

The Gift, A Testimonial

I lived in New Mexico for 13 years. The Spanish there often had 4 or 5 children, then suddenly 7 to 9 years later, they discover they are pregnant again with their last child. They often call this one "the gift." Yes they already know a lot about raising children, but the last one teaches them more than all the other children put together. Pony is my gift. I thought I could ride. But now I have learned so much more, I'm still learning. Pony has been and is the means by which Shayan Richet has taught, and continues to teach me how to ride, well and safely. He is excellent in training, riding and instructing, the best I have ever seen.

In May 2009 Shayan Richet began working with Pony and me. "Someone just gave me this pony," I said to Shayan. There stood the pony about 13.2 hands, 3 years old, excellent conformation, looking like a little horse. Half APHA and half Paso Fino. Her face was white, one blue eye, one brown, her coat a rich dark chestnut with white flashes on the sides and neck, straight legs, no white there, and a flaxen mane and tail.

"Someone just gave you this pony?" he was incredulous. "Why didn't someone give me this pony?" Getting down to it, he asked, "What do you know about her?"

"She was rescued from a rescue place," I replied. "They felt she wasn't being treated right there, some kids were teasing her so they took her to their barn. They had her a few months over the summer but they couldn't afford board for 3 horses—the mother's show horse, her daughter's show horse, and the pony." They had let her run loose into their trailer, didn't tie her and let her unload herself. They had brought her to my place the same way. There was a picture of her being lunged in a pink halter. She came with one lavender blanket and one pink and lavender plaid blanket, pink bell boots and a cribbing collar. When I had put her blanket on and had reached across her chest to buckle the straps she had reared up on me in her stall, barely missing my arms with her front legs. Nothing had been said about her training.

The first time I walked Pony down the road 0.7 miles to the round pen, I had my brother-in-law help me. I wasn't sure we could make it by ourselves. 20 years ago I rode Amateur Owner Hunter over 3 foot 6 inch fences with my 16.2 hand Thoroughbred mare, Sweet Georgia Brown. She had died 12 years before. In the last 3 years I had ridden only 3 times on my 26 year old retired dressage horse, a half Hanoverian, 16.3 hands, Max. In the past 9 months I had had 3 major surgeries, one replaced my left knee. I had had back surgery March 31, 2009. I have 4 large metal screws in my back to correct and stabilize scoliosis and spinal stenosis. I still had to wear the neurosurgeon's back brace. I didn't start Enbrel shots for the arthritis until July 2009, the chemotherapy medication methotrexate hadn't been working. I wasn't able to ride yet, I wasn't very strong, and walking was hard even without Pony.

In the round pen we discovered Pony already knew how to fight. She's very quick and extremely bullheaded ! First she would rip the reins out of Shayan's hands, throwing her head down between her front feet.

then she would back up suddenly, spin and slam him into the boards, like a hockey player loosening up her opponent. And she would do it, again and again. It did not matter if we tried her with a halter, a bosal, a snaffle, a tom thumb, a D ring or anything else for that matter... Shayan just rode her with a full chick snaffle. Of course she'd rear up on her hind legs, 5 or 6 times in quick succession, power lifting her rider again and again. When she got "tired" she would be "good" for 5-10 minutes. Once she caught her breath, it started all over again. Shayan adopted a strategy to delay her fighting, trying to delay it until later in her lesson. Hopefully, one day we could avoid it altogether.

Then came the day she threw him in the mud. Shayan had come to my barn to ride her in the pasture. He mounted her next to the barn. Pony moved suddenly, and Shayan was in the mud, unhurt, laughing. A little later she was fighting so much, Shayan said: "Nancy I need to lay her down. It won't hurt a bit but I need to establish a relation and she is not cooperating... when a horse is laid on their side and maintain there for a little while, their Instinct kicks in. They feel very vulnerable. To make an analogy It is like a reset button . It looks a lot worse than it actually is". "Do you trust me ?" he asked, I said yes. I know shayan would never hurt Pony. "Not many people should do this though, You need to know what you are doing" he added. It took at least 6 attempts to place the rope on her right front leg. She'd kick so fast and hard the rope flew off. I was afraid she'd strike him and break his legs. She was fast, he faster. On the ground, Shayan laid across her neck. The saddle, Pony, and Shayan were all covered in mud. Then they were back up, Shayan riding her again. He stood on the saddle on her back, not even holding the reins to demonstrate the extent of reset concept . Pony seemed to act like nothing had happened. I later found out that Pony already had 3 trainers who all had be thrown and eventually gave up on her. Shayan was number 4 ! By August, Chesapeake, Virginia was hot... I watched all her lessons. Having walked her down the road and back I had a lot of time to think. One day I had courage enough to ask, "You're not going to quit on me and Pony...are you? I know she is hard, impossibly hard. But I wouldn't know what to do with her if you quit. I mean, we have to make an honest citizen of her. That has to be her life, otherwise, there's nothing for her." Shayan assured me he would not quit on us. What was I thinking? He predicted, "A day will come when she will not fight. Now I am working to postpone, delay the fight. A day will come when she will decide to walk. She will simply walk. She will be content to walk." That day came late in August. It was a miracle. She walked nicely, slowly, with Shayan mounted on her back. Pony's attitude had been there was no point to just walking. She would walk very fast. There was no point to trotting. Really, the only thing she wanted to do besides fighting was to run, fast and faster. I believed it only because I saw it ! They walked the field relaxed. That was it. That was all they did that day. Walk. There was no fight that day or the day after.

Pony was hard, but then we were at a different level. Shayan said, "Pony is like a rock. There is a sculpture inside. I have to be the water. Flow over her. You could break her, but you wouldn't like the result. It wouldn't be beautiful. It wouldn't be her. Her eyes would be soulless. I would never ever do that to a horse, period. I am strongly opposed to it."

Yes, Pony still had tantrums backing up, picking up her right lead canter, but Shayan fixed these. Now I am learning how to ride correctly, and how not to nitpick her and antagonize her. She is an absolute dream to ride, so smooooth... in all gaits.

Before I could ride Pony, I took lessons on Max. Shayan put a soft jog on the old dressage horse, so I could sit the trot and learn to keep my hands still. Yes, I too would like to have "the silk hands in iron gloves." I took lessons on his 7 year old quarter horse mare, to develop my seat and legs position. Legs position is still an issue, mainly due to the extensive surgery I have undergone. I keep my legs a little forward on Pony just to feel more secure, on Shayan's mare I feel more confident and I can position my legs pretty much where they should be. At one point I asked to ride Pony, but I wasn't ready. I was too heavy with my hands, I was too nervous. 2 months later we tried it again, and I have been riding her ever since. I had to become a good enough, and my back strong enough to ride Pony. People are always looking for a better horse, whether in the hunter ring or dressage. The secret is to become a better rider yourself. Shayan would get on my old dressage horse, Max...and he'd come alive, move more beautifully than ever before. The elegance, floating, the roundness and softness of the collected trot and canter are present when asked for correctly. I want what he has...at least some of his ability and knowledge. I have to learn as much as possible from him so Pony and I will continue to have a good, safe, fun life together.

During lessons, Shayan would take my reins and make me feel what the horse's mouth should feel like in my hands, to know what I should feel as I moved with the horse, not against the horse. Whenever I ride, I will feel his presence in the reins, and in the horse's response. Shayan will be moving to California in August 2010. I hate to see him go—but he has to go and help others "ride the horses they have." They will be better riders and there will be better horses wherever he goes to work. He demands excellence and correctness from not only the horses he trains, but also the riders of the horses. All that is required is willingness, dedication and work. Then we all will have something beautiful. There is a sculpture inside. We have to work to bring it out for all to see, appreciate, love and enjoy.

Sincerely,

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