

What is more difficult; Healing from the loss of a twenty-year relationship with my riding-horse or getting used to a new mount? Follow my five-year journey as I befuddle my way into the heart of an Arabian mare, and her into mine.

Lessons From Meerah:

How a Rescued Arabian Mare Helped Me Evolve as a Horsewoman

By Suzy Graf

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CHAPTER 1:

BREATHE

It is amazing how a week's events can alter one's life. Just last Monday, December 13th, I had awoken full of hope and promise. Christmas presents were all purchased and ready and family would be gathering at my home for Christmas Eve. All I had left to do was thoroughly clean the house and bake cookies. My "to-do" list was checked, I was organized, time to enjoy a respite from the holiday rush and enjoy some "me" time.

Coincidence collided with my occasional riding lessons with two of my favorite riding instructors into the upcoming weekend. Instead of worry about doing too much, I accepted the challenge and had planned on trailering out to Rhode Island on Saturday to participate with Meerah in a Working Equitation lesson and then, on Sunday, I stayed local and traveling to my friend's indoor for a lesson on Centered Riding. But when I went down to the barn to feed on Monday morning, I questioned whether my weekend plans would materialize at all.

I was greeted with an uncharacteristic whinny by Meerah as I walked out of the basement door with her morning feed. I should have known something was wrong.

Meerah only "screams" at me if I am late... but I was on time. I pushed the butterflies back out of my gut as I reasoned

her call was precipitated by an uncharacteristic late season “heat” cycle. After all, this fall has been incredibly warm and the forecast for the upcoming week was well above average. These warmer than average temperatures fueled my optimism. I was excited to be able to practice riding my overly sensitive “Sand Princess,” Meerah, in my own outdoor arena without battling freezing temperatures before the scheduled weekend lessons.

Life was good!

I walked down to the barn to the usual sight of my three mares hanging their heads out of their respective doors, all eagerly awaiting the little grain the fat buggers receive. There was nothing out of the ordinary about their expressions. However, my heart sank when I opened Meerah’s door to pour her grain in the feed tub and noticed she had leftover hay from the night before.

Meerah usually ate every blade of hay I fed her. But I wasn’t ready to accept an illness as I reasoned I must have somehow fed her too much hay in her new “slow feeding” hay bag. Or, perhaps, there was something distasteful in part of her hay which she simply chooses not to eat. I made note of this peculiarity, and closed her stall door, leaving her to eat her grain as I turned my attention to my other animals.

I dumped my other two mares’ grain, then I absent mindedly handed the goat her “cookie” and poured the poultry feed into their feeders. Then proceeded to throw the two prefilled “hay pillows” stored in the hay barn out into the

paddock where the horses spend their day. Those chores completed; I once again turned my attention back to the horses.

Meerah was hanging her head out of her door. Her way of telling me that she was through eating.

As I've done for the past five years, I opened the door to Meerah's stall, and she walked out into the neighboring paddock, followed by the other two mares when I also unlatched their doors. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary as I half watched the three girls meander over to the hay piles. I resumed my usual morning routine and wheeled the wheelbarrow out of the hay room with the muck fork and broom precariously balanced off to one side. But when I began to muck out the farthest stall something was nagging inside me.

I paused my cleaning and looked out to the paddock to watch Meerah's behavior.

My heart sank when I noticed she was barely nibbling on the hay pillow as her lips delicately pulled a few blades of the dried grass out of the webbed netting in front of the canvas bag. She did not usually eat like a Victorian debutant. My barbarian warrioress would usually attack the hay bag, oftentimes flipping it over as her teeth chomped down. If she wasn't happy with the mouthful she gleaned, she would pin her ears and jealously chase the other two horses away from the next hay bag, just to claim it as hers too. Her dance of dominance may last for one or two swaps until she decides which hay bag was the best choice. Only then would she settle into gobbling the green gold hidden inside the slow-feeding contraption. I knew

her half-hearted attempt at eating this morning meant that something wasn't quite right with my mare.

It was with trepidation that I abandoned my stall cleaning and walked back over to Meerah's stall to inspect her feed tub. As I had feared, she did not finish eating her morning grain. I felt my neck muscles tighten and my stomach turn as my mind raced with a newfound fear that Meerah could be sick with colic, a horsey stomachache.

For such a large animal, horses are surprisingly fragile creatures whose long necks don't have the physiology to regurgitate. So, if they eat something that doesn't agree with them, they must eventually poop it out. Which doesn't seem like such a difficult task BUT they have a relatively small stomach that, if packed with too much food, can literally swell, and burst. Their small intestine can "twist" if filled with too much grain. And their large intestines can impact or get constipated. Again, a horrible scenario due to the physiology of the horse; unable to vomit, small stomach, lots of intestine and a working fermentation vat of an appendix called the cecum.

The realization that my mare was sick initiated a surge of adrenalin into my system. Logically, my mind told me not to panic. Earlier life experiences, and my lifeguard training, told me to stay calm and simply assess the situation. But my emotional mind was screaming irrationally and running around in small circles like a human toddler!

“Breathe” was what I heard echoing through my mind. Obediently, I listened and momentarily closed my eyes to become aware of the rhythm of my breathing. Just this simple exercise allowed my parasympathetic nervous system to kick in. Conscious breathing allowed my body to calm and counteract the “flight or fight” state my previously worried mind wanted to lapse into. I practice and have taught yoga classes, I know how to meditate, but for years I struggled with using these same, simple techniques when around my horses. I can credit Meerah for pushing me into learning how to stay calm when under stress.

This little bay Egyptian Arabian has taught me much. She has re-trained me to stay calm and not to overreact with emotions. I knew from past experiences that if I walked up to her with my body in a state of concern panic, she would not allow me to approach. So, I calmed my nerves...

... and walked over to the mare who was still gingerly picking hay strands out of the hay bag, and I stood next to her and waited to see what she wanted to tell me.

Meerah sniffed at my pocket expectantly and I offered her a horse cookie that was buried inside. She halfheartedly ate the treat and then strolled back to lightly munching the hay. Her willingness to eat the treat set my mind at ease. I kept one eye on her for the next hour while I cleaned stalls, changed the horse’s blankets, and stuffed hay feeders for the evening feeding. The rhythm of my morning routine was peppered with watchfulness as I kept checking on the mare’s slowly

improving appetite. This was not my usual hurried morning routine. I allowed my mind to calm as I reflected upon just how far our relationship had developed over these past five years.

Meerah was not the first horse I've owned. No, I've owned many horses over the years, but she was the transitional acquisition. The first new horse I've owned after sharing my farm with the same two mares, Ginger, and Heather, for almost thirty years. There was a time when even Ginger and Heather were the new kids on my farm. At one time my herd was up to five horses when I was birthing my own family of children.

My farm's occupants morphed as did my family. Human babies grew up as I bought ponies for my kids to ride and just as easily rehomed half-trained ponies as two of my three children lost interest in horseback riding. After a few years I settled on keeping just two rideable Arabian mares with the attitude that if any one of my children wanted to ride, they could share one of my horses. This attitude served me well until my youngest child, a horse crazy tweenaged girl, eventually convinced me she needed her own horse. I bought her a half-Arabian show gelding with the attitude that it was her horse... I never really bonded with him.

My heart, and focus, laid upon my two mares who I spent most of my leisurely time either showing at horse shows or trail riding. As I look back in time, I never realized how twenty-plus years of riding the same two horses can mold a person into habits that were not exactly exemplary of "good horsemanship."

Time progressed, my mares aged, and, unfortunately, my 28-year-old insulin resistant, arthritic, and slightly foundered mare, Ginger, died of colic in March of 2016. That same year my young adult daughter had bought her own farm. I knew she would be moving her gelding off my farm soon. So, I scrambled to find another horse to keep my one surviving aged mare company.

When news of Ginger's death reached my friends, they networked to help me find a stablemate for my surviving elderly horse, Heather. I could have been gifted an "almost sound" three-year-old quarter horse gelding, or an aged Arabian mare, or a pony. But I DEFINITELY did not want a pony and was weary of caring for elderly horses too. After not having ridden Heather in years, and only riding Ginger lightly due to her advanced arthritis, I didn't want to care for another old, unrideable, horse. I also was tired of the expense of senior feed and vet bills for the infirmed. I politely refused the few "free horse" offers that wafted my way and spent the next few weeks looking for an inexpensive equine candidate.

I'm a "mature" woman, and was in my late fifties, and I should have been logical and sought out a calm riding companion. But I loved the Arabian horse breed, and all the custom saddles and bridles I had bought over the years, and wardrobe of horse blankets in various colors and gram weights, were purchased to fit my Arabian mares. I quickly realized I couldn't afford a well-trained horse, so I narrowed my search to buying a younger Arabian horse that was old enough to ride but may still need some training.

Almost thirty years ago I had bought Heather as a three-month-old filly and, two years later, Ginger was born on my farm. Since I raised both of my old mares from babies and started them myself, I reasoned I could train this new horse too. I never really considered myself, well, old. I was a trained fitness professional who taught water aerobics and yoga classes. I reasoned, surely, I still had the agility and physical strength to easily and confidently train another “green” horse.

Little did I realize I was biting off a bit more than I could chew.

It was years since I had bought a horse, and I quickly discovered that I could no longer purchase a horse through ads found in the back of magazines, newspapers, or regional periodicals as I have done with my previous mounts. This time I will need to use the internet to buy my next horse.

Since I have adopted dogs through the internet, I went to that same rescue site and scrolled through the listings of adoptable Arabian horses for sale. All I found listed within a reasonable driving distance was a horse living at the New Hampshire SPCA. She was the right age, and pretty, and I considered her for a moment but something about her photo seemed to raise a red flag. The horse in the photograph was Meerah. She looked way too stressed, and I certainly did not need another CRAZY Arabian.

I use the adjective, “crazy,” because after almost thirty years of being together, my current aged grey Arabian horse, Heather, and I never really clicked as a pair. When the horse

was young, I worked with a quasi-Arabian horse trainer who taught me all the “tricks” of showing the breed. In retrospect the gimmicks were just that, gimmicks, and the result was that I made Heather respect me, but not trust me, nor did I her.

Over the years we developed an understanding. Kinda like an elderly couple who never got along but stayed married. Heather would respect my space, do as I wished, but she watched out for herself first if she panicked. And when Heather panicked, I learned to hold my breath and react... fast.

Breathing to calm my nerves around Heather was a choice I never considered. No, with Heather it was all about staying tense, thinking fast, and getting the hell out of the way if she overreacted!

Heather had given me a black eye when I was trying to clip her, sent me to the hospital for a suspected broken foot after she ran over me to get away from the fan I had turned on in her stall, and had knocked me over numerous times due to her inability to walk calmly through tight gate openings. But in 2016 the asthmatic and arthritic 30-year-old mare was still prancing and enjoying life. She missed Ginger, and even though Heather and I had our relationship flaws, I felt obligated to care for her in her old age. And I honestly liked my crazy little grey Arabian mare, Heather.

I felt compassion for Heather who missed her old companion. I felt she deserved a new friend. I was determined to find a rideable and young replacement for me, and a companion for Heather too. But sadly, what I really wanted

was for Ginger to simply be alive and back in my life once more.

Ginger was only part Arabian and was naturally calmer than Heather. I had owned her mother who I bred to an Arabian stallion. I'm not sure if it was her breeding, or the fact that Ginger was born on my farm, but she always seemed to "try" for me. If Ginger panicked, she would prance in place and wait for further instructions from me, while Heather would sometimes become feral and "check out" and leave, or simply run over me! And it was that familiar feral, panicked look in the eye that I recognized in the eye of Meerah staring at me through that SPCA's internet post.

I just KNEW Meerah's attitude was like Heather's. I scrolled past the photo twice and, finding nothing suitable listed, I decided to not rely upon my first impression of the photograph and allowed myself to read the attached website blurb.

Meerah was part of a small herd of Arabians surrendered to the SPCA because the woman breeding them was infirmed. The eighty plus year old woman was not properly caring for them, and her family did not want the responsibility. Consequently, the few horses that were born at this small breeding facility these past few years have not been handled. There were several horses surrendered to the SPCA, from weanling aged on up.

Meerah was five years old and barely halter broke when she arrived at the facility. The manager of the horse division at

the SPCA took an immediate liking to the mare. She posted; “Meerah was sensible and friendly and deserved a chance.” She sent the horse off for thirty days of professional training with an individual who showed Morgan horses because the SPCA representative felt that training the horse to be ridden made the mare more adoptable.

Now that I understand the reasoning behind the photograph, I studied it more closely.

It was a head and neck shot of a very pretty, bay horse, with her head cranked into the vertical position by side reins. The horse was confined within a box stall and a biting rig, a lightweight harness, was placed on the horse with the side reins pulled tight to a loose-ring bit in her mouth. I could see the tightness of the muscles in the horse’s face. It looked like the mare’s mouth was trying to work the bit but couldn’t; a nose cavesson was snugged over the mare’s muzzle to keep her mouth closed. What stood out the most in the photo was the white of the horse’s eyes. She was a dark horse, in a dark stall, and her eyes held so much fear, or pain, or confusion.

She reminded me of Heather about to explode.

I didn’t feel the photo was of an abusive situation. On the contrary, it simply illustrated the tradition of the Arabian and Morgan Industry’s horse training logic of “bitting” a horse that you are teaching to be ridden. The theory being that the horse can “figure out” the bit pressure by being left alone in a stall. I understood the logic but have experienced mixed results with this technique.

My first experience with biting a horse was when I took an independent study course while attending college. The University of Connecticut had a herd of Morgan horses and the Barn Manager at the time taught me how to teach a horse to drive (to pull a cart.) Years later, when I worked with the Arabian trainer who helped me train Heather, I was once again re-introduced to using the biting rig. And when I started to show my Arabians, I met others who had great success achieving the “headset” they were looking for through the practice of biting a horse. If done properly the method has merits, but, as with all training practices, it could be disastrous if done improperly.

And I had made some stupid mistakes with biting rigs over the years and my biggest faux pas was with my half Arabian mare, Ginger.

Ginger’s father was a purebred Arabian, but her mother, Peaches, was the product of a nurse-mare and teaser pony. Consequently, Ginger’s maternal grandmother, the nurse mare, was a Tennessee Walking Horse and her grandfather was a non-descript buckskin pony. Ginger inherited many of the pretty characteristics of her Arabian father but, unfortunately, also inherited her maternal pony grandfather’s cresty or thicker neck. Aesthetically the thicker neck was not offensive because the mare’s Arabian dished face, wide white blaze, large pony eyes, and longer than average mane complimented her overall conformation. But her larger proportioned pony-like neck also meant she sported more muscling there. And Ginger was

strong headed. If Ginger decided she wanted to lean on the bit to pull the reins out of my hands, there was no stopping her.

At first, I simply accepted her heaviness in the bit. I would brace my body, or even pull back on the reins to counteract her naughty behavior. I most likely would never have considered re-training Ginger if it wasn't for her low placing at her first few horse shows. I queried my horseshow friends and listened to ideas on how to change my mare but wasn't quite sure how to proceed. That is until a friend invited me to show with her at an upcoming "A" rated show. Then my competitiveness trumped any sensibility of kindness.

I was excited at the prospect of this new adventure, but cautious because Ginger was only five years old at the time, hadn't had a lot of experience at shows, and I had just started riding her the previous summer. I knew we did not have a lot of miles in the saddle together and I was feeling the pressure of going to an early spring horse show. I listened to my friend's opinion on how to fast track Ginger into being "lighter" in the bit and decided to try her suggested technique to "fix" Ginger's problem and teach the horse how to "back off" the bit.

I was using a thicker, loose ring, snaffle on the mare at the time and my friend suggested switching to a thinner mouthpiece which would apply more concentrated pressure on the horse's tongue and therefore I'd get more response when I pulled on the reins. I looked at the thin mouthpiece of this new bit with suspicion. My friend proceeded to suggest biting Ginger while lunging her or keeping the horse in motion while

using the side reins, would be a better choice with such a harsh bit.

Thinking as she spoke, my friend reasoned out loud that the mare might hurt herself fighting the biting rig in the stall. She was convincing as she finished her thought process. Yes, allowing Ginger to travel forward in a circle around me, would better emulate me riding her, and thus would illicit the best response from the horse.

I should have questioned why not simply ride the horse in this new bit. But I didn't. Instead, I followed her suggestion and experimented with tying the mare's head to the side reins and tried to lunge her in circles. But Ginger did not read our lesson plan.

Instead of "backing off the bit" when Ginger went to extend her neck, she fought the pain this thin piece of metal placed upon the bars of her mouth. She did not tuck her head and "respect" the bit pressure, instead the mare leaned heavily on the bit, and the more it most likely hurt, the faster she would trot, and then canter, and then gallop when she finally lapsed into a rather uncontrollable panicked run!

I realized the situation was getting out of control and held my breath to stay strong while I used both hands to white knuckle my grip tighter on the taunt lunge line. I was barely able to hang on as the mare careened around, and around me in a faster, and faster circle. If this was a cartoon, she would have become airborne like one of the swings in an old carnival swing carousel ride. But this wasn't a cartoon. The reality of the

situation was far from carefree. I, or my horse, could become seriously hurt.

Within moments that seemed a lot longer, Ginger started to slow down as her reasoning replaced panic. Finally, I was able to stop the mare and the horrible scenario that just unfolded in real time had ended.

I felt horrible, relieved, scared and a little angry while I walked up to her trembling neck to unhook one of the side reins keeping her head tethered in place, and then the other. When I stepped around to Ginger's offside to unclip the other side rein, I was horrified to see blood coming out of the mare's mouth. I held my breath in anticipatory panic. Then exploded into an authoritative, "whoa," and once convinced that the somewhat sensible state of mind she was in would hold her still, I allowed my emotions to quiet into cajoling.

I wasn't sure if the mare trusted my concern, or if she was convinced, I was going to cause her more pain if she moved. I waited to gauge her reaction.

Her wild eyes had begun to soften, and her head was beginning to drop in exhaustion. Once I felt safe that she would remain still and allow me to inspect whatever damage I had done to her mouth, I, too, let out an involuntary sigh of relief. She seemed to appreciate my exhalation and visibly relaxed further. Only then did I feel confident enough to slide my fingers next to the bit still held in her mouth. She obediently opened her mouth wide for me to peek inside.

Amongst the open mouth chewing jaw, the damage was clearly visible. The bit had made a quarter to eighth inch cut into the entire width of her tongue! I was thankful the cut wasn't too deep. But the thin bit's cut left a permanent scar upon Ginger's tongue, and a reminder to NEVER again use a harsh bit with side reins on a horse again!

I threw that bit in the garbage

Ginger had two weeks off to heal, and I then resumed conditioning her for the upcoming horse show, and before we knew it, I was trailering her to a neighboring state for this "A" rated Arabian show.

I was stepping out of my comfort zone. Leaving the familiarity of one day local horse shows where I would show out of the trailer to staying at a venue where I shared a hotel room with my friend and poor Ginger was confined to four solid wooden walls with a cement floored prison cell of a stall for five days. And even though I had the company of a friend that I've frequently showed with at my local horse shows, and Ginger had the company of those stabled around us, we both felt displaced.

My previously overly confident friend was now a student rider, under the tutelage of her horse trainers who were funny, and pleasant, and more knowledgeable than either of us. I wasn't quite sure how I was supposed to act, and the near week away from home was quite unsettling for both my pony and me.

The inside of the barn next to the indoor stadium where we showed felt foreign and unlike any barn that I've been in before. Ginger was stabled at the end of a ten-stall dead-end alleyway with five horses on each side of the central aisle. Blocks of stall neighborhoods repeated in geometric fashion throughout this barn and were all intersected by a wide central alleyway that ran the length of the huge barn. Ginger was amongst the six horses stabled in the trainer's care. When I first glanced at her in the stall, all seemed normal as she munched contently on her hay like one would see in any ordinary horse barn. But the alleyway between the stalls was transformed into a temporary home for the long weekend. Box fans buzzed quietly at the top of the stalls and rubber mats were laid on the cement to cushion the horse's legs. Potted flowers, a small table with candies and pamphlets about their training services, two small couches and a large decorative banner with the trainer's stable name were expertly placed alongside the last stall by the center alleyway of the barn. It was as if someone moved their living room into a horse barn.

Not just horses occupied the stalls. One stall was converted into a place for a groom to sleep and "watch over" the horses stabled under their care. Another stall was used for our tack where saddles, bridles, grooming supplies, and horse show clothing were organized. The trainer's groom kept their horses immaculately clean... they smelled more like shampoo than horses. The groom even sprinkled diluted Pine Sol out onto the freshly swept aisle-way to freshen the air. Our area of the barn smelled more like the inside of a person's home than horses.

I felt out of place in this weird environment. I could only imagine how poor Ginger felt.

The area where I was to ride my horse was also odd. I was used to trailering to a horse show, tying my horse to my trailer, warming up the horse in an outdoor arena and, depending on the show grounds at home, either stepping into the indoor arena for my five minutes of a class, or showing in an outdoor arena. But this A-rated show was very different.

The show grounds were located within the city limits where there were no green spaces. Cars, trucks, and paved parking lots were everywhere. I would lead Ginger out of one barn, across a paved parking lot and into a covered arena to exercise her or, into another covered arena to show her in a class. The trainer would joke about heading from one horse cave to the next. His horses were used to this life because they lived in a large barn with an indoor arena attached. My horses were stabled in my back yard with a shed row of an open barn and only an outdoor arena or field to be ridden in. I felt out of my element; like a country bumpkin thrown into downtown Manhattan and I'm sure Ginger felt the same.

It wasn't just the environment that caught me by surprise but the whole energy of the place. Again, it was like going from the relaxed pace of farm living to the hectic pace of the city as loudspeakers blared news about upcoming classes or the current class's placing.

I soon learned that "first call" meant I had around 20 minutes to prepare for my class, second call meant my class

would start in less than 15 minutes. Start to line up meant the class before me was being judged and I had just around five minutes before I'd ride into the show ring. And this time keeping placed my psyche into a state of frenzied worry, which I'm sure Ginger sensed as well. Our first class was a disaster, and I was pleased to simply survive and not look too foolish as Ginger ignored my direction and we placed last, sixth out of six riders.

I'm not sure if the trainer I stabled with felt sorry for me or if he was worried about his business's reputation with me housing my mare in his block of stalls. As I said, I just wanted to survive and not look too offensive. So, when he offered advice on how to improve Ginger's performance I gladly accepted.

I wanted to fit in and trusted his air of expertise.

He lent me a different western bit to use that also had weighted reins. He bitted Ginger in her stall for thirty minutes before I would show her. The theory was that Ginger would figure out how to keep her head in the correct position and therefore keep that same desired "headset" while in her riding class.

Western Pleasure riding classes were not very long; walk, jog and lope in one direction, reverse and then walk, jog, and lope the other way. Bring the horse to the center of the arena to line up parallel to the other competitors where we would also prove to the judge that our horse could go in reverse. Then the

competitors would be asked to retire to the far end of the arena and wait for the class results.

All these maneuvers were usually completed within five minutes. I only needed to keep Ginger looking well behaved with her head in the same position while performing the desired movements and staying on the outside of the arena without going too slow or too fast and, most important of all, looking like a “pleasure to ride” for less than five minutes. I also had to keep a smile on my makeup plastered face and not move my rein hand too much nor my legs to create this illusion of an easy horse to ride.

The trainer had placed spurs on my boots and, along with the heavier bit and reins on Ginger’s front end whose purpose was to make the horse more “packaged.” The spurs drove her hindquarters forward while the heavier bit and reins slowed the front end down. The mare felt bouncier and performed to the best of her ability. The ride wasn’t exactly comfortable, and I tried to relax and enjoy the newness of it all. I sensed Ginger was nervous and uneasy with the change in her show gear too.

I held my breath and said a silent prayer that the horse would not panic as we maneuvered around the big white walled arena. I kept reminding myself to sit still, smile, make it look easy and for God’s sake do what we were instructed to do without messing up... for just five minutes.

I learned at that show, and at many years of subsequent horse shows of lesser caliber, to watch the judge and cheat. This was the practice of all the competitors. When the judge

was looking I would “show” my mare; sit still, smile, relax my gut, and make the ride appear relaxed and flawless. But when the judge’s attention was focused on watching another competitor I could “check” my horse. This was raising my rein hand high while simultaneously touching my spur into the horse’s side. The high rein hand would cause the horse to lower her head and slow down slightly while the spur would accelerate her hind end or “push her back up into the bridle.” This “packaging” or checking needed to be done quickly and, just as quickly I needed to resume that relaxed, pleasure of a fake ride while the judge was watching me.

I found that showing in a Western Pleasure Class required a lot of physical work and true relaxed breathing was never a possibility. I needed to sit up, have great posture, dart my eyes around without moving my head, smile until my face twitched, jerk, jerk on the reins and bump, bump with my spurs then be still, be perfect, and for God sakes, keep that smile while hoping the mare didn’t lose her mind and totally freak out, which some horses did.

A fraction of the horses in those classes would not be able to contain themselves with all the pressure and would simply choose to no longer listen to their rider’s requests. These maverick ponies would manifest faster movements, slower movements, prancing, bucking, rearing, or simply stopping and refusing to move. The younger, beginner horses would sometimes be quite “fun” to watch as the horses would experiment and try to say “no.”

The trainers at this horse show were not abusive and would laugh at each other when their mounts bolted away at a run or would leap sideways like a gazelle. Then the trainer would have a way to “fix” the situation by biting the horse or lunging it until it was no longer “fresh,” or simply staying on until the horse was finished being naughty. Eventually the horse learned not to object and would hug the rail, go round and round, look obedient and earn a blue ribbon.

Not all horses made it as “Pleasure” horses. There were other ways of showing. The horse could be taken over jumps or raced around obstacles in classes called gymkhana or asked to be more animated in another style of riding called saddle seat. But those horses that could be convinced to go round and round with their head down in a Western Pleasure class were rare.

My other mare, Heather, was too nervous about other horses passing her in a show ring and I retired from showing her after two years of trying. Heather was the horse I trail rode instead of showed, while Ginger was naturally compliant and tolerated the traffic in the show ring just fine.

Ginger learned to be obedient. She learned to stay on the rail with her head down. She learned to tolerate my nervous glances at the judge so I could “fix” her head with a check or spur. And over the years Ginger became more like a robot in the arena without much expression in her ears or pep in her step. She even carried my daughter, and three of her 4-H

friends too, to the winner's circle at horseshows. Ginger helped children receive their first blue ribbon. She was a special girl.

I still shed a tear when I think of Ginger; the ease of riding a horse that knew how to carry herself and the obedience and familiarity of directing her that was earned after hours and hours in the saddle. I have recorded all the shows Ginger, and I went too. This habit began as a journal to remind myself about what judge "liked" us and which I should try to avoid. (Judging is an opinion and some prefer the way a horse moves while another might look for the demeanor of the mount.) By the time Ginger had died we had shown in 122 horse shows together.

I also kept notes as to how I messed up in a class or what I needed to work on to improve in my horseshow journal. I was my worst critic and was always striving for perfection. Look at the judge, minor adjustment of my hand, spur only with my leg by the rail, where the judge can't see, drop my hip on the inside slightly to move the horse up into the bridle... I learned how to make minor movements, unseen adjustments and Ginger would respond in cue. Together we developed a silent language that was unique to us and our riding experiences together, a language that another horse would not understand.

I no longer bitted Ginger after her first few years of showing. She understood the bit, my expectation, and tolerated my nervous energy as my eyes would dart, my body shift, and the dance of the five minutes would begin. I was never relaxed in the show ring. I would hold my breath as if engaged in a video game; watch, react, quickly analyze, react, look, adjust,

and when it was finally over, and the judge's card handed to the card runner I could lose my posture and allow the muscles in my butt cheeks to soften and my back to slump.

My body was subconsciously trained to react in the show ring just like Ginger was trained. I held my breath and micro-managed my mount until I had that brief bliss of relaxation. My physical body was trained to "equitate" or use my posture muscles to engage in what I was taught was the proper way to sit in my western saddle as my legs would inadvertently move to signal the mare. An untrained horse would not understand my tenseness, the "game on" tightness I kept in my body nor my sucked in breath. I really wasn't prepared to ride an untrained horse once more. At the time, I didn't understand that I needed to go back to the basics; breathe, relax and be patient.

Ginger and I held the memories, but it was my new horse, Meerah, who would teach me how to relax and use my breath while riding on a horse.

This might sound odd. Of course, I was breathing, but not as a Type B relaxed and confident personality. Instead, I impatiently grunted and demanded that the horse that I was riding at the time would do what I instructed... or else! I rode my old horse, Ginger, like a Drill Sergeant ordering around a Private. Meerah taught me how to be still, breathe and to consider what Meerah wanted. Eventually, I learned how to become "one" with my bay beauty, Meerah.

It wasn't easy and it took years. But I learned a lot from this little horse. Yes, I learned a lot!

I used to be a Type A personality when it came to working with horses. I was the master and the horse my servant. And I had trained my previous two Arabians to be respectful, almost fearful of me. This was how I was introduced to horsemanship years ago and how I thought my relationship with a nearly 1000-pound animal should be. My previous two Arabians were trained to watch me and to react to my slightest signal... or else! My sense of urgency; be it anger, fear, stage fright or pride, would immediately bring their ears forward as they would analyze what I wanted. I demanded the horse to react to me and didn't really understand that they had a voice too.

That was until I adopted Meerah over five years ago.

Unlike Ginger, Meerah was wicked smart and could read me before I realized that I was having an emotional meltdown. If I was tense Meerah would be tense, or explosive, or would fight, or would take flight. The only way to work around and with Meerah was to relax and breathe, which was probably why some of my traditional horse training friends are not fans of the Arabian breed, which I am.

I suppose the perception of beauty and tolerance for behavior is different for every horse owner. If using dog breeds as an example, I own Shelties, a breed of dog known for their Lassie-like cuteness and super high energy joyfulness. While my friend loves her Labrador retriever, a strong and sturdy breed of dog known for their sweet nature and loyalty. If switching this over to horse breeds I enjoy a quirky playful super intelligent personality of the Arabian breed and find the

calm, docile and easily trained personality of the Quarter Horse to be boring. I attribute this preference mostly to my first experience of owning horses.

I got my first horse, Bonnie, as a gift when I was fourteen. I was a horse crazy kid who lived in suburbia in a traditional family of six. I always wanted a horse, a gentle quarter horse became available and, voila, I owned a horse. Arrangements were made at a nearby horse boarding facility and during the summer of 1972 I learned about horsemanship through all the mistakes that were made.

Bonnie was a stocky and overly fat Quarter Horse. Unfortunately, her weight, coupled with a 1,000-plus miles ride in a trailer, and a change in diet, all resulted in her contracting a hoof condition called laminitis. My first month of owning Bonnie was focused on stuffing pills down her mouth and soaking her feet in a kiddie pool of ice water. My parents and stable owners helped me to treat her and make her “sound” or rideable again.

I was only fourteen years old, impatient, and tired of all the work of owning the mare and ready to have some fun.

Riding lessons were not within my family’s realm of thought. I learned how to put on a saddle, how to bridle a horse and how to pick feet. There were no U-tubes back then. So, I learned from watching my newfound stable friends as I fumbled my way into the world of horsemanship.

I rode in circles in wooden enclosed fields and paddocks with new friends. Bonnie was very obedient and not too energetic. I had to push her to get a trot which I thought was the most fun ever. And when I learned to canter her, I allowed the canter to lapse into a bit of a run. The stable owner admonished me for “riding her sweaty” and showed me how to “cool her off.”

My inexperience and lack of guidance was an accident waiting to happen, which happened when I made the mistake of allowing her to hand graze under a pear tree and she developed the laminitis condition again. It was late summer, and my parents were finished supporting a horse that was always sick. They gave the mare to the stable owner, and I became an angry and horseless teenager as the fall months faded into a new year.

I pretty much secluded myself in the prolonged pout of a protest that winter and busied myself reading Walter Farley’s *The Black Stallion* series about a boy and his Arabian stallion. I was also gifted a subscription to *The Western Horsemen* magazine for Christmas and learned about Quarter Horses and Mustangs and working cattle but that wasn’t what I wanted. I wanted to own a horse that was healthy and strong and beautiful and spirited, like the stallion in Farley’s books. And when I saw Charlton Heston’s relationship with his four white Arabian horses in the movie, *Ben Hur*, I was hooked. The ideal horse for me was the beautiful, intelligent Arabian horse!

When the opportunity aroused to buy another horse the following spring, I couldn't believe my luck in having stumbled upon a half Arabian gelding for sale in our area. I don't remember how I first saw Turok, or even why I knew he was for sale, but I fell in love with the bay half Arabian, half Hackney gelding the minute I saw him running free in the farmer's back field.

The little bay gelding I saw in 1973 was beautiful to watch as he trotted and floated and ran around the huge field. He puffed himself up like a peacock as his front legs pumped almost up to his nose. The Hackney breed is bred to be a carriage horse, and this little guy moved like a mini and skinny and less hairy Budweiser Clydesdale in a rhythmic trot that was effortless. He carried his head up high, like an Arabian does during play and snorted as he bolted away from us with his flag of a black tail curled up over his back.

He was stunning!

I never saw such a beautiful horse. And after owning my rather sedate and boring quarter horse, my horse-crazy teenaged-self yearned to own such a beautiful and impressive animal!

I half listened to the farmer tell my parents more about the horse; the price for him was \$175, he was professionally trained when he was five, "hasn't worked" for two years, and the farmer's teenaged daughter had moved out and left the horse with him.

Perhaps missing his daughter was the reason why the farmer was willing to sell the horse so cheap to me, another teenaged girl? I didn't really care WHY he sold the horse to me. I was simply happy to own Turok.

I was young and didn't understand responsibility, let alone common horse sense. I was a kid; the horse was pretty, and I wanted him. I suppose it was parental guilt over my disastrous earlier ownership of Bonnie that allowed Turok to be bought without even being caught. Money was exchanged that day, and the horse was now mine!

I was happy beyond words to be a horse owner again, even if I couldn't catch the sucker to ride him. But boy, was he pretty, as he trotted or galloped around the four plus acre field that he lived in. I loved the way he moved, how he looked, his fiery spirit... I was in love.

It took three days of me trying before the farmer took pity on me and showed me how to "chase" Turok into a small pen off the four-acre field the gelding lived in. Then we threw a western saddle on the 13.3 hand gelding and placed a "Tom Thumb" bit in his mouth, and I got on and rode. The horse didn't trot, nor did he walk. He chose to move in a way in-between the two gaits, like a nervous jig, but his prancing was surprisingly comfortable. In retrospect I held the reins too tight, and the horse was most likely complaining by jiggling. I guess Turok analyzed my lack of riding skills overnight because when I chased him into the pen the next day to ride him Turok was prepared to react.

I saddled him without an issue and, eventually, got the bit in his mouth. Then I led him into the open field to ride. I gathered the reins in one hand, held the horn with the other, pulled myself up and... Turok took off at a run. My airborne butt landed behind the seat of the saddle. This encouraged Turok to go faster. It all happened so fast; I was pulling myself up onto the horse, the horse took off, I was straddling his back/butt and then he was bucking. One, two bucks and I was catapulted off and landed on my butt on the grass while Turok took off across the field and circled back around me, performing a very pretty freedom dance of a trot, as if taunting me.

Too angry to be afraid I easily caught the now timid Turok. He eyed me wildly as I yelled at him that he was bad like I would scold the family's dog that peed on the floor. My teenaged self knew little about horsemanship and only resorted to punishing the bad animal by yelling and even swearing until my nerves calmed, and my fear subsided enough to get back on.

The pony was tired and allowed me to ride him without further incident. But the following morning I was a little nervous about riding again, as was my mother who was told about the incident during our family dinner. The solution was to have my much larger older brother ride the pony first.

I don't remember if my brother had a say in the matter.

He drove me out to the farm the following day and HE rode Turok. My brother was a high school track star and was in

excellent shape. His six-foot-plus frame easily swung onto the pony. He seemed so large on Turok who immediately took off at a run. But instead of being afraid my brother laughed and hollered and encouraged the pony to run and run and until Turok became too tired to run any longer. Then I crawled onto the sweating pony with flaring nostrils and triumphantly rode around the pasture while my brother watched.

This went on for a few days. I'd catch and saddle the horse, and then my brother would yell "Yee Haw" or "Giddy Up" and kick Turok into his panicked run. The horse would run all over the field until tired, and then I would get on and ride.

In retrospect, the farmer must have been watching our antics from his house and couldn't stand the thought of us kids trying to kill ourselves on his property. The kind man came out and showed me how to lunge Turok. He lent me a long rope and stood still while the pony ran around him in a circle. The farmer assured me that I could "get the fresh" out of the pony this way without my brother's help. I tried it, it worked, and that was how I learned to lunge a horse.

Bless this farmer for his patience in watching me learn to lunge and ride. I'm sure there was a parental conversation about my ineptness because the horse was soon moved to a horse boarding facility that happened to also breed Polish Arabian horses.

Riding lessons were not within our realm of thinking. I learned, like the other two girls my age at the farm, how to ride just by doing it. Together we rode in the outdoor arenas or in

the perimeter of the adjacent soybean fields. I became close friends with one girl, Pat, and she eventually traded her “boring” appaloosa gelding for a spirited half Arabian that an older lady boarded at the farm.

Pat and I graduated from walking our horses, to trotting a lot and then to running our horses. I was just happy being around my pony while Pat had a different vision. She wanted to jump her new horse so we experimented with obstacles we could set up in the arena. We soon learned that the western horn was not too conducive to lean forward in a saddle on while going over a jump. So, our solution was to ride without the saddles. By the end of that summer, I was efficient at swinging onto Turok without a saddle and guiding him over the little fences we constructed.

Those two years at the horse boarding farm were carefree, especially during the summer when my parents would drop me off in the morning and pick me up late in the day. While at the farm I watched the stable’s owner handle his prize “white” Arabian stallion and marveled at the beauty of the roan-like grey babies that greeted me at the fence whose purchase price was in the thousands. I wanted to own a beautiful purebred Arabian, and this was imprinted upon my young mind as the equine standard of perfection I wanted to achieve.

I was happy in Indiana for those few years. But unfortunately, my family was transferred once again. Luckily, I was able to bring my horse with me and my half Arabian gelding was also transferred to New England. We moved east,

to Connecticut, where everyone seemed to ride in English style saddles and owned tall thoroughbred horses that dwarfed me, and my Western fitted half Arabian pony.

I made friends and rode the bridle trails through the woods in our community. But I never felt fully accepted as a true equestrian by my hard hat wearing friends who wore tall boots, strange pants and shared stories about riding lessons and weekend horse shows. The few times I rode with a friend on the trails I felt looked down upon as my pony pranced and jigged. I thought Turok's spirit was absolutely, marvelously, beautiful, and longed for the "normality" of being amongst a horse community of spunky little Arabians once more.

In retrospect I suppose it was my first introduction and the joy of riding with my Arabian horse owning friends that shaped what kind of horse I wanted. I felt that the equine standard of beauty was the Arabian horse, and that a spirited somewhat hyper behavior was normal.

I was imprinted in my early teens and by the time I was in my thirties I had achieved my goal and owned two mares; Heather, a purebred Polish Arabian, and a half Arabian named Ginger. These were the two horses I've cared for and have ridden for the past twenty plus years. And now I was faced with the task of finding a new horse... Ugh!

It never occurred to me to investigate buying a different breed of horse. I was an "Arab person." I longed to have a replacement for Ginger and a new friend for Heather and hoped that one would magically appear. But I was running out of

options. The photo of Meerah was the only Arabian mare that I could find within my price range on the internet that Spring of 2016.

Days turned into weeks and my impatient personality led to a phone call to the SPCA, and then to an application, and, eventually, to an offer to come and meet the mare. I was prepared to ride the horse when I drove the two hours up to New Hampshire with my adult daughter as company. I wore my riding blue jeans and brought along Ginger's training bridle complete with snaffle bit. I knew there would be snow on the ground, but I assumed the SPCA must surely have a cleared riding arena where I could ride the mare before I bought her.

I was wrong.

The lady who managed the horses through the SPCA was young and kind and very optimistic. She assured me that Meerah was rideable and apologized because she only had a muddy paddock on the slope of a hill cleared enough to ride in. I listened to her praise for the gorgeous Egyptian Arabian mare standing in front of me in the small, centered aisle horse barn.

The facility was clean, the manager professional and the horse very well presented; spotless coat, shiny long mane that smelled like conditioner and clear alert personality. Meerah reached out her nose to greet and smell me and then waited expectantly for me to pat her.

I was smitten.

The manager led the mare out to the muddy paddock, and I followed with my daughter in tow. The metal gate swung open with a crank and Meerah began to execute an Arabian Piaffe, a beautiful trot in place prance. The handler unsnapped the lead, and Meerah was set free to frolic. She floated around the paddock in an animated trot that took my breath away. Her long neck was extended, and arched, and the engaged neck muscles tapered to a small throatlatch which widened into her jowls and, once again, tapered in the most delicate of a muzzle. She did not have a very high knee carriage, but that was okay because I was not looking for a saddle seat horse. Instead, she floated with powerful hocks snapping in rhythm with her front legs, propelling her across the uneven ground with ease. There was not a hint of lameness as she effortlessly trotted over the snow and mud. She was beautiful, and I would have bought her even if she was never handled before.

Yup, like I did over 40 years ago, I bought a little bay Arabian just because it was pretty running out in a field. I never rode the horse that day, instead the conversation shifted into the nuts and bolts of the adoption process. I agreed to the fee and due to earlier emails and conversations, I, and my farm, were “pre-approved.” We set a date for me to return with my trailer the following week and I drove home wondering...

... “What exactly did I just do?”

I was in my late fifties and knew better. I just bought a horse I did not know and am now going to trailer her home in my two-horse trailer down I-95 for a few hours! My twenty-

year-old SUV was okay for around town excursions, but this was a major highway with big trucks and going fast and... UGH!

Luckily, I had my sensible grown daughter's assurance to guide me. Sam offered to lend me her new Ford truck which can handle my trailer just fine. She even offered to go with me on the drive the following week. And, most importantly, she paid attention to content when the barn manager spewed compliments about the training facility that Meerah was at the previous month. I guess I was hypnotized while watching the beautiful mare careen around the paddock for I honestly didn't hear any of the details of how she was trained nor the mare's history of "overreacting" when ridden.

Unfortunately, one of my many personality flaws is when I think of a situation, I start to place myself into the scenario and daydream about how I will go ahead with my plan, rather than listening to the conversation unfolding around me. So, when the manager explained how Meerah was started under saddle at the Morgan trainer's facility I didn't listen. I was too busy daydreaming about how I was going to be training my beautiful new Arabian mare at my farm.

I did hear that the Morgan horse trainer thought Meerah was "afraid" of the bit and had success riding her in a Western style bitless bridle called a bosal. I personally have no experience using a bosal, but I've seen trainers use them before on young horses at the Arabian horse shows I've attended in the past.

The bosal is a tear dropped shape piece of rawhide which fits high over the horse's muzzle and is held in place by the bridle leather that wraps behind the horse's ears. The attachment of the reins is different from a bridle with a bit. Instead of running from either side of the face when attached to the underside of a bit, the reins of a bosal attach to one spot and are tied as a big knot under the chin where the tear drop nose piece comes to a point. There is a third rein, called a mecate coming out of this same knot. This extra rein could be used by cowboys to lead a horse from the ground when dismounted. But it served another purpose too.

The rider needs to hold a rein in each hand when riding a young horse in a bosal. The third rein of the mecate was not supposed to be held in one's hand while mounted, but rather loops around the horn of the western saddle where this extra rein coiled alongside of the neck of the horse. The theory was if one needed to dismount quickly, the loop of the two reins would stay out of the way on the horse's neck while the third mecate rein could be grabbed on the way off.

I never really considered using a bosal on this mare. Just as I didn't need to worry about getting bucked off or falling off either. I thought of myself as an experienced rider who knew how to introduce a bit to a horse. My ego KNEW that I could get the mare to accept the bit. I wasn't convinced that mere nose pressure coupled with a knot hitting the underside of mare's chin could cause her to stop. I only understood what I knew; a bit in the mouth was how to communicate with a horse, and the horse would learn to accept the bit... period!

I can't really say it was an over inflated ego that spurred me into trying to train Meerah the way I did. Rather it was a small "toolbox" of previous experiences to draw upon. I had owned and showed and attended clinics focused on the Arabian horse breed. That was the community and horse logic I belonged within. I was ensconced within habits of riding and habits of treating horses. I was buying Meerah because I was not interested in changing any of these habits. I was planning on using the same tack and, with time, riding this mare the same way, as I rode my previous horse. The thought of changing never occurred to me...

... Meerah on the other hand had different plans.

CHAPTER 2:

PATIENCE

I kept a watchful eye on Meerah throughout the day that Monday and she appeared perfectly normal. She ate all her evening's grain that night and pranced out of her stall without a worry on Tuesday morning as well. I never thought her aggressive attitude would be a relief, but it was. I smiled as I watched her trot across my paddock to chase Lila away from her hay pillow. I could only assume that whatever had caused her to act odd the previous day was an anomaly.

I was relieved NOT to have a sick horse. Meerah was only ten years old; too young to be ill. It was hard to believe that I've owned the mare for five years now. Five years! As I cleaned the stalls that Tuesday morning my mind began to wander back to when I first trailered her home to my house in April of 2016...

...The trip up to New Hampshire went smoothly. I chatted easily with my daughter, Sam, during the two-hour drive and, before I knew it, we had pulled into the SPCA. I met with the manager, exchanged a check for paperwork to sign, and then returned to the truck and trailer to get the shipping boots I was to place on my new horse for her trailer ride home.

I was a little disappointed to learn that although Meerah was a purebred, and was registered with the Arabian Horse Registry, her previous owner had not surrendered the horse's

registration papers. The SPCA manager assured me that I should be able to get the papers and gave me the breeder's name and contact information. I was somewhat disappointed that the proper paperwork was not available, but I sensed no dishonesty from the manager and happily followed her into the barn. But I did feel awkward vibes when I produced the shipping boots and began to lean over to Velcro a front boot over Meerah leg.

Meerah didn't seem to notice me, she just took one look at the blue boot whose Velcro I had just zip, zipped open, blew out a big snort and started to dance in place. The barn manager nearly pushed me over as she stepped close to the mare and handed me the lead rope to hold. A little startled myself, I stood up and stepped back as I felt the manager grab the shipping boot out of my hand. She moved as fast as a cat as she bent over and expertly attached the Velcro on one and then the other front leg's boots. But when she went to place them upon the back legs, Meerah danced around and around me as if she was being lunged.

It was not pretty, but the manager was persistent. I was not pleased with Meerah's insubordination and was tempted to give her a sharp tug on the lead rope and grumble; "knock it off." But I was at another's facility and felt I needed to be respectful of how the manager was handling my new horse. So, I swallowed my opinions and watched the manager dance around me with the mare.

The woman was quick and somehow got each hind boot on and Velcroed shut with one felled swipe of the hand. Meerah eyed the woman suspiciously, but her body calmed into stillness once she was no longer being “chased by the boots.” I calmly led my horse forward and the mare obediently followed with that animated dance that horses do when they feel boots across their cannon bones. Like a majorette in a marching band, Meerah high stepped her way out of the barn, onto the paved parking lot and towards my awaiting horse trailer.

I had left my two-horse trailer open with the ramp down, the escape door open and the center divider pushed off to one side. I would have walked my old horse on without missing a step. But I hesitated when I got near my rig. My mind needed time to calculate the best way to get the mare on with parked cars crowding my trailer. The manager must have interpreted my hesitation as inexperience because she grabbed the mare’s lead rope out of my hand and, without breaking stride, continued her forward walk up my trailer’s ramp and out the side escape door.

Meerah dutifully followed the manager and was now in my trailer.

“Close the door” the manager calmly hollered. I worked as quickly as I could, as I; fastened the butt bar, pulled the ramp up into its vertical position and latched the overhead doors closed. Meanwhile, the manager had ducked under the chest bar of the trailer, stepped out the escape door opening, turned and then clipped the mare into the waiting trailer tie.

I admired the manager's confidence. She did not hesitate while walking on the trailer or when she closed the escape door shut. Yet I could feel fear starting to bubble up inside me with the realization that I was responsible for the upcoming two-hour drive home with a horse that I don't know while driving on a major highway. Something inside me screamed; "What have I gotten myself into?"

I started the truck and rolled the window down to say a pleasant, albeit short, goodbye to the manager. Then I pulled out of the driveway, onto the main road and entered the entrance ramp to the interstate.

I was a nervous wreck during that ride home.

Every time a semi-truck blew by me, I white-knuckled my grip on the steering wheel and braced my back against the truck's bucket seat. Unfortunately, there was a good fifty miles of road construction on I-95 which necessitated me switching lanes, merging with traffic, or traveling over rougher than normal roads. Then we saw an accident out in front of us as a little car miscalculated a cement jersey barrier and bounced into another car. The roadway was straight, and we saw the entire accident.

Luckily, we were far enough away. Both cars had pulled safely off to the side of the road, and traffic had barely slowed down by the time we passed by the scene. I kept up with the flow of traffic but, for some reason, I could sense the nervousness of this new steed I was transporting and sighed

with relief when I finally chugged my daughter's truck up the hill and parked it in front of my farmhouse.

I pulled in my usual spot for unloading a horse and preceded with the dance that Sam and I have done countless times before. I opened the escape door, unlatched the trailer tie from the mare's halter, attached a lead rope, then held the rope steady all while standing outside the escape hatch. My partner in this dance, Sam, simultaneously dropped the ramp at the rear of the trailer and unlatched the bar behind the mare's butt.

Time to unload my new partner.

With the tail gate down daylight spilled into the trailer. I could see that even though it was a cool April afternoon, the little mare was wet with sweat and obviously scared. I pulled back gently onto the lead rope and asked her to come back but she simply stood there, shaking with her back legs standing stiffly in a wide-open stance. She was planted in place and showed no signs of moving. I asked her to back up once again and she had a glazed eye look of fear, or was it stubbornness, in her eye. She simply froze in place and refused to move.

We tried for around an hour to get her to back out. We tried pulling on her tail. We tried pushing on her chest. We tried waiting and petting her and using our voices to encourage her. We tried twisting her head slightly, just to get her off balance in the hopes of moving at least one foot. I swung the center divider as far open as I could and latched it place just to give the illusion of a bigger space behind the mare. If I was a horse,

I would have backed out of the trailer by now. But this mare refused to move.

I learned from my earlier experiences with Heather that using a whip on a scared and volatile horse would be counterproductive. This mare was obviously frightened. I looked at the width of my two horse Hawk trailer and guessed at the chest to tail length of this short-backed Arabian.

I had an idea.

I asked Sam to hold the mare's head while I walked around to the rear of the trailer. Then I risked walking in through the back of the trailer so I could stand next to the mare and from alongside her I grabbed the horse's lead rope and asked her to turn around and, voila, the mare folded herself just enough to make the turn and calmly walked forward out of the rear of the trailer.

I placed her in a paddock that was next to Heather so they could get acquainted through the fence line. Then I brought out two flakes of fresh hay for all the horses and filled a bucket of water for Meerah in her space. All seemed well, so I was finally able to go inside and relax, which I needed to do because my back was killing me!

I'm not sure if I was sensing the mare's tense back or if it was that nerve-wracking ride in my daughter's truck that injured my own back, but the next morning I was in horrible back pain. I spent that weekend eating Tylenols and lying around the house with a heating pad on my back, waiting for

the assaulted muscles to loosen their vise on my spine. Thankfully Sam was able to care for the horses and our farmhouse had stupendous views of my paddock areas. So, I was able to watch Meerah “settle in” and get used to her new surroundings, her stable mate, Heather, and my daughter’s gelding in the adjoining paddock. I was near back to normal by Monday and looking forward to beginning Meerah’s training.

I was surprised how awkward I felt working around a new and different horse after years of brushing, saddling, lunging, and riding the same two mares. I immediately sensed Meerah’s trepidation over... everything! She was nervous about the pavement that leads up to my arena and nearly jumped on top of me when my barn cat came out of the grass on the other side of the road.

Being mindful that Meerah might pull back when tied, I tied her to the trailer with my usual slip knot, but left it extra loose, just in case I needed to release a struggling horse. Luckily, I didn’t. Even though Meerah was wide-eyed and looked and reacted to just about everything, she never fought the rope by leaning back. Yes, she would dance in place when tied, but she appeared to have an understanding that she couldn’t pull herself free.

Like Heather, Meerah was a very sensitive horse. Even if I used a soft brush, she would react by raising her leg every time the brush touched it. She would hold a front leg high, as if she was a dog waiting to shake hands with me. However, her hind legs were more of a problem, because she reacted by cow

kicking; a knee-jerk response of looping her leg up and toward me, as if to push me away. I knew she wasn't really trying to kick at me, but protesting the sensation of the brush, so I took care to stay safe and wait for the few experimental kicks to subside into acceptance.

I was starting to reconsider my purchase when a waft of fresh air brought an uncharacteristically non-horse smell into my nose. I wasn't sure what hair conditioner the SPCA had used on her coat, but she had the softest and thickest black mane that smelled wonderful. I took a step back to really look at her, and an involuntary smile broadened my face once more. She was cute, and her good looks made up for her shortcomings, or so I kept telling myself.

Once she was groomed, I led her into my arena. She was wearing the same leather halter that she came with, and I considered whether I needed to use a chain over her nose or not. I opted for the "not" because even if she got away from me, she would be contained within my 100 x 150-foot outdoor sand arena. I was betting that she was sensitive enough to respond to just the pressure from the leather halter's nose piece when I asked her to lunge in a circle. And I was correct.

The mare went out on a perfect circle like a pro, trotting and scooting then trotting again. I allowed her to free trot for quite a while as she held her beautiful Arabian head high and eyed me, expectedly. I asked her to canter, which she did, and just as easily she came back down to the trot. I made the mistake of shanking, or jerking, the lunge line and she reacted

by throwing her head and momentarily traveling a little faster. I used my voice to calm her, and she responded easily. Then I asked for the “whoa.”

I suppose one could say that this is a pet peeve of mine but, when I ask for a “whoa” I expect an instantaneous halt. The mare slowed but didn’t stop so I did shank the line, once, and Meerah responded by scooting away so I said whoa again, shanked and she started to trot so one more time I shouted whoa and shanked and she stopped and looked at me... trembling. I looked at the stupid horse and allowed her to stand as a reward. Then I put her away.

Over the next few days, I only lunged her and reinforced the word “whoa.” Once I felt she understood my cue to stop, I progressed to lunging her in Ginger’s old saddle. She scooted a little at the flopping stirrups, but she was smart and already remembered what I had taught her in the prior days of work. I was pleased when I said “whoa” and she stopped quickly and turned her face to look at me. I set up the cues and responses I wanted to see; willingness to lunge with the saddle on, and not react to the flopping stirrups, and listen to my walk, trot and whoa commands without hesitation. Now it was time to finally ride my new horse.

I felt I had negotiated obedience and willingness to carry my saddle and all I needed to do was to fit a bridle to her face. I got Heather’s old English bridle out of the tack room and placed it on Meerah’s face. As I had thought, it fitted her head perfectly.

Then I tested the mare's reaction to bit pressure by standing along the left side the horse, grabbing one rein, and giving it a gentle tug. The mare's head followed without argument and her mouth stayed closed and soft. She flexed her neck just as easily to the right too. I was pleased with my accomplishments over the past few weeks. Now it was time to get on.

I felt confident and excited to be finally riding in my old western saddle once more. I had found my old riding helmet that I hadn't used since training Sam's horse years ago and strapped it on my head... just in case. The plan was for my daughter to hang on to the lead rope attached to a halter under the mare's bridle. I would sit on Meerah and be led around and, if everything seemed okay, I would have the lead rope unsnapped and ride her without help.

I didn't expect any problems because I've owned the mare for almost two weeks now. She was acclimated, used to my farm; the paddock, other horses, the arena, and me. She also seemed okay with carrying my saddle, bridle and was responding to my voice and was familiar with how much I tugged on the lunge line. Yes, she danced around a bit when being saddled but this was her normal behavior. The last item I wanted to cross off the list was Sam, so I asked her to take the lead rope and lead Meerah around the arena before I got on, just to get reacquainted. Then I put my left leg in the stirrup and swung onto my new horse.

Meerah felt so little compared to fat Ginger! She was a little taller, but she was petite boned, had long overly active ears and

her thick black mane seemed more substantial than her neck. I felt a twinge of sadness wash over me when I realized this was the first time I had sat in Ginger's saddle since she had died. But Meerah wasn't going to allow me to wallow in sad memories for long.

She started to sidestep impatiently, and I sensed the horse needed to move forward to alleviate her anxiety. I was not too worried as I instructed Sam to lead her forward at a walk, assuming this normal behavior would calm her nerves. We took around a dozen steps with Sam leading the horse and me as the passenger, when something inside Meerah snapped. The horse bolted forward, and I instinctually pulled her head with my left rein to keep her contained within the confines of a small circle around Sam.

This was a trick that I used while riding all the horses I oversaw when running a summer camp during my college years. A YMCA camp hired me to be their Riding Director in charge of forty plus horses, a handful of riding instructors, a dozen camp counselors and roughly forty campers. The horses were rented from a horse dealer, and most were not exemplary examples of equine perfection. Many were bought through the auction house and arrived with yellow stickers still stuck to their butts. I'm sure quite a few ended up in the kill-pen after that summer too.

I tried my best to figure out how to keep the kids, counselors, and my staff safe. With limited resources I became creative on how to "make do" with what I had to work with.

We had a few bolters in that herd of summer camp horses, and I quickly learned that if I pulled, hard, on just one rein the horse couldn't run very far or fast. The only danger was that if the horse was already in an active state of running, doubling his head off to one side quickly could cause the horse to be unbalanced and fall over. But if the horse was just starting the bolt, the turn of the neck seemed to change their minds and would stop their onward mania of an escape.

This logic was burned into my body so when Meerah started to leap forward, I instinctually pulled on the left rein. I expected the mare's senses to return. I expected her to slow and eventually stop with her head off to the side. But instead of stopping little Meerah just ran little circles around Sam with her neck craned in an unusual shape. I don't know how the mare contorted and stayed standing, but she did. I suppose if Meerah was a person she could have been employed as a contortionist.

I held the rein taut and waited for her to stop. But instead, faster, and faster the little mare started to turn, and she was so off balance that I was afraid she would fall over. Four, five, six times around and I could see past the horse's thin neck that I was pulling the bit through her mouth. I knew I had to correct the bit sliding to the left, so I turned her to the right to help reposition the crooked bit. Just as I told Sam that I was going to pull her the other way I at once realized my mistake as Sam had to run to stay on the outside of the circling mare. One, two circles and Sam was losing ground so, I did the only thing I could do... and I jumped off.

I landed on my feet and the mare settled rather easily for Sam. I looked at the horse standing at the end of the halter with her mouth gapping and the side piece of the bit in her mouth, the mouthpiece halfway out, and the other side piece halfway up her face. I honestly did not understand how this mare could open her mouth wide enough to allow the cheek piece of the metal bit to slide into her mouth when her muzzle was supposed to be held shut with the leather of a nose cavesson. But she did.

As I carefully slipped the crooked bridle off her face my mind raced with solutions to this new problem. Sam stood holding the horse with the halter that lay under the bridle and reminded me that the barn manager DID say the mare had an overly sensitive mouth. I wasn't angry, nor afraid, just frustrated to be changing my training agenda for this horse.

I really, really, wanted to ride her that day. But I decided to temporarily abandon riding Meerah until I could figure out how to continue. Not wanting to end this failed riding session on a bad note, I decided to backtrack. Instead of simply turning the mare out, I retrieved the lunge line from the horse trailer and lunged her. Meerah seemed to relax with this familiar game, and I as well. Only then did I put Meerah back in her paddock, happy to have ended our relationship that day with a positive outcome.

As I walked back towards my house I re-thought the day's activities. The manager at the SPCA said I'd have to "take it slow" with Meerah, but I never realized the mare would need

this much time to acclimate to new stimuli. I was a little frustrated with the delays but accepted the challenge.

I searched through my basement of horse paraphernalia and found a training bit with extra-large side rings and swapped the bit on Meerah's training bridle that same afternoon. Now confident that these larger side rings should help stabilize the bit in her mouth, I formulated my new plan. I didn't want to risk getting hurt while Meerah learned to "accept" the bit, so I decided to acclimate her to the stimuli while I stayed safely on the ground.

I taught her to ground drive or walk in front of me while I held long reins, or lines, which would attach to her bridle. I learned about ground driving while in college and have taught a half dozen horses of mine how to drive over the years since. I was confident that I could teach Meerah too. It took a while, and she was a bit of a challenge, but we did it.

I could have trained the mare with more patience, but I honestly did not know how. My theory with horse training was to introduce a new idea, wait to see if the horse freaks out or accepts the situation, and change what I needed to do to get the correct behavior. I never really watched the horse's attitude or considered the horse's position. I wanted the behavior, and the horse would comply within moments or be punished with a shank of the line or a snap of the whip. This was how I learned to train horses and how I worked Meerah that spring and summer.

I thought of myself as a knowledgeable horsewoman before I got Meerah, and I was confident that I could train anything, and, luckily, have survived some near disasters. Years earlier, when my only child was just three years old, I was gifted a two-year-old Arabian colt named Matthew. I should have known I would have trouble with introducing Matthew to the lunge line because he came with scars across his legs from being tangled in barbed wire when he was a yearling. He was a quiet gelding and would stand tied, but I soon discovered he would lose his mind if a rope got tangled around his legs or body.

My son was playing in a sand pile alongside the two paddocks when I pulled Matthew out for his lunging lesson that day. I did not have an official arena at the time and felt confident that my son was safe, way on the other side of the paddock, far away from where I worked the gelding. I don't remember why Matthew got the lunge line out of my hands, but he did, and then the horse lost his mind.

Matthew ran like Satan was chasing him as the freed lunge line swung and tangled into his legs. The colt could have run around the two-acre paddock but, instead, he headed straight for my son playing in the sand with his trucks. I never ran so fast in my life that afternoon as I was simultaneously yelling for my kid to move and swearing at the horse to stop.

I watched in horror as Matthew ran right over my son.

Strange plea noises and cries escaped my mouth as I gasped for breath and willed my legs to pump faster along the grass. It

all happened so fast. I ran as fast as I could to check on my boy and half ignored the stupid horse. Mathew was less than eighty feet in front of me, running off to my right. I was going forward and to the left. When the horse apparently ran out of fence line to follow and turned back around.

I was almost to where my child was, just a few yards to go, when I saw Matthew coming back towards my son. I couldn't believe what was unfolding in front of me! That stupid horse had turned into the fence, instead of simply veering away from the fence, and out into the grassy field beyond. Matthew chose to run back alongside the fence right towards my crying son.

I watched in horror as the horse jumped over him!

The angels must have been shining their light of protection down on this situation because, other than crying from being frightened, there wasn't a mark on my son. I gave him hugs and checked him over completely, not believing my good luck. I settled my son on the grass of the backyard and comforted him until his young mind floated back into playing with his trucks in the grass. Satisfied that he was safe once more, I turned my attention back to Matthew, and yet I sensed one more diversion before I removed the tangled lunge line, and the halter, off the exhausted horse.

Instead of hurrying to rescue the horse, I felt anger, and my mind searched for a way to "teach this horse a lesson." I wanted to end his foolish fear of ropes around his legs once and for all! So, I retrieved a soft cotton lead rope out of my basement, marched into the pasture, untangled the lunge line from

Matthew's front legs, unsnapped the lunge line from his halter and replaced it with a soft rope lead. Then I turned the horse loose in the field and walked back to my son who was now safely ensconced behind the fence that bordered my backyard.

It didn't take long for Matthew to recover his wind. And, as I had predicted, Matthew reacted to the long lead rope as if it was going to cause him harm, but I didn't really care. I was standing in the safety of my backyard with my son playing at my feet. Together we watched the silly gelding careen around the field. Matthew ran, and ran, and then trotted, and, eventually, he settled down enough to graze. I kept a watchful eye on the horse for the rest of that afternoon. It took several hours, but by evening feeding time, the horse didn't seem to care about the dangling rope entangling his legs anymore.

I used that same; "tie a rope to the horse and let them figure it out logic" with Meerah too.

Even though Meerah easily accepted the lunge line coming off the inside of her halter she was not too thrilled with another line being positioned on her offside. So, I simply hung a soft rope on the surcingle of her biting rig and let her walk around with it. Then I pulled that same rope over her butt and waited for her reaction. She would scoot or run at the sensation of the rope across her butt. I knew I was safe on the ground, so I confidently used the opportunity to reinforce the "whoa" by shanking the inside lunge line attached to her face... hard... if she ran through my "whoa" commands.

Once the mare got comfortable with the rope against her butt, I experimented, trying to find the exact location where she liked the rope positioned over her butt, be it either, balancing across her croup, over the tail, under the tail or even lower on the back of her legs. Through many days of trial and error I eventually figured out that she liked the offline low on her butt, right above her hocks and she liked my pressure to be snug on the lunge line, as if the line was hugging or holding her. Once convinced she was okay with the idea of the line against her butt, I attached the lines from the lunging cavesson to the bit of the bridle and started to ground drive her with two lines.

Accepting the lines was one challenge, me standing behind her was yet another. I knew the mare was pretty much programmed to lunge and therefore naturally fell into traveling in a lunging circle. She was used to her “horse clothes” now too, wearing a biting rig, accepting bit pressure, and having no objections to the offline lying across her butt. I was delighted I was finally able to ground drive her in a lunging circle, but ground driving her in a straight line sure wasn’t as easy to do.

The mare appeared afraid that I was going to do... something... to her when I stood directly behind her. And while it took less than two weeks to get her long lining in a lunge circle, it was well over a month before she accepted me long lining her from behind. I introduced the idea to her slowly. I’d lunge her with two lines and then walk slightly behind her and switch back again to a perfect lunge circle whenever she got uncomfortable with me behind her. Ever so slowly Meerah got used to long lining or ground driving.

By the summer I was driving behind, switching to a circle, driving to another corner then trotting and then walking with ease. The rings of the surcingle contained the long lines in the perfect pressure to keep the horse's head where I wanted it. I even experimented with pulling a little too hard on the bit and watched for Meerah's reaction. She was not pleased but would listen without overreacting to tight pressure on the reins. Finally, after more than two months of groundwork I was confident that I had conquered her "fear of the bit" and it was time to try and ride her once more.

I smiled when I saddled and rode her that day. I had accomplished much over those past few months. She had progressed into a good citizen at the horse trailer too. Months earlier she would have danced, or trotted in place, or sideways, while going up to my trailer. Once tied to the trailer she wouldn't have stood still when I brushed or saddled her. But two months later had quieted her mind. She still wasn't perfect when I'd touched her hind feet and I wasn't sure if she was trying to cow kick at me, or, if she was simply kicking at flies. I was learning this mare's quirks and getting used to her.

We were making progress. The mare stood still at the trailer while I tacked her up and walked confidently into the arena. Months of lunging, biting and ground driving had created an understanding between me and the mare. I lunged her briefly before I rode and was happy the mare respected my verbal cues and easily picked up the gaits when asked. I had asked Sam to come out to the arena for moral support that Saturday afternoon and was rather pleased with myself when Meerah allowed me

to mount and then walked forward one, two, three steps and then stopped.

Yes, Meerah chose to stop on her own, but I didn't push her. The horse didn't panic. She allowed me to ride her obediently for those few steps, so I ended that ride on a good note, praised her, and put her away for the day.

We continued with groundwork, and very limited and short saddle work, over the course of the summer. I was only able to get the mare to move a half dozen steps before she would balk or freeze and refuse to move. But I was pleased that she would allow me to ride her at all. At the time I was teaching afternoon exercise classes and even though I was tired when I got home from work, I would do something with Meerah. Thankfully the days were long and warm, and I squeezed in what quality time I could with the mare. I was on a slow and steady track to get this mare properly trained. She was responding well to the word "whoa" from the ground and equally well when I would ask while in the saddle. Walk a few steps, ask for whoa, stop and let her settle and then, if she felt okay, I'd even ask for another short walk down the fence rail.

It never occurred to me to ride this mare differently than my earlier horses. I was the Master; this was just a stupid horse who needed to get used to stimuli. I knew what I was doing. I was confident and now that the horse was accustomed to the bit pressure, I wanted to re-instill absolute obedience whenever I would say "whoa." Meerah was confident now and would stand still while I stopped and adjusted the long lines or the

bitting rig. I trained her the way I knew how to; one day of lunging free, one day of lunging bitted and a few days of long lining and getting in a short ride occasionally. I was taught to “switch” up the routine so the horse in training would not get complacent or bored. Then my routine and my training program came to a halt.

In September of 2016 I had surgery on my foot and when I felt better enough to work her again the weather had turned colder. I tried to resume Meerah’s training but kept running into obstacles; the days were getting shorter, my arena was not lit up by lights, and I was working a part time job. Then the ground started to freeze, and I resigned myself to the fact that I needed to stop working Meerah for the winter months. I could tell she didn’t like the hard surface of my frozen arena because her canter was off balance. Then a cool spring delayed my horse training endeavor even longer. I didn’t start working the horse again until April of 2017.

I never really thought I’d have any trouble continuing with the mare’s education; one or two weeks of just lunging and long lining and then I started to ride again. I was confident in my ability as a horse trainer and rather proud of the progress I had made with the mare so far. Hours of long lining and lunging bitted had perfected her Arabian headset. I had even trained her to jog very, very slowly while in the long lines. But for some odd reason, I couldn’t get her walk the entire length of the arena, let alone jog under saddle. She knew my cue to walk, but when I asked her to walk under saddle, she would walk four to five steps then stop and refuse to move. I could

pull her off balance and reinitiate the walk, but her movements were stilted and unsure. I was pleased that she stopped whenever I asked. But I was becoming impatient. I wanted her to move forward with a willing attitude.

It was May, and my horses were getting used to the green grass of pasture once more. I would put the mares on pasture when I left to teach my 4 PM class and get home by 6:15, take Meerah back off the pasture to ride her while other family members were home... just in case I took a spill. I was becoming impatient and unhappy that I couldn't join Sam and my friends who were riding and invited me to join them on trail rides or at horse shows. I knew my mare wasn't nearly ready for riding with other horses. But these repeated requests from friends started to seep into my psyche and I found myself becoming frustrated at the snail's pace Meerah's training has taken.

I should have known better. I should have sensed or felt how Meerah was reacting. But the social pressure of pushing my horse faster was nagging inside. Something inside me felt pressured to get Meerah to trot... NOW.

I should have listened to my intuition instead.

I was in a grumpy mood that Tuesday afternoon in May. I was teaching fewer classes that spring but the reduction in workload was not enough. In retrospect, I was burned out and probably should have stopped teaching all my water aerobics classes. I had other self-employment endeavors that would easily fill the financial obligations I had. I have new priorities

in my life now. I wanted to spend more time riding and was frustrated that I had to spend valuable riding time working. I should never have ridden while still in a sour mood... but I did.

I pulled Meerah off the pasture and saddled her up by my trailer. She tried to kick me when I worked around her back feet. I didn't think much of her relapse into kicking and had grown accustomed to avoiding her vain attempt at a lateral "cow kick." She was used to our routine as I lunged her bitted without any evidence of distress. I got on her and she walked four steps and then Meerah just stopped and refused to move.

I was tired of this shit!

I shouldn't have done it, and I knew better, but I verbally said "Walk," and I gave her a little kick with my legs.

She still refused to move.

So, I kicked her a little harder and, to my surprise, she took off down the fence line. We never trotted, just went from the dead stop into a canter, closing quickly into a hand gallop. My first reaction was to use all the practice we had with the biting rig. When I pulled on the reins and yelled a frustrated whoa and expected the horse to stop as easily as she would have on the ground. This stupid horse needed to learn manners and I was tired of pussyfooting around her. I was angry, and the "angrier" I became the faster the horse started to run until she hit the end of the arena and turned around to run back to where we started.

The mare was traveling too fast to safely use the one rein pull, and I felt my anger melt into fear as I heard my voice holler; “Whoa Meerah... WHOA!!!”

Greg was half watching from the house and came running out just in time to watch me ungraciously bail during Meerah’s second quick turn as she headed, once again, down the fence line at a dead run. The side of my body hit the arena fencing and I popped both the top and bottom rails and then I landed in the sand on my back.

Meerah ran around the arena without me, her saddle stirrups flapping in the breeze. She was terrified.

Greg came running up to the arena while I unceremoniously pulled myself back up.

Now that I was standing on the ground, I was too pissed to be afraid. After all that preparation I couldn’t believe that stupid horse would NOT respond to the word “whoa.” We practiced it for months last year and then again, this year. She was flawless on the lunge line and while ground driving. I was stymied.

I caught that little mare and screamed at her and lunged her and yanked on the lunge line if she didn’t respond to my “whoa” command instantaneously. My yanking was so harsh that I eventually ended up breaking the snap at the end of the lunge line off which sent the little mare off to the far side of the arena at a run. By this time Greg was standing next to me.

I reassured Greg that except for an anger-induced state of high blood pressure I was fine.

I was rough with the horse as I untacked her and put her away that night and lamented my current situation... I have owned this horse for over a year now. I was frustrated that I didn't have a horse to ride with my friends, tired of being patient, and still missing my deceased mare, Ginger, more than I could bear.

I was sore that night and my back and right side of my ribs and shoulder were covered with bruises where my body had met the 5/4 thick by 6-inch-wide fence boards. Luckily, the previous month I had just replaced those same fence boards which my body had just knocked out while falling off Meerah, so the new wooden boards did not splinter when I hit them like the original twenty-year-old ones would have. Just as luckily, other than my pride, I didn't have any long-term damage to my body. I even joked with my doctor that I did not need a bone density test because I certainly did not have osteoporosis.

I should have broken something.

I wasn't aware of being afraid after the incident, just extremely frustrated. I considered sending the horse out to be professionally trained but I honestly did not know of anyone who could handle her. I made three phone calls to old friends who knew and worked with Arabian horses before, but they were not interested in "getting hurt." I was busy planting my flower and vegetable gardens and still too pissed at the stupid horse to work her properly.

Other than feeding her, I didn't do anything with Meerah for a few weeks after that incident.

I had run out of ideas and wasn't sure how to go forward. I had bitted this horse and long lined her, and I felt that "on the lines" or while being lunged she was lovely to watch. I had gotten her used to bit pressure and my voice. Again, on the lines or the lunge she was obedient. Yet I could no longer trust her under saddle. I honestly liked the mare and didn't want her to end up in the wrong hands. I was ready to cut my losses and start over again with another horse and considered rehoming her, but I didn't know of a safe haven for her to land in.

Eventually I started to work the horse again, but only on the ground. I did not trust this horse enough to ride her. Whenever I tried, an overwhelming sense of panic would flood my being. I reasoned that if I could get someone else to ride the mare, just for just two or three rides, then the horse would start to understand again, and I could resume training her once more. It was two months before I found that right person.

A friend recommended a *Natural Horsemanship* trainer and at first, I balked at the idea. To me *Natural Horsemanship* was a phrase that meant a person would capitalize on my interest. I saw this at our local equine events where the Horsemanship Guru would show up to teach a clinic and everyone would be "wowed" by this horseman's stupendous ideas and would rush to buy his or her videos and paraphernalia. What I saw in the past was a performance, a

trick that would produce quick ideas or gimmicks to impress, or a quick fix to a problem.

I wasn't really interested in getting involved within a pyramid scheme where I would need to buy videos and training bridles and certain lunge whips and all the other stuff that I watched some of my *Natural Horsemanship* friends subscribe to in the past. I wasn't interested in the latest style of bridle or the fanciest of training bits. No, I just wanted to find SOMEONE who could help me to figure this little mare out! My friend insisted that Danielle did not come with any gimmicks and that she was kind, so I arranged for Danielle to come to my farm and evaluate Meerah.

When she pulled up to my arena four days later, I had expected her to simply take over and ride the silly horse. That was what the woman who helped train my daughter's horse did. We brought the horse to her farm and saddled it up for her, she rode him, we watched, she critiqued her ride, and we came back the next week for more. But instead of simply working Meerah, Danielle told me she wanted to watch what I was doing with the mare first. I wasn't used to someone watching my horse BEFORE they rode it. But I was desperate for help, so I allowed the scenario to unfold.

I lead the mare up to my horse trailer. I explained about the kicking and overly sensitive skin as I brushed her and picked her feet. I led the saddled horse into the arena and lunged her briefly. I had intended on biting the horse as well for Danielle so she could appreciate the horse's pretty headset

and the obedience she showed on the lunge line. This was my opportunity to showcase her extra slow jog and her beautifully animated trot. But I never had the chance. I had barely lunged the horse to get her “fresh out” when Danielle announced that she’d seen enough. She asked me to bridle the mare and then she led my horse into the center of the arena to get on.

Danielle swung easily into the saddle and at first Meerah just stood still. I wasn’t aware of the woman using her heels, but she must have urged the horse forward somehow because Meerah exploded into a run. But Danielle was ready and with reflexes like that of a cat she started to circle the mare after just a few strides. Around and around and around they went until Meerah eventually stopped.

Meerah stood still with her mouth gaping and her bit pulled halfway through. Danielle kept the horse’s head cranked to the side until she settled. I remember that look of shock on Danielle’s face when the mare first took off and the smudge of dirt her nose picked up from the mare’s mane when she leaned forward to grab a hunk to stay on. I was concerned that I had almost killed the only person I could find to help me as I involuntarily spewed apologies for my mare’s actions.

I wasn’t sure if Danielle found the event to be humorous or challenging. She dismounted and repositioned the bit and, before I could react, she swung back up on the horse. Meerah did not offer to run away with her again. Instead, the pair rode around the arena at a walk, and then at a trot. Meerah was a little off balance but was obedient. Danielle was quiet and

respectful and, when she thought the mare had had enough, she stopped Meerah and quietly dismounted. Then we discussed Meerah's new training plan.

Danielle explained the philosophy behind the small bending circle she used to stop Meerah to me; "While in the wild, horses will run like heck when going straight forward and it was only when the danger was passed that the herd mare slowly circled and ultimately stopped the herd. When the herd starts to circle something clicks in the equine brain that the danger the horse was fleeing is no longer a threat. It's this same logic that cowboys learned to use to safely stop the colts they would break."

I always thought the circling was just a way to physically capture the horse's forward energy, while Danielle explained it as a psychological way to rewire a panicked horse's brain. Danielle explained that the true way to stop a horse in a small circle must include the horse stepping underneath herself with the inside back leg. This way the animal was not just bending her neck, but also her rib cage and entire spine as well. Only then will the central nervous system signal to the horse's brain that the danger was over.

Danielle went to her car and came back with a cowboy halter and long lead rope with a snapper tail end. The halter was made from rope, tied with knots where the side piece met the nose band, and, in theory, would apply even pressure over the horse's nose for better control than the nylon stable halter I usually used during groundwork. The lead rope was longer

than usual, thick, and heavy with a frayed end that could be used to pop and make noise. She placed the new halter on my horse and started to work her in a little circle.

She explained how to yield the horse's shoulders by flicking the end of a long lead rope while twisting her body and looking at the mare's shoulder while standing a respectable distance away from the horse. This maneuver looked very similar to the turn on the haunches I've practiced when showing my horse in horsemanship classes. Then she turned her focus to looking at the horse's butt and asked the mare to yield her hindquarter. Again, my mind went to what I knew, which was a turn on the forehand. I didn't really understand what she was talking about when she pointed out how Meerah was flicking her ears or if the horse was licking and chewing.

My impatient mind knew the answer. All I needed to perfect was to teach Meerah a turn on the forehand and a turn on the haunches. I didn't hear Danielle talk about the horse's signs of her paying attention, being afraid, angry, or relaxed. I was taught that a horse who chose to tip its nose towards the handler was a sign of paying attention, while one whose nose was tipped away was a sign of avoidance. I found what Danielle was saying interesting, but I couldn't see much value in it.

If Meerah went around in the lunge circle the way I wanted her to, why would I care how her ears were pointing, or if she was chewing. I honestly didn't care if the horse was happy with what I wanted; I just wanted the horse to do what I wanted.

With time I thought the horse would just get used to being ridden and wouldn't mind the activity. I never really considered the horse being relaxed. I thought keeping the horse timid or in a subservient state of fear was a good thing and if she was relaxed enough to "be chewing" then she wouldn't be attentive enough to properly listen to me or react to my signals when I rode her.

Danielle had commented that Meerah looked bored when I lunged her, and I honestly did not understand why that would be a bad thing. I was taught to drill a gait, or a movement, into the horse by repetition until the horse just did the pace without emotion or variation. I wasn't quite sure if I wanted a horse that had an opinion. The idea was just too foreign for me to consider at the time. But I needed to try something to ride this horse. I listened to Danielle as she suggested homework, things I could work on before she could return and help me again.

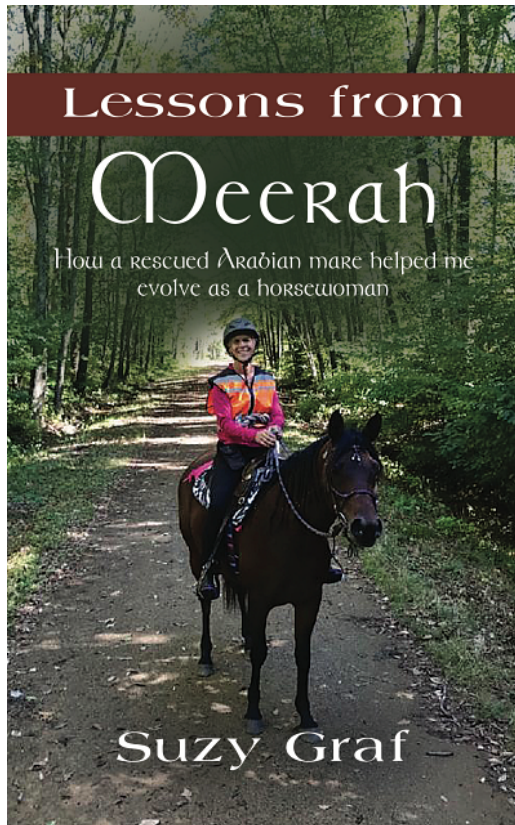
Danielle felt that Meerah was afraid of seeing a person up above and on top of her. To alleviate this fear Danielle suggested I get a mounting block and stand on it next to the horse's shoulder. She showed how I could gently pull the horse's head from first one side, and then the other. Not unlike what I do when I ground drive her but from a different, higher up where the rider would be seated perspective, which was "the above the head" area that this mare was apparently afraid of. I thanked Danielle for all her help and watched her drive down my road with mixed feelings of hope, shame, and fear.

I was hopeful that I could make progress with Meerah once more. At least I have a game plan now. I was a little ashamed that Meerah bolted with Danielle, and I wasn't quite convinced this new trainer would agree to come back and help me again. And I feared that Meerah and I had failed this "meet and greet" first lesson, and that I would be on my own once more.

Unfortunately, Danielle had a long-term obligation late in the summer of 2017 and she only came out to my farm three times that July before she had to leave. I practiced what little she had time to teach me and perfected what I could. I never did ride Meerah again that summer of 2017. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd own a horse which I couldn't figure out how to ride. This little mare turned into one hell of a project!

"Admire the horse for all the good things he does and just kinda ignore the wrong things. First thing you know the good things will get better and the bad things will get less."

Tom Dorrance



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