

Pushing a String

In the early morning before the lessons of the day had begun, the outdoor ring at Cloverdale Farm had the appearance of a Zen garden of precisely raked sand. In this case the rake was motorized, and the substrate was crushed stone, but the concentric patterns it encompassed invited a contemplative mindfulness nevertheless. This was tempered, however, by the need to remain continually alert while seated atop Sadie, a potentially excitable thousand pounds of horse.

Along one long side of the ring lay thick woods, home to a variety of wildlife. Sometimes a deer would burst from cover and bound across a clearing, putting the horse on high alert until the source of the disruption was determined, because equines were a prey species and therefore always on the lookout for potential predators. Anything unknown could be a threat to them, and they were on some level always poised to flee. It was simply their nature and needed to be taken into account at all times. On occasion, the dogs would flush out small game and rush past, rustling the forest's undergrowth in hot pursuit of their quarry. Or, during hunting season, shots would suddenly ring out, setting the woodland animals off in a panicked dash over the forest floor, leaving behind them the unsettling sound of flight as they ran past, cracking the sticks and striking the rocks with which the ground was littered.

Such rapid and unidentified movements on the periphery were potentially unnerving and at the very least distracting to Sadie. It was the rider's role to maintain calm by monitoring and releasing his own muscular tensions and so to convey reassurance that there was nothing to fear. Large as she was, Sadie could feel a fly walking on her back, so she was directly aware of any muscular holding or imbalance that might be going on with my body when I was in the saddle, and she was able to react to any shift. And so she did - and in a big way - both mirroring and amplifying my most subtly imperceptible (to me) departures from good use with a four-footed caricature, mimicking all of my

vertical errors with her own body language on the horizontal plane. Should I tense up under the stimulus of being eight feet in the air without a seat belt on a big, brown, furry, moving animal with a mind of her own, Sadie would feel that and become a bit tense herself, probably thinking that there might well be something out there to worry about after all, since I appeared to be concerned.

And so a session on horseback had a way of focusing one's attention on the necessity of maintaining physical and emotional equilibrium so as not to inspire any untoward reactions on the horse's part. It was for this chance to practice applying the Technique in such a heightened context that I had begun my study of dressage three years ago, the summer before entering the Alexander training program. This was an equestrian discipline aimed at rendering the horse calm, supple, and attentive to the rider by establishing a subtle form of physical communication between them. I had started with lessons on simply following the lead of the horse, but at this point I was learning to guide her, and the objective of this session was the use of the reins. These were narrow strips of leather that looped over the back of the horse's neck and connected at either end to the bit, a metal bar resting in the back of her mouth. This was not power steering in the sense that exerting leverage would directly change the orientation of her head and neck, but rather a means of delivering a signal that Sadie had learned to interpret in directional terms. As such, the rider sought to maintain constant contact but to employ a light and nuanced touch that would permit the horse to detect and react with sensitivity to slight changes in angle and tension.

The topic of rein effects had arisen before, and the analogy suggested to me had been to think of pushing a wheelbarrow in order to elicit the sense of lifting while going ahead. The idea was to give instead of take. If the rider pulled back instead, it interfered with the horse's coming forward onto the bit to maintain connection. Like many images used in teaching riding (or other physical skills, such as the Alexander Technique, for that matter), this had seemed clear until I tried to put it into practice. At that point it became a bit more problematic, giving me the feeling that I was trying, not very successfully,

to push a string a yard long. But today my insightful instructor, who was also an Alexander teacher, tried a new approach: I was to use my hands as if they were on a student, teaching the Technique. Imagining the bit in Sadie's mouth and also my own, I was to think of using my hands to direct that bit forward and up, not back and down. This connected in my mind with the admonition to let the student take the responsibility for coming up into my hand, and it seemed to work for Sadie too.

The next week, back in the teaching room, I had all my Alexander students "on the bit," coming up from the inside out with a lot less doing on my part. Teaching the Technique might well be like conducting a sort of Montessori tutorial for adults, in which they could make their own discoveries with the guidance of a teacher in a prepared environment, as I had been thinking of it for some time, but now I had another way of looking at it as well: the Alexander Technique as dressage training for humans.