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Change. Life is a series of changes and navigating them requires resilience. Change can be positive: getting a new job, starting a new family or moving to an exciting new place. It can also be negative: losing a loved one, failing health or sudden financial problems. Every change requires adjustment and adjustment requires mutation in stages. The alterations are inevitable to adapt to the newness. Awareness of the constant evolution of these mutations is a gift. Without this awareness, change can be painful and frustrating because all change is stressful. Understanding that the stages of adjustment are necessary and temporary and that “this too shall pass” is imperative in successfully piloting unknown zones. The first phases of a major change often feel daunting, alien, fragmenting and unnerving. We wobble on our new turf and reel in our new sphere, desperately trying to find familiarity and re-establish some sense of routine. Although change can be both positive and negative, all change equals a loss of what was. What was is gone and what is, is now.

If the change was a loss, regenerating is a difficult process. If you severed your foot, it would take a long time to walk again and an even longer time to run, if ever. Habituating to this new affliction is debilitating and there is a painful, healing journey ahead that is not possible without a regiment of necessary processes. Understanding and respecting the needs of each healing phase is where we experience difficulty. Allowing the emotions and actions that accompany each stage of healing is imperative and remembering that things will be different as time passes is crucial.

I recently lost my lead mare whom I had partnered with and loved for 15 years. Her name was Buttons and together we helped hundreds of people with mental health issues, disabilities, emotional and behavioral challenges. She was a hot-blooded Arabian quarter horse and she was feisty. Her attitude either drew oppositional people toward her or scared timid people away and she had no issues with telling anybody to get out of her face, or else. Although she was never known to bite anyone, she certainly threatened to kick many. With the other horses, she often led in the same way she treated humans; mostly threatening to bite or kick but never really doing it. She actually was a healthy leader with a booming voice and they listened well to her. She was gentle and kind in her heart but she was sensitive and reactive to her environment which warranted her leadership as she noticed everything immediately.

One day, she fell. It was in a place she had stood for 15 years but somehow she fell and landed in between a fallen and a standing tree. We think she was there for less than an hour but the damage was fatal. We were able to get her up with grave difficulty and only with the help of a tractor but within three days, she had fallen again and we had no choice but to end her beautiful life. We were devastated. I was broken. I had recently lost my brother, mother, father, x-husband, childhood friend and many of my beloved therapy animals, some of whom had been with me for almost 20 years. My heart was shattered. And the horses...my God the horses. Buttons had led the other two horses, Echo and Rain for more than a decade. She was like a mother to Rain, who was initially not accepted by other horses due to having no ears, and she was best friend and compassionate companion to Echo who was a Racehorse who was injured on the track and bullied by other horses in his past. Neither one of them had the capacity nor the desire to lead.

After Buttons' death, Rain slept for nearly two weeks and Echo angrily kicked out at anyone who approached him. They ate, drank, walked, slept and moved as one wherever they went. They were completely inseparable in a way that was unusual and they visibly looked miserable. My heart bled for them. I didn't know what to do and I couldn't bear that they were silently grieving the loss of their “mother” and best friend. It was bone crushing.

Two months later, a lady contacted me out of the blue through a program I was running therapy groups for. She had a 9 year-old horse that she wanted to give to a good home and she asked if I would take him. He was a Connemara and she had paid \$7500 for him. Her daughter had been riding him for jump competitions but she had outgrown horses and moved on to Cheerleading. I thought about my sad and mad, grieving horses who I often saw standing in the place where Buttons fell and after a long visit with them, I decided to go see this horse and screen him. He passed with flying colors and I brought him home to hopefully fill the void in my horses' lives, my treatment team's lives and my devastated heart.

This horse had never lived with horses per se. He had been barn stalled for the majority of his life and when he was not in the stall, he was being ridden. Interacting with other horses in an open pasture as a herd member was not something he had a lot of experience with and he did not have the opportunity to understand "leadership" in horses. At first, we kept him separate from Rain and Echo because Rain did not appear to appreciate him. When they met over the fence, she squealed in a high pitch and if he got close to her, she tried to bite him. I had never seen Rain behave like this toward other horses. It was disappointing that I had brought him home for them to have a new companion and not only did she not seem to like him but having them together might prove dangerous.

I kept the new guy with our sheep, goats and Shetland pony for about a month and then I decided to integrate him with the horses and see what happened. After all, he was here to be their friend. When I let him out, he went straight to the donkeys and stayed with them. He didn't even approach the horses and although they saw him, they did not approach him. After a bit, Rain and Echo moved toward him and when he saw them coming, he ran away. They chased after him and for about 10 minutes it was like watching a carousel as the new guy ran in a big circle with both Rain and Echo running behind him side by side. If he changed direction, Rain and Echo pivoted on the same leg at the same time and changed direction too. It was a merry go round. I was hopeful that this trio could meld and that my lonely grieving horses could begin to mend.

A month later, Rain went into heat. The new guy, although he was gelded, behaved like a stallion and the fun began. He chased after her, causing everyone to be running and the pasture to become dangerous. This was not a good thing for the therapy program with treatment staff and children often in the pasture. I worried that this was not going to work as obviously, we could not have this kind of behavior in this kind of program. He was adjusting to his new turf and reeling in his new sphere as he did so. By this time, he had also taken leadership of Rain and Echo, likely because they had been leaderless for three months and were so desolate during that time. Unlike Buttons, when he wanted the other horses to do something, he rushed toward them with his whole body, pinning his ears and using his body to force them into wherever he wanted them to go. Rain and Echo still moved as one and I grieved for them as they respectfully moved out of his way and stood together watching him warily. He was an unhealthy leader. In his defense, he was never in a herd. He did not know how to 'be a horse' and his first experience was with two leaderless, grieving horses. Oh boy.

We are still reeling in our spheres as we explore our new turfs. I have three horses again, Rain and Echo have a leader and the new guy, who we call Romeo, has a new home although he lives in a separate pasture while we sort out our dilemma.

Through our loss we were forced to make a change that we thought would have a positive outcome. We were excited and happy to have a new horse and to begin to move on through our grief. It didn't go as we planned and now we must make another change which will result in another loss and more grief for all of

us. Although Romeo is across the pasture, the horses call to him and visit him over the fence. He longs to be with them and they with him, but it is not a good match. With change comes choice and making the right decision can be torturous. Change is fear provoking, sometimes painful and its outcomes are never easily predicted.

I have had so much change that I am in a whole new world in the exact same place. Everything looks almost the same but is completely different and I understand that there are phases in each change. I also understand that I must make the right decisions, not the easy ones. It would be easy to keep him here and to continue to 'make it work' even though I know it is not the best decision. When Spring comes, the fence between the horses will become a new dangerous issue and dealing with this before then is the right thing to do.

This will cause another phase and stage of adjustment for us all. The phases will continue to mutate and evolve until eventually, what was will be replaced with what is acceptable now. We often cannot control how things unfold but we can control what we will do about it.

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