

Therapists with Hooves: The Miracle of Animal-Assisted Therapy

CHRISTINE PARKER



WRITER'S COMMENT: This assignment for UWP 101 (Advanced Composition) was to model an expository essay after an article that may appear in Harper's or The New Yorker. Having such a broad range of possibilities allowed me to write about something that was both personal and universal—an experience I had volunteering at an equine therapy stable. The writing process started as a broad discussion of the overall experience, but with the guidance of Professor Walker and the peer reviewers in class I was able to condense and focus on one specifically important event. Writing in the first person seemed easy enough at first, but when I actually started the essay it turned out to be more difficult than I thought.



The hardest part was using my voice as a writer without seeming too casual or getting carried off on tangents. This part of the revision process is where the collaboration process worked especially well, since we were all working on the same assignment.

—Christine Parker

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: My UWP 101 (Advanced Composition) classes always challenge students to write for audiences beyond the university. Christine Parker, a double major in English and History with a minor in Classics, wielded academic discourse with practiced ease, as I saw in her first essay. In her second piece, she addresses the different expectations of lay readers with equal success. "Therapists with Hooves" tells the story of a traumatized paraplegic girl's first visit to the therapeutic riding stable where the author worked for two summers. A wealth of precisely rendered details make readers feel as if they are there, just behind the author's eyes, watching the girl's interactions with the horses carefully, usually at some distance. The purity of the style, unencumbered by sentimentality, gives readers space for their own

emotional reactions. Near the end, a single, crucial paragraph deftly explains the scientific basis for equine therapy. By then, we have already seen how well it can work. It's a powerful essay. (Warning: it might make you cry.)

—Jayne Walker, University Writing Program



I had never known the true meaning of the term “living dead” until I met Hope McGinnis. She was the first paraplegic client I met at Trinity Hearts Farm, a therapeutic riding stable which helps physically handicapped children overcome their injuries through horseback riding. Hope had been involved in a serious traffic collision only three months prior to her visit to Trinity Hearts. Her brother and sister were killed instantly in the accident. She survived the accident, but was left paralyzed from the waist down. My usual excitement to meet new clients was eclipsed by a strange bewilderment when I met Hope. For a teenage girl who by all biological standards was alive, she seemed strangely hollow and stony.

Her mother explained to me that despite a dozen treatment sessions with leading pediatric psychiatrists, Hope has not spoken a single word since the accident. The tears welling up in the young mother’s eyes belied her outward show of enthusiasm and I knew that, underneath, she felt that she had lost all three of her children in the accident. Throughout our conversation I could see Hope eyeing the barn and the horses, thinking about why she was here and what these horses could possibly do for her.

As usual I took the new clients on a tour of the entire farm, introducing them to all of the horses. First-time parents were often understandably nervous about putting their children on the backs of 1,200-pound animals, so Gingersnap was the first stop on the tour. Ginger was a medium-sized roan mare who had called Trinity Hearts home for over a decade. Her gentle nature and sweet disposition made her a favorite among anxious parents. The familiar squeak of a wheelchair beckoned Ginger to the open window in her stall, and she poked her head out. Hope’s icy façade showed no sign of change, and she quickly looked away from Ginger, staring back at the ground. Strike one. The next stall was home to the regal thoroughbred gelding Dufferin (Duffy for short). Duffy fractured his foreleg in the last furlough of his debut race. After his fracture healed imperfectly, he was prescribed a new course of treatment: euthanasia. Luckily, Trinity Hearts heard of him through the equine grapevine and offered a bid to his owners. Of all the animals on the farm, he seemed the

most capable of empathizing with our young clients. I was shocked when Duffy took one look at the stone statue in the wheel chair and wanted nothing to do with her. He made a great show of ignoring the girl and going back to munching his beet pulp. Strike two. It was time to pull out the proverbial big guns. Ironically, our big gun was one of our smallest employees, Merryweather, a small Connemara pony from the salt marshes of Galway, Ireland. He had been patiently waiting to meet Hope since her mother took her wheelchair out of the trunk. He began to kick the side of his stall as we approached, to show his discontent with our slothful approach. He eagerly thrust his speckled muzzle towards Hope's hand, expecting a sugar cube or apple slice, but she pulled her hand away and gave poor Merryweather a swift swat on the nose. Strike three.

This had never happened to us before! I felt just as rejected as Ginger, Duffy, and Merry. If the jovial (and adorable) Merryweather was unable to connect with Hope, then who could? I pulled her mother aside to explain that a meeting with one of our staff psychiatrists would be the best way to match Hope with a horse. The squeaking of a departing wheelchair was so commonplace at Trinity Hearts that I did not even notice Hope was removing herself from the barn while we were talking. Her mother agreed to meet with Dr. Lally, a specialist in childhood PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), but as she turned to tell Hope, her daughter was gone. The straight track of narrow wheels in the dirt led us to her. She was stopped at the pasture fence, fixated on something in the pasture.

Merlin was a once-beautiful Olympian. He had competed in the Atlanta Olympics in 1996, and trotted off a proud bronze medal winner in the dressage competition. After his win at the Games, Merlin went on a rock star-like tour, visiting small farming towns and large cities alike. Like Hope, he was the victim of a serious traffic accident. Merlin's driver fell asleep behind the wheel one night and drove the truck and trailer off the road. The driver was unhurt, but Merlin was badly injured. A small fire had started in the trailer and spread to the hay bunk where Merlin's halter was tied for the journey. He suffered horrendous burns on his face and neck, as well as lacerations to his legs and side. Though he survived, Merlin required thousands of dollars worth of veterinary surgery to reconstruct his airways and broken bones. Like Hope, he was outwardly scarred by his trial, but Merlin never seemed to let it get him down. I loved Merlin most among all the animals at Trinity Hearts.

His grotesque-looking face disguised a playful, intelligent, and achingly benevolent nature.

I whistled aloud for Merlin to come over, and of course, he did (one of our charming pet tricks to show parents that horses are just like big dogs). Merlin came over to us with the proud air of an Olympic champion, not a cripple. Hope's eyes seemed to flicker with a trace of life. He stood perfectly still, staring at Hope and calculating the situation. After much thought, he decided to completely ignore the reticent girl and go about nuzzling my pockets for the sugar cubes he knew were there. Her furrowed brow signaled Hope's displeasure with Merlin's disinterest in her. This girl was clearly used to being doted upon (she was the baby of the family after all) and could not stand being ignored. After he had his fill of sugar cubes, Merlin meandered off to go back about his grazing for fresh clover, without acknowledging Hope at all. Opportunity only knocks once, so I gingerly placed a few sugar cubes on the fence rail directly in front of Hope. Upon seeing these small freebies, Merlin decided he wasn't *quite* full, came back over, and took each cube separately, savoring their sticky sweetness. Hope reached out a small hand to brush against Merlin's rich gray mane. This touch could have been no more firm than the breeze of a spring wind, but it was enough for the astute Merlin to inch closer to the fence so Hope could reach him better. She placed a full hand flat against one of the many scars on Merlin's neck. There was a tangible energy in the air as she connected with Merlin. Then the unbelievable happened. Hope asked in a meek, cracking voice, "What's his name?"

There is a wealth of scientific evidence to support the theory that interaction with animals is a valuable method of physical and emotional therapy. The rocking motion of a horse's saddle requires patients to use minor muscle groups to steady themselves and maintain their balance. The synergy between horse and rider is a potent psychological poultice. The innate compassion and group dynamic (herd instinct) of horses extends to human patients. They are able to connect through body language, sound, and on a deeper, unexplainable level. When it was first developed in the late 1980s, equine therapy was seen as a bizarre holistic treatment; but after many successful cases, it has become widely accepted into mainstream physical therapy in recent years. Hope's case was grudgingly referred to Trinity Hearts by her team of traditional physicians as a last-ditch effort to reach the girl. The meeting with Merlin was concrete

proof of Trinity Hearts' efficacy in healing patients emotionally. Needless to say, her mother was beside herself, ecstatic to spend the rest of the afternoon filling out a stack of insurance waivers and liability forms in the director's office. Hope and her mother left to meet with the director, and I went back to my regular farm chores.

I can't say I wasn't glad to be rid of Hope, because honestly, she made me uncomfortable. I was leading Merlin out of the pasture by his faded purple halter for some exercise in the round pen when we attracted Hope's attention. The facility director and her mother were standing outside of their car setting up their next appointment and discussing the normal progression of equine treatment. Again, Hope had eluded notice and wheeled herself over to Merlin and me. She sat quietly, watching me clean his massive obsidian-like hooves. And barely more audible than a whisper she asked "What happened to him?" I explained what had happened to Merlin, ending with "but he seems thankful for the small blessing of survival, and does just fine here." Understanding what I was really trying to say, she nodded her head and reached out for Merlin's muzzle. I had not even noticed at the time, but she had taken one of the sugar cubes I laid out on the fence and put it in the pocket of her wheelchair. She revealed the melting cube of goodness to Merlin, and he gently took it from her flat palm. She giggled slightly and said, "He's still very pretty."

For a girl who hadn't spoken in three months, her few words were an epic triumph. I had high hopes for the rest of her treatment. That was my last summer at Trinity Hearts, and I left only two weeks later for college. I didn't get to teach Hope how to ride or take care of the horses, but I knew she was in good hands. When I went home for Christmas break last year I visited my friends (hoofed and otherwise) at Trinity Hearts—which has expanded its workforce to include thirty horses (including all the originals, of course), three donkeys, and seven pygmy goats. I was casually looking at the pictures tacked on the "Success Stories" bulletin board, and there was Hope McGinnis in her wheelchair holding Merlin by his faded purple halter, with a great big smile.

