



Sometimes they have to get a little troubled to make a change.

It's Only Words

Finding Meaning with Joe Wolter

by Patti Hudson

We all know how certain expressions can catch on and suddenly turn trendy. These buzzwords get to be fashionable at a particular time and in a particular context, but are often quickly worn out and soon become almost meaningless.

The use of the word “Natural” in relation to horsemanship is a pretty good example of this. As we learned with food labeling, the word is not only misleading, it’s been so misconstrued and overused it’s now nothing but hollow advertising jargon.

It’s easy to get caught up in the words, especially when trying to define something that’s as hard to pin down as our relationship with horses. Ironically, getting too focused on the words and what they might mean distracts us from what we’re actually trying to achieve with the horse.

Clinician Joe Wolter agrees that words can get in the way. So instead of looking to a dictionary for the meaning, he looks to the horse.

Here are some words that seem to crop up fairly often:

TROUBLED

“I hear the word troubled a lot,” Joe says. “I can understand why people think of it as a bad thing. But sometimes what we call troubled is really just the horse searching and doing what he thinks he has to do right then to survive.”

If troubled means struggling through difficulties or experiencing adversity, then Joe sees trouble as a chance to bring about a change in the horse. “Some folks think struggle is a bad thing, but it seems to me the more a horse works at something, the deeper his understanding is when he finally comes through. That’s why you’ll see me working through something with a grin on my face. I’m waiting on the change I know is coming and I know that when it comes it’ll be real – it won’t be like I just did drill number forty-seven for the fifteenth time.”

WORRIED

Webster’s defines worried as feeling anxious about something that may happen. But Joe thinks looking for something

to happen with a horse can actually encourage it to happen. "Instead of focusing on the negative, I like to see people focus on the positive – the good things going on with their horses and all the things they're getting done. If you concentrate on the good stuff, then the bad has a way of getting smaller, and when that happens the good just gets bigger."

But what if the horse really is afraid of something? "If he's truly fearful or spooky you can take advantage of it and use that as an opportunity to operate his body – to work the hind end, then the front end, as you help him get away from whatever he's afraid of. Take him before he takes you and you'll build his trust by getting with him. You get with him and he'll get with you. There will come a day when you just point him someplace and away you'll go."

BRACED

This is a kind of a catch-all term for a horse that feels resistant to what we're asking. But Joe suggests the problem might not rest with the horse. "Check yourself out first," he says. "Don't just assume it's the horse. Maybe it's how you're presenting yourself. Maybe you're the one that's stiff or tight or preparing for something bad to happen."

By examining your part, you can be more open to what the horse might have to offer you. "Reach for him like you're taking someone by the hand. See what you get back," Joe says.



Enjoy the ride. Don't worry about the words.

"Acknowledge his try. It might be small, but it's there. I truly believe horses are trying all the time. We don't always notice it or make use of it, but it's there."

OVEREXPOSED

This one seems to have become a buzzword for the concern we all have about overdoing something and perhaps creating an even bigger problem. But Joe says get over it. "Sometimes you have to do too much to know what enough is. Sure you're going to make mistakes, but if your heart is in the right place you can make mistakes and your horse will forgive you. He'll get over it, as long you keep your emotions out of it and let him have a say in things."

And it's not only us who get something out of these slipups. "By allowing your horse the room to make some decisions and possibly make his own mistakes, you can figure out where his understanding is at," Joe explains. "Then you can build on that understanding together."

And isn't that what we're all trying to do? So no matter what words we use, in the end it's our approach that has meaning. "That determines what you get out of all this," Joe says. "Whatever you want to call it; it's about working on yourself, not the horse."



Joe, waiting on a change with a smile on his face.