

Beyond the Arena

by Devon Combs

“Dev-Dev, come home”, my twelve-year old sister wails into the pay phone as I stand in the gas station parking lot of a small mountain town. My parents have the police out looking for me as I’m on a suicidal mission to end the pain that devours me. A faint voice inside my head tells me to pull the car over and call home. I don’t know what to say as I put the quarters in and dial the home number. My mom answers and I recall nothing she says. I am numb. Then another voice comes through the phone and my senses start to stir. It’s my younger sister Darien and I hear her crying and her pain and more shockingly, I feel her pain, coming through the phone. She cries into the phone that she doesn’t want to lose me and I believe that. Her young voice strikes through my self-hatred and loathing and I listen to her words. She is telling me to come home. She speaks to the part of me that I have long ago shut out. I tell her ok. I get in the car and head back down the mountain, away from a mountain ledge I had imprinted in my dark brain that would do the trick to end the pain. I walk straight into the house and slink downstairs to my bedroom where I slam the door and bury my face in the pillow. I have no words for anyone. In fact, I have nothing for anyone. I am dead inside.

I hear a knock on my door moments later. It is two men’s voices saying they are the police and they are coming in. I have no fight left in me and I know why they are here. I know why my parents had to make the toughest call of their life: to have their daughter arrested in their own home because she was a threat to herself. I barely sit up and do not make eye contact. They promptly handcuff me and walk me upstairs and past my parents who are waiting

by the front door. My mom and dad have tears in their eyes and from what I can imagine, the greatest shame of their lives. I have disappointed everyone. I'm relieved the cops are taking me away. I need help and have no idea where to start.

Weeks before, I had come home from living abroad in New Zealand which was supposed to be my fresh start. I truly believed that if I travelled far enough away that I could escape the bulimia and self-hatred that consumed me in college. Ignoring my intuition, I was wrong and at an all-time low with no support system of friends and family half way across the world.

New Zealand was my last attempt to outrun my addiction. I had previously dropped out of two colleges because I couldn't make it to class. My days were consumed with frequent trips to the cafeteria, loading up to-go boxes with more food than college football players could consume in a day, racing back to the dorm room, binging and purging, heavily drinking at night to forget my day and waking up in places I still shudder to remember. It was not the college experience I had dreamed about.

Living at my parent's house again, I hardly recognized myself from the bright, outgoing, horse-loving girl who felt on top of the world leaving high school. That identity had been flushed down the toilet along with more calories than I can count. I had no sense of who I was anymore. Days before I decided to end my life, I had taken scissors to my beautiful long blond hair and I had given myself a dreadful mullet/pixie cut. My exterior now reflected my interior. I was operating at the lowest vibration known to human kind, which is shame so deep that suicide sounds like a logical way to end the pain. I had hit rock bottom.

Post-handcuffs, I spent time in two different psychiatric wards in Denver. I needed the twenty-four hour supervision yet I knew drug and alcohol classes and anti-depressants were a temporary fix. My parents would not allow let me live at home again which turned out to be a blessing because I had to seek out alternatives. I admitted I had a problem and I was willing to accept that that in order to recover, I needed to huge shift in the way I had been living. I searched the internet and the faint voice inside my head spoke once again as I landed on a particular page. Yes, this was where I needed to be. At a holistic eating disorder treatment center in Tucson, Arizona.

I arrived in the heat of the desert and for the first time in my life, I began the journey inward. The center had holistic modalities for healing such as art therapy, acupuncture, inner child work and Reiki. These were unfamiliar concepts to me yet I was willing to try anything, as long as it kept me from returning to the psych ward. The modality that literally brought me back to life was their equine therapy program. All of the patients loaded into a van and drove to the therapist's ranch where the "therapy" horses were boarded. As a horsewoman my entire life, I was excited to be around horses again, but I had no idea that this day would mark the beginning of my life's purpose.

At the ranch, it was my turn to enter the arena, where Jack the horse was standing. I entered determined to prove my horse knowledge and experience in front of the rest of the group. After all, I had grown up with horses and competed in 3-day eventing. Strutting up toward Jack with my hand out, he turned his head away from me and began to walk other way. I was embarrassed and confused. I was an experienced horsewoman and used to being in

control. Jack didn't give a damn about any of that. Being a prey animal, Jack instantly sensed my energy as a predator coming toward him with an agenda. Through reading my vibrational field with his heightened sensitivity, he also picked up on something I has mastered at hiding over the years--being incongruent. I was skilled in the art of acting like I was fine when on the inside, I was a mess. Jack's feedback to me about what he picked up through my energy and presence was invaluable. I had a lot to learn from this horse.

From the outside of the arena the equine therapist, Marla Kuhn, suggested I stop my actions and breathe to get grounded. She guided me through a series of breath work where I felt my body anchored into the dirt floor. With the desert sun beating on my face and my palms outstretched to the universe, a melting feeling washed over my brain. Something started to shift. My inner critic's voice was nowhere to be heard and I was aware of a connection to my body, which felt foreign. For the first time in a long time, I wasn't trying to make things happen, trying to change the way I felt, trying to change the way I looked or trying to make everyone like me. I gave myself permission to just stand still and breathe.

Simultaneously, Jack walked straight up to me from the far side of the arena. I caught myself tempted to put out my hand for him to sniff, as I had for so many years with horses, whenever they approached. Yet, Marla encouraged me to simply be aware of Jack's presence and to continue taking the long, slow and deep breaths that my body was hungry for.

That horse put his face inches from my chest and stood still with me. Jack's four hooves did not move an inch while he breathed into my heart area and a flood of my suppressed emotions washed over my body and through my brain. There were no words, just a connection

that I had been craving my whole life...with no agenda and no expectations. Heaving, as the tears streamed down my face, I noticed that Jack did not move or run away. He stayed present and continued taking deep breaths with his eyes soft. I was astonished that the weight of my emotions had not scared him away or made him run for the hills. He stood with me in my pain and slowly but surely, I too, embraced the present moment without running for the hills...or the cafeteria.

That day, I connected with horses in a way that made my heart sing and the dark clouds of my eating disorder began to part. I came home. I came into my heart and released tears and fears and joy that had been locked up so deep inside my body that I had not been able to access these emotions through any prior methods. The difference being with horses this time around was that my ego had to step out of the way and let my inner light shine through. Damn, what a life changing concept.

I was able to open up with this gentle giant in a way I had never felt comfortable in doing so with family, friends, boyfriends, teachers or therapists. I saw how self-destructive my mind-set had become when I relied on external, artificial things to make me feel good about myself. By stuffing down my feelings, yearnings and desires for years--my body, mind and soul were crying for help. It was in the arena I discovered that it was ok, in fact, healthy, to be myself; which is what horses had brought me all along, without judgment or asking anything in return, except for me to be in my heart.

I returned to the retreat center that day radiating love --not only for horses but also for myself. I felt clear headed and excited to be in a new relationship with how I now craved to

interact with the equine world. I was also blown away by witnessing the powerful healing these animals had brought other women who were at the ranch that day. I knew on the bus ride home that I had found my true calling: to facilitate healing experiences with horses as my partners, for women across the country who struggled with eating disorders. I now had a vision, a mission and a soul's desire to share the spirit and wisdom of horses, which truly changes lives. Funny, how all along my calling had been towards horses, I just didn't know in what form it would manifest!

Life gave me a huge wakeup call through my eating disorder. That was the red flag that I needed to go deeper and forge past the artificial bullshit to be able to access my soul to live the life I am meant to. Horses came into my life at an early age to be my companions on my journey. They stuck by my through hell and I always drew strength from their wisdom, spirit and power. My energy vibration was raised in the presence of these magnificent creatures. My soul could sing, my body came alive and my feelings were honored. When the student is ready, the teacher appears. My first teacher just happened to eat hay and had a mane and tail.

When I returned to Colorado from the treatment center, I saw life from a new lens. I embraced being a woman and the intuitive gifts that I could rely on within, as opposed to always seeking external answers and validation. Horses had taught me that I was best when I was myself and that there was no shame in crying and being vulnerable. As an oldest child, I had always tried to be the strong one, showing no tears but only strength. That was a bit of the tomboy in me which I still cherish today. Yet I also embrace the feminine side of me which is

soft and intuitive and compassionate. My true strength has emerged from within, once I allowed it to breathe and stopped blocking it with resistance because I was afraid.

In Colorado, I started working with a life coach, Deb Roffe, to support me in my forward growth. Deb helped me recognize when my inner critic was leading my life and how to get around my self-sabotaging beliefs to keep moving forward. I was determined. I had a mission that was far beyond my life just being about me, myself and I anymore. I knew with all my heart that I was destined to make a difference in women's lives through horses. I realized that trying to conform and throw out my gifts is what led my soul to revolt and literally take me to the edge to wake up and realize that I was not aligned with my purpose.

In 2008, Deb forwarded me an email about a woman in Boulder who was teaching a course on how to create a career with horses. I attended the introductory call about the course and even before the end of the hour I knew with all my heart and soul that this was what I was seeking. My intuition went nuts and I was able to honor my inner knowing this time around! Unlike the colleges I attempted before, this course was a fit. This was the learning and experience I was yearning to have, way beyond an academic education but an education that resonated with my soul. Thus, my next teacher appeared: Melisa Pearce, CEO of Touched by A Horse™ Certification Program. Throughout the next eighteen months I became certified in the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method™ and learned how create a business by partnering with horses to coach women struggling with eating disorders. At my graduation, I was empowered, passionate and eager to use my life experiences to make a difference in other people's lives.

Today my business, Beyond the Arena™, is my dream comes true. With horses as my partners, we help women access their inner wisdom in the arena and take their “aha” moments beyond the arena, into their everyday lives. Sitting in the back of a police car with handcuffs on, I never would have believed that I deserved to have joy. Yet, my eating disorder could not fight my life purpose and calling. By the grace of god and a horse named Jack, I learned how to channel the enormous energy it took to have constant self-loathing into something that feeds my soul and benefits the greater good. Striving to live authentically, serving others and speaking my truth, is freedom for me. And freedom is the best taste there is. Even better than chocolate!

Devon Combs is the CEO of Beyond the Arena™, LLC which is based in Larkspur, CO at a stunning horse ranch with an indoor arena. Devon is passionate about sharing the life changing impact that horses have on people, through the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method™. She offers retreats, workshops and individual coaching sessions at the horse ranch and over the phone. For more information on Beyond the Arena’s services, please visit www.beyondthearena.com.