



mentoring human action

Check out back issues!  
www.mhainstitute.ca

# InfoMine

Vol. 16. No. 5 ■ September-October 2009



## The Courage to Learn and Lead Part 1B: The Wheel of Life and Nugget the Sensitive Horse

by Marilyn Herasymowych,,  
Henry Senko and Tovie Van Nes

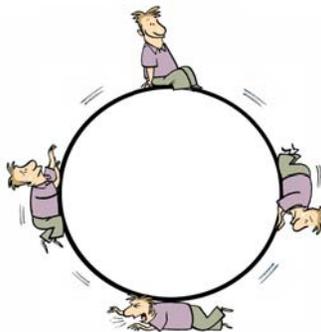
“Leadership is found most often in simple acts of self-expression, when conscience overcomes reticence and we make our presence known by challenging a falsehood that has been advertised as truth, calling injustice by its name, stopping to help another, or on one memorable occasion, daring to take a seat at the front of a bus.”

— Madeleine K. Albright, from the Foreword by Madeleine K. Albright in the book **Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead** by Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors (2007)

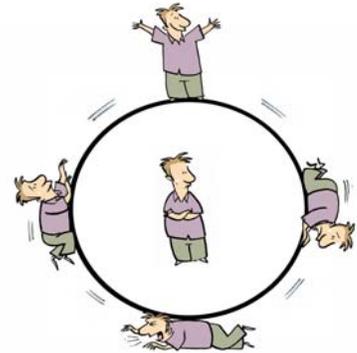
In the previous newsletter, we began a new series on the courage to learn and lead by exploring the metaphor of the *Wheel of Life*. In the next

part of this series, we will explore how working with horses helps us to understand what is meant by leadership through learning and the courage to learn and lead.

Tovie Van Nes is a horse handler and trainer from just south of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. She works with what she calls “troubled horses.” These are horses who are experiencing difficulty, which is negatively affecting them and their owners. The way in which Tovie works with horses, and how other owners tend to work with horses, is based in leadership through learning and the courage to learn and lead. In the previous newsletter you were introduced to the *Wheel of Life*, and how most people tend to operate from the outside of the *Wheel of Life*.



In this newsletter, Tovie’s work with horses provides a concrete example of what it means to operate from the centre of the *Wheel of Life*.

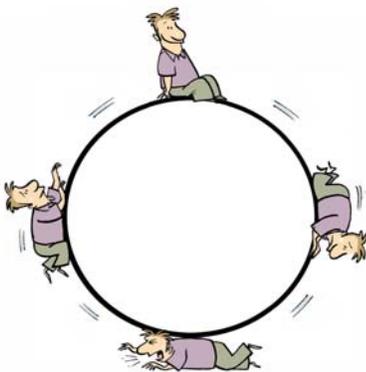


Tovie and a horse called Nugget crossed paths for the first time in June 2005. A friend of Tovie, who is not a particularly experienced horseman, had always wanted a black horse, saw Nugget on a trail ride, made an offer, and bought Nugget on the spot. When Tovie first met and rode Nugget that June, he was only four years old, and even though Nugget was still quite young and inexperienced, he was very sensible and easy to get along with. The first hint of trouble was discovered when the owner was trying to de-worm Nugget with a tube of paste. Nugget would have no part of this, and would rear and throw his head way up and back to avoid the tube. If force was applied, Nugget would get extremely resistant and difficult, creating a very dangerous situation.

Not knowing what to do, the owner called to see if Tovie could help him over this hurdle. Tovie worked with Nugget to help him get used to having his mouth handled, and to lower his head to a manageable position. This proved very successful and enabled the owner to de-worm Nugget without a fight. The owner had no more trouble with Nugget that season.

The following spring the owner decided to go for his first ride of the season. Nugget reacted quite violently to being bridled, creating another dangerous situation. The owner, not knowing how to respond to this, hired a professional trainer to *fix the problem*. Tovie was familiar with this particular trainer, and had seen the sad results of another horse this trainer had tried to *fix*. Tovie did not believe this trainer's forceful methods would work, particularly on a sensitive horse like Nugget. One of the methods the trainer used was the archaic method of twisting the horse's ear to get him to comply. After two weeks the trainer called the owner to say she had never even managed to get the bridle on him, and that Nugget was dangerous and unpredictable and should be sent to slaughter.

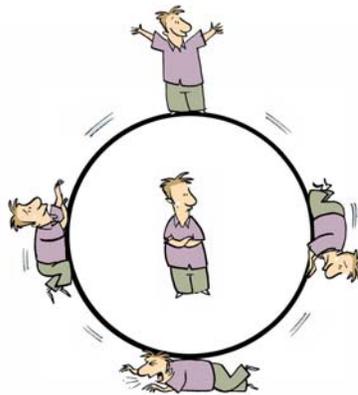
The trainer dealt with Nugget's behaviour by operating from the outside of the *Wheel of Life* (participant only).



She did not like Nugget's behaviour and reacted to it by trying to control Nugget and change his behaviour forcefully. It is important to realize that the trainer does not mean to hurt the horse. She is convinced that this is the way to deal with the horse's difficult behaviour. In this situation, Nugget was a *problem to be solved*,

not a *mystery to be explored*. The only way to deal with Nugget was with firm force and discipline, which actually made Nugget's behaviour worse.

The owner called Tovie. He was distraught, and Tovie suggested that he bring Nugget over so she could *work* with him. Instead of operating from the outside of the *Wheel of Life*, Tovie naturally operates from the centre of the *Wheel of Life* (participant and observer).



Tovie works with horses as equal living partners in the relational system, and assumes if the horse is behaving poorly, there must be something wrong in the system. The horse's behaviour is simply an indication that there is something wrong. Tovie believes that her job is to find out what that is.

After two days of working with Nugget, and seeing no signs of trouble, she was able to bridle him without incident. It took another month before Nugget would permit anyone else to bridle him, but eventually he allowed others to bridle him, and then went home to his owner. Although Nugget was not a fearful horse, Tovie did observe that he was extremely sensitive, and so she always handled him very thoughtfully (mindfully). As

Tovie and Nugget developed their trust of each other, Tovie was able to push him a bit harder. She discovered that Nugget has a wonderful willingness, but must be handled as a *mystery to be explored*.

Tovie demonstrates that she and the horse are in relationship with each other, and when she operates from the centre of the *Wheel of Life*, she can observe the horse's behaviour as well as her own. She is neither overconnected nor underconnected to the horse and herself. She is *simply* connected, and she creates the conditions for the horse to also be connected.

"We think of great leaders as famous, and some of them are inspiring to follow .... There are however, many more models created by people whose names will never be etched in marble or memorialized in a book. ... Not every leader marches at the head of a band."

— Madeleine K. Albright, from the *Foreword by Madeleine K. Albright* in the book **Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead** by Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors (2007)



**Complexity, Relationships, and Strange Loops: Reflexive Practice Guide**, see [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca) for more information

**MHA Institute Inc.**  
Suite 205  
259 Midpark Way SE  
Calgary, Alberta T2X 1M2 Canada

Phone: (403) 257-4597  
Fax: (403) 257-4649  
E-mail: [info@mhainstitute.ca](mailto:info@mhainstitute.ca)  
Web: [www.mhainstitute.ca](http://www.mhainstitute.ca)