
Dancing with Horses: The Shimmering Star

by

Andrew-Glyn Smail

(Reflections on rereading Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling's *Dancing with Horses*. All references are to the Trafalgar Square Publishing edition of 2001.)

It is easy to gate-crash *Dancing with Horses*, the book, by bypassing the “accompaniment” which precedes the text proper but the reader does themselves a disservice by doing so, because it is crucial to understanding the approach adopted by Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling (KFH) to horse-riding in general and his elucidation of it in *Dancing with Horses*, in particular. This accompaniment tells the story of a noble caballero, who while lying on his deathbed at the age of 96, laments the misfortune of his impending demise with tears in his eyes. Listening to him, his nephew is puzzled, pointing out that “this time comes for every man” and that his uncle has had a “long, rich, blessed life”. The old man concurs but confesses that “it was only about a week ago that I first realised what it means to truly ride a horse”.

To KFH riding a horse represents the summit of a unique cross-species experience, the vast bulk of which involves extensive interaction between horse and human on the ground as they establish and develop a close relationship with each other, and the intuitive and physical prowess that riding and the lead-up to it demand. This is an approach which is also reflected in the number of pages devoted to riding in *Dancing with Horses* and their position in the book, namely, the last 62 of a total of 204 pages (30%). The contrast is even greater in KFH's most recent book, *The Horse Seeks Me*, which only devotes the last 45 of a total of 343 pages (13%) to riding.

The theme of *Dancing with Horses*, KFH tells us, is “collected riding on a loose rein”, a “reconciliation of opposites” which is “probably as old as riding itself” but which “has managed to stay virtually unknown” (p. 13). Indeed, even though “The Art of Body Language” is cited as the book's subtitle on its cover, it is “Collected Riding on a Loose Rein” which features as its subtitle on the title page of Kristina McCormack's fine English translation (and which is the English translation of the subtitle of the original German edition). Together these opposites – “the collected horse, a being bursting with pride and power, quiet and yet animated, schooled and strengthened by man solely to carry man upon his back”, and “the loose reins a symbol of willingness, a symbol of partnership, trust and harmonious friendship” (p. 13) – seem “a bit like a star, shimmering in the night sky, so very far away, unreachable and other worldly, almost unreal” (p. 15), and the world's current cream of dressage superstars can testify to this as they so ably demonstrate at each outing in the globe's premier competitive events.

If the goal is so apparently unattainable that our world and Olympic champions cannot even attain it, why then should any human even contemplate the journey? KFH likens it to *From the Earth to the Moon*, a science fiction novel written by the French writer, Jules Verne (the book is accorded the title of a 1902 black-and-white film loosely based on the novel in the translation of *Dancing with Horses*), in 1865. The idea of landing on the moon was a dream

and realising it involved a long, arduous task which demanded enormous effort and eventually only came true 204 years later. Even then only two humans set foot on the moon and, although others followed in their footsteps, ultimately only a handful of people were involved. Yet humanity as a whole has benefitted from the experience, KFH argues: “Only a very few people actually set foot on the moon but their path to the goal brought us all an infinite amount of new knowledge that today is seen as more important and useful than actually reaching the intended goal” (p. 15). Herein lies the answer to our question as to why any human should ever contemplate the journey. As KFH puts it, “our shining star” of collected riding on a loose rein “is far off and beautiful, and even to set off on the journey towards it is an act of great consequence” (p. 15).

This produces one of three principles which KFH articulates to guide our actions. In a world in which “guiding principles seem to have little meaning ... and where only the winner is important” (p. 17), he sets out the following three guiding principles. First of all, whatever we do must always be fun. This principle is important enough to be printed in a bold font: “what we do is only worthwhile if it is done in a spirit of joy and adventure, for ourselves and for our horses”. The statement is so trite that it is ridiculously easy to gloss over it, yet it is so demanding as to be potentially life-changing. Consider for a moment just what is required in order to do everything with our horses in “a spirit of joy and adventure” (p. 18) . We are being called upon to be happy, not just to feel it on the odd occasion but to be it as long as we are with horses. In this sense, if we want to be with horses, we are being challenged to do what it takes to ensure that we are happy. Put another way, if you are not happy, stay away from horses. It is bad enough that you have to put up with your own unhappiness. Why saddle horses with it as well?

The second principle which KFH enunciates is this. If the path we are following is appropriate, what we do with horses will be beautiful. The bold print puts it this way: “everything we do will always be beautiful, from the first lesson on”. This is the sense we get when “everything is magic”.

The third guiding principle is arguably the most challenging yet simultaneously the most liberating. Allowing it to guide us will also enable us to act in accordance with the first two principles. The bold print in the book (p. 19) says it all:

If the path we have embarked upon is good, and we have conquered the need to be bigger and better than anyone else, that is marvellous! Then there is no more stress, everything we do is always fun, is always beautiful and the goal has become irrelevant. it will never be reached anyway, even by the most talented (see *An Accompaniment*).

And here we come full circle to where we started: the old man who has finally realised (just before his death) what it means to ride a horse has been reaching his goal every day while on the journey towards doing so. In short, the path has become the goal.

Oh alright, so KFH has got all the answers then, has he? So tell me how I am going to do this then. I have a full-time job, then there are the kids and a partner who need to be fed and the house has to be cleaned, then there are the school ... the medical ... and the And I have a mare that is full on and goes over the edge every time she comes within sniffing distance of a hunk in the herd but I have no time available other than to throw a saddle on her a few times a week to go out for a ride.

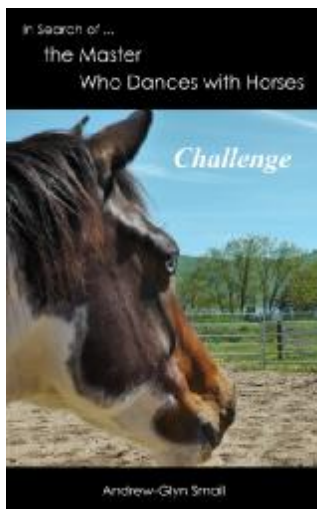
Reading between the lines, this is an easy one to answer but a difficult answer to put into practice: find the horse a new home or radically change my life. If it is not fair on me to relate

to my horse in this fashion, it is definitely not fair on my horse either. Neither of us deserve this.

However, if throwing out my partner and kids is an option or, better still, if I am willing to go in search of a solution which enables me to keep them while starting on my journey to that distant, shimmering star, then KFH has an invitation for me:

Let us put ambition to one side and begin to listen and to see. Above all, let us begin to “feel”! The ability to feel is a gift from God to each of us. Let us begin to feel ourselves and to understand our horses. Let us commit ourselves to this journey which is attended by unending successes and constant joy, this journey that makes it possible for us to stop putting off enjoyment of today’s work until tomorrow, or the day after, or until we have achieved some goal of questionable worth. Let us begin this journey that allows us *to live fully in the here and now*, just as our horses actually teach us to do (emphasis added – p. 19).

“If there is one book about horses you read this year, this should be it!”



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