

Paula Josa-Jones  
CMA, RSMET, SEP

Meditations and Strategies  
for Deeper Understanding and  
Enhanced Communication

# OUR HORSES, OURSELVES

DISCOVERING THE COMMON BODY

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

Equine-assisted therapy surged into the mainstream in the past decade. With applications developed for those with physical disabilities, autism, and PTSD, as just a few examples, as well as individuals seeking ways to better manage themselves and others, the horse is no longer considered merely a working or recreational partner. He is now seen by many as a conduit for healing and personal growth. Now in this fascinating book, dancer and choreographer Paula Josa-Jones combines her two greatest passions—movement and horses—as she explores our understanding of the physical body and its role in communicating what is inside each of us to the outside world.

Through stories, strategies, and over 65 meditations and gentle exercises, Josa-Jones shows us how we can develop greater somatic awareness—consciousness of breath, integrated and coherent movement, and the understanding of movements and touch as potent channels of communication—away from the horse, as well as how being with the horse can help this consciousness continue to evolve. The result is we not only have a closer, more intuitive connection with horses, we are more trustworthy, more comfortable in our own skin, and better prepared to act with balance, sensitivity, and kindness in all our relationships.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paula Josa-Jones is a dancer, choreographer, and movement educator known for her visually rich, emotionally charged dance theater. Her work includes choreography for humans, as well as inter-species work with horses, dancers, and riders, and work in film and video. Josa-Jones has been called "one of the country's leading choreographic conceptualists" by *The Boston Globe* and *The Village Voice* describes her work as "powerful, eccentric, and surreal." Her dances have been produced in Russia, Europe, Mexico, and throughout the United States. Josa-Jones has taught in the dance programs at Tufts University, Boston University, and other

colleges, universities, and dance festivals nationally and internationally. She is a Certified Laban Movement Analyst, Somatic Experiencing® practitioner, and a Registered Somatic Movement Educator and Therapist (RSMET). She is also a TTEAM (Tellington Touch Equine Awareness Method) practitioner. Josa-Jones is an avid horsewoman with a deep love and appreciation for her horse partners Amadeo, Capprichio, and Sanne. She works with individual clients and teaches workshops, focusing on the human-horse bond, and the wisdom of the moving body.

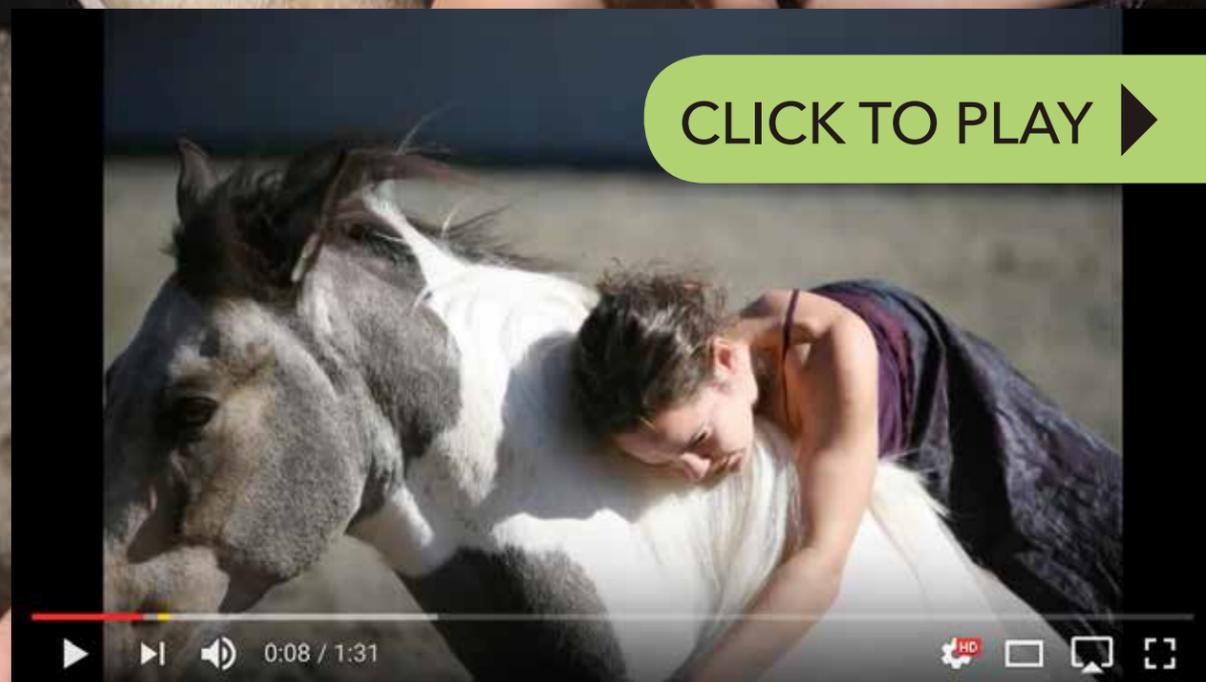
"What Paula Josa-Jones has done...is to bring each aspect of the combined arts of equitation and dance into new and sublime focus."

**CARLY SIMON**  
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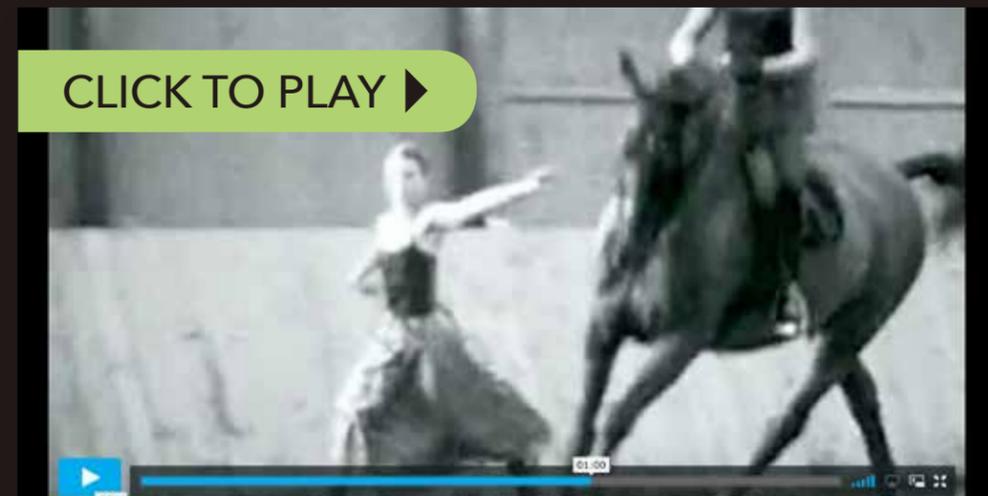
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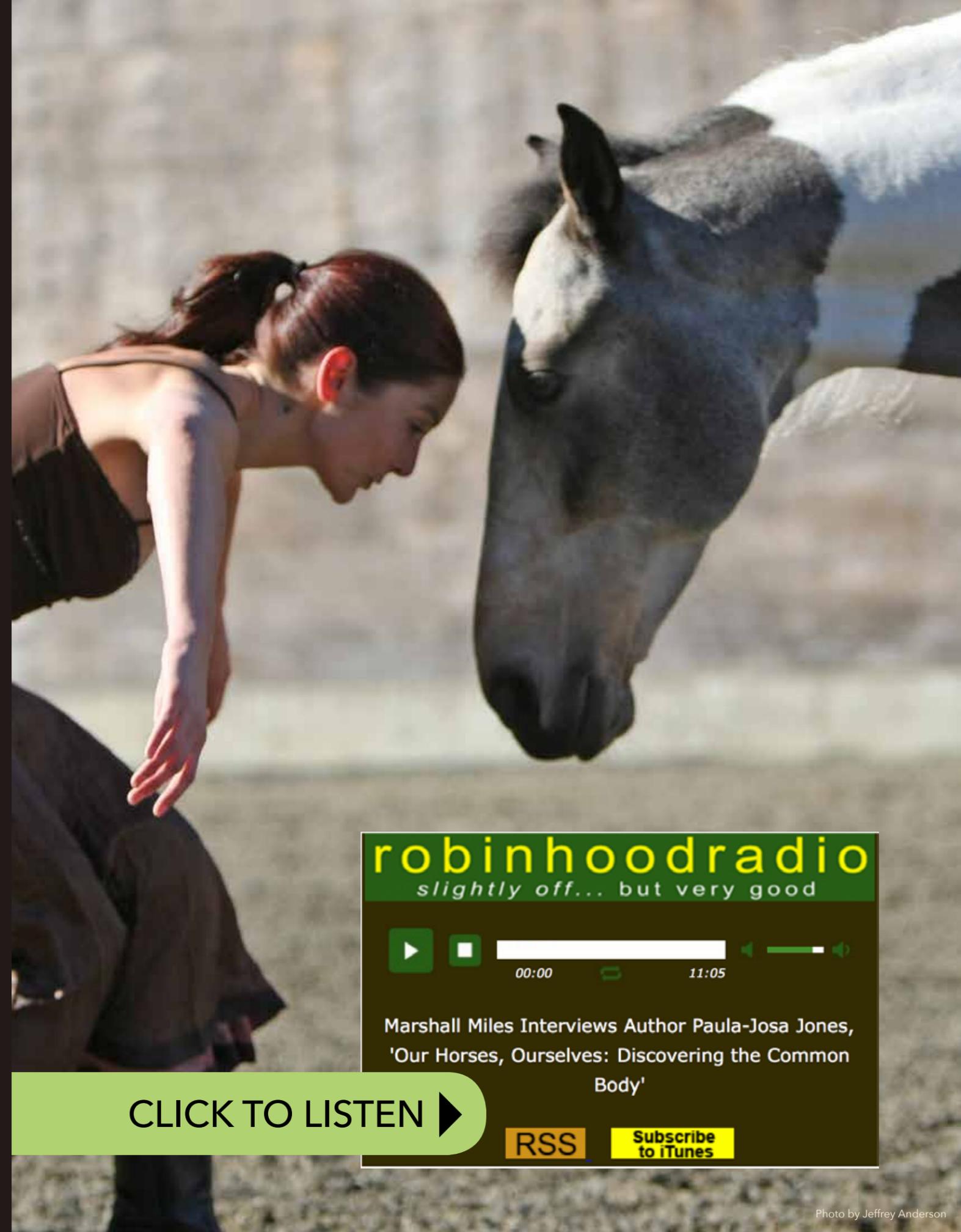
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one of us with a true desire to  
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with them in work, pleasure, or  
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# Q&A WITH PAULA JOSA-JONES

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Which came first in your life: Horses or dancing? How did your interest and experience with each evolve?

As a child, I knew that I wanted to be with horses and that I wanted to dance. There was such clarity and ferocity to that desire. My parents were not particularly eager for me to do either. I would plead to go riding, and we would go once each fall. I begged to take dance classes, but because my mother was a pianist, those were the lessons I got. I can remember her braiding my French braids tight-tight-tight as I would practice the piano each morning when I was young, so I grew to associate playing with pain and constriction.

I spent my summers on my Aunt Pearl's farm in Sioux Falls, but there were only a few ponies wandering in the neighboring farm's fields. When I finally went away to camp, there were horses, and I would ride every day and write long letters home about each horse. So there was always so much yearning—like a fire smoldering underground, waiting to burst through to the surface. I think that I learned very early on that I would have to feed my own dreams; that I was the one who would have find the way to do what I so deeply desired. And in that way I learned to be rebellious, to fight for what I wanted, and to do it in my own way.

When were you first moved to combine your two passions, horses and movement? How did this inspiration find form at first? Did the dances come to life easily, or was it a challenge to merge the two?

When I started to ride again as an adult, almost immediately I felt this strong desire to be in the saddle and feel *that* dance, but then to get out of the saddle and move with horses as a dancer on the ground—to improvise with them in the language of movement and see what they would understand and how they would respond. Because I was so deeply naïve about horses as a species—their nervous systems, their ways of communicating—it was difficult at first, but I was very, very determined. And so I persisted. What I discovered was far more than I could ever have imagined—about horses' willingness, their curiosity, their desire for connection—and how all those qualities mirrored what I was feeling in moving with them, and in simply being with them.

Can you explain your therapeutic work, how it relates to your background in dance, and how you have interwoven horses? How has it helped you? How has it helped you help others?

Well into my formal training as a dancer,

I felt that although I was moving, I did not feel particularly connected to the movement. It was someone else's movement that I was supposed to replicate, and that felt dry and empty to me. The exception was when I studied with the great African dancer Charles Moore. In his classes I felt illuminated, engulfed by the dancing—he taught me that movement could transform through an experience of pure joy. But the Western concert dance forms, although they trained my body, felt mechanical.

I began searching and discovered the work of Rudolf Laban, the great German choreographer, teacher, and movement theorist. Understanding more about the dynamics of movement, ways of using space, and what my actual movement preferences were gave me a tremendous amount of information about myself as an artist, a performer, and a creator. Through that, I discovered Body-Mind Centering, Authentic Movement, Somatic Experiencing, and the work of Linda Tellington-Jones. Each of these added a layer of understanding and depth to my work as an artist and an educator. I view myself as a teacher and practitioner with a practice of embodied research into the structure, function, and expression of the body-mind. In other words, I have worked the clay of my own body for many, many years, and from

that I have gained perspectives that I can share with others.

In terms of how the horses are a part of all that, they are my finest and most demanding teachers. When I told my spouse Pam that my horse Sanne was the kindest and most challenging of my horses, she said, "He is your target audience." I think that is right. If I can get it right for Sanne—listening through the trillions of cells in my body to the trillions of cells in his body—then I have begun to get it right.

If I am working with a client and a horse, regardless of what we are DOING, we are focused on staying in our own bodies, in sensing the flow of consciousness in ourselves and how that



Photo by Pam White

# Q&A WITH PAULA JOSA-JONES

connects to the flow of consciousness in the horse, whether in the saddle or on the ground.

Your book is entitled **OUR HORSES, OURSELVES: DISCOVERING THE COMMON BODY**. What do you mean by “the Common Body” and why is it an important concept for us to understand?

The Common Body means that your body is not separate from my body or from the body of the horse, the praying mantis, the hummingbird, the manatee, or the earth itself. We all share a kind of cellular intelligence that is expressed in different ways by different species and shaped by our experiences and preferences.

The false idea of our separateness is deeply harmful and disruptive at so many levels. It teaches us to experience ourselves as essentially disconnected from the world and from other beings, particularly of other species. In fact we are profoundly interconnected with all of life—intertwined biospheres carried within the large biosphere of the planet. So much of contemporary culture excludes the experience or expression of our commonality: the richness and permeability of our bodily animal selves, the sharing of breath, blood and, earth that connects us at the deepest levels—*anatomically, energetically, psychically, spiritually, and emotionally.*

Recently a friend introduced me

to a book about the “wood wide web”—how trees are connected through the network of their roots, including the microscopic fungi that live on and around the roots in a symbiotic relationship with the trees. The roots and the fungi constitute a vast communication system that allows the trees to share resources and send one another information. I believe that humans and horses are like that “wood wide web,” profoundly interconnected, but that we often don’t know that we are actually communicating or exchanging with each other. My hope is that by “waking up” the body and the mind we will begin to hear each other all the more clearly.

Your book contains stories gathered from your own journey, as well as those of other artists, writers, and horse people. What is one theme that binds these stories together? What do you hope they will teach us?

I hope that they will help us to become more embodied, to develop in and toward ourselves the qualities of compassion, kindness, generosity, and awareness. Body-mind psychotherapist Susan Aposhyan defines embodiment as “the moment to moment process by which human beings allow awareness to enhance the flow of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and energies throughout bodily selves.” True embodiment is a continuous, uninterrupted experience

of what I like to call “body presence.” The body does not actually go offline or unconscious when we are on the phone, or on the horse, or at the computer. Our awareness may leave, but the body is always there, breathing, moving fluids, carrying out its intricate functioning with steadfastness and intelligence. What we want is for our conscious sensing of the body to be an integral, essential part of all of our experiencing. The body is not waiting for us in the movement studio or the stable. It is here, it is now.

A central theme of the stories shared in my book is that horses can help us with whatever needs helping. They often illuminate issues or life lessons in ways that our human companions may not. In my experience, they can give us insights into the places that

we are stuck—places of resistance or habits of body and mind that have become serious impediments to our ability to open fully to our desires. Many times, that information is stored in the body. It can show up as pain or stiffness or a lack of feeling and joy. As my friend and mentor Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen says, “There are no wrong postures, only positions we have forgotten how to come out of.”

Throughout there are gentle exercises and meditations offered. How have you used these exercises in your own self-discovery and self-healing? How will they help us with our horses, and in our life in general?

All of the exercises arise from my own research and exploration, and from



Photo by Jeffrey Anderson



## Q&A WITH PAULA JOSAJONES

the shared wisdom of my teachers and collaborators. These meditations have been a part of my own expansion and discovery as an artist, a horsewoman, and a teacher. Some are contemplative and others are more active. My hope is that they will support the discovery of a more embodied, richly felt sense of the self, and that a softening attunement and awareness will in turn be communicated to our horses, our children, our partners, and the earth.

My work with clients, students and horses includes body-mind practices that help us feel and understand ourselves with greater clarity and compassion. This happens when we experience the balancing awareness that horses uniquely offer, because they so clearly sense and reflect our inner emotional states. Working with horses is about learning new ways of handling our reactions, our nervous systems. In doing that, we have the possibility of bringing greater awareness and deeper listening and refinement to everything that we do.

**What is your intent for this book and its message?**

To open a door. To shine a light. To create possibility.

I don't believe that the horses are here so that we can pin ribbons on stable walls or achieve some kind of technical perfection. I believe that they are

in our lives for a much larger, more soulful purpose that has to do with opening up and doing the hard, hard work of becoming more fully human—meaning more vulnerable, playful, expressive, curious, and loving.

The body is the vessel that the mind lives in. "Mind exists in every cell of the body." (Candace Pert) This relationship of body and mind is the inescapable through-line of our lives. When we consciously cultivate the ability to experience body and mind at the same time and in the same place, we have begun to be embodied and open to an alignment with the present moment, where we all belong.

My experience is that horses can be guides in this process, because they reflect our inner bodily, emotional state, because they allow us to be close to them, and because of the essential generosity and kindness of their nature. With them, with practice and patience, with openness and willingness, it may be easier to feel the sense of life flowing from them to us, from us to them, and from both of us outward to the world. One does not have to be a rider or a horseperson to experience this.

**PAULAJOSAJONES.ORG**

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# AN EXCERPT FROM *OUR HORSES, OURSELVES*

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What constitutes a limit? Is it the body, the mind, the stall, the bridle and reins? Is it our belief that we are separate entities; living lives essentially independent of each other, unable to feel ourselves part of a larger whole? How can we listen more deeply and hear what is being communicated by the natural world—an oak tree, a horse, a singing wren, a friend? How do we negotiate these limits of body, mind, heart, and spirit? Except for wild herds in places like the American West or Chincoteague, the Camargue in France or Mongolia, horses live within the confines of stalls, paddocks, and work. They inhabit the spaces we permit, their freedom cut to fit our needs and demands, completely dependent upon our care and feeding.

Like our horses, our bodies express our limits: habitual postures, aches and pains, and a lack of feeling, expression, and imagination are all part of the boundaries that we expect and endure. Habits of mind become engraved in our tissue, cells lose elasticity and fluidity, and our bodies become little stalls instead of open pastures. These physical, mental, and emotional contractions can be reflected in our work, relationships, and health, impeding our ability to live joyfully.

The good news is that our bodies can also help us feel and release these limiting beliefs, tensions, and anxieties, and horses can play a crucial role in this process of moving toward greater freedom of body and mind.

According to anthropologist David M. Guss, in tribal societies, “A system of reciprocity existed in which all living things took part.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, what many think of as more “primitive” cultures were not limited by dualism—the “them and us” worldview that is deeply rooted in many aspects of contemporary thinking, particularly in relation to other species. Guss observes that in tribal societies, connections with other humans, the natural world, and all nonhuman forms of life, were continually reaffirmed by song, dance, dress, and other cultural forms. “This ceremonial life of the tribal person was a constant dialogue, with interspecies communication both ordering and transforming it. This was the magical ingredient that seasoned every action, dissolving the individual into the greater reality while at the same time defining his relationship and responsibility to it.”<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps this is the most devastating limit we experience: the loss of an embodied, numinous relationship with nature in all its forms....

...Is there a reliable, readily avail-

able way to dissolve our limits, to deepen connection to the larger whole? In an article in *The New York Times*, David DeSteno, a professor of psychology at Northeastern University, states, “Meditation fosters a view that all beings are interconnected.” In his work with psychologist Piercarlo Valdesolo he has found that “any marker of affiliation between two people, even something as subtle as tapping their hands together in synchrony, causes them to feel more compassion for each other when distressed. The increased compassion in meditators, then, might stem directly from meditation’s ability to dissolve the artificial social distinctions—ethnicity, religion, ideology, and the like—that divide us.”<sup>31</sup>

For a time, we lived across from a farm. People would drop off cats, and several of them made their way into our yard, which is how we expanded our population of cat companions. One day a young mother cat appeared in our garden with three kittens. While we kept the kittens, the mother was very feral, so we spayed her and then released her. I named her Mamacita. We built a little shelter outside our door with a heated pad where we would feed her daily. It seemed that she wanted to stay, but we could not touch her, and she would flee if she saw us.

I spent many hours, and soon many years, sitting quietly, waiting, allowing Mamacita to sniff my fingers, then eventually she let me touch her head. One winter she decided that living inside was preferable to the cold,

and she hid in our living room, declining to leave when we offered her the outdoors. Again, I would enter, lie down nearby or sit quietly and wait. After perhaps six years, I was able to hold her. It is now ten years since Mamacita first appeared. She lives in a small room off my studio with a cat door. When I come in to feed her, she calls plaintively to me, and does not eat until we have had a luxurious long snuggle. She still has her spooky, fearful, hiding moments, but for the most part she has overcome the limits of her wildness.

I tell this story to demonstrate that meditation is not only sitting on a cushion. It includes moments that invite awareness and a quiet, receptive mind. Touching and being touched, dancing, singing, and writing can all be forms of meditation when we bring intention and conscious focus into the heart of each moment.



Photo by Jeffrey Anderson

# CONTACT

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