



Wind Walkers:

Healing with Horses

A Family Approach

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It's quiet – silent enough to hear the soil sifting off the horses' hooves during lulls in the conversation. As two riders and three staffers move around the indoor arena, instructions and laughter punctuate the calm. The parentheses of my mount's fuzzy roan ears, attuned to every nuance, follow the sounds as Anne's mare nickers and is answered by horses in the paddocks outside.

Today, Anne Merz has invited me to join her riding lesson at WindWalkers.

When we entered the arena, Anne walked deliberately and determinedly, using two hiking poles to supplement her dragging feet and weakened legs. The poles, she informed me, were a gift from the national Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Society.

Merz has been riding Skippy for three months and has been taking therapeutic riding lessons at WindWalkers for a year and half.

Today, I'm riding Cody and following Skippy. As Cody moves, my backbone sways and my hips rock from side to side in answer to his gait. I feel the gelding's warmth, his breathing and the coiled strength beneath the skin as I run my hand over his haunches.

I soon fall into Cody's pace. It's not just a physical sensation, not just a slowing down. I feel a palpable shift

Anne Merz and Skippy

away from the lickety-split, left-brain chatter that usually defines my days. I'm a writer, but also an artist, and I recognize the feeling as the right side of my brain takes over from the left. I begin to inhabit a place where words fade and space opens, where I become aware of color and scent, of rhythm and warmth. It's something I experience while painting, skiing or during focused rituals.

Call it flow, mindfulness, meditation or communion. Whatever you call it, it renews the spirit. When we slow down our rapid-fire cognitive processes, we allow the heart to open. There's time enough for emotions to flow up from that dark well into which we stuff them when we're busy or preoccupied. It's in that fallow space, open and quiet as this riding arena, that affection and connections can blossom.

Merz looks composed and in command as she and Skippy, accompanied by two "walkers" pace around the arena. We're using flatter, hornless, English saddles; I think they make greater physical demands than Western saddles, but English riding is Anne's preferred style. She grew up riding that way in Minnesota, where she had her own horse, an Arabian named Guinevere. That was before she was diagnosed with MS at the age of 18.

Merz is now 58 and rides at WindWalkers once a week.

"It is physically demanding," she says. "It exercises and soothes both the body and the mind. I like that I get to spend an hour talking to the walkers, but I also have a bond with the horse."

WindWalkers Equine Assisted Learning and Therapy Center, located in Missouri Heights above Carbondale, serves more than 40 clients each week and is home to nine therapy horses. A five-person, volunteer board of directors runs the organization, and the staff includes riding instructors, a psychotherapist, a physical therapist, a program director, a herd manager and a volunteer coordinator who stretches Windwalker's \$470,000 annual budget by keeping as many as 50 volunteers busy and productive.

WindWalkers is celebrating its 10th anniversary and has provided more than 12,500 service hours – "butts in the saddle" – to over 3,200 riders. It offers programs that range from therapeutic riding and equine-assisted counseling to horsemanship lessons and an all-inclusive summer camp for kids.

Executive Director Gabrielle Greeves says, "If someone has a developmental challenge or a disability – ranging from spinal bifida and MS to autism and even trauma in the brain – we can help them. We work with outside medical professionals to determine the lesson plan. That's what *all* equine therapy should be." What makes WindWalkers unique, she continues, is the organization's family-centered approach; siblings, parents and grandparents are encouraged to come and ride with patients.

Two chest-high wooden platforms face each other across a horse-width passageway along the arena's front wall. Stairs lead up the platforms' sides, and one platform is flanked by a wheelchair ramp. At the beginning of today's lesson, Beth Gusick, WindWalkers' program director and a doubly-certified therapeutic riding instructor, led Cody into the slot and demonstrated how some-

one can be lifted from a wheelchair atop the platform onto a horse. Encouraging me to play rag doll, she lifted me from the platform on Cody's left to a sidesaddle position. Then Mary Jane Nunes, WindWalker's herd manager, grasped my leg from the opposite platform, lifted it over Cody and tucked my foot into the right stirrup.

Gusick and Nunes, serving as walkers for Merz, led her horse and monitored Anne for a walking warm-up and then some stretching, a kind of horse-mounted yoga. If you're reaching for the sky with both hands, you have to push down through your feet to stay anchored to your mount. It takes muscles and balance.

Next came "two-point" riding, where the rider perches on her feet and hovers above the saddle. That takes thigh muscles. Next came some posting, which calls for the rider to shift her weight from side to side in counterpoint to the horse's stride. We finished up with a trot.

Throughout the lesson, Cody was eager to follow Skippy, but he was attentive to my every move. It took nothing but a cluck of the tongue and a nudge to get him moving. He would turn in response to a single hand's tug on the reins – a far cry from many stable horses.

"It takes some experimentation to find the right horse," comments Gusick as we dismounted. "They're all good horses, but some you might have to squeeze to get going. That would be a problem if you didn't have much thigh strength. We want to make a bond between the horse and rider, and that takes some time and trial..."

"And knowing where to find the carrots," adds Merz, laughing. (That explained why Cody seemed to be blowing in my ear and pushing his velvety nose into my pockets.)

It's easier to *experience* why riding can be therapeutic than to explain it, but Merz does a good job: "It's freeing. I don't have to depend on my legs. The horse's legs work for me. They lift me up in the world. You're up high. It creates a sense of independence and self-worth. Being on the horse and having a bond – it's a wonderful thing."

"Sometimes we work with kids who are hyperactive," notes Gusick. "Their little motors are just running full tilt. But when they get on the horses, they slow down. And slowing them down makes them less impulsive. They start to listen, and they get much more communicative."

"Horses do mirror our emotions, and they're intuitive," adds Greeves. "When people mention this, we always laugh and tell them, 'You know they are herd animals. And what is a herd? It's a family. So when they are with humans, they adopt us. We become family. They are the healers, and they are on the job six days a week.'"

