I don’t know what’s best, do I? All I can ask is that it be resolved as painlessly as possible.

The point is, intentions are powerful. You can pray, write in a journal, ask during a meditation, or simply have a conversation with your guide while out walking your dog. It can’t hurt, right? Heck, even my dogs figured that out. Never mind I just gave them a treat 5 minutes ago - it never hurts to ask for another one.

So just try it. You might be really pleasantly surprised.



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