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Sanctuary One at Double Oak Farm

by Della Merrill

Rogue is an eight-year-old quarter horse mare. Her wide eyes, often rimmed in white, reflect the abuse of her past. Rogue lived knee-deep in manure and mud and was barely alive when she was rescued by law-enforcement officers and brought to Sanctuary One. Unfortunately her foal did not survive the filthy and starving conditions.

I met Rogue on one of my first visits to Sanctuary One. Her ribs poked through the sides of her skin, her coat was dull and dirty, and the terror in her eyes told me all I needed to know about her past experience with humans.

Sanctuary One is about healing; humans, animals and the earth. We practice natural horsemanship as a way to heal the rescued horses, to regain their trust in humans and to rebuild their confidence in the world. This approach also teaches us life lessons that go beyond the horse/human connection. For example, the importance of practicing love, language and leadership, all in equal doses, as well as taking responsibility for our actions, controlling our emotions, and practicing patience and persistence.

I understand Rogue needs love, but just as importantly she needs for me to understand her language and be the leader she innately requires. Loving a thousand pound animal without a balance of leadership and the ability to understand them leads to dangerous situations. Horses are herd animals that need a leader to feel safe. If their human is not a strong leader, the horse will take over becoming pushy, obstinate, even threatening. Likewise, in order to be the effective leader she needs, I need to learn and understand her equine language. How horses communicate through body language is essential.

Taking responsibility for how Rogue reacts rather than blaming her is a huge life lesson for me. When things don't go the way I expect, instead of blaming her and wondering why she is doing that, instead I ask myself - "What can I do differently?" It is common

to find fault in others rather than taking personal responsibility and looking at how our own actions have had an impact.

Horses often mirror our intent and energy. If I get frustrated or angry, it only serves to drive Rogue away and causes her to distrust me. Anger and frustration also closes me down to the gifts that are presented in the moment. Natural horsemanship reminds us that if the horse is doing the opposite of what we are asking, it's

most likely because of how we are asking, not because the horse is intentionally trying to make us angry. So a key to succeeding with Rogue is controlling my emotions, looking at feelings of frustration and anger as an opportunity to learn something new, to try something different, to ask myself - "What am I doing in the way I'm communicating that isn't working?"

Practicing patience and persistence to achieve a goal is an important life lesson as well as an important

practice in natural horsemanship. It might be faster to corner Rogue in order to catch her, but what about taking the time to create a trusting relationship where she starts to see me as a source of comfort and safety and then begins to choose to come to me when I want her? It might take longer for this to happen, but the results are lasting and real.

Today Rogue is a different horse. Her coat is shiny, she has filled out and is healthy and robust, and her eyes are often soft and inquisitive. She has a long way to go, but each day she trusts a little more and fears a little less. Rogue reminds us of our responsibilities as caretakers, to never forget to take responsibility for our actions, to be ever mindful of our emotions, and to take the time it takes to achieve goals worth achieving. She also reminds us the importance of practicing a balance of love, language, and leadership.

For more information about how you can help the Sanctuary rescue horses like Rogue, visit Sanctuary One on the Web at www.SanctuaryOne.org, or call 541.899.8627.



Staff member Della Merrill, the Sanctuary's horse rehabilitation expert, working with "Rogue."