

Fear and Faith. And Abscesses.

by Joe Camp

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Mariah Healed Herself

I'll never forget standing out in the rain one cold October day, soaked from head to foot because the rain wasn't expected. The temperature was only in the mid-fifties, but to me, sopping wet, that was freezing.

I looked at our horses, heads down, dripping with water, and I just couldn't stand it. I went for the halters and lead ropes and brought them into their covered stalls. The stalls were open, actually only half-covered, with one solid side facing the usual weather assault, but if we'd had a cozy barn with central heating and warm fuzzy pillows I'm sure I wouldn't have hesitated to take them right in. Or cover them with blankets had there been any available.

It's difficult for humans, especially when cold and wet, to understand that the horses do not feel like we do. Or eat like we do. Or react like we do. We want to believe that the horse will always be better with human intervention. Human "help." How can they possibly make it without us?

Later that month I was wandering through a barn in northern Idaho. As I walked down the center aisle, I was struck by how clean it was. Pristine! When the owner happened by I said, "Do you never use this barn? It's so clean."

"Oh sure," he said. "We use it for hay storage."

"What about the horses?"

"They like to be outside."

"Even in the winter? In the snow?"

"Yep."

We were only twelve miles from the Canadian border. Winters are not warm here. I was amazed.

The owner walked around the barn to show me a lean-to he had built which was attached to the side of the structure. Just a roof, with divided stalls, to keep the horses separated when eating their supplements. They had free access to this shed, but never came into it except for the feed. Again, I was amazed. This ran so counter to everything I felt for my horses. We want to think of them as children, or big dogs, and treat them in the same manner.

They aren't aren't children, or big dogs.

Not even close.

What sometimes seems too simple for me to grasp is the fact that horses have been around for millions of years, evolving to survive as a prey species, and those evolved genetics are precisely the same for every horse on the planet, wild or domestic. Given the opportunity they can take care of themselves.

They're built to do it. If not, we would have never heard of the horse. They would've been extinct eons ago.

At both our former California home and the new one in middle Tennessee we had worked hard to mimic the wild horse lifestyle as closely as possible. But it never fails. Just when I think I've got it, when I'm certain I understand the concept...WHAP!

Along comes a blow to test my faith.

Mariah quite suddenly went dead lame in her right front foot. With a pounding digital pulse. Couldn't put any weight on it at all. An abscess! Apparently a bad one.

Fear rushed in and faith went right out the window.

It could've happened a few days earlier, before Kathleen ran off to California. But it didn't. No, it had to be while I was home alone. With no one to help, or soothe, or listen. I was frozen in place.

Freaked out.

Tharn!

I love that word from Watership Down. It's rabbit-speak, and there is simply no English equivalent. It's what happens when a rabbit gets caught in the headlights and is so suddenly petrified that he can neither move nor think.

I was tharn. Our vast experience with horses – almost 5 years at the time:) – had never shown us an abscess. I was told gory stories of digging out all this gross-looking stuff with a knife and soaking the horse's hoof several times a day. High doses of antibiotics. And all the terrible things that can happen if it's not properly cared for. I was so tempted to violate my firm beliefs, my faith in Mariah's systems and the wild horse lifestyle, and lock her up because she was obviously in a great deal of pain trying to walk and keep up with the herd. But keep up she did, wherever they went. It was painful to watch. I was told the vet should come and dig it out. And told I absolutely HAD to soak it.

Mariah grew tired and annoyed with keeping her foot in a tub for fifteen minutes at a time and finally she said enough!

And: Where's my herd?!

And off she went. On three legs.

"Get a soaking boot. You have to soak," someone said.

I bought a soaking boot.

It was never used.

When I arrived back at the house with the boot there was an email from Yvonne Welz, the amazing editor of The Horse's Hoof. She said: Joe, when a horse has healthy hooves and is living like horses are genetically designed to live abscesses are often here today, gone tomorrow! Just not a big deal. Yes, when the hoof has good blood circulation and lots of movement, the body just absorbs the problem

area. Why do abscesses happen in healthy horses? Some sort of trauma or environmental cause, usually.

Natalie Cruz of Shoe Free Performance Horses went a step further: The vets won't like this but abscesses will heal themselves. The best thing you can do for your horse is give it a couple of tablets of bute a day for a week or so and baby the horse a bit for your own peace of mind. Keep the horse turned out so it can move which increases blood flow so the abscess either blows out or disintegrates inside the hoof. But check to make sure the horse was not kicked or otherwise injured, of course. If not, and the horse is suddenly dead lame on one hoof, it is usually an abscess. Take a couple of aspirin for your own headache and wait it out. But don't allow anyone to dig it out! This is counterproductive to healing and can actually introduce bacteria into the hoof and cause problems! No need to wrap the hoof either. It just annoys the horse and doesn't help its healing one iota. So drink a glass of wine and prop your own foot up instead. :) Some drawing products like Epsoms salt may help a little bit though I don't use any of them.

I had barely finished reading these when suddenly Mariah was better. Limping, but putting weight on the hoof. The next morning she was walking fine. A day later she was cantering down our steep hill with the herd racing to the barn for breakfast.

A few months ago we had watched an abscess on Skeeter's belly (caused by an allergic reaction) slowly disappear as the body dissolved it. Likewise my thorn-ness began to dissolve away leaving an embarrassed logic. Of course, it's the blood circulation that does the dissolving. So why shouldn't Mariah's body do it's job. She has terrific circulation in her feet because she wears no shoes. She gets tons of movement which increases circulation even more. Her diet is good. And her body is working as it's designed to work.

The verse Oh ye of little faith came to mind.

Unfortunately appropriate.

Since that time we've had a few more, one that lasted a week and finally blew out along the hairline. But we've never touched or soaked a one of them. Or put any of the horses in stalls.

The lesson? Nobody says it better than Rick Lamb: Give them as natural a life as possible. Then get out of the way.

Anybody want to buy fifteen pounds of Epson Salt?

The story of our journey with horses (to date) is told in the two books that follow: the national best seller *The Soul of a Horse – Life Lessons from the Herd* and its sequel *Born Wild – The Soul of a Horse*.

And what a story it is as two novices without a clue stumble and bumble their way through the learning process so that hopefully you won't have to. If you haven't read both of these books already please do because with that reading, I believe, will come not just the knowledge of discovery but the passion and the excitement to cause you to commit to your journey with horses, to do for the horse without waiver so that your relationship and experience will be with loving, happy and healthy horses who are willing partners and who never stop trying for you. Horses like ours.

- See more at: <http://thesoulofahorse.com/blog/faith-and-fear-sometimes-its-hard-to-stay-on-the-horses-end-of-the-lead-rope/#more-1116>