



THE NEXT PARADIGM SHIFTERS

By Katrina Hays

Paradigm shift: noun

A fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions

A paradigm shift in horsemanship began in the American West in the mid-Twentieth century when Bill and Tom Dorrance began showing an effective, gentle way of horse training that emphasized feel and observations of horse behavior over the use of domination. Ray Hunt, Buck Brannaman, and Pat Parelli are notable figures who pushed that message out into the world, teaching humans and their relieved equines what became known as “natural horsemanship.”

Today, who are the teachers continuing this arc of what we can call “horse-humanship”? Who are the thinkers encouraging us to see and train and relate to horses from a grounded, scientific, and more humble platform of curiosity and wisdom? This EH series interviews just a few of the notable people—from trainers to body workers to veterinarians—who are putting the pieces together a little differently, and teaching us how to be better for our equines.

KAREN ROHLF

Dressage Naturally



It could sound like the beginning of a joke: “A dressage person and a natural horsemanship person walk into a barn...” Off the joke spins into a punchline of mutual bafflement, because the assumption among many horse people is those two disciplines operate at right angles to each other, and don’t play nicely.

Not for Karen Rohlf.

“I’m interested in common threads,” she says. “The mental or emotional part that I learned from natural horsemanship and the gymnastic development of the horse found in classical dressage actually work beautifully together.”

Karen has spent the past 25 years as a trainer, clinician, and speaker, using the best of both worlds to help humans create “happy athletes” of their equine partners. Her business is called “Dressage Naturally”, and focuses on offering ways and means to establish and deepen connection and to develop strength and biomechanical freedom for the horse—regardless of what area of equine sport is being pursued.

She found her way to the discipline of dressage as a teenager, and trained with Anne Gibbons, represented the United States four times at the North American Young Riders Championships. Situated in New York, Karen became a dressage trainer herself and was squarely on the traditional full-time professional path with students, clients and client horses, and an exhausting schedule. She and her students did well, competing and winning regionally and nationally at all levels, including Grand Prix. But in the pressure and the rush, she was burning out and finding herself shut down and distanced from the horses themselves.

“You know when someone asks how you’re doing, and you sort of shrug with that weird little smile and say, ‘I’m okay?’” Sitting in her home in Ocala, Florida, Karen mimics a false smile and a thousand-yard stare, and then laughs. “That was what I was like. Disconnected.”

Hoping to help a horse she was given who was himself shut down and exhausted from a high-level dressage career, Karen went to a Parelli natural horsemanship clinic “on a whim,” hoping to learn some “silly things she could do with Bubba” in order to entertain him. What she learned softened her whole perspective on training horses and rekindled the feeling of connection she’d had with her horses as a kid. She began to see what she had previously

understood as resistance or “being internal” in horses was actually stress. In a series of unexpected coincidences, she ended her training business and lived in her horse trailer for two years while she worked with Pat and Linda Parelli at their properties in Colorado and Florida. She took the time to completely learn their system of natural horsemanship, as she had learned the training system of classical dressage years earlier. Then she created her own system, using what she viewed as the best of both worlds.

“I realized that the Parelli work nailed the mental and emotional, but they were missing a lot of the physical. In the dressage world, they had the physical but were missing a lot of mental and emotional. I wrote my book, *Dressage Naturally*, to explain exactly how I was putting everything together.”

She started with happiness as the main and most important building block of a Dressage Naturally training scale that also includes harmony, communication, biomechanics, and sports-specific gymnastic training.

“With so many training problems you see, the horse is just not a happy individual. So, we work on that first. Horses make us happy, but they shouldn’t have to. We need to arrive to our horses as happy people.”

Horses helped her learn and refine the techniques of “Dressage Naturally” by showing Karen that, given the opportunity, they would organize their own bodies to do difficult moves like a canter pirouette—without her needing to use constraining equipment.

“It was very humbling to realize I didn’t need all the aids. I mean, it was freaking cool. But it was also just hugely humbling, because I realized I needed the aids because (the horses) weren’t understanding, then deciding, then committing and organizing themselves (to the work.) And I thought, maybe—just maybe—



my body on their back was actually interfering with them. So if I forgot all the fancy techniques, and if I focused on knowing if my horse was willingly participating and understanding what the job was, I was 80 percent there, and the rest was just kind of helping them know what to do in their bodies to carry me.”

The pursuit of happiness, harmony, and communication led Karen to discover she didn’t need spurs, or a saddle, or a bit, or anything on her horses in order to ride in collection, with all of a horse’s

power and grace on full display.

Lisa Howell, a longtime student of Rohlfs’s, says, “I went to a Parelli event twenty years ago, and Karen comes out riding this gray horse with nothing on it, doing all the collection and all the dressage moves—and I cried. I wanted to do that.”

Her students say what sets Rohlfs apart as a trainer and teacher is her ability to empower people to create deep trust and connection with their horses—and to trust their own instincts.

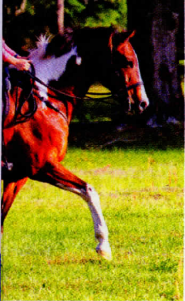
Equestrian and yoga teacher Sylvia Vitazkova Houston, who created “Aware, Balanced, Calm,” the Yoga for Equestrians course on the “Dressage Naturally” website, has been a student of Rohlfs’s for about five years. She says, “I have been inspired by Karen to rediscover the fun of playing with horses, and to try doing different things with my mare, such as bridleless riding. Working with Karen has strengthened the relationship that I have with my mare, and has made me feel more confident in my intuition and feel.”

Karen describes her work as “a system that’s not a system,” because it requires of the human that we be curious and responsible for noticing what does not feel right—and then look for ways to work with or encourage the horse to find something that feels better.

“I realized that what was really happening in the “Dressage Naturally” work was changing this idea of obligingness on the part of the horse. And what changed that paradigm was looking at the two worlds (of dressage and natural horsemanship) completely differently and asking: ‘What the hell is going on here?’”

She pauses, thinking.

“I want people to get curious. That’s the state of mind of ‘Dressage Naturally.’ It’s a system, but it’s not a system. It’s a system of: What’s going on here? And then you start asking questions and going to your feel in order to help the horse.”



IN THE COMMUNITY

Karen and her husband Dana launched a subscription website for training videos way back in 2010 in order for the trainer to reach more people than even her busy clinic schedule permitted for. Today, "Dressage Naturally" offers a video training library with hundreds of videos that demonstrate the process of learning to improve partnership and ease of movement using techniques from dressage, natural horsemanship, and personal development toolkits. There also are online courses in creating healthy biomechanics, developing and deepening partnership, and increasing the gymnastic abilities of horses for any sport.

And she says she has seen huge growth and increased openness in both natural horsemanship people and dressage people.

"There's been a lot of softening in the past 20 years or so. I get people in my clinics who have a lot more knowledge of both areas, which is really exciting."

Watching Karen Rohlf with her horses at her home barn is eye-opening. A young mare at liberty is attentive and playful—and in the course of a few minutes working a 20-meter circle, she noticeably changes her posture, organizing her own body into a correct bend and stretching through the topline. A gelding, ridden with a pad and halter, does the difficult work of rocking his weight to his hindquarters, appearing to float as he canters past.

The horses are at ease, even in the work. Karen is joyful. She laughs often and tells her horses again and again, "You are perfect!"

Karen Rohlf shifts the paradigm of horse-humanship not only by creating connections between different approaches to training, but also by working with the big notions of love and harmony with respect to the horses. In a recent talk and blog post, "Love It Or Change It," Karen observes that due to training that prioritizes results over harmony, horse-folk often develop a habit of tolerating what is uncomfortable in their relationships with their equine partners. They adopt that false smile and thousand-yard stare of disconnection. It is Karen's passion to empower people to find the mental, emotional, and physical connection with their horses of which they dream.

"It's important to notice what is not in harmony, then get curious about how to bring that into harmony," she says. "There are two choices: Decide to go with your horse (love it), or decide to help your horse come with you (change it). There are many dials you can turn! So many riders get stuck thinking, 'Is this right?' rather than experimenting to find a place they know feels right between them and their horse. Get to the YES! It is amazing to be with a horse in mental, emotional, and physical harmony—and it is more achievable in any moment than people think."

Karen Rohlf is adamant that every horse owner has the ability—and the responsibility—to trust their own best instincts towards love.

"What is important is to listen to your heart; to find a way of training or a system that speaks to your heart and is right for you and your horse."

All joking aside, prepare to be surprised when you follow that path of love and harmony with your horse. Karen offers this beautiful encouragement:

"Never underestimate the possibility for things to improve in ways you cannot yet imagine."

THREE QUESTIONS

Who are you? *I am made of stardust, like everything else in the universe. Horses are my inspiration, and playground. I am here to delight, to experience, and to share what I learn from my unique perspective. My goal is to move beyond human domestication and experience the oneness of all things.*

What is a horse? *A horse is a being made of stardust of equal value. What concerns me more than "What is a horse," is "Who is this horse?" Each horse is a mirror and an opportunity to learn about life and myself.*

What are some things you hope people take away from reading an interview with you? *Horses owe us nothing. Their lives are in our hands—so help them be safe and happy. Listen to your heart. We are taught to ignore disharmony in our hearts. All measuring systems are invented—except what is in our hearts. Be curious; play; experiment; be free to re-invent so you can find happiness inside your heart.*

MORE INFORMATION

"Dressage Naturally" website & free videos
www.dressagenaturally.net

Karen Rohlf on Natural Horsemanship:
blog.dressagenaturally.net/dont-do-natural-horsemanship

"Dressage Naturally" Podcast:
dressagenaturally.net/podcast/