

WALKING MY HORSE HOME AGAIN

by Ann Noe Dapice 1996

AS I DROVE down the street close to where I lived as a child, I remembered that it was about here that she would stop and begin to eat the grass at the side of the road. The street is filled with suburban houses now, but when I used to ride my brown and white pinto down these roads they cut through wheat and corn fields with only occasional houses. Decades have come and gone, but I still remember that when she decided to stop and eat, there was nothing I could do—or at least nothing I had the heart to do—to get her to pull her head up and start walking again. So I'd climb down, pull the reins down and we'd walk home together side by side.

For years it had been a source of some embarrassment that I couldn't get my horse to obey, but my feelings are different now. My horse was my responsibility, but never one that I minded. It was my job to feed her, ride her from her fenced area to water, and attend to her other needs. Riding her to water was an especially enjoyable task, for the ride took us through a large grove of native pecan trees. It was an especially beautiful ride at sunset. Since there was no grass there under the trees, there was no temptation for her to stop to graze. We usually took the long route—often as long as I could make it—because during my late childhood and early adolescence she was my close companion and confidante. I always had much to tell her about at the end of the day. Sometimes it was good, sometimes it was bad, but she was always there to listen—a source of comfort to a shy young girl.

It was when I took her out on the country roads for longer rides that her grazing on the way back became a problem. We'd always start out the same way, Star and I. I'd slip her bridle on, and climb on top of a tree stump, and from the stump onto her back. I never used a saddle, partly because I've never been good at things that required much dexterity, and partly because I just preferred riding bareback, feeling the way she moved as she walked.

It was then that I learned that you see things differently from the back of a horse. It's a view unlike any other—I've noticed that wherever I've ridden horseback, whether in Maine, Kentucky, New Mexico, or Oklahoma. I've come away knowing these places better because I experienced them from the top of a horse. Because you have to adjust your body to fit the angle of the horse, you feel the ups and downs more clearly on horseback. And you tend to pay close attention to the places where the horse has to walk carefully so as not to stumble. The slightest change in pace or rhythm is felt at once. And somehow, you are more attuned to changes in heat and cold, more aware of the ground under the horse's feet, whether it's slippery or dry, soft or broken.

There are views and scenery that would be missed if you were walking or going by car—views that force you to pause to take it all in. Somehow, your senses come alive and you become more connected to, more a part of, all that is around you.

Seeing things in a different way is necessary—and also healing. It was especially so to a young girl entering the chaos of adolescence. Atop my horse I could sort things out, see from another perspective not only my problems, but all that was around me as well. It was a place where I could put things where they belonged—a kind of bracketing of time and space.

Daydreaming and fresh ideas come naturally atop a horse. The rhythm of the horse, the feeling of the sun and breeze on your body, all help your mind to go idle. The chatter in your brain begins to slow until there is only the constant motion of the horse. And so your mind can rest. Emptied of all that is unnecessary, there is room for new and better thoughts.

But at some point, it comes time to return home. And so I would turn Star around and we would head back. But at this one spot on the road, she would stop. It was as if she said, "That's enough, you can get down now, I've listened and allowed you new understandings. But you can't stay in that world, it's time to get down and go on your own now. We can walk side by side, as real companions do."

And so I'd get down and we'd walk home together.

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