



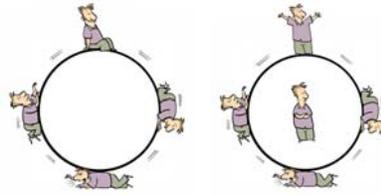
The Courage to Learn and Lead Part 1C: What Horses Teach Us About Leadership

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“The truth is that we are all called to lead wherever we are planted: in the family, the workplace, the community. But many of us fear the challenges that come with leadership, and not without reason. If we could listen in on even the most effective leaders talking to themselves, we would hear a steady hum of stress and self-doubt.”

— Parker J. Palmer, from the *Introduction by Parker J. Palmer* 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 talked about how Tovie operated from the centre of *The Wheel of Life*, as an *observer*, whereas Nugget’s owner and his trainers operated as *participants*. When you are a *participant* on *The Wheel of Life*, it is very hard to focus on anything but the experience itself.



Participant

Observer

This means that your ways of thinking are also confined to what you already believe that you know, leading to decisions and actions that tend to be narrowly defined. Leadership requires that you operate as an *observer* as much as possible. Here’s an example of what that might look like.

Recall that when Tovie worked with Nugget, she had experienced success, and Nugget had returned to his owner. The owner did not experience any problems with Nugget for the rest of the season. However, in the following spring Nugget erupted again. The owner became confused and frustrated by Nugget’s behaviour. He decided that Nugget was *a problem to be fixed*, but he was still not sure that he wanted to get rid of Nugget. So, he sent Nugget to two new trainers to *fix* Nugget’s behaviour.

But, Nugget responded negatively towards the trainers. Nothing they did changed Nugget’s behaviour, so they decided that Nugget was dangerous and unpredictable, and was *a problem that cannot be fixed*. The trainers told the owner that they recommended slaughtering Nugget. Because the trainers were operating as *participants* on *The Wheel of Life*, they were unable to consider that Nugget’s behaviour might be *a mystery to be explored*. To them,

he was *a problem to be fixed*, and if he couldn’t be fixed, he was dangerous and unpredictable, and should therefore be sent to slaughter.

The owner was distraught with the idea of slaughtering Nugget, so once again he brought Nugget to Tovie. But this time he brought Nugget with the understanding that if Tovie did not want to buy Nugget, he would be sent to slaughter. When Nugget arrived at Tovie’s farm this time, he was less trusting. Even though Nugget was less trusting, and Tovie had experienced difficulty with Nugget before, she did not see him as dangerous and unpredictable. She saw him as sensitive, and also a horse capable of being easy to work with. So she bought him. Because Tovie was operating as an *observer* in *The Wheel of Life*, she did not automatically see Nugget as *a problem to be fixed*. She was open to the idea that something else might be going on, and even though she was unsure of what might be causing Nugget’s behaviour, she continued to treat Nugget as *a mystery to be explored*, rather than *a problem to be fixed*.

Tovie would never have purchased Nugget just to save him from slaughter, because she does believe dangerous horses should be destroyed if they are a menace to themselves and others. While she did consider what the trainers said when she began handling Nugget, she simply did not have the same experience with him as the other trainers. Although he was not a fearful horse, Tovie *observed* that Nugget was extremely sensitive, which caused her to handle him very thoughtfully (as *a mystery to be explored*). As Tovie and Nugget

developed their trust of each other, Tovie was able to push him a bit harder. She discovered that Nugget had a wonderful willingness.

More often than not, we attempt to understand the complexity of a situation by acting as if the relational system is simple, rather than complex, and that our view of the system is adequate. As a result, we think and act mindlessly, as *participants* on *The Wheel of Life* — totally unaware that patterns are running unchecked in the background. This is what happened to the owner of Nugget and his trainers. Because we are acting as *participants*, we can become so convinced that we know what is going on that we are often surprised by any information that challenges our viewpoint. Even though Tovie had success with Nugget, and the owner had a good season with Nugget, this did not change the interpretation of the owner, and his willingness to believe the trainers' recommendations.

On the other hand, when we become an *observer* in *The Wheel of Life*, we consciously notice, inquire into, and challenge our and others' thinking and actions. Tovie believes that Nugget is very sensitive; therefore, he needs special treatment all the time. This sensitivity will always produce a sense of unpredictability in Nugget's behaviour. Acting as an *observer* helps Tovie to work with this complexity, by giving attention to her relationship with Nugget.

Recall that when the owner first had problems with Nugget, he sent Nugget to one trainer, who told him that Nugget was a dangerous and unpredictable horse, and recommended slaughtering him. The owner then went to Tovie for help. Tovie was able to help, and the owner had a good season riding Nugget. However, the following year, Nugget

acted up again, and the owner repeated the pattern by sending Nugget to two other trainers, rather than to Tovie, who had actually been successful with Nugget. The two trainers had a similar experience with Nugget as the first trainer, and recommended the same thing: Nugget was a dangerous and unpredictable horse, and should be slaughtered.

This is an example of a repeating pattern of behaviour that characterizes operating as a *participant* on *The Wheel of Life* that has both a pessimistic and optimistic nature. From the optimistic side, the owner was *hoping* that the trainers would *fix* Nugget, even though his prior experience had been the opposite. The owner's hope fueled his *participant* behaviour, thus not allowing him to exit being a *participant*. Because the owner was operating on his hopes and expectations, when he realized that the trainers were unable to *fix* Nugget, the owner resorted to a second repeating pattern. He went to Tovie for help. The owner's pattern was to try other trainers first and Tovie second, even when he had evidence that Tovie was more successful with Nugget than the trainers. This is the strength of the mindless repeating pattern, driven by *fixed* hopes and expectations. And it is this pattern lived, and the relational conditions, that creates the *stuckness* with repeating patterns of rotating on *The Wheel of Life*.

Operating as an *observer* in *The Wheel of Life* allowed Tovie to find out why Nugget erupted every spring. Within one year of observation, Tovie discovered that when the new green grass appeared in the spring, Nugget was definitely more sensitive for a time. Spring grass is very high in sugars, and can cause horses to become hyperactive. Tovie started to think that this is what may have caused Nugget's unpredictable and

dangerous behaviour with the owner and the trainers. In May of the first year Tovie had Nugget — her first experience with Nugget on fresh green grass — Nugget did throw Tovie off his back. However, Tovie viewed falling off, and getting a bit bumped up, as an interesting and important observation that explained Nugget's behaviour.

Because Tovie operated as an *observer* in *The Wheel of Life*, she was open and curious about Nugget and his behaviour. Tovie created the conditions for Nugget and Tovie to learn about each other. Tovie treated Nugget as a *mystery to be explored*. And her success with him has helped Nugget develop into a friendly, hard-working, willing, and confident riding partner.

"... leadership is everyone's vocation, and it is an evasion to claim that it is not. When we live in the close-knit ecosystem called community, everyone follows and everyone leads. Leadership, I now understand, simply comes with the territory called being human."

— Parker J. Palmer, from the *Introduction* by Parker J. Palmer in the book **Leading from Within: Poetry that Sustains the Courage to Lead** by Sam M. Intrator and Megan Scribner, Editors (2007)



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