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a tribute



A healthy Brenda with her current equine partner, Ponca.



The Nourishment of Horses

By Brenda Reynolds

Number: 3029. Date of birth: 05-11-1970. These two pieces of information, typed on a bracelet wrapped around my gaunt wrist, labeled me. Once full of a zest for life, I now was an inpatient for the treatment of anorexia nervosa—an eating disorder that affects females from the ages of 5 to 65—and felt surreal, standing in the doorway of an eating disorder facility, away from all things familiar.

I was 29 years old and would spend four months total in treatment, regaining my momentum for living life, breath by breath. It seemed like a dream at the time—so far had my life gone from where I intended it to go.

Life for me was not always absorbed with starvation and despair. There were times before anorexia, where I thought the wind carried only joy, possibilities and the rich intoxicating smells of horses, all blowing in and through me.

Before I even learned to read, I thought all things horse. My mother would read me horse books over and over until memorized. Anything horse was a magnet. Yet, by the age of fifteen, that joy-to-bursting sense of wonder for life and all things horse was locked away and nearly starved out. For the next 20 years, anorexia dominated my life – surfacing up at various times, depending upon my feelings of safety and security.

People often mistake anorexia for simply a fear of eating. That's a misconception. Anorexia is not a fear of food; it is a fear of living. For various reasons—physical, sexual or emotional abuse—the soul weakens, tears a bit and folds before the disease's grip. Anorexia nervosa renders the individual powerless. The only way to appease its voice is to have extraordinary discipline over food. The skeletal body that results is an outward manifestation of an internal battle for life and death.



Brenda with her first "therapist," Duke.

My journey of overcoming and emotionally outgrowing this disease was a long and painful one. I pushed my dreams away and shelved opportunity for growth. Yet, even in the darkest of times, there was the presence of horses. They filled a place in me that no human could fill. Somehow, in the most critical times, when I thought I would waste away beyond redemption, horses would show up. With them, I experienced moments of joy, peace, tranquility and mindfulness.

There was a wide assortment of horses (wild, old, young, adventurous, retired) that came through during those oppressive and life-restraining times. I remember three horses in particular, who had the courage to partner up with me even when I was distracted, self-absorbed and fearful. These three special horses were all geldings - Duke, Cisco and Rafferdie.

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Cisco was an integral part of Brenda's recovery.

I was 16, and malnourished emotionally and physically, when I first saw Duke at the end of a small dusty barn aisle. I vividly remember that the floors of the barn were hard dirt and the stall doors worn with years of use, weather and horse chewing. I had arrived at this barn to check out a possible high school internship offered for Future Farmers of America members. Duke caught my eye immediately. His eyes greeted me with curiosity and a twinge of pain. I looked down to see a fresh wound, newly stitched and glued all the way across his chest. I learned that his chest had been slit open by a run in with barbed wire. I think on it now, his scar left by a barbed wire was visible; my wounds to the heart and soul were invisible.

Once his chest wound was healed, Duke and I were off and running. We played together, went on walks together and practiced halter showmanship for summer shows. Mostly, we practiced friendship. I remember one autumn day in the arena, when the ocean breeze was soft and the sun warm and kind, that I casually decided to see what life looked like from the view of Duke's back. So, up the arena fence I climbed and on Duke's back I went. With halter and rope we just stood together, each content with this new situation. After a few minutes, we walked around; I giggled, Duke just calmly walked in semi-straight lines and circles.

I cannot remember if we went on to win any ribbons. What truly mattered was that we were together and formed a strong bond of trust. For the next two years, his friendship redirected my thoughts away from a painful and harmful place.

Motivated by a sheer need to be with horses, Duke especially, I pushed aside the merciless voice that had me living on lettuce and not much else. I was so obsessive at that time that I'd spit out my gum after I started chewing it. Yet, with

my new horse routine, I started eating more nourishing foods. Within a few months, I was healthy enough to muck stalls, ride, run and groom the five horses in the barn. During my high school years, eating disorder therapy was not well established. So this small, rather rundown old barn was my haven and Duke my therapist.

I have since learned that if one does not change one's thoughts, the brain continues to cycle the same thinking patterns – harmful or otherwise. The destructive thinking pattern of anorexia resurfaced quite a few times after I left high school and Duke's companionship.

A few years after college, my body reached a breaking point – too tired to fight the voice of anorexia and too tired to live. Thanks to some friends and church members, I was flown to Arizona to enter an intensive eating disorder facility. They had horses. Once again, my therapist came in a four-legged package; as a dun Quarter Horse gelding named "Cisco".

For the next two months, Cisco and I held private conversations, rode down desert arroyos, and had quiet time in the arena. Sometimes, when the sun would set and illuminate the distant mountains,



Cisco takes Brenda on a journey of healing.

Cisco would swing his head around as if to say: "Did you see that?" Cisco held a container of safety and acceptance for me – standing still when I needed to cry and moving about when I remembered to laugh. He extended his friendship and it made all the difference in my willingness to recover and look for brighter horizons ahead.

A year after leaving the treatment center, I returned to Arizona, this time to a town known as Sedona. Amongst the red rocks and expansive night skies, I befriended a husband and wife, John and Karen, who had a horse caretaking business. They were extraordinary human beings. They had an Arabian horse named Rafferdie, who they intended to train as a top endurance horse. When John discovered he had a bacterial infection in his heart valve, he was unable to train nor ride Rafferdie. This flea-bit Arabian gelding melted my heart almost immediately. Boldly, I asked if I could start him, and eventually, ride him on practice runs in the nearby public lands.

For the next few weeks, Rafferdie and I formed a working relationship. After practice in the pasture, we ventured out among the alluring red rock cliffs and arroyos. We walked, trotted and galloped to the beat of a different drummer. We occupied our own little world – he free from the confines of the pasture and I free from being labeled by anorexia. There were nights when I would lay on his back looking up at the stars, hearing him crunch his hay. I felt so blessed to be alive, befriending this magnificent animal and experiencing this vibrant landscape – both full of vitality. There was no need to revert back to anorexia to help me deal with life challenges. I had all the comfort and friendship one woman could ask for.

Rafferdie and I worked together as a team for four precious summer months. His willingness to partner up and investigate life beyond the safety of the pasture gave me courage and strength to go beyond my self-limiting beliefs.



Now, eleven years since treatment, I am once again turning to horses; this time offering the gifts I received from the three horses in my past to teen girls. I'm in the planning stages of establishing my own horse program for teen girls – learning life skills through horsemanship. I want to give teen girls life tools I have learned so they will want to embrace life, rather than reject it. I've had one practice program so far. During this one practice session, I stood in the arena watching five girls who were walking their horses to establish partnership, looking fully focused in their task. I felt like I was contributing to lasting memories. I believe that through learning horsemanship, teen girls can develop life-altering patterns, just like I had developed with Duke, Cisco and Rafferdie. This dream now consumes every fiber of my being and I cannot wait to watch it unfold.

My recovery and vision for a teen horse program would not have been possible without these saints with manes and tails. Each one of these horses in my past saw a window into my soul and, despite the troublesome spots inside me, chose to extend their friendship, strength and support. What a true gift I have been given – one that will not fade, tarnish or be misplaced. It is with me always.

Rafferdie was the last horse to help Brenda overcome the grip of Anorexia.

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