

About “Down-to-Earth Natural Horse Care” book
An interview with author Lisa Ross-Williams
by Kate Riordan

Q: Why should people care about keeping their horses “natural?”

A: I believe that whenever we have the task of caring for an animal, it is our responsibility to do that in the best way we can, to meet their basic biological and psychological needs as a whole or holistically. The way they are kept, fed, cared for, worked with, and related to needs to align with their equine nature as much as possible. Horses are not motorcycles that are ridden and then forgotten until the next ride. They are sentient beings and they deserve the best we can give. Plus, a naturally healthy horse is safer, costs much less in vet bills, lives longer, and frankly is able to bring more joy into our world.

Q: Do you think there’s a movement afoot about natural horse care? Why?

A: Absolutely. I’ve seen a huge increase in acceptance of natural horse care in the last five to six years. Back in the late 90’s, Kenny and I were considered the “crazy people” who were going to kill our horses by not putting shoes on them or chemically deworming every 6-8 weeks. I had been attacked in local newspapers and Yahoo discussion groups—it was amazing how defensive some people got when a different view was offered.

It really has been a majority of women who are embracing a natural approach with horses, although there are some men coming on-board as well. My assumption is women are more nurturing and empathic overall to the needs of others, including animals. I also think it might be easier for women to let go of their ego in order to look at a new approach with an open mind.

So yes, things are changing and it makes my heart soar to see this increased awareness. Indeed, natural horse care is not the wave of the future - it’s already here! Just as many people have turned to a more holistic and healthy lifestyle for themselves, their horses too are benefiting from this balanced awareness.

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

A: When I first started to dive into the natural horse care concept and learned so many amazing things and saw the positive outcome, I felt compelled to share the knowledge with others. I initially built the Natural Horse Talk site (www.naturalhorsetalk.com) and started an internet webcast, the If Your Horse Could Talk Show, to do this. Although there were a couple of books that focused on one certain aspect of natural horse care, no one really had anything that covered the whole gamut, so I knew there was a need. Plus, I love books, so what better format to go with!

Q: What do you think the role of domestication should be with our horses?

A: Well, domestication is a fact of life. Domesticated horses and wild (feral) horses do have differences; our horses count on us for their care. I don’t believe many horses could survive if thrown right into a wild environment. Here in Arizona there is a place offering a “wild horse experience” where the horses are turned out on thousands of acres and pretty much left to fend for themselves; many horses can’t make it. The point of this book is to inform owners how to give their horses some “wild” while still having balance and responsible care.

Q: What do you think the impact is on horses who are kept in what we think of as “traditional” modes—from housing to shoeing to nutrition and pharmaceuticals?

A: It’s just very sad and unnecessary. Horses, however, just seem to accept their lives, which I think is unfortunate. Horses are being harmed by the conventional way of caring for them! Truly, it’s not rocket science; it’s just questioning the practices that are convenient to humans but harmful to horses. Horses can live well into their 30’s, but with conventional care, they are considered old by nine or ten. Arthritis, ulcers, hoof imbalance are often considered normal—there’s something wrong with that!

Q: Is there any particular horse who took you down the path to natural horse care?

A: Rebel started it all and I tell that whole story in the book. He was a beautiful, gray five-year-old Polish Arabian and he had pretty much given up on humans and was not afraid to show it. Rebel sent me on a journey that would change both our lives’ paths. As I began looking for horse-handling information to deal with Rebel’s special issues, I realized all the conventional or normal care practices seemed so ‘unnatural.’ Thus began my personal quest to find a better approach. However, each equine that came into my life became my teacher, and each had a different lesson for me to learn. I have a section in the book introducing every horse and the key things they each taught me.

Q: What did you learn personally by writing this book, and what was your most profound “ah-ha!” moment.

A: That I’m no good at writing in proper grammar; I write more from a creative and passionate side. Ah-ha moment is getting print quotes by various companies.

Q: In your references to herd environment, is that something you’ve witnessed first-hand or have you just read about it? Why are people so keen on keeping horses separated, when in Nature they’re in a herd environment?

A: I witness it constantly with my herd. Since I work from home, I spend a huge amount of time observing their behavior. I do most of my work on the back patio overlooking the main horse area. In fact, most of the “stories” in the book are about my horses. Our eight equines range from 40” up to 18 plus hands, five years old up to 22, all different breeds including a donkey and they all live together as a herd.

Q: Why do many people keep horses separated?

A: Quite honestly, out of ignorance and probably some fear. As I talk about in Chapter 1, Creating a Natural Environment, horses are herd animals. Just because they are domesticated does not mean they no longer have the instinctual drive to be together. I’m certainly not saying our herd doesn’t play hard (they’re all boys), they do. There also is a herd hierarchy and occasionally that means some will get a good nip to the butt if they don’t move quickly enough. I think it is very sad when horses are isolated from their own kind as it’s truly against their nature.

Q: In your subtitle, you mention the horse’s soul. What’s your opinion about a horse having a soul? How does that come into play with regard to natural horse care?

A: It's not even a question in my mind that horses and all living creatures have souls—it's certainly not limited to humans by any means. How can anyone look deep into a horse's eye and not believe they have a soul? I personally believe a soul's purpose is to live life to the fullest, to experience love and joy, and to reach its highest potential. Natural horse care gives our equine partners a better chance to do this.

Q: What's the role of natural horse care when it comes to a horse's mental well-being?

A: Since we're looking at the horse as a whole or holistically, the mental/emotional component is very important to balance. We've all probably seen horses who are unbalanced mentally—either shut down due to abuse/neglect (which I cover in the chapter “Bringing Zombie Horses Back to Life”), those who are in physical pain, horses who are overworked with no playtime, and those who develop vices or are just plain dangerous due to traditional care. Again, it all goes back to caring for them in the most natural way possible, which in turn gives them mental balance.

Q: What was your personal journey in writing this book?

A: Hmm...that's an interesting question. This book was just something that was meant to be. I actually started writing it in 2000 because even then I was passionate about empowering people to make informed decisions for their horses. Really the journey for me was to continue learning, keep writing it all down, put it in book format and figure out when to publish it

I was originally signed on with Trafalgar Square Publishing back in October 2008. However, due to slow book sales, they kept pushing back many of their titles and I got to the point I was ready for this book to be read. There also were some creative differences and since I had envisioned this book for so long, I knew what I wanted it to be. Both parties decided to void the contract and I went the self-publishing route. I'm so happy I did!

Q: What's the one message you want your readers to come away with?

A: I can't just stick with one message. The first is to relate to your horse as a horse to fulfill his or her basic biological and psychological needs as a whole or holistically. The next is to look at what is normal with horses, start asking questions, and become empowered enough to be the best guardian for your equine partner that you can.

Q: Whom do you suspect your readers will be?

A: I believe the majority of readers will be everyday horse guardians, but I've also found through the endorsement process that many professionals who specialize in a certain modality or field are gleaned info as well.

Q: Okay, they've read the book and want more. Is there a place your readers can come to for further “hands-on” education?

A: Yes, we'll be offering two-day natural horse care seminars to begin with, perhaps adding an intensive five-day format as well if people are interested. If anyone would like to host an event, please contact me. I also am

planning a home study program, but, although the foundation has been started, that will be a bit later. I also have built a Yahoo discussion group for anyone who purchases the book so everyone can share info and ask questions.

Q: Is there a second book taking form in your mind?

A: Well...yes, of course. I think the reason it took me so long (10 years) to publish this book is I'm always learning. At what point do you stop writing and finish it up? So, yes I'm already thinking about an expanded 2nd edition covering some of the topics more in-depth and adding others including vaccination, use of bits, topics of concern such as the wild horse roundups, soring and abuse in the gaited show world, the PMU industry, etc. I also would love to write about raising the four kittens, Smudge, Desi, Uno and Punky, and introducing people to natural cat care. We've just added two emus to the ranch, Ozzie and Harriet. They are fascinating creatures, yet there were only two books on emus on Amazon. Writing is in my blood, so who knows where it will go.

Q: In performing all the research you did for this book, did it make you look at your own life in any different way? And if it did, what changes did this book inspire in your personal life?

A: It first started with the basics for the horses. I then took a close look at my pets (cats and dogs) and how I was caring for them. We switched over to a natural raw diet 12 years ago and cut out unnecessary chemicals and vaccinations.

Kenny and I are still working at eating better; I adore Arby's roast beef and hot wings for instance. We've learned the value of taking time for ourselves and enjoying life. We also use a naturopathic doctor when needed and don't use prescription drugs. Overall, we have a very balanced and happy life, but I do credit all of our animals for helping with that.

Q: Is educating people about natural horse care your "mission" in life?

A: Absolutely. Empowering people to make informed decisions about their animal's care. Knowledge is something no one can ever take from you. It pains me so much when people are pushed into something they know in their heart is wrong, whether from vets, equine professionals or more experienced horse people. So yes, educating people, which in turn benefits the horses, is my mission and passion.

Q: Do you practice all that's in your book? How has that made a difference in your horses' lives?

A: Of course I do. I certainly would never suggest or write about anything I haven't done with my herd of eight equines. As I say in the book, my herd are horses of health, spirit and life. However, that doesn't mean they never have issues—if that were the case I wouldn't know half of what I know. For instance, Rebel my number one horse, has melanomas. I was really, really angry about this as he's had great natural care since he was five years old; he's 19 now. But, as Glen Dupree, DVM, our holistic vet reminded me, I'm dealing with generations and generations of gray Arabians who have the gene that is conducive to melanomas. So yes, I follow everything I write about in my book.

Q: In an ideal “natural horse care” world, what would it look like for horses?

A: A plan conceived by following the suggestions in my book, done to the best of what the individual person can do. Ideally, we would all have at least 100 acres for our horses to roam. This is rarely possible, but even a small property can offer a natural environment. In a nutshell, a natural living area with at least one other horse with room to move; guardians who truly love them and are connected; following the guidelines, thinking about the nature of horses, etc. I don't think it's much different than what we desire as humans—health, love, joy, and the ability to kick up our heels once in a while.

Q: What's your one piece of advice for horse owners, new or experienced?

A: Again, it's very hard to come up with just one—open your minds, let go of your ego, listen to your intuition and empower yourself with knowledge so you can make informed decisions.

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