

PHOTOS: JEFFREY ANDERSON & PAM WHITE

OUR HORSES, *Ourselves*

{ HOW RIGHTING WHAT'S INSIDE
MAKES THE OUTSIDE RIGHT, TOO }

By Paula Jose-Jones

I have been a dancer, as well as a lover of horses, most of my life. Much of that time was, in a way, an out-of-body experience. Years of dance training meant pushing the body, often with very little awareness of what it was telling me about pain, limitation, and feeling. My body was first and foremost an instrument, and I expected it to work. When I found myself hungering to “dance” with horses—not just ride them but draw together my two great passions—it was then I discovered that it was the horses that brought me most deeply into my body. Horses have taught me many lessons, including how to feel my body in startling detail. They have helped me to notice my emotions, and

become more aware, expressive, and focused in the present moment. That connection can give us a more embodied, intuitive, and heartfelt relationship with each other and ourselves. To be embodied means that we are experiencing our bodies in a feeling, conscious way—that we are listening to intelligence and insight that arise from the body itself, rather than from cognitive learning alone. We are feeling into, rather than only thinking about.

THE HORSE CONNECTION

What is it about the horse? Why does he have such a magnetic appeal for millions of people?

THE PREY ANIMAL IS CONGRUENT, meaning that **his inside feelings and intentions** MATCH HIS OUTSIDE **expressions and behaviors.** His responses ARE AUTHENTIC because he does not **dissemble or have hidden** MOTIVES.



Horses are mythic, beautiful, and big. We revere them and we fear them. They are planted deep in our psyches—in a field, on film, in dreams—capturing the dancing light of our consciousness, memory, and imagination. Horses, like us, are playful, social, but unlike us, completely, utterly present. They are not distracted by the past or the future. They possess an intricate kinesthetic language that is revealed in their keen sense of touch, movement, and sensory perception. Among horses, signals get passed almost invisibly with movement, breath, and subtle shifts in energy. A twitch of an ear, a glance, a sudden start, or a deepening stillness, all travel in currents through the herd: “Look out!” “Better grass here.” “Get away from my mare!” “Follow me.” While we humans, too, live in “herds,” we tend to think of and experience ourselves as individuals with independent lives essentially separate from one another. Because we are continually thinking, analysing, second-guessing, making assumptions—much of which overrides our intuitive, bodily knowing—we are actually less adept at reading signals and decoding the subtleties of others’ behaviour and meaning.

To live fully in your body is to enter what poet James Wright calls “wild arenas we avoid.” Horse trainer, philosopher, and writer Vicki Hearne says that most humans lack a clear vocabulary and syntax of the body—we don’t understand its language fully or always communicate well with it. Learning about horses—their nature, their physicality, their ways of sensing and perceiving—can carry us into Wright’s “wild arenas” and open us to a greater depth of somatic experiencing where we more fully inhabit every moment.

CONGRUENT VS. INCONGRUENT

Horses are profoundly attuned to humans, in part because we are predators.

They are continually reading our behaviour and intentions through the expression of our bodies and psyches. They can discern in us layers of feeling that we are not aware of. The predator is wily and subversive: he does not want others to know what he is planning. As prey animals, however, horses are, by necessity, keen observers and interpreters of their world. Reading their environment is key to their survival. They are wary, alert, and intuitive.

The prey animal is congruent, meaning that his inside feelings and intentions match his outside expressions and behaviours. His responses are authentic because he does not dissemble or have hidden motives. Humans—predators—are often incongruent: feeling one way and acting another, our bodies and behaviours mirroring our habits and unconscious thought patterns. These are felt by our horses, who in turn reflect these unexpressed, contradictory emotions back to us, mirroring what we might be feeling but perhaps are not showing or want to conceal.

For example, when you are riding a horse and acting brave but feeling fearful or anxious, the horse reflects your fear because that is what is “true” in that moment. His reaction shows you are out of sync, that your inner and outer expression is discordant. When you learn to pay attention to the horse’s behaviours, you can become more aware of your emotional landscape and its relationship to what you are expressing outwardly. In this biofeedback, our



horses provide us rich and fertile soil for observing and understanding ourselves, and unravelling the unconscious mysteries of our bodies and minds, showing us how thoughts become things. They offer us the opportunity to shift our minds and bodies away from what we fear and toward what we want to create in our lives.

AMADEO AND HENRY: LESSONS IN CONGRUENCE

My horse Amadeo has taught me a lot about congruence versus incongruence.

For years, I could not figure out why he was so jumpy, fearful, and explosive when I rode him. I saw that my trainer had no such difficulties when she rode Amadeo—he was relaxed and quiet, easily moving through even the more upper level movements that I yearned to master. I had suffered a concussion from a fall several years before and often felt fragile and vulnerable with Amadeo. Eventually I understood that he was reflecting and embodying my emotions: I was acting calm on the outside, but inside I felt terrified that he would bolt or spook, and I would fall off and be hurt.

I saw the same thing with my friend

Elsa. Her horse Henry was spooky and reactive when she brought him out of his stall to groom him and tack him up. While usually confident, Elsa became tentative and ungrounded as she moved around her horse. Her breathing was tight and irregular; her hands fluttered as she brushed Henry’s body—and then his eyes widened with concern, his head came up, ears pricked forward. Henry was reading Elsa’s physical language, and his nervous responses were directly related to her uncertain, quick, breathless movement. Slowing her touch, connecting her breathing down through her legs and feet, becoming aware of any tension in her body, and adding a quality of depth and feeling to her touches changed Henry’s breathing in minutes. His body visibly relaxed as Elsa gained confidence and steadiness in her movements.

Learning to be congruent, like horses, makes us more trustworthy—to ourselves and to others—and more comfortable in our own skins. We become more attuned to the “currents” passing among us, more able to blend, empathize, and act with balance, sensitivity, and kindness.

LEARNING TO BE CONGRUENT, like horses, **makes us more trustworthy—to OURSELVES** and to **others—and more COMFORTABLE** in our own **skins.**

TRY THIS: ENTERING THE RIVER

10 MINUTES

PURPOSE: Too often we walk our horses to the barn, the paddock, or the arena without consciously inviting them into that transition from one place to another.

“Waking up” to connecting while simply walking with our horses is a way to create partnership by shifting our awareness to what Phoebe Caldwell calls an “inward conversation of self and other”—one that harmonizes body and mind of human and horse.

1. Take a walk with a friend, either human or another species.
2. As you walk, begin to feel the similarities between your gaits, the way your rhythms match and echo each other. Simply feel the movement of your body, rather than thinking about what you are doing.
3. Consciously shift your own rhythm and pace so that your walking begins to feel more and more aligned with that of your companion.
4. Let your partner’s walk summon you into a rhythmic flow, as if you had placed the canoe of your body into the river of your friend’s movement.



TRY THIS:
RESTING, FINDING SUPPORT

10 MINUTES

PURPOSE: In our rushed, highly technological, media-infused world, we rarely take the time to rest and let go deeply and intentionally. These habits of hurrying, and the associated, chronic tension transmits into every part of our bodies, and therefore, our horse's bodies. Allowing for moments of deep rest, consciously releasing our bodies into the support of the floor, or any surface, can be profoundly restorative. Over time, this can help rewire your nervous system, creating a more settled body-mind, which in turn will support a more balanced relationship with your horse.

1. Lie down on your back on the floor in a quiet place, with a folded blanket or towel under your head.
2. Notice where there may be tension or where you feel like you are "holding" your body in a particular position, and allow those parts to yield into the support of the floor. Be aware of the pliant, elastic, skin container of your body, and its contents of bone, muscle, fascia, organ,

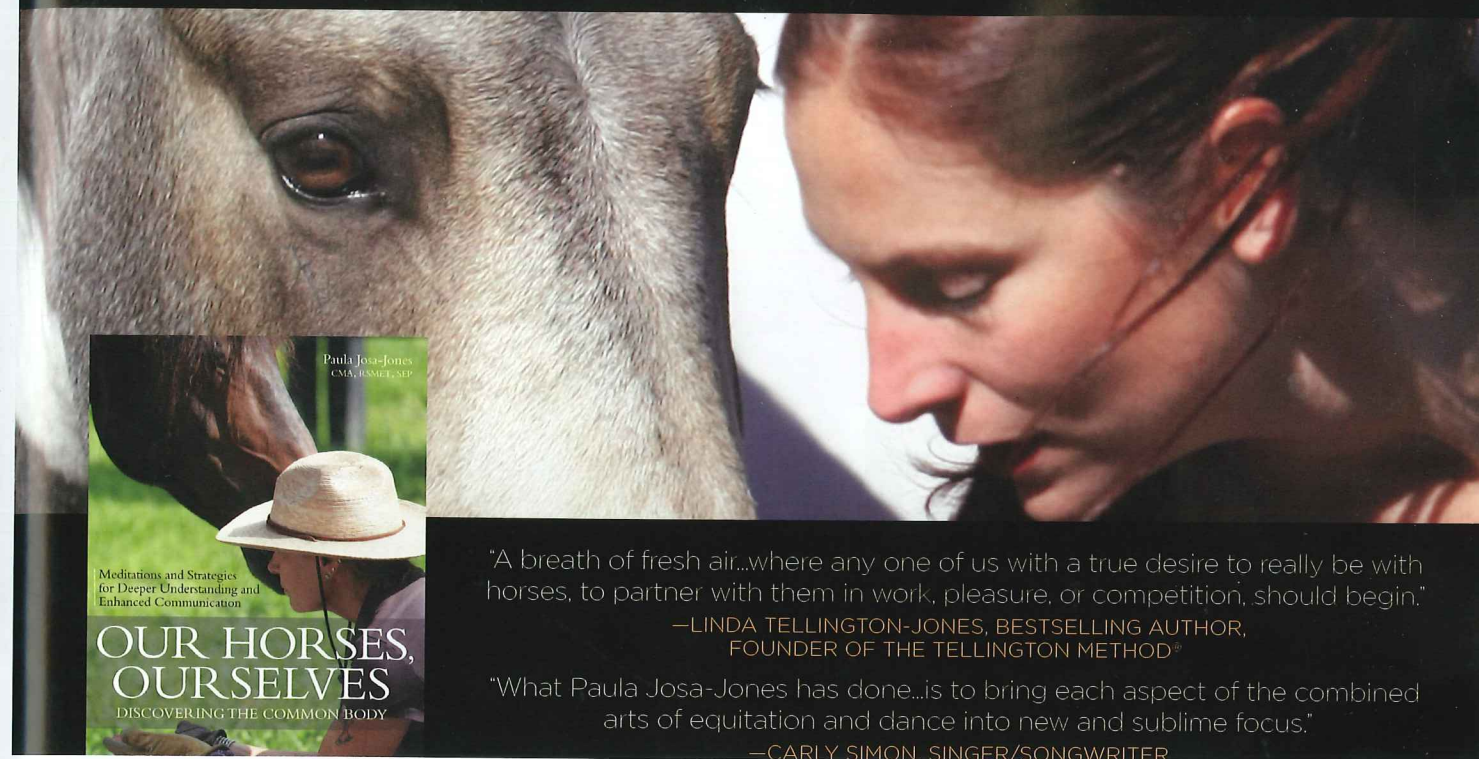
and fluid. Imagine that your whole body could soften and widen across the floor like a balloon filled with water.

3. Close your eyes, taking time to feel your eyes and eyelids soften, become heavy, and settle back into the supporting concave hollow of the eye sockets.
4. Feel your lips resting on the arch of your teeth. Release any expression from your mouth and face, letting them become spacious and peaceful. Let your tongue soften and widen inside the hollow of your mouth. Allow gravity to release and shift your bottom jaw down toward the floor, at the same time letting the top jaw unhinge and float upward, so that your mouth relaxes slightly open.
5. Release the skin and the inner chambers of your ears so that your hearing expands both inward and outward.
6. Breathe, without shaping the breath, just following the movement of the breath with a soft, open focus.
7. Notice anywhere in the body where you feel restriction or where the breath does not flow. Imagine sending your breath there, and visualize that "closed" place flowing open on the river of your breath.

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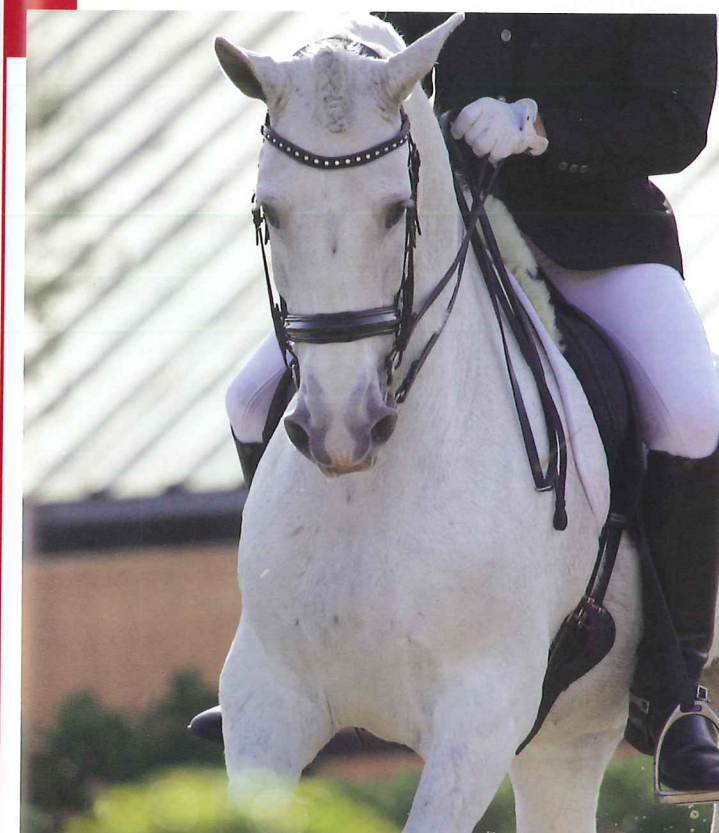


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