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In Search of a Jungian Approach to Equine Therapy

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Equine therapy is a form of psychotherapy that includes the presence of one or more horses in the therapeutic process. This article explores the possibility of using the presences of horses in Jungian analysis as a tool or “third” to facilitate the connection between the patient and the unconscious. A series of active imaginations with the Welsh Goddess Rhiannon and the author’s first horse bring forward the deep and historical connection between women, horses, the feminine, and the natural world. The author briefly explores her personal history and connection with horses before delving into how her preverbal experiences with hip dysplasia resurfaced through her own work with horses and led to an awareness of a pattern of abandoning herself and stepping out of the way to make room for others. The author sees equine therapy through a Jungian lens as utilizing an awareness of the individual, the body, the natural world, the unconscious, psyche, the inner child, and the transferential relationship between the individual and the horse. The experience of remothering is also present, as an intimate relationship with a horse can offer an experience of secure attachment that was missing in the original mother–child dyad.

It is possible to participate in the unconscious with other persons, with animals and even with objects through an unconscious abaissement du niveau mental. Connection is made and something may happen. I may, for example, verbalize what the other person intended saying. But even the clouds, or a glass, can reflect the inner psychic situation.

—Conversations with C. G. Jung (Evans, 1964, p. 51)

Stepping Back

Seventeen years ago, I was in the process of training my mare when I had an experience that transformed my relationship with horses, deepened my self-awareness, and sparked my curiosity about equine therapy. I was holding a lead rope and asking my two-year-old horse, Luna, to walk around me. As she passed in front of me she came too close, so I backed up one step in order to get out of her way. The trainer’s reaction was instantaneous. He said with frustration that it was going to take me at least one hour to undo the effects of that one step back. He went on to explain that by getting out of the way, I had ceded authority to the young mare and had told her, as clearly as if I had spoken the words to her, that she was in charge.
The trainer was right. It did take me over an hour to take back my authority. By stepping out of the way, I had communicated to the horse that she needed to be the leader, as I was unable to hold my own ground. The trainer's explanation about what I had communicated to Luna was delivered in a matter-of-fact way, but the deeper truth in the moment reverberated through me as if a gong had been struck. I realized that stepping out of the way was an engrained habit. For as long as I could remember, I had stepped out of the way and made room for the needs and movements of others. I did not know how or feel the inner authority necessary to hold my own ground. Although I had been in therapy for over a decade, this one-second interaction with my horse revealed something about me in a way that was direct and impossible to ignore. My fascination with and belief in the potential role that horses might play in the therapeutic process began in this moment.

At the same time that I was developing an interest in equine therapy, it was just beginning to be recognized as its own field. At the end of the 1990s three professional organizations appeared almost simultaneously. The first was EFMHA, the Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association that is now known as PATH, or Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship. This was followed by Epona Equestrian Services (EPONAQUEST) and Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). In the last 17 years at least a dozen more organizations have been added to this list; there are now a number of training/certification programs offered and national conferences in the field. The primary focus of all the schools is similar: They use horses as participants in experiential therapy to help patients identify self-defeating and destructive behaviors, as well as negative thoughts, so that they can make changes in their lives. As one practitioner said, echoing my own experience, "While you might forget a conversation you had with your counselor a few weeks on, it's unlikely you'll forget what happened when you stood in a field with your counselor and a horse."

Although my interest in equine therapy goes back 17 years, my love of horses goes back further. Horses were my first love. I have been horse crazy all of my life. Every year, when my parents took me to the county fair, they had to field one question after another about why I couldn't participate in the junior livestock events. I was a suburban kid who wanted to be a member of the agricultural clubs like Future Farmers of America (FFA) and 4-H. The San Fernando Valley still had rural pockets when I was born, and there were horses all around me. However, horses were not allowed in the backyards of the neighborhood where I grew up, even though the neighborhood that began across the street from my house was zoned for horses. The middle of my street felt like a very arbitrary dividing line between having horses and being denied that pleasure. On weekends I would watch neighbors ride their horses across the street. Throughout my childhood, horses were simultaneously close by and completely out of reach. Like Jungian analysis, horses have been in my life from the beginning, but finding a way to successfully integrate them both into my life has been a long journey.

My love of horses feels like something that runs through my veins. I imagine that I inherited it. My father's maternal family descended from the Celtic horse culture of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, and my father was raised with horses in rural Illinois. Because my father did not talk much and seldom shared stories about his childhood with me, I doubt I will ever understand how he could have been raised around horses, how he could have had his own horse as a boy, yet have had no interest in sharing that experience with me. Something else I will never understand is how my parents were able to ignore my passionate feelings about horses, and my constant pleas to be around them. To be fair, they didn't completely ignore me. They did surprise me with pony
rides at my fifth birthday party, which were amazing, and I did get to go to a rodeo once in Wyoming right after my parents bought me my first pair of Wrangler jeans. Also to their credit, they let me have every other kind of pet imaginable: dogs, cats, snakes, mice, lizards, fish, a chipmunk, a rabbit, and a duck. However, riding horses, horseback riding lessons, hanging out in stables, or having a horse of my own were out of the question. I asked my mother recently why she and my father never took my obsession with horses seriously. She replied that she had been told when I was a child that it was just a phase that girls went through and that it would pass. My memory of my 16th birthday is that I was still so obsessed with horses that I asked if I could have a horse instead of a car. When I moved back to Los Angeles in my 30s I was finally able to take matters into my own hands, and I bought a house in an area where I would be able to fulfill my dream of having a horse in my backyard. This article is the product of my enduring love for horses as well as my growing belief in the effectiveness of equine therapy. It is also an exploration of both my personal relationship with horses and the collective, feminine, horse–human experience.

LEANING IN

After many unsuccessful attempts to find a door through which to enter and immerse myself in these subjects, I realized that the way in for me, the leaning in, could be through the purely creative and imaginal path of active imagination. I realized that I could begin by entering the unconscious. This made sense to me intuitively, so I decided to approach my exploration into the possibility of Jungian equine therapy by making a connection with the unconscious, with nature, and with psyche through active imagination.

There is nothing linear about active imagination, which makes it a perfect place to start, as there is also nothing linear about Jungian analysis, equine therapy, horses, or the feminine. In using active imagination as my personal research method, I am letting go of all pretenses that this work will proceed in a straight line. Writing this article has been like panning for gold. I have come up with an idea, immersed myself in it, and then sat down to sort through what I fished out of the water and explore what I have brought up from the depths. Jung wrote (Jung, 1967):

The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, letting go of oneself as taught by Meister Eckhart became for me the key that opens the door to the way. We must be able to let things happen in the psyche. For us, this is an art of which most people know nothing. Consciousness is forever interfering, helping, correcting and negating, never leaving the psychic process to grow in peace. It would be simple enough if only simplicity were not the most difficult of all things. (par. 20)

With this approach in mind, I have temporarily put consciousness aside to do two series of active imagination. The first series of seven is with the Welsh goddess Rhiannon, and the second series of four is with my first horse that was also named Rhiannon. I bought my first horse when I was 40. She was 23 when she came into my life. There are very few written records in existence about either Rhiannon—the goddess or my horse. The earliest known records of the goddess date back to the eleventh century. However, the stories about her, which were preserved as part of oral tradition, may date back as far as 2500 BCE. She is mentioned in the Mabinogion, a cycle of Welsh legends that were not recorded in writing until around 1200 CE. The original
transcription was done by Christian monks in Ireland, who seem to have removed any elements that were incompatible with their religion or with patriarchy. Rhiannon is never referred to as a goddess in the written saga. She is referred to as being a “fay” or the “queen of the fairies” and is depicted as having some magical qualities.

There are two stories that are often told about her. One involves her future husband, Pwyll, who was so taken with her beauty that he pursued her on horseback more than once. He was never able to catch her, even though she appeared to be moving slowly and peacefully, until he stopped following her and asked her to stop. The other story tells of Rhiannon being accused of killing, and in some versions, eating her infant son, who disappeared from his cradle at midnight after all six of his nurses mysteriously fell asleep. To protect themselves from blame for the baby’s disappearance, the nurses smeared Rhiannon’s hands with blood. They justified this action because she was an outsider. As punishment Pwyll sentenced his wife to sit at the horse-mounting block by the castle gate for seven years and carry anyone who wanted to enter the castle on her back like a horse, while telling them the story of her crime. Four years into her penance, which she endured with grace and dignity, her son appeared at the castle gate with the family who had found him as a baby, abandoned and crying outside their home. With the return of her son, whose disappearance was attributed to magic, her name was cleared.

Most of the details of my horse, Rae’s story, have also been lost. I can trace every time she was bought and sold and her bloodlines through her registration papers, but I know nothing about what her life was like or much about her story before she found her way into my backyard. When I bought her, I was told two stories about her. The first was that she had been a world champion show horse in a style of riding called Saddle Seat. The second was that she had been sold at one point to a Sierra pack company. It was hard to imagine what could have occurred to cause a horse to fall from the heights of world champion to the base task of carrying gear up into the mountains. After Rae came to live with me, the first veterinarian who examined her pointed out the scars left from the numerous times that her vulva had been sewn closed in an attempt to enable her to successfully carry a foal to term. The vet speculated that she might have originally been sold when her owners accepted that she was unable to have a successful pregnancy and make the kind of money for them that a foal born from a world champion mare would fetch. In our early days together, she felt to me as if she had been an ambitious, hard-working career woman who could not be bothered with the idea of raising children. The treatment of her after it was discovered that she was unable to have a successful pregnancy felt reminiscent of the way women have been treated throughout history when it was discovered that they were unable to bear children or provide an heir.

Confronted by the dead end in the historical trail of Goddess Rhiannon and the death of my horse before I was able to begin to work with her as a therapy horse, I have chosen to ask them to share what they have to teach me about themselves and working with horses. I am positioning this material at the beginning of my article as an invocation of the goddess and as an invitation to psyche and the unconscious to remain present as I continue my exploration of horses. Our love of horses, I believe, is an expression of both our need to connect with the natural world and the need of the feminine to connect with the earth and all of nature.

I approach active imagination as a ritual or sacred act and have a great deal of trust in the process. Twenty years ago I studied animal communication and worked for a time as an animal psychic. Part of that process involved learning to trust that the
words and images in my head were not mine, even though they usually felt and sounded very much like my own thoughts. I was taught to engage that process first thing in the morning, before the static of the world had a chance to enter into my thoughts. I have continued that early-morning practice with active imagination. I usually do it right after waking, before I have done anything more than make myself a cup of tea. Before I start, I light incense as an act of opening the space I am about to enter, and I light it again when I am finished as an act of closing that space. I sit quietly until I feel myself enter the process and then begin writing my experience. Sometimes I do this as it is happening, and sometimes I stay with the experience and do my writing after I have finished sitting with my eyes closed. Aside from correcting my spelling and grammar, I do very little editing or rewriting of the material that comes out of these sessions.

**ACTIVE IMAGINATION**

The Goddess Rhiannon

*One*

My dear Goddess Rhiannon, I do not know where to find you. I can feel your grace and strength in the stories that remain, but feel as if they have been diluted and passed through the filters of the male world of war, conquest, Christianity, and proprietary relationships to women as fantasy sex objects.

I was with my mare yesterday wondering about your white mare, wondering about the practice among your followers of the king mating with a mare, wondering about the women who have done this with stallions and if back before men took over your story, the children you bore were half horse and half human. Yesterday I learned to hold the position of lead mare in my herd and felt the strength and conviction of that for the first time. I felt the power of knowing that everything around me and in front of me was mine and that the other horses would wait until I moved out of the way and gave them permission to eat. I could feel power welling up from the ground through my body as I calmly stood there and repeated to myself, “My food.” I stood, legs spread and hands on my hips, and felt confident and powerful. It was a different kind of strength than I have ever felt before. There was nothing strident or aggressive about it. It was an internal feeling of inherent confident power. I was feeling the feminine strength of a mare, not imitating the power of a man.

As the goddess of horses you have known this strength and have embodied this for the women who have worshiped you. Men, your husband, responded to your internal power by putting a harness around your neck and leaving you at the gate of his palace to tell your story and carry his visitors through the streets on your back. You were accused of eating your child. Maybe you did, or maybe your inherent strength and influence felt like it was taking the life out of men and challenging them as they rose to power, so they created a story in which this act was depicted and your punishment followed. The story, instead of shaming you, casts a poor light on the men. Many expressed their power then, as they do now by being reactive, demeaning, humiliating, and cruel. You as a goddess lived like Cinderella on your knees and in a position of subservience—a beaten draft horse that had once been a wild mare running free on the moors.

I want to hear your story, and I can feel you ready to tell it. I can see you, even before I pause for you to speak, standing with your arm draped over the back of your
horse, who is at times a white mare and at times a chestnut. You are standing on bluffs above the ocean face into the wind. I will meet you here tomorrow and you can begin to tell me your story.

Two

My dear Goddess Rhiannon, I can see you standing, face to the wind on the bluffs above the ocean with your mare, and am waiting to approach you until you shift your gaze and focus away from the horizon. While I wait, I too turn my attention towards the sea and the wind. I feel like a child as I stand here copying your stance and your gaze. I can hear and feel the power of the sea and am stirred by the wind. My body feels strong and unyielding even as it absorbs the sounds of wind and waves and sensations of the damp salt air on my skin. I think about this stance that straddles strength and softness, and my thoughts take me back to the sea and the wind. I can feel the gentleness of her muzzle searching the palm of my hand or my face with touch and smell, and see in her soft eyes, curiosity, hesitation, and fear. I can feel the alert trembling of her entire being as she approaches a new place. Her quivering. This all feels so sensual and feminine. In this moment I can feel the connection between women and horses as prey. I can feel our shared fear approaching new places, our need to know in every moment if we are in danger of attack. I wonder if women love horses so much because of this shared fear of the predators around us. I feel sick to my stomach thinking this and wonder how humans split into two—some of us predators and some of us prey. I wonder about the history of the horse and its transformation from gentle creature to warrior. A horse by nature is afraid of new situations. How did we train it to gallop head long into battle? How did the horses on the plains feel when they ran down their sister, buffalo, enabling her to be killed by the Native Americans on their backs? Perhaps the horses were not willing participants in battle and bloodshed but were simply running in terror—a stampede that was controlled by the manmade constraints of bits, and whips, and spurs.

I had hoped to speak with you today, Rhiannon, but the images I am filled with standing here have brought me to my knees. I am both humbled and nauseous. I am witnessing a bloody montage of rape and death at the hands of men. Animals and women are falling, screaming. I am rageful and feel powerless at the same time. I bring myself back to the cliffs above the ocean and sink to the ground weeping, too weak to stand beside you with my face into the wind again.

I sigh deeply as I feel the ground beneath me, the moss against the palms of my hands. I pull myself up and stand again behind you, the wind on my face, the strength returning to my body up from the ground through my legs. I sigh deeply again and feel like I have seen enough for today. I bow deeply towards your back and, walking backwards, take my leave.

Three

Good morning, Goddess. I watched a clip from a new movie called Human last night. The clip began with a Mongolian girl on a horse galloping over a vast green open landscape. I continue to find myself thinking about the gift of the horse and the way that it transformed our world by enabling us to travel vast distances for the first time. We are so accustomed to automobiles, trains, and planes now that it is hard to imagine a world in which we walked everywhere. I was wondering yesterday, while with my own horses, how we first imagined horses as creatures capable of battle. Was it because we
had witnessed the power and fury of two stallions fighting for dominance in their herd? I have been irate because horses were taken as property by men and then used as pawns. How did this happen? The horses that we first encountered were wild and running. They would not have shown us their gentle sweetness until we earned their trust. History believes that domestication was made possible as we raised the first foals and fillies in captivity, separated from their mothers and the role models in their herd, so that they would imprint on humans.

I am seeing now the strength and softness of both horses and women. I am seeing the miracle of birth in them both. I am aware of the strength and majesty of the horse. I wonder if the story we tell of you, Rhiannon, parallels the shackling of the horse itself. The taming of its wild nature. This morning I am unable to distinguish you from the horse at your side—hair and mane mingling and billowing out around both of you in the wind. I wonder if we got to know your nature before we tried to tame it. I wonder if men ever get to know ours.

Four

Oh, Rhiannon. It is dark this morning and quiet. I am sitting on the same bluffs above the ocean, breathing deeply and alternately feeling the cool grass beneath my right hand and pulling individual blades of grass up between my fingers. In my body I feel a mix of deep and profound sadness, and the sensation on my skin of the breeze carrying the moisture from the ocean below—playful and persistent. My impulse is to dig into the earth beneath my fingers with my hands. I am gripping the grass and soil in my fists, feeling the mud beneath my fingernails. I can feel you kneeling at the gates with the saddle on your back and am unsure if the outrage and anger I am feeling are yours or mine. In the same instant I see the terror and outrage in the eyes of a cornered horse as a circle of men pull her down from her hind legs with the ropes they hold that are also around her neck. The men are breaking the horse, in the same way that they broke us. They are holding her down until she no longer believes that getting up, or fighting back, or freedom, is an option. Learned helplessness.

I was looking for the true image of you in history. I believed that there was something more authentic than the story of you in shackles at the gate of your husband’s palace, but that is the true image. That is part of the legacy that you have passed down to us. It is buried, but it is there. There were 4 million mustangs in North America in the 1500s. By the 1970s there were only 20,000. Wild freedom is no more allowed in horses than it is in women … than it is in a goddess. History has been rewritten so that the gift of the horse is its contribution to civilization as a warrior and as a beast of burden. But there is another history that has to do with fairies and magic, shamanism and sacrifice. At one time, more horses were sacrificed than any other animal. The death of a horse on one side of a river ensured a safe crossing to the other side. Did our ancestors believe that the spirit of the horse would lead them safely across the water, or that the gods would guide them to a new place if they gave up something so precious before they attempted the crossing?

The sun is coming up and I can see you walking towards me. I am aware that I am terrified of seeing everything you have to show me. I too want to see the sweet elegant horse next to the beautiful goddess that is how you are represented in images now, and I want to gloss over the aspects of you with bloody teeth from ripping out the throats of your attackers. I am afraid as I get up to follow you. I am aware that you are leading me towards the underworld to answer my questions about your relationship to death. I see
the classic gray images in my mind of trapped souls straining behind bars as if they are
in a medieval dungeon. I am frightened and my eyes snap open. The image and sounds
vanish abruptly.

I think of my own horse and my practice of taking her only to her edge of comfort
and no further. I breathe deeply and wonder if I am at my edge and can go no farther.
I feel my trust in you; I surrender my authority to you as the lead mare and close my
eyes again. We are in a green valley. There is a creek to my right flowing gently over
rocks and moss. It is morning. The air is heavy with moisture and everything around us
is softened by mist. You drop your head and drink deeply from the stream, and I sit on
a rock and let the water run through my fingers. I am aware that this too is the under-
world. I breathe deeply, sigh deeply, and slowly open my eyes.

Five

Oh, Rhiannon. I am beginning to understand. I have been reading and sifting and
searching for stories about you and clues to who you are, but you are a fay—a fairy and
are not easy to see. The owls in the tree outside have resumed their call-and-response
hooting. You are a goddess of birds. Are they calling to you? Are you calling to me? Last
night the two owls had their child in the woods with them, and for a long time the sound
coming from the trees was the soft call and response of the two adult owls, followed by
the awful squawk made by the adolescent. I suspect that that is me in this situation
with you. I am the adolescent owl trying to imitate and learn, trying to grow up, trying
to enter the realm of the goddess.

I listened to a lecture on birth trauma yesterday. I was sitting behind, not next to,
my mother and in front of Elizabeth, who was in front of Mary. We were more like pas-
sengers on a train then colleagues sitting together. On the drive home my mother
talked about her birth trauma and what she had learned from the lecture. The part
about second-generation trauma must have washed over her in the talk. She did not
ask me any questions or include me in her comments, certain in herself as the mother
who had birthed me that the talk had not applied to me. I found myself being retrauma-
tized by a mother who had never known of, or been curious about, my trauma, and
I felt in my gut this inheritance from her that I had passed onto my own daughter—
each of us untethered, unmothered, unable to even imagine a mother, a connection, a
goddess with us, or the soft yielding within ourselves that would allow us to rest our
heads in a mother’s lap.

I am doing that with you now. I am allowing myself to be held by you and be car-
ried away by you on your horse. I am both a baby tied to your chest and a young girl rid-
ing behind you with my arms tight around your waist and your wind-blown hair all
around me. We are moving effortlessly over the moors. I start out holding on for dear
life with my eyes squeezed shut, but slowly open them to find myself in a world of green
surrounded by flowers, moss, and dappled sunlight shining through the leaves in the
trees. I see birds flying in flocks in the valley below me and hear the sounds of the
ocean. Your horse has slowed to a gait that is unfamiliar. We feel like we are gliding.

As I take in all of this beauty, I wonder again about your story. My favorite part is
that no one who pursued you could catch you. Your future husband, Pwyll, tried three
times, and each time your horse stayed just out of reach. The fourth time Pwyll was
also unable to catch you and so called out to you to please stop. It was his asking, not
his entitlement, which made you stop. I too have been seeing you and, on some level,
chasing you until now. Now I am with you and not looking to uncover the truth about
you. With my head pressed tight against the space on your back that covers your heart, I can feel you. I am no longer a rhesus monkey, holding on for dear life. I am a woman feeling the warmth from your heart spreading through my entire being. Unthawing me as it moves from your back into my ear and down to my toes. I can feel your love, compassion, humility, and also the pride of a woman who would not turn around unless invited to do so with respect. I am aware of a strength and unbendingness that is not anger but closer to confidence, certainty, and will. I know that you did not kill your own son, but I can feel with certainty that you can and did kill. I am imagining you sitting by the gate waiting to take anyone traveling into the city on your back as punishment for what had happened to your son. It no longer feels like something done to you but rather something you took on willingly in your grief. What else was there to do but put one foot in front of the other? It is not so different from Demeter in her grief, letting everything go and watching the plants wither and die. In one version of your story it is told that you asked for counsel from the wise women of the land, who advised you that it was better to accept penance than to struggle further.

We have stopped riding. I have understood your story. Your connection to the underworld is the same as mine—through grief, through a mother’s grief, which is an unbroken thread connecting us through history as women. You/we are as comfortable walking here as in the land of the dead. Your horse has her head down munching grass and I am sitting on her back alone, on your back, no longer clutching tightly to you, no longer unable to open my eyes. I take a deep breath in and once again try to make equal room for the beauty all around me, and the grief inside of me. The grief, as always, is trying to hold me down in the world below. Tears are falling slowly from my eyes. The owls have flown down the canyon and their calls are faint and rhythmic, like my breathing. A dog barks a short, sharp warning. I am aware of my daughter’s dog snoring loudly beside me. I come back to the surface and open my eyes.

_Six_

Greetings, dear Goddess. It is again dark and early. The world feels particularly silent. The mechanical sound of a truck straining its gears to get up a hill is the only sound in the distance beneath the rhythm of the crickets. I, who have so much trouble dropping my head and bowing, have come here to bow before you. I have stopped trying to meet your gaze or stand beside you. Instead, here in the dark waiting for the sun to throw some light out from behind the hills, I can only bow my head with reverence and respect for you and the power and fragility that you hold within you. In this position I see you for the first time in your fairy form—a tiny horse and woman no bigger than a dragonfly, hovering like a hummingbird in front of me and then darting this way and that. The final lesson: finding the balance between standing firmly on the earth and riding the wind. I bow my head again, and you are gone.

_Seven_

Dear Goddess Rhiannon, I am coming to you one last time for your guidance and your blessing. I have embarked on a project to discover what my way is when I work psychologically with horses. I am looking for a “Jungian” way. A way that honors the self and that honors all of the participants—myself, my horses, and the individuals who come for our help. My feeling is that there is a way to do therapy with horses that is similar to doing active imagination or using a sandtray, in the sense that the horses
might act as a third and embody the unconscious, seemingly bringing it to life and enabling it to be present with us in our work. Writing about it now to you, I can see the sacred nature of the horses. I can feel the sacred moving through them and wisps and cloud trails of spirit blowing and drifting through them. Their connection to the unconscious is great, as is their connection to us, to humans in the day world, through our ancient original shared ancestor.

Closing my eyes, I see a beautiful lone horse walking slowly along a trail. It is a white Appaloosa with a black spotted rump. It is, however, not alone. There is a horse in front of it carrying a woman riding sidesaddle. They are walking uphill and leaving the dry grassland behind for the cooler green shade and meandering streams of the mountains. It is no longer two horses. There is a small herd coming around the bend slowly, one at a time. There are two babies frolicking besides their mothers, but in all other ways this is a serious march. I watch them for a long time and do not understand what I am seeing. I have a sense that I am watching something like fairies—magical creature—but at the same time the march has a feeling of Sierra packhorses carrying our burdens to a more beautiful place.

The image brings to mind my first horse, Rhiannon. I think part of my personal work is to feel concretely what it means to be carried into a beautiful place on the back of a horse. Perhaps that is my starting place: a concrete understanding of the work involved for the horses when they take us where we want to go. Is the image about us not lifting a foot? Is it about horses willingly carrying our burdens? I do not understand completely.

There is something here that I want to explore. I will stay with the image; I will hold it and keep it with me while I am with my horses this week and see where it leads me. Right now, the image is leading me to my old horse, Rhiannon. Perhaps I need to continue this conversation with her. Thank you, Goddess.

My Horse Rhiannon

One

Dear Rae, I am coming to you now for guidance. I want to discover a “Jungian” way of working psychologically with horses. I am looking for a way that honors all of the participants. I had always hoped to do this work with you, but you died before I really started inviting my patients to be with my horses. In those last years it felt as if you were trying to hold on so that we could begin this work together. Perhaps this is our beginning. I would love to understand how you feel about this process into which I have entered.

I am walking behind you holding onto your tail. We are on a narrow winding path, and I am not able to see around your body to what lies ahead of me. We walk like this in silence for a long long time. It is early in the morning. The air is crisp and the birds are singing. I can see my breath and the steam rising off of your back. The trail becomes steep as it begins to lead upwards. We have come out of the trees and are climbing. I marvel, as I always do, at your sure-footedness while I am stumbling over rocks. I am able to see down now over the edge of the mountain into the valley below and up at the sky above. I am aware that the path we are following is circling the mountain. There are no switchbacks. I think of the Buddhist practice of circumambulating a stupa and give myself over to climb. I laugh to myself at the image in my mind of one of the crooked
pointy mountains in a Dr. Seuss story, and wonder if we will have to balance on the point of this mountain when we reach the top.

When I return to the moment, I am aware of my breathing, the steady sound of your feet ahead of me, and the sun seemingly orbiting around us and hitting my back, my side, my face, and my side in a steady sequence as we climb in an ever-narrowing spiral. I wonder again if we are climbing to a point. The climb takes us a long time. When we reach the top, I am relieved to see that there is a plateau with one tree, a small pond, and some grass. We both lean over and drink deeply from the water. I lean my back against the tree as you begin to eat the grass. I eat some nuts I find in my pocket, aware that this is as far as we are going to go for today.

Two

Dear Rae, it is dawn. There is one blue jay announcing the day. Otherwise all is quiet. I feel as if I am still on the mountaintop with you, but I am also here in Topanga, listening to the traffic through the canyon and the sounds of my horses waking up and starting to eat breakfast in the arena below my house. I have started using my horses regularly in my work with one client. I have no doubt that the work is affecting and stimulating growth and awareness in her. She is coming up against feelings and patterns that are buried deep within her. The sessions are moving. She is an enthusiastic and also a hesitant participant. However, I am less confident that the work is affecting my horses Colt and Luna in a positive way. I guess that is always the question: How are we as therapists impacted and changed by our participation in the work we do with others? In one session “M” was struggling to assert her authority and by the end of the session Luna had stepped into the power vacuum and assumed authority over her. The next morning, when I went to work with Luna, she was still in that place of feeling alone in her own authority. I had to work hard to reestablish our relationship and my position in relationship to her as the lead mare. Is this the same as the feelings we sometimes carry with us when we leave our office still carrying the emotions and energy we have been in contact with all day during our sessions? Is this work with patients unfair to horses? Is there a way to cleanse the horses after each session? Is it hubris to think that this is something I need to worry about? Can they do this for themselves?

Three

Dear Rae, it is dawn here on top of this mountain and the air is cool and crisp. The only sound I am aware of is that of you tearing at and chewing the small patch of grass. I wonder why you brought us up here. I wonder what this perspective will enable us to see. I was thinking yesterday about the first weeks we spent together after I brought you home to live with me. I joyously rode you around the neighborhood with nothing but a halter, feeling like an adolescent girl, finally expressing a longing that had gone unanswered in me for decades. After about one month of that, you became aware that I was along for the ride and not a woman in charge. You began to assume authority, which forced me to take you to a trainer so that I could learn how to communicate with you. I have been on the path of learning how to best communicate with you ever since.

The first trainer matched your level of training as a world champion show horse. You went through all of your paces with precision. I do not remember being aware at the time of how you were feeling, but I am aware now of the anxiety in your eyes. The second trainer invited you to have a relationship with him. I learned from him that a
relationship based on herd dynamics with only one animal being in charge can be comforting for everyone. I thought about horse therapy for the first time working with him. I have learned a lot from humans about horses. Now, however, I am coming to you to learn how horses can help us to communicate with other humans and also help humans understand themselves—how to use the attentive, playful, curious, powerful, challenging presence of horses in the work I do with people. I feel like I have so much to learn from you that will help me in my work.

I am remembering the first patient I brought into your stall to work with you. She was riddled with cancer, angry, standoffish, and afraid. You walked over to her and leaned your forehead against the middle of her chest. She wrapped her arms around your neck and leaned her weight against you to steady herself on the uneven ground. For just a moment she took in your support. I felt privileged to be there as a witness. It was in this moment that I began to think of equine therapy as a form of remothering, particularly for women, and that my role was to get out of the way and allow you and the patient to explore each other and find a point of connection together.

Last week I had my own eye-opening experience with Colt and Luna in my arena. I was trying to get them to move in a particular way while they were moving about freely without halters or lead ropes. My energy was right and my actions were right, but I could not get either horse to pay attention to me. I became aware that my actions and feelings were incongruent. Internally, at my core, I did not believe in my ability to get the horses to move. It was as if someone inside of me was hesitating and stepping back even though my body was going forward and making all the right motions. My persona believed in what I was doing but my inner self did not. The horses felt my inauthenticity and held their ground. It is this heightened awareness of authenticity and inauthenticity in people that the horses seem able to sense, that keeps drawing me to doing therapy with horses. There is no refuge in thoughts and logic while working with horses. They offer an invitation, an opportunity to be in sync with the rhythm, the order, and the honesty of the natural world. Animals do not lie. They do not have a persona or a false self. In the office, as in the arena, we strive to find, connect with, and nurture this authenticity. Finding and connecting with one’s authentic self is what individuation is.

Working with the horse, then, could be one part of the path towards individuation. Thank you, Rae, for taking me up here so that I can have a new perspective on the work that I am doing.

Four

Dear Rae, again it is dawn. I am aware of the rhythmic chorus of crickets and birds welcoming the day. It sounds like the heartbeat of the earth. My trip to the top of this mountain with you feels like a meditation retreat. There is only stillness and silence. When I came to you, I imagined that you would show me things or tell me things that would help me in the work, but instead, as is so often the case, you seem to have brought me here to be with myself. Like the wise teacher you always were, you are sitting with me here, listening to my thoughts and guiding them with an occasional contribution of your own.

I have been thinking about the fact that horses and other beasts of burden are prey, whereas dogs and cats are predators. Beasts of burden. I can feel you reacting to that phrase. How did horses evolve in our minds from pulling the chariot of the sun to serving as beasts of burden? That seems to be our human pattern with nature. We become blind to the wonder. We stop seeing the magnificence and shift our thinking
towards how we can make use of whatever it is. Rivers become dams; forests become fuel; beautiful creatures literally become workhorses.

Thinking of this and trying to imagine it from your perspective makes me even more curious about what it is like for you to live side by side with humans whose ancestors used to eat yours or offer them up to their gods in sacrifice. Is the memory of that piece of our shared history in your DNA? If it is, I am not seeing the horror of it now. I am feeling instead the mutuality of our horse-human relationship. I am feeling your willingness to be here, and our shared affection for each other. I can also feel the wild and free aspect of your nature and how much you loved living in the oak grove at my last house.

There is something about reconnecting to nature that you are trying to communicate with me. I see you running through the woods, splashing through water, charging up hills, and then we are here again in the silence looking out over mountains and meadows. I feel as if you are asking me to clear my mind and resist jumping to any conclusions. Clearing my mind. It is so difficult to listen and feel my way into something without thinking it through. My mind jumped to the conclusion that this is because I am human, but then I remembered the look on Colt’s face as he was paying attention to new information and trying to figure out how to accomplish what Martine (our trainer) was asking him to do. Something in him was solving the problem. Was he thinking it through?

Something in me is trying to solve this problem while sitting with it, doing nothing, and turning it over in my thoughts slowly. This is the Jungian overlap with equine therapy. It is the not-doing. It is the sitting with and sitting in. It is sharing silence together as we are here. It is not techniques or questions. It is not hiding behind a box of tools or a wall of theoretical ideas. It is being with. It is wading in and seeing what floats to the surface, as happened with me last week when I felt the difference in myself between knowing the physical movements I needed to make to move Colt and Luna but not being able to move them because, on an inner level, I could feel myself pulling back from the confrontation instead of moving forward. Again, in a new setting and a new situation, I was faced with the contrast between stepping back and leaning in. I am still working internally on my ability to claim and hold my ground and my awareness that the thought, the idea, the concept is not enough if I cannot embody that intention.

That is it, isn’t it? That is what you brought me here to show me. You brought me into nature to help me feel what it is to be connected with nature, to understand my inner nature and to know and trust that being in nature and connecting with my Self is enough. As I wrote that sentence the birds began to sing, calling in and welcoming the dawn. I am going to stop writing now to watch the sunrise.

Moving Forward

The dynamic principle of fantasy is play, a characteristic also of the child, and as such it appears inconsistent with the principle of serious work. But without this playing with fantasy no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable. It is therefore shortsighted to treat fantasy, on account of its risky or unacceptable nature, as a thing of little worth.

—C. G. Jung (1971, par. 93)
As I read and reread these encounters with the goddess and my horse, I am aware that, like dreams, they do not contain hard and fast answers. When I began the process of doing active imagination, I fantasized that in this instance it would be like sitting with someone who would tell me everything I wanted to know. I was hoping that the outcome would be something like a how-to manual and that I would be able to see clearly what equine therapy looks like through a Jungian lens. Instead, I feel as if I have been left holding a ball of brightly colored thread and given the task of pulling apart the threads and untangling the ball. It is interesting to me that this is the image that I have come away with. I have two associations to it. As a child I was told that at one time, Jewish girls in Eastern Europe were given a ball of tangled thread to untangle as a test to see if they were ready for marriage. The other image that comes to mind is the ball of red thread that Ariadne gave to Theseus to enable him to find his way out of the maze. I wonder what marriage, what kind of union I am preparing for or approaching at this moment and how following the thread will help me find my way.

As I sit here and begin to untangle the threads, I am most surprised by how tightly the images of the horse and the images of the feminine are wound around each other. Yesterday I stumbled on an article called “Loving-Knowing’ Women and Horses: Symbolic Connections, Real Life Conflicts and ‘Natural Horsemanship’” (Savvides, 2011). It is one of many articles I have come across that explores the innate intimate connection between women and horses. In this article, the author cites the 1877 novel Black Beauty, by Anna Sewell, as “one of the earliest examples of the woman–horse connection as socio-political symbol” (p. 62) and suggests that in the book, Sewell was implying a connection between the oppression of women and the suffering of horses and other animals in the male world. As interesting as the topic of oppression in the male world is to me, what is really fascinating about this topic is how far back the connection between women and horses goes and how identified women are with the oppression of horses and the destruction of nature. There is something about the male world that is not natural to women. I believe that it is this need in women, or more accurately in the feminine, for a connection with nature that can make the presence of horses beneficial in therapy. The presence of horses offers an experience outside of the linear rational world, which allows information to come to the surface through the body and through the non-thinking realm of nature and Mother Earth.

Wondering about this relationship between horses and women has inspired me to shift my focus from the case material of my patients to my own material for the remainder of this article. This shift feels appropriate because this is becoming an increasingly personal exploration. My work with my horses and the way it has changed me are at the core of my interest in equine therapy. It has been a deeply personal journey that ultimately has been a process of allowing myself to be held and remothered within my relationship to my horses and nature, and through that process, forge a relationship with the feminine.

About 3 years ago I began riding my horses as part of the work that I was doing with them. Traditionally, equine therapy is done on the ground. In the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, they say, “You can’t look in a mirror if you are sitting on it.” However, in some cases I believe in the therapeutic benefit of interacting with a horse in a more directive way that begins with groundwork and can evolve to riding. I find that this relationship, which forces interaction, creates something like a transference–countertransference relationship between human and horses. At this point in my own process of working with horses, I do a mixture of work on the ground and work on the horse’s back. In both cases the horse and I remain in a discussion the
entire time we are together. I tell the horses what I want to do; they let me know how
they feel about the way I have asked them; I react to how they react, and so on.

When I ride, I use a bareback pad instead of a saddle so that I am more directly
connected to the horse. As my riding ability progressed, my trainer began pointing out
the fact that I was not balanced on the horse. I felt balanced, but she could see that my
body was totally out of alignment. My right leg hung down farther than my left, my left
shoulder was elevated, and my right hip was forward at an odd angle. It didn’t matter
how many times she pointed this out to me, I was never able to feel it or really correct
it. As I struggled to adjust my posture and find my balance, my lower back and my right
hip started going out on a regular basis. I have lost all track of time, but I am certain
that we went on like this—me being out of alignment, trying to readjust my body to
find my balance, and my hip or back going out within a few days—for over a year.

One morning while I was riding, feeling as mystified as ever by my inability to
align my body, I remembered, out of the blue, that I had worn leg braces on both legs
when I was 9 months old. I was an early walker. I was up on my feet and walking before
I was 9 months old. Either because of this early pressure on my legs or because of a
birth defect, my hips were loose in their sockets. After I started walking, I became
severely bowlegged. In an attempt to correct this I was put to bed each night in a leg
brace that extended from my hips to my feet on both sides of my legs and on both sides
of my body. In addition, there was a perpendicular bar connecting the two sides of the
brace together between my legs in the middle and at the bottom. I wore the brace for
the next 9 months or a year. There are no pictures of me in this contraption. When I
imagine what I must have looked like, I can feel how terrified and filled with shame my
mother was when she saw me like this and imagined the possibility that her beautiful
daughter might be disfigured for the rest of her life.

Because of the awareness of my body I had experienced through riding, I began to
have bodywork done to address the impact the brace had had 60 years ago on my lower
body. I also began to work through the impact that this preverbal experience had had on
my psyche with my analyst, and to talk about the details of what had happened with my
mother. In the process of straightening out the physical injury, I was able to straighten
out some of the psychological trauma as well. As long as I can remember, I had always
had two dark secret feelings that I could not make sense of. One was that I had been
molested at some point when I was under 2 years old, and the other was a feeling I could
never shake that there was something wrong with me. In an effort to explore those feel-
ings, I talked with my mother about the experience of being in the brace in order to put
language to something that had happened before I could talk. The more we talked about
it, the more certain I felt that my mother would not have been capable of putting the
brace on my body. It would have been too hard on her emotionally. When I asked her
what that experience was like for her, she replied that she just couldn’t do it. She asked
my father to attach the brace to my legs every night. She also told me that I was very
good about it and never once fought, or cried, or complained. I find the description of my
compliance at 9 months old, heartbreaking. I can’t imagine that I, as a baby, was comfort-
able having that brace attached to my body, or comfortable trying to sleep with it on.
However, there was a lot going on in my family when I was born, and for most of my life,
starting with this experience, I seem to have gone out of my way to avoid being a burden.

The more I discussed this time in my life with my mother and my analyst, the
clearer it was to me that my sense of something being wrong with me and my feelings
that I was molested both grew out of this early trauma with the leg brace. Every night
for over 250 nights, my father had laid me in my crib and done this very intimate
procedure of fastening metal braces to my hips and between my legs. He “molested” me by the act of confining my young body in a cage. I am aware that sometimes events are not what they appear to be in a child’s memory and I believe that this had been the case with me. Of course, I will never “know” for sure, but I do know that something relaxed in me, accepted this as the truth, and is no longer trying to find the answer to an unsolvable puzzle. I only wish my father was alive so that we could talk about this, and I could hear what his experience was. I also believe that the sense that something is wrong with me that I have carried my whole life is connected to the feelings of fear and pity that my mother felt when she looked at me, whether in my brace at night or without it during the day, standing on bowed legs. There was something wrong with me. It was a fact. The feeling I have carried my entire life is that there is nothing I can do to fix it—that I am permanently damaged. This emotional dark cloud that has hung over me of feeling irreparably damaged has also lifted as my body has begun to heal. At this point in this process, I am able to feel my body on the horse, feel my own alignment and sit with perfect balance. I feel as if I have been reunited with my body and with a part of myself I lost track of a long time ago. I am in awe of the fact that my connection to this lost history was made possible because of my connection to a horse.

I have chosen to share this story here because getting up and walking when I was 9 months old was my first experience of giving up ground, which I eventually recognized as a pattern 17 years ago while working with my horse. My father had a heart attack when I was 3 months old and had been told he had, at most, 5 years left to live. My mother, who had been raised by a single mother during the Depression, was terrified about the real possibility of returning to the impoverished life she had lived through as a child. She had two young kids, little education, not a lot of money, and both a mother and mother-in-law to support. I was the younger of her two children. I got up on my feet and got moving to do my part and lend a hand. It was the first instance of a lifetime of stepping up to take care of situations that were too much for me, because I believed that no one else was going to take charge. This is different from leaning in and moving forward. Getting up and walking at 9 months, though on the surface an act of leaning in and moving forward, was in fact done to make room for the needs of others and was essentially the same as the step back I took 45 years later to make room for the movement of my horse. In both cases, I gave up my own ground. I put the needs of others ahead of my own well-being. The current challenge I am facing with the horses of feeling my own authority as I move forward and ask the horses to move in a specific way feels like an extension of this same pattern. At this point my body is moving forward, but internally a part of me is still stepping back. I am excited about continuing to work on this with the horses.

The two examples of moving myself out of the way that I became aware of while working with my horses are the bookends of a lifetime of moving out of the way to make room for and care for the needs of others. As I wrote in the beginning of this article, in both cases working with horses provided me with a direct bodily experience of these behaviors, which made them impossible to rationalize or explain away with my thoughts. What I keep coming back to is the image of Jung (1966) building his village by the banks of the river, or his quote, “Often the hands will solve a mystery that the intellect has struggled with in vain” (par. 181). By serving as a therapy process that engages the body, equine therapy invites “the hands” to participate in solving some of our inner mysteries.

This, then, is how I see Jungian equine therapy. It is equine therapy done with an awareness of the individual, the body, the natural world, the unconscious, psyche, the inner child, and the transferential relationship between the individual and the horse.
The presence of the horse and the presence of the natural world in the therapeutic process act as an invitation to lean in to the presence of the unconscious, to the presence of play, and to the presence of the child. It is a nonlinear process that occasionally makes use of activities or structured interactions with the horse to stimulate felt reactions in both the patient and the horse. I have found the experience of remothering to be an important aspect of equine therapy, as if the horse can offer an experience of secure attachment that might have been missing in the original mother–child dyad. Although it was not covered in the personal material I discussed here, Jungian equine therapy can also involve playful interactions between the patient and the horse, which also support the reintegration and healing of the inner child. Equine therapy involves being open to and inviting in the presence of felt experiences that can then be explored, understood, and integrated through language, as was the case in my experience of stepping back and also being unable to find my balance.

I think the best description of Jungian equine therapy came up in the fourth active imagination I did with Rae: “It is the not-doing. It is the sitting with and sitting in. It is sharing silence together as we are here. It is not techniques or questions. It is not hiding behind a box of tools, or a wall of theoretical ideas. It is being with. It is wading in and seeing what floats to the surface.”

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FURTHER READING


Vol.6. Psychological types (1971)
Vol.16. The practice of psychotherapy (1966)