A VOICE FOR HORSES

— The Magazine for Conscious Horse People —

AUTUMN 2025
TRAUMA

2. EDITION — AUTUMN 2025
CHF 4.50, ONLY AVAILABLE ONLINE

Breaking the Silence

Why Riding School Horses Need Us to Listen and Learn Their Language

PHOTO: VIEW BY KWP / KAJA WENNICH PHOTOGRAPHY.

Kids learning SMILE Horsemanship© at one of the riding schools that take the welfare of their horses seriously

When I first started riding, at age 42, I met many traumatized riding school horses. The one I rode most—Robin, whom I later bought—carried both: scars in his body and wounds in his soul. And he wasn't the only one. I still remember the other horses: hollow eyes, stiff gaits, flinching at hands that meant no harm—or exploding into bucks and bites when they couldn't cope anymore. At the time, no one seemed surprised. *"They always do that,"* people said.

Years later, during my equine massage therapist education, I was required to complete 50 free practice sessions on riding school horses and ponies because our teacher, a veterinarian, said: *"They really need it."* And it confirmed what I had always felt: most of them suffered from serious problems in their bodies—and their minds. Many were in constant pain. Many had given up trying to communicate, and some still tried: cribbing, bucking, or biting. Others had shut down completely.

At one riding school, every single horse was cribbing—and no one even wondered why. *"That's just how they are,"* I was told. Only one riding school I came across had regular visits from an equine therapist—and I know this because one of my horses once lived there.

I still hear the same dismissive words everywhere: *"It's always been like this." "She's just happy when she bucks." "He's just stupid." "She's just stubborn."*

These words hide the truth: many riding school horses are crying out—yet still unheard.

The Need for Change is Real

Running a riding school is expensive. Horses are costly to keep, and many schools don't have the budget to keep them truly healthy, happy, and supple. Routine care is often limited to the bare minimum, and regular bodywork, enrichment, and professional assessments rarely happen. Even worse, many staff members simply don't know enough about the horses' language and signals to notice when something is wrong.

The horses try to tell us, again and again. Their body language is clear to those that are willing to listen to and understand horses: stiffness, resistance, tail swishing, pinned ears, refusing to move forward, biting when being saddled, bucking, bolting, cribbing, or just shutting down completely.

But too often, these behaviors are written off as attitude. Too often, horses are punished for showing pain.

We need to change this.

We can change this.

Children, staff, and parents can all learn to understand the horses' signals. It is not only possible—it is essential.

When children learn the horses' language, they notice sooner when something is wrong. They

PHOTO: VIEW BY KWP / KAJA WENNICH PHOTOGRAPHY.

We owe it to the horses to listen to them—Braveheart and I

can speak up, ask questions, and bring issues to the attention of adults before it's too late. They grow into riders and horse people who respect and advocate for their horses.

When staff learn the horses' language, they work more effectively and more compassionately. They see each horse as an individual, not just a tool for lessons. When parents learn the horses' language, they support their children in seeing and acting with empathy.

One Horse at a Time

In 2020, I launched SMILE Horsemanship© to promote mutual respect, empathy, and effective communication between humans and horses.

Beyond the simple reminder to smile when we interact with horses, SMILE is an easy way to remember what good horsemanship is all about. It stands for *See, Mind, Inspire, Listen, Ease.*

I offer SMILE workshops for riding schools—both for kids and for staff. Since spring 2025, riding schools can also become SMILE certified, and the first was certified in May. Incidentally, it is also one of the rare schools that already had regular equine therapy. But it takes persistence to be heard in the community. Whether the resistance is due to lack of interest, lack of knowledge, lack of belief, or fear of uncovering just how much care horses actually need—I do not know. But the work continues: teaching awareness, understanding, and respect—qualities that every riding school horse deserves from us.

When we finally break the silence—by speaking up and by truly listening—we give horses a chance to heal.

We can change their story.

One school at a time.
One child at a time.
One horse at a time.

SMILE Horsemanship©

S is for "SEE." Look at the horse. Does he or she look healthy? Is he or she moving correctly? Notice body language and learn the meaning of signals. Look around you through the horse's eyes. Focus on the horse and what you are doing together.

M is for "MIND." Be mindful. Notice how the horse is feeling. Notice how you feel. Feel the horse's body and be mindful of lumps, wounds etc.

I is for "INSPIRE." Be an inspiration to the horse. Do things both of you enjoy. Praise often. Be a good inspiration to others at the stables. Have fun and help each other out.

L is for "LISTEN." Listen to the horse's signals and show respect. Listen to your gut feeling, it is always right. Learn from those with more experience.

E is for "EASE." Lead, train, and ride with ease. Be gentle and careful. Make tasks easier if they are too hard. Show direction with only the needed amount of pressure.

Camilla Louise Jacobs, founder of HorseMama and SMILE Horsemanship©, helps build strong, empathetic horse-human bonds and supports horses' wellbeing through bodywork and horsemanship. | **www.braveheartsworld.com**

Impressum

A VOICE FOR HORSES
The Magazine for Conscious Horse People

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Black Diamond Publishing

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Subscriptions

This magazine is published online 4x/year: March 3, June 3, September 3, and December 3.

Annual Rate: CHF 18.00 or CHF 4.50/issue

Just drop me an email: hello@marinaparris.com

Advertising

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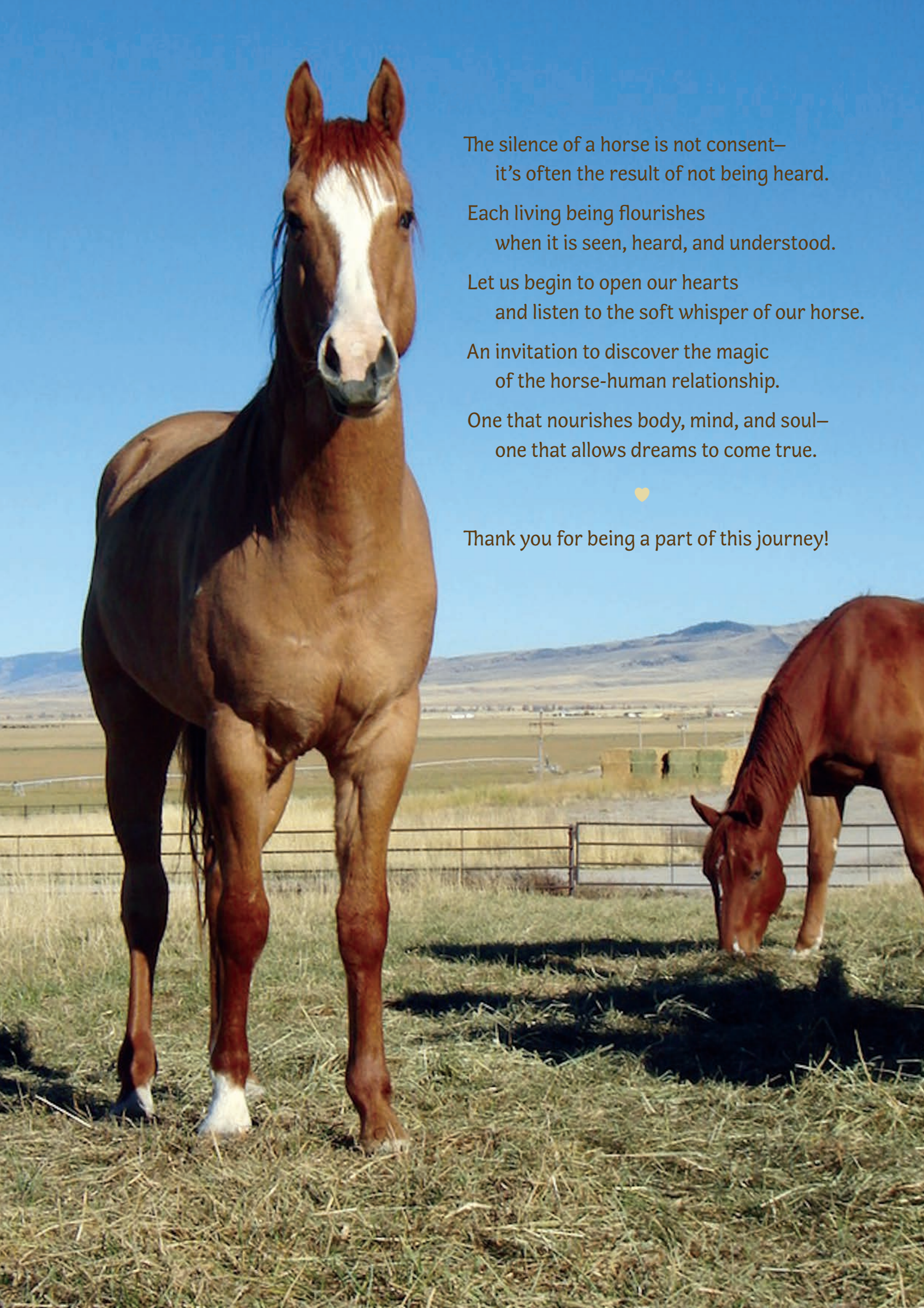
Preview

Emotions

Upcoming Issues

Winter 2025	**Emotions**
Spring 2026	**Energy**
Summer 2026	**Trust**
Autumn 2026	**Growing Old**

If someone comes to mind in connection with any of these topics, I'd love to hear from you.



The silence of a horse is not consent–
it's often the result of not being heard.

Each living being flourishes
when it is seen, heard, and understood.

Let us begin to open our hearts
and listen to the soft whisper of our horse.

An invitation to discover the magic
of the horse-human relationship.

One that nourishes body, mind, and soul–
one that allows dreams to come true.

Thank you for being a part of this journey!