

INTENTIONS

By Letitia Hise

I've thought a lot about intentions over the years. A major stumbling block in human-horse communications happens because humans are so highly verbal and have lost most of their ability to think anything but words. Horses, being primarily non-verbal, are much more attuned to picking up the intentions of others through their movements, expressions, and yes, even their energy. As verbal creatures, we're poor at reading these signs in others, but most people take notice when someone with high energy enters a room. Horses pick up on your energy the way you pick up on someone giving you a dirty look. No words necessary. As a rider, you exhibit that energy in a number of different ways, from the way you breathe to your posture as you sit in the saddle. Leaning forward, sitting back, slumping, or stiffening, all send signals to your horse, usually without the knowledge of the sender.

Even though you may be consciously sending your horse a signal to move forward and to the right with your reins and your leg, your horse may be receiving conflicting signals of your intentions from your posture and your energy. It's not as crazy as it sounds. The next time your horse doesn't want to move forward, try making a mental note to yourself of how you're sitting and where you're LOOKING when your horse balks. Are you looking down at your hands? At your horse's ears? At the object on the ground you want to avoid? Or are you looking off in the distance to where you intend to take your horse? What are you thinking? Are there a tumult of words flowing through your brain? Or are you picturing your horse moving forward, imagining the feeling of forward motion, with the feel of the breeze in your face? No, horses can't read your mind, but they can read intentions -- by feel.

Here's an example. My horse Twister becomes terribly herd bound. I don't know that he's really lacking in self-assuredness so much as that he doesn't think the herd can survive without him. (I don't think he knows he's gelded.) So when trying to ride Twister away from the pasture where "his" mares are in danger of consorting with other geldings, I would run into some difficulty. Generally, a lot of balking, spinning, and even a little popping up in front, but usually, just refusal to move forward in a "departing" direction. One morning as I sat there cursing him, I suddenly realized I was falling into the trap I used to warn my students about: I was looking down. I immediately corrected myself and looked off into the distance--and being an extremely verbal creature and practically incapable of thinking in anything but words--I said aloud, "Look at that tree over there Twister; let's go see that tree!" (Mind you, I was looking at the tree, and by speaking the words, I changed my own energy.) Like magic, he started moving forward. It was a wonderful moment. I know better than to look down, but it's so easy to fall into that trap.

Where do you intend to go? Picture it -- LOOK at it. INTEND it. Your energy changes when you do that.

With horses, your balance (seat) changes too, when you look where you're going rather than where you already are (which is what you're doing when you look down). Have you ever thought your horse was stupid for walking right into that wire that you were staring at and trying to steer your horse around? You were the one who directed him right to that wire by focusing on it.

I used to say to students, "If you're looking at your horse's ears, he's leading you around by the nose." Where do you intend to go? If you're staring at his ears, you're not sending him anywhere but where he's already at, and you're a follower, not a leader. Look ahead; project your intentions to go up the road, up the rail, across the arena, over to that tree, through that water--but don't look AT the water--look BEYOND it!