

Thriving in challenging times

By Carlyn Sikes

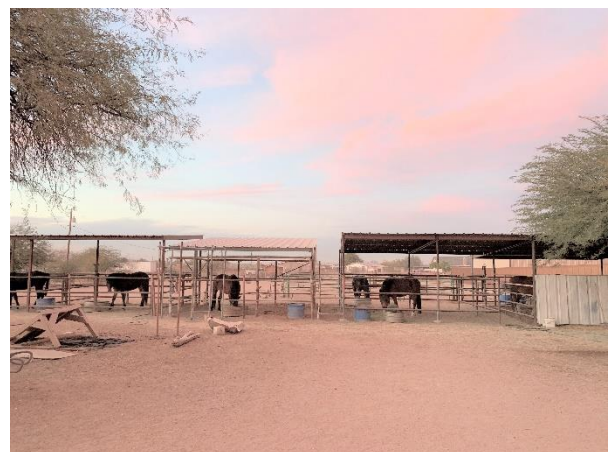


A year ago, at this time, our Iyengar Yoga community was looking forward to our annual workshop with Nancy Stechert. A year later we are once again looking forward to this time with Nancy but under very different circumstances. I don't think any of us even remotely considered that we would be attending this event in 2021 via Zoom. Last year, within 2 weeks of Nancy's visit we were in the midst of a global health crisis, the first pandemic I have ever lived through, due to COVID. The campus where I teach remains closed with all classes offered online. I have weathered the storm by staying home besides my weekly trips to the grocery or feed store. Visitors to my property include my son and various professionals that work with the horses. Other social interaction is mostly via text or the occasional zoom meeting with staff or colleagues.

Me and Murphy

As an introvert, at times it seems as if I have been preparing for this moment of self-isolation my whole life. I truly do like people and enjoy having company but am also very much desirous of adequate amounts of alone time. I have had moments of loneliness, sadness and mild depression that fortunately does not persist. It is hard not to have these moments of anxiety and emotion with so much still unknown as we move through this unprecedented time. I recall the words of my mother's dear friend Alice Hulings to "bloom where you are planted". I believe I have done that for the most part throughout this past year. I have maintained a healthy state of mind that allows me to maintain and I might say thrive during this challenging time. It is a combination of where I live, the animals that are here with me and of course Yoga.

I moved out to my little ranch property in Queen Creek 6 years ago. I had lived with a love of horses my entire life and got my first horse, Murphy, 9 years ago. Almost immediately the desire to have him with me always took over and I found this property. I was so intent on getting a place that I could have Murphy in my backyard, initially that was my only focus. Once here, though, I became aware of how much I liked the quiet and solitude that comes with living in a semi-rural neighborhood. My acre and a half provides an insular distance from my neighbors. The roads aren't paved and there are no streetlights which enables me to enjoy the vast



Evening feed with the start of sunset.

brilliance of the night sky. I also have views from my horse corral of the Santan Mountains, as well as mountains nearby in Apache Junction and Scottsdale. The air is clear and clean. I am surrounded by

nature. This I had not considered when I was looking for properties but has been a huge benefit. I feel safe here in a way I haven't anywhere else I have lived. I have privacy and peace but do not feel alone.

Of course, some of this could be attributed to the presence of the animals that are ubiquitous here. One horse has multiplied into 8 plus a donkey. There are 3 goats, 3 turkey hens, 2 ducks and the requisite chickens in addition to 6 dogs. The natural world and animals always remind me of the presence of the divine. It is the horses that bring me closer to the divine presence. I feel a kinship with them that I can't explain. When I am with them, I feel as if I am "with my people" accepted into the herd. Part of the tribe.



Ruby, Murphy and Violet in the glow of the sunset.

I have noticed that during this COVID time I lose track of the day of the week. The horses give a consistency and regularity to my day to day that helps me stay grounded and centered. They have a consistent feeding time, stalls and the corral need to be cleaned, the two riding horses need to be ridden and the ones currently being trained need their time as well. Most of the social interactions I have, besides online teaching, are because of the horses. Social distance is part of horse world. I see a trainer once a week for Ruby and Joe, two of the mustangs as well as farrier visits, vet visits and hay delivery.



Showing her spirit of adventure, 2-year-old Katy Scarlet O'Hara.

Of course, there is social interaction with the horses. Horse lore describes horses as noble, affectionate and loyal. This is absolutely true. Both Ruby and Murphy seem to look forward to their riding time as much as I do. Rather than a chore, it is time spent with a friend. Murphy will come and meet me halfway when I enter the corral with the lead rope. He is affectionate with me touching me with his muzzle and bending in for horse hugs. There is a communication that provides social interaction. Words are spare, rather body language and a calm mind foster an indescribable connection linking me with the mystical attribute of horses where I "discover the world around and the universe within."

Extrapolating further, I have found it is best to work with the horses when my mind is calm and there is focus without distraction. The goal of Yoga practice is the "stilling of the fluctuations of the mind stuff". Communication with the horses is less mental and is more intuitive. Like Yoga practice, when I am with the horses, I step into the flow of an ancient wisdom that brings a deep and abiding connection with another life.

Another aspect of the effects of Yoga practice is absorption. When the mind is calm and you are able to entirely occupy your mind, there can be absorption. I am able to experience this when interacting with horses. They are big. The smallest equine on my little ranch, Violet the donkey, weighs around 600 pounds. I recall mentioning something that Murphy had done, perhaps he had stepped on me or almost done so. A friend said, "Oh. He doesn't know how big he is!" They absolutely do know how big they are; it is how they operate within the social structure of the horse world for



Ruby and Murphy, heard leaders.

dominance, boundaries, et cetera. In addition, horses are prey animals and are acutely aware of their surroundings. If you are distracted in anyway there is potential for disaster. The effect of a calm mind is better communication with the horse that I have noticed a carrying through in practice, in the corral, and in life.



Emmett, Katy Scarlet, Ruby, Murphy, Bart and Violet “the protector”.

Non-violence is the alpha and omega of interaction with horses. All anyone has to do is read *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell and you will get the gist of how horses have been treated by some humans. I have avoided training methods that involve domination, fear and pain and worked with trainers that have used gentling methods that reward any step in the right direction. This requires an understanding of how a horse processes life and I think is based in love. Ahimsa is defined as non-violence in thought word and deed that when practiced changes our mental, physical and emotional state. I have also heard it described as the presence of love. It doesn't have to be merely a suppression of our violent tendencies as humans, but rather bringing love and learning how to come from this. I have inexplicably loved horses my entire life; I was born with this love. In my life with the horses, my love for them has only grown and deepened. When I go out to do the most mundane task such as cleaning up the stalls I feel as if I have stepped into a spiritual dimension, as though I enter God's Kingdom each and every time I set foot into the corral.

What I have shared has been more about the horses, but please don't misunderstand; I don't consider my time with them my Yoga practice. Rather, it has been my Yoga practice that has helped me to find this “happy place”. My Yoga practice dovetails with my horse “practice,” both of which have graced me with the strength and tranquility to withstand this difficult year.

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