What has Classical Riding Taught Me?

By Megan Sorentino *Owner of Classical Horsemanship*

What has Classical riding taught me? As the reader you probably assume that I am going to list a handful of things that have improved my riding and working with horses. Such as, Classical riding has taught me: how to control the weight and thrust on all 4 feet, how to make my seat not interfere with the horse's movement, or how to do high school level figures and movements. Yes, Classical riding has taught me how to do all these things which has improved my riding greatly, but these things are not the most valued lessons I have gained through Classical riding.

I have told my wonderful always smiling husband that he never would have married me if I hadn't learned Classical riding and I know this is true because I wouldn't be the person I am today. From my Classical education I have gained kindness, compassion, awareness, gentleness, and the ability to slow down. All these attributes make me who I am today.

Let's start with kindness and compassion as these are what I think have benefited me the most. Before one can be kind and compassionate to others one must be kind to themselves first. From the time I was a little girl all I wanted more than anything, after a horse, was to be "perfect." Everyone knows that perfect is not a realistic standard though. Since my desire to be perfect was unachievable I was constantly beating myself up, and being unkind towards myself. Nothing like training horses to teach you how imperfect you are and that you will never be perfect. The moment that you think you are a perfect rider you will always meet a horse that will knock you back down to reality.

When I started to learn Classical riding, I was about to turn 21 and had been riding for more than 15 years in a more conventional military way. If there was something to show me how far from perfect, I was, it was Classical riding. This cut me extra deep because riding was a skill that I already thought I was

good at. More than anything I wanted to be a great rider, there was just one big thing standing in my way, the desire to be perfect. As they say on one of my favorite podcasts, *The River of Suck*, "you have to suck at something before you are good at it."

I was not prepared to suck at riding, so I tried very hard to ignore that I sucked. It wasn't my fault; it was the horse's fault or I would argue with my instructor……I was not being kind to others because I wasn't be kind to myself. My deep desire to be perfect was interfering with my learning, I had to learn to be kind towards myself. Yes, I sucked at the time but through practice I got better. I started to stop blaming the horse and started being kind and compassionate towards myself and my own learning process.

Sometimes I was confused and sometimes I was doing the wrong thing at the wrong time, but I was learning. I was learning Classical riding, and I was also learning to let go of my frustration and find compassion for myself. It was not my instructor's fault, and it was defiantly not the horse's fault I wasn't getting it, it was the process of learning, that's why I wasn't getting it. No one is perfect at a new skill right away. So instead of focusing on how far from perfect I was, I started being kind to myself and took my attention away from my internal anger and placed it on cultivating an awareness for what I was doing so that I would improve more quickly.

"The only thing that makes me a better rider than you, is that I have a higher level of awareness," this is one of the favorite phrases that my wise teacher Craig Stevens says to me. Horses, being prey animals, are constantly aware; as riders we must also become constantly aware. Awareness can come in the form of many things such as: being in our body, not thinking about the past/future, noticing our reactions, or focusing on our breathing.

For me, my best rides aren't the rides where I do lots of high school level movements, even though they are fun. My best rides are the rides where I am present every single step that the horse takes. I can feel the smallest change in the horse's weight, the movement of the thrust through each leg, the horse's breath, my seat moving with the horse's back. These rides are what life is all about, feeling everything that is happening in a given moment, the bad and the good. If a horse never disconnected under me, which is a bad feeling, I would never know what it feels like to have a horse come together and alive underneath me, a good feeling.

How is a rider to react in these "bad moments" or as some may call moments in which the horse resists? A conventional instructor would shout something like "Don't let them do that! Hit him harder!" but as you have already learned that is not a kind or compassionate way to react. When resistance meets resistance what do you get, more resistance. Classical riding has taught me that in these moments take a pause, take a breath, become aware. Focus on my breathing so that what once was my natural reaction, to get angry at the horse, subsides to become gentle towards the horse.

The best way to breakdown resistance is by softening- gentleness. When someone wants to argue with you it is impossible for them to argue if you keep agreeing with that quarrelsome person, same is true of the horse. Unless a horse has been very severally abused, they are gentle peace-loving creatures because when everything is peaceful, the herd is harmonious, working as one, which means safety.

Classical riding has taught me to be gentle towards myself, the horse, and other beings. We have some chickens that we got a few years ago that was our first flock. I will be honest with you I am kind of scared of chickens, so when we got chickens, I wanted to be sure to handle them a lot so I wouldn't be scared of them. When the chickens were little baby chicks, I tried to hold them once a day and when holding them I would always cradle them softly in my hand and be careful not to put them in awkward positions or put my hand in their faces.
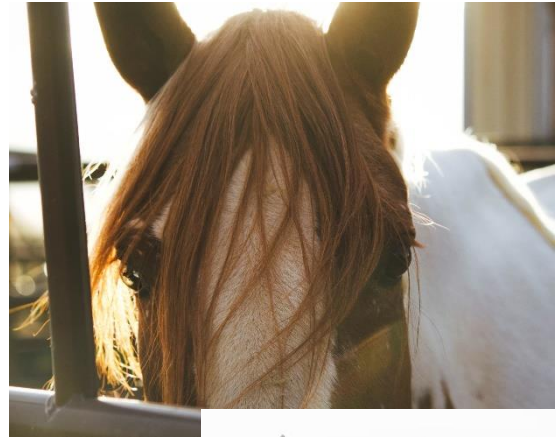
As the chickens got older, we moved them outside to a small chicken coop and during the day I would move them out to a little run. When I would move the chickens back and forth, I would always wait till they approached me, gently pick them up holding their wings down and then softly set them down in their new location. Every time I went into the run they would come up to me right away and were very friendly, which I thought was wonderful so I started letting other people move the chickens.

One day after not having moved the chickens for a while I went to get the chickens from the run and all of the chickens ran away from. So, it took me awhile but I crouched down and slowly caught all the chickens. After this experience I started watching other people move the chickens and it was a cloud of feathers and dust every time. Upon watching this I realized how much Classical riding had taught me to be gentle towards all other beings, even chickens.

Even though my helpers had good intensions they were scaring the chickens because they weren't being gentle. Thankfully everyone took to my chicken lessons as well as they did my horse lessons and now are chickens are back to being happy friendly characters in our barn. The number one tip that I told the chicken wrangles is to slow down, speed is aggression, slowness breeds gentleness.

The other day I asked my husband to describe me in one word, I was surprised when he quickly answered, "powerful." Upon hearing this my thought was, "wow! that is flattering and surprisingly accurate." Slow and powerful don't usually go hand in hand so you guessed it, another gift Classical riding has given me is the ability to slow down. The easiest way to gain kindness, compassion, awareness and gentleness is to slow down, this applies to humans and horses. Horses naturally move at a much slower pace than we do. Next time you are around a nervous horse trying go slow, then slower and I pretty much guarantee that the horse will become less nervous.

On the days when I feel extra sped up and anxious the horses always let me know. Once I become aware of this, I take a moment to just slowly pet the horse. Feeling each strand of the horse's coat pass under my fingers. In this moment I try to let go and be truly present with the horse. The skill to let go of the past and stop worrying about the future, to have time slow down with a beautiful animal is another gift that Classical riding has given me.

Before my Classical riding days, I rode and worked with lots of horses, but I was never really there. I was always thinking about the thing I was going to make my horse do next or even worse I wasn't even thinking about riding at all. Classical riding has taught me to let go of whatever is going on in the rest of my life so that I can give the horse the gift of my full attention, this gift has transferred to all the other relationships in my life. This ability to let go and be present leads me to the final gift Classical riding has given me and that is the ability to love more deeply. By learning all these things: kindness, compassion, awareness, gentleness, slowing down, letting go, have all lead to leading a life full of love.
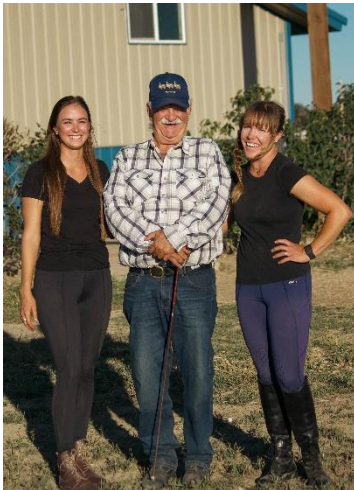
Because of Classical riding I now know that to love someone or some other being fully you must be kind, gentle, compassionate, and present. Someone could be anyone, even a stranger that you see has their hands full so you grab the door for them, or it could be dropping what you are doing to listen carefully to your spouse about something they are excited to tell you. Both acts are showing love for others. To show love for another being could be swerving on your bicycle so that you avoid hitting a caterpillar that is inches from getting crushed by your bike tire or noticing that your horse is having an off day so you change to lighter training plans. Or love can even be shown in how softly you pick up a chicken.

Classical riding has filled my life with so much love and every day I fall more in love with, riding, animals, people, and the harmony of the universe.