



An Inseparable Pair

Learning to Feel Through Contrast

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

It's been cold for a week and I finally get out into the sunshine and take one of my geldings out across the frosty grass and soak in the fleeting warmth of a mid-winter sun. I have been inside these last few days, venturing out to feed and do a few mandatory chores, then back into the house for office work and scheduling. But today is different. The ice is a little thinner on the tanks, the temperature just a little kinder. I feel the sweetness of the sun and let my muscles soften in its temporary glow. It is so much different than the summer sun, not just because it is softer, not just because the air is so cold. It is different because I have been confined and I am experiencing the ecstasy of relief from those limitations.

I am feeling the sensitivity that is created from moving between boundaries. Boundaries that are both consistent and ever changing. This is the paradox that comes with learning to feel.

BUILDING A DIRECTIVE

Learning to feel can only happen in the face of contrast. To ride a horse with feel requires that the rider establish boundaries that the horse can move within, coming up against a limitation, then moving into that space that the rider has prepared as a refuge. If the rider builds a boundary they must equally build and protect a place just behind that barrier that the horse can move into for at the very least relief and at the very best comfort. Relief is the phantom twin to any boundary and unfortunately, the most frequently forgotten or misunderstood.

Great Horse-man-ship ("horse" and "man" relation "ship") is a manipulation of contrast.

The better a rider is at defining a boundary and paring it with this phantom twin, the more feel and sensitivity will be achieved. Horses will lean into a boundary when, over time, they have searched for that pocket of comfort to no avail.

Depending on a horse's temperament and level of training, the size of that pocket of comfort and the duration of time a horse needs to inhabit it varies. Typically, younger horses need a bigger pocket of comfort and need to stay in it longer before being asked to leave it. So often older, more seasoned horses are not given the same incentive as their younger counterparts. There is an old saying that states, "Making a nice horse is tough, but keeping them nice is even tougher."

This is because as riders, once a horse understands a directive, we frequently drop the "phantom twin" and

forget to offer that proven incentive that led them to excellence in the first place. Older, seasoned horses need the same amount of relief a younger horse needs—but they can get it in much shorter increments, more frequently. These increments can become so subtle and frequent that to a novice rider observing, it appears as though there are no boundaries, nor pockets of relief—only seamless union. The boundaries are still in place, the pockets of relief still preserved, but like movie film through a projector, we do not see each individual frame.

THE CRIME OF OMISSION

When riders fail, they fail because they have only done half their job. They have, perhaps, given a horse a directive, i.e., set a boundary without engineering this pocket of relief or refuge that must accompany it. Engineering this pocket of relief is not something the rider does after they impose a boundary; it is something that must be engineered into the directive before any boundaries are put in place. I see many riders giving a directive, for example setting a boundary with their hands, then, as if as an afterthought, start thinking about where the horse must go or what he must do to find some relief. Going at it in this way will make a rider consistently late, consistently behind.

The general public will watch a horseman work with a horse and be astounded by what that horseman can accomplish in what appears to be a few minutes with a particular horse. What they are witnessing is a horse finding relief and comfort paired with every

directive in such a consistent and reliable way that the horse is able to feel successful. A horse that is able to feel successful when seeking and finding relief will awaken and relax into the knowledge that no matter the pressure or boundary set, there is always a welcoming place to go to relieve it, if only they are willing to find it. This feeling of willingness is the horse's positive effort to seek, find, enjoy and seek again this pocket of relief.

As we have traveled around the U.S. teaching our clinic students, the frequency of this deficit is marked, so marked that a second revolution of horsemanship could be born just by eliminating this deficit.

ALL THINGS DIVISIBLE

A directive that fails to set a well-defined boundary and a well-defined pocket of relief will fail over time, every time.

When a rider thinks of how to engineer a directive, they need to give some thought to the complexity of the maneuver they are attempting and immediately think of a way to break it into its smallest possible parts. Breaking maneuvers into small manageable bites means that instead of engineering one large maneuver with one large pocket of relief, the rider now has to take each piece they have defined and engineer a directive that includes a boundary AND a pocket of relief. These will be the stepping stones the horse learns are always there, skillfully placed by the rider across the chasm of the horse's uncertainty.

Directives, or "cues," will always have two parts: a boundary and a pocket of relief.

MEETING IN THE MIDDLE

To refine this concept even more, the rider will not only ask that the horse come off the boundary that has been set but, when the horse does move into the pocket of relief, the rider also reach into that pocket and subtly meet the horse there. This is a key concept. I see so many who understand setting a boundary with their hands. I see them hold it and wait for the horse to come off of it, and when the horse does come off of it and move into the pocket of relief, I see the rider still holding that boundary out there firmly.

A good leader never asks anything of his charges that he would not be willing to do him/herself. It is only fair that when I ask my horse to move off a boundary into a pocket of relief, that I must do the same, if only for an instant. Riders must know that they will meet the horse twice, first at the boundary and second in the pocket of relief.



This concept can easily be misunderstood and takes some attention to comprehend.

To clarify, I will continue with the example of setting my hands as a boundary. Once the boundary is set and the horse moves off of that boundary into the pocket of relief, I will subtly and equally move my hands into that pocket and meet the horse there. My hands have softened, as has the horse, and we both live together in that tiny moment of pressureless serenity. I may have to immediately re-establish the boundary when the horse leaves that place but I believe the horse can feel my willingness to reach

into that pocket of emptiness just as I am asking him to reach into that pocket of emptiness.

This concept is why "checking a horse up" that is tying their head around to something solid like a cinch or rigging ring might get a horse off a barrier, but will never improve a horse's positive willingness to do so. This is the living element that cannot be duplicated with anything mechanical. This is not to say that I would never check a horse up; there can be a time and a place for it in ethical moderation. But there is no substitute for the willingness communicated when a rider meets a horse in the middle, in the pocket of relief, reaching into the neutral place where there is no pressure, both trusting, resting if only for an instant, together in the place we all long for.

The horse, out of excitement or laziness, may choose to leave the pocket, at which time the rider will meet the horse as they leave the pocket with the same firmly established boundaries.

These small pockets of relief will be the "breadcrumbs" that lead the horse and rider out of the forest of frustration.

The walls of my house shelter me and I can willingly stay behind them knowing that I am choosing to stay behind their boundaries. I can be comforted there because I know that they are temporary, only in place for now. If that changed and the windows and doors were nailed shut, the same comforting, cozy walls would immediately become my prison. I need to know that I am choosing to stay behind them. Horses need to know these things to be willing and comfortable to respect the boundaries the rider puts in place, to meet the rider willingly in the pockets of relief, and to know that there is a comfortable place to be with the human even while boundaries are in place.