

# **The Search for Harmony: Horseman, Horse, and the Land<sup>1</sup>**

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What I present here is not about how to do something, but how to think about something. The foundations for my propositions did not originate with me. I have taken them from the teachings of land ethicist Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), and the great horsemen Tom Dorrance (1910-2003) and Ray Hunt (1929- ). These men were truly deep thinkers. Undoubtedly, they were affected in some ways by popular beliefs of their time, but not so much that they were prevented from independent thinking. These were honest men who sought the fundamental answers to what constituted right and wrong ways of doing something. They were humble men who asked of themselves what it was that made one thing wrong and something else right.

## **Harmony as the Goal**

Tom Dorrance was arguably the ultimate natural horseman. Ray Hunt, an extraordinary horseman in his own right, has been Dorrance's quintessential apostle and has built and elaborated on what he learned from Tom. Their breakthrough in discovering and teaching the fundamentals of how to work best with a horse was to establish the basic need to understand the horse – “mind, body and soul.” No amount of technology would ever produce enough gadgets and shortcuts to neutralize failures to understand the horse. No nutritional and medication regime, regardless of cost, could offset failure to strive for *unity* and *harmony* with the horse. To these men, it was the responsibility of the human to strive for this relationship. They clearly felt that a true horseman could never be developed so long as this responsibility was neglected.

Working in a different time and in a different arena, it is unlikely that Dorrance and Hunt ever heard of Aldo Leopold, or he of them. But because they were all deep thinkers, they arrived at the same conclusion about the root problem in human relationships with horses, in the case Dorrance and Hunt, and ecosystems in the arena in which Leopold worked.

Paralleling the conclusions of Dorrance<sup>2</sup> and Hunt<sup>3</sup> for horse-human relationships, Leopold concluded that for ecosystems our solutions to preventing and healing human degradation were less limited by science, technology, and economic game-

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote address given at the First Rocky Mountain Trails Conference, Rocky Mountain Horse Expo, Denver, Colorado, March 11-13, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Dorrance, T. 1987. True Unity – Willing Communication between Horse and Horseman. M. H. Porter (ed.) Word Dancer Press, Clovis, Calif. 151 pages.

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, R. 1997. Think Harmony with Horses. M. Hunt (ed.) Raymond J. Hunt, Le Grand, Calif. 87 pages.

playing than in seeing ourselves as a part of the community of soils, waters, plants and animals. He contended that when we saw ourselves as at one with this greater community, we would begin to treat it with love and respect, which would then generate ethical behavior towards it. In the context of ecological stewardship he wrote:

*Conservation is a state of harmony between men and land.*<sup>4</sup>

For Dorrance and Hunt, the foundation for true horsemanship was a striving for harmony with the horse. For Leopold, the foundation for ecological stewardship was a desire to behave appropriately relative to other ecosystem components. Clearly, Leopold was of the opinion that just as we shall never achieve perfect harmony among men, we shall never achieve perfect harmony between men and land. The important thing was the striving for this goal.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, Ray Hunt offered:

*My goal for the horse is for us to someday be in perfect harmony. ... Even though I will never hold it in my hand, working for this goal is very real and rewarding.*<sup>6</sup>

#### **An Intense Consciousness**

Dorrance and Hunt asserted that a good horseman is one who knows the horse's "mind, body, and soul." Great horsemen can anticipate every movement and effectively and efficiently communicate their expectations for movement. There is a deep awareness on the part of the horseman, that in the context of ecosystems, Leopold called an "intense consciousness."

An intense consciousness does not just happen because we want to be that way. It becomes a way of life; an acceptance of responsibility to be aware of what we are doing and what it means to the horse and to the land on which we ride. It becomes a disciplined awareness of and thinking about reactions to the way we do things. It becomes a labor of love if we love and respect the horse and the land that accommodates us.

#### **Consciousness and Conscience**

An intense consciousness of horses and of land brings us to an awareness of their capacities and what constitutes appropriate expectations on our part. Capacities for different tasks differ greatly among breeds of horses and among individuals within breeds. The same principle applies to ecosystems. Some are fragile and can withstand

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<sup>4</sup> From "Round River" page --- in Leopold, A. 1949. A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There. Ballantine Books, New York, NY.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, G. W. 1993. Ecological conscience, economics, and Ethics: Exploring Leopoldian Thinking. Pages 49-57 in Kulhavy, D. L., et al. (editors) Red-cockaded Woodpecker: Recovery, Ecology and Management.

<sup>6</sup> Page 8 in Hunt, R. 1997 . Think Harmony with Horses.

little disturbance without being adversely affected, while others are robust and can withstand a lot of human and horse use. Just as it is unconscionable for us to ask of a horse a task that is going to leave him sick or lame, it is inappropriate for us to ride across a landscape in a way that is going to leave it degraded aesthetically or ecologically.

These considerations are about ethical treatment of the horse and the lands on which we ride that horse. These considerations are matters of common sense. They have little or nothing to do with the avant guard ideas about ethical treatment of animals or fanatical environmentalism. Just as we work hard not to make sick or lame a horse, we work to avoid degradation of the ecosystem.

The principles that guide us in striving for harmony with the horse and the land are called ethics. The fundamental purpose of ethics is to stabilize relationships. Behaviors, including inadequate awareness and thinking, that degrade the animal or the ecosystem destabilize our relationships with them. In response to unethical behavior on our part, whether done knowingly or unknowingly, the horse sometimes strikes back, and sometimes that response hurts us. Usually we blame the horse for this wreck.

In the case of behaviors that degrade the land, the land does not strike back. It lies there scarred, lame, and sick. When land managers and other land users, including trail users, complain and undertake efforts to have our access to the trails denied, we typically blame them for not liking horses. In each case, the horse has ended up taking the blame for our inadequacies.

### **The Ecological Conscience**

Humans have a capacity for conscience that has not been rivaled in 3.7 billion years of organic evolution. It is associated with and dependent upon our intellectual capacity. Our intellectual capacity informs our tendencies to be greedy, including the “I want it now” syndrome. It also informs the conscience which functions to counter our tendencies to be greedy and impatient.

We can devise shortcuts to haze or intimidate a horse into something fairly quickly in some cases. But this approach almost always comes with a price, the cost being subtracted from the potential for a harmonious relationship. We can ignore the condition of a trail and ride roughshod over it. But sooner or later there will be a price to pay for such insensitive behaviors that have degraded the land.

The ecological conscience is informed by a developed awareness and an intense consciousness of right and wrong behaviors. While clues to right and wrong can come from various forms of literature, the primary impact of this type of information should be to stimulate the trailsman to think.

Take heed of how Ray Hunt admonishes people seeking harmony with horses:

*We expect others to do our thinking for us. ... Think what's happening; don't wait for somebody else to tell you.*<sup>7</sup>

The same admonishment applies to our responsibility to behave on the land with ecological appropriateness.

#### **Extending the Human-Horse Harmony Idea to the Land**

I used to think that trail horsemen would quickly pick up on the idea of a harmonious relationship with the land that would be guided by land ethics and prompted by the ecological conscience. The principles were already laid out in the fundamentals of good horsemanship. For the most part I was wrong.

Thinking, learning, and changing our ways of doing things are all hard work. Typically, we avoid hard work, especially when that work is a mental process. And most especially when the process involves admitting that we might have been doing things wrong in the past.

The best horsemen have gone through this process, and they can usually detail the benefits of change. One benefit when working with horses is that we typically do not get hurt as much as we used to.

The benefits of changing the way we view land, i.e., changing to a striving for harmony with it, are usually not so tangible in terms of personal, physical rewards. The primary personal benefit that we can receive, at least in the short run, is the satisfaction that we are striving to separate right from wrong, and do the right thing. It is a matter of an eased ecological conscience.

On the other hand, there are benefits in the long run that will accrue to us only if we live long enough, but are certain to influence the prospects for the future of recreational trail riding. American society will not tolerate the degradation of the public lands. The citizenry's perceptions of degradation are just as devastating to us as the real thing. Among non-motorized users shod horses are the traffic that is hardest on trail treads.

To the extent that trail traffic degrades a trail, it is almost certain to adversely impact the ecological matrix in which that trail is embedded. Protection of the land from us can become the justification for denial of our access to trails based on statutes that protect water quality, biodiversity, endangered species, and wilderness quality. Recreational trail horse use need not degrade any of these things, although it has at times in the past. An intense consciousness of land that equals the intense awareness that a good horseman has for his/her horse will prevent such degradations. It simply must do this, or the future of recreational horse trails is very dim.

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<sup>7</sup> Pages 19, 20 in Hunt, R. 1997. Think Harmony with Horses.

**Harmony is the purpose of ethics. Leopold articulated the land ethic as**

*A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.*<sup>8</sup>

**We strive to preserve and enhance these exact same elements in our horses. Is it unrealistic to expect the extension of this principle to the land in order to achieve the fullness of harmony between the human-horse entity and the land that we seek to enjoy?**

**When we have brought ourselves to this task, which will never be either perfect or complete, the time will come when at the end of the day on the trail, the horses will be tended, and supper chores will be finished, the fire will die low, and we will sit and think deeply.**

*And then we may hear it – a vast pulsing harmony, its score inscribed on a thousand hills, its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals, its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries.*<sup>9</sup>

**And we shall wonder: “What is our role in this great symphony?”**

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<sup>8</sup> From “The Land Ethic” page 262 in Leopold, A. 1949. A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There. Ballantine Books, New York, NY.

<sup>9</sup> From “Song of the Gaviolon” page 158 in Leopold, A. 1949. A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There. Ballantine Books, New York, NY.