**Trust and Permission**

**A leadership lesson in vulnerability**

Late in 2021 I was delivering a client programme when, out of the blue, I received some extremely difficult news. My blood froze when I saw the 12 missed calls throughout the day from two different numbers I didn’t recognise. What I learned in the subsequent minutes folded me in two and knocked me to the ground. There was no question of me entering the classroom again, I was in deep shock and grief.

Five months later Spring 2022 dawned and it was time for me to get back to doing the work I love, facilitating Equest’s horse-led leadership development programmes. We had 20 international leaders coming to the farm where we are based in Wiltshire for a two day programme. As it approached, still feeling raw and emotionally spent from the aftermath of my bereavement, I began to doubt whether I was up to leading our team of 10 humans and 8 horses and facilitating an intense process for a group of this size.

The nature of the leadership development we offer plumbs the depths of human emotion albeit gently. We’d be talking about being authentic, connecting with the essential self, about being vulnerable and creating emotional safety. And here I was, the programme leader, on track to be perhaps the most vulnerable person in the room. I knew my feelings of trauma could easily be triggered at the location where my nightmare had started and I began to question whether I should do the programme at all. I was terrified of spoiling the experience for the group, of being hijacked by my feelings, of looking stupid, of losing control, of not being able to provide a safe environment for others.

‘What is the worst thing that can happen?’ My supervisor said to me in our session a couple of weeks before the programme.

‘That I break down and completely lose it,’ I said.

‘So? What would happen if you did?’ She continued.

‘I suppose one of my team would take over. I would trust them implicitly to carry on without me, to cover for me.’

‘And what would the impact on the participants be of you breaking down? What kind of example would it set?’

‘I guess it would be an example of authentic behaviour, and of being courageous enough to be vulnerable!’ I couldn’t help a wry giggle.

So on the morning of the programme I briefed my team that they needed to be ready and verbalised the trust I had in them. Together we devised a ‘Pam breakdown back-up plan.’

The classroom hummed with happy expectation as I stood to welcome the client group. I shared that I’d had some bad news the last time I stood there and that I was still fragile, which the tremor in my voice betrayed. But I breathed deeply, grounded my turbulent feelings down through my feet, looked outside to the tranquil herd, the beautiful landscape, the red kites hovering overhead. I felt calmer. I had done it. I had named my vulnerability and suddenly everything seemed possible.

My usual introduction didn’t seem appropriate. Instead I read to the group from my journal about why the leadership development work I do with horses is so important to me. I spoke of how our approach has evolved through the interconnection and courage and contribution of many, both human and equine. I held myself together, just about, and the emotional chord I struck continued to vibrate it’s beautiful harmonies throughout the following two days for everyone present. I hadn’t broken down as I had feared, but I hadn’t pretended either. I had let my emotions live and breathe within the group process. And the group’s learning experience was richer for it: safe, joyful and profound.

I had rested in Trust - of my colleagues, of the horses, of our clients, of the process. And I had given myself Permission - to be truly real, to shed the need to be brave, or infallible, or in charge. The heart-opening which I had no choice other than to embrace flowed through to the group - they trusted and they too gave themselves permission to be true to themselves.

This experience has changed the way that I lead forever. Whilst the pain caused by my bereavement will lessen over time, I trust that the gifts it gave me - how to be openly vulnerable with grace, intention and fortitude and how to ask for help - will continue to grow and make me a better leader, practitioner and human being.

**Pam is a writer, leadership coach, specialist in Embodied Horse-Led Leadership Development and Director of Equest Limited. Her books *The Spell of the Horse, Stories of Healing and Personal Transformation with Nature’s Finest Teacher* and *The Spirit of the Horse, Finding Healing and Spiritual Connection with the Horse*, are published by Blackbird Books and available from all good publishers.**