Peggy Cummings and Connected Riding®

By Kate Hester

Peggy Cummings, developer of Connected Riding

Obody swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance? - William Butler Yeats

You've probably experienced one of those magical moments with your horse when it seemed that your spirits were melded in true accord. Perhaps you were scratching that special spot that gives him the most pleasure, or maybe it was a long hug - one of those intense, quiet "I love you" moments in which the two of you were together in a place all your own. You eventually turned to another duty, but your horse followed you, still immersed in the moment of communion.

Can you summon those moments of "oneness" at will? Are you able to extend the moments to minutes or hours? Do you ride with that same sense of complete harmony with your horse?

Monty Roberts calls this "Join Up". Tom Dorrance calls it "True Unity". Peggy Cummings calls it "Connected". Peggy Cummings not only knows how to achieve and extend those moments, but she can teach others how to ride with the same connection with their horses.

> Each of Peggy's exercises has a specific focus and purpose and is carefully designed to achieve a specific goal.

Participating in a Peggy Cummings Connected Riding clinic is a bit like beginning to learn the short form or abbreviated version of T'ai Chi. All attention is focused on the sequence of physical exercises that Peggy presents as she explains her ideas. She demonstrates the exercises she has developed and clinic attendees practice with intense concentration. Over and over the movements are practiced and as with T'ai Chi, it is not until the exercises are mastered and committed to muscle memory that one begins to recognize the depth of the work that is being done. Peggy calls this learning "from the inside to the outside".

In a sense, the Connection that Peggy teaches can be achieved by 'connecting the dots' - that is, connecting all the separate tools of good horsemanship for the purpose of connected riding.

Those who read any of the many publications devoted to equestrian pursuits are aware of a multitude of ideas to achieve improved horsemanship. The wise horseman prepares for riding with connection by becoming equipped with bodywork skills for horse and self, knowledge of human and equine biomechanics, physical/mental harmony, and a grounding or centeredness of energy.

In today's world, rider fitness is encouraged. Proper breathing is fundamental. T'ai Chi is recommended to develop balance; yoga supports mental and physical harmony as well as flexibility. Pilates is a form of exercise that helps one discover core power. Body awareness is promoted by the Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais. Rolfing can result in structural integrity for the human and equid alike. There are many other forms of bodywork that are becoming part of the vocabulary of the equestrian world.

Riders are often encouraged to utilize mental tools such as visualization and meditation, and to remember the effortless effort of Zen. Energy work and vibrational aids are commonplace in many barns and for many riders: flower essences, homeopathic remedies, essential oils of aromatherapy, Reiki, and more.

For the horse, bodywork includes everything from simple carrot stretches, chiropractic, acupressure and acupuncture to SENSE and TTOUCH. Craniosacral therapy is available for horses as well as humans. Functional Unwinding is available in some areas as well.

The current focus on natural horsemanship has made popular such training methods as clicker

Barb and her mare Charlie, a lovely horse - given to Barb because of unmanageable behavior.

training, round pen training, resistance-free training, and Pat Parelli's games, to name a few. These methods encourage clear communication between horse and rider.

Riding skills are addressed through such programs as Centered Riding, Resistance Free Riding and others, in addition to traditional approaches.

AND...

Often riders haven't been able to put everything together to bring about the desired end - riding the horse in perfect harmony - or what Peggy refers to as "The Dance". Many riders have studied these various disciplines. Some have gone on to become experts in one or several of these areas. Others have taken what works for them from the different disciplines and adapted them to their own success in riding. These are the riders who are able to study various themes and bring them all to the fore when riding. Others - perhaps the majority of riders - are unable to make the connection between one theme and another with the result that, when they ride, they're not connected to their horses. They are equipped with many useful tools, but without bringing them all to the work site, the job doesn't get done.

Therefore, when attending a Peggy Cummings Connected Riding clinic, the rider should bring along all the tools she has, and be mindful of her own skills in bodywork, relaxation techniques, and communication. It is as empowering to recognize your own contributions as it is to learn from a good teacher. Don't appear empty-handed at a clinic waiting to be handed a whole new set of tools; if you bring your own, you will learn to use the best of them to build your connection, your dance. If you bring no skills, Peggy will show you what you need to know, and you will need to do some work to make them work for you.

Peggy has combined her lifelong observations of horses and riders with her studies of biomechanics, both human and equine, mental disciplines, and energy techniques to devise an approach that is uniquely her own, with the well-being of the horse always in mind. She has studied Feldenkrais and Alexander, is a TTEAM practitioner and an advanced instructor in Centered Riding. She draws on many of these disciplines, some to greater extent than others, takes what works for her, and has made her Connected Riding program a composite of her own wisdom and these other approaches. She brings them all to the job of connecting with the horse and riding with connection. She connects the dots to bring about Connected Riding.

Each of Peggy's exercises has a specific focus and purpose and is carefully designed to achieve a specific goal. The clinic experience will demonstrate the ideas behind Peggy's method, and a rider must take responsibility to follow through to really learn and develop any skills she particularly lacks. Perhaps she has little understanding of equine biomechanics and thus cannot intelligently observe her horse from the ground. Maybe she has weak abdominal muscles - one of the most important things a rider must do is to develop her own abdominal core. Rider balance and centeredness comes from a strong core. Without abdominal strength and control, a rider is not equipped to ride with connection. The rider must be grounded and centered in her own energy and able to balance and rebalance as required. Only then can she reach out to meet the energy of her horse and make the connection.

Peggy uses language carefully. She coins a new term for each new biomechanical adjustment in the rider, believing that using old names will call up old riding postures. You won't hear "heels down", for example, and she uses different cues for stopping and starting. The most evocative word Peggy uses is "melt". It denotes a gentle, gradual release, and she uses the word in many instances. She constantly reminds riders to "melt the tail" - meaning to release the back just to the point of neutral. When the rider's pelvis is in neutral, her inner core is

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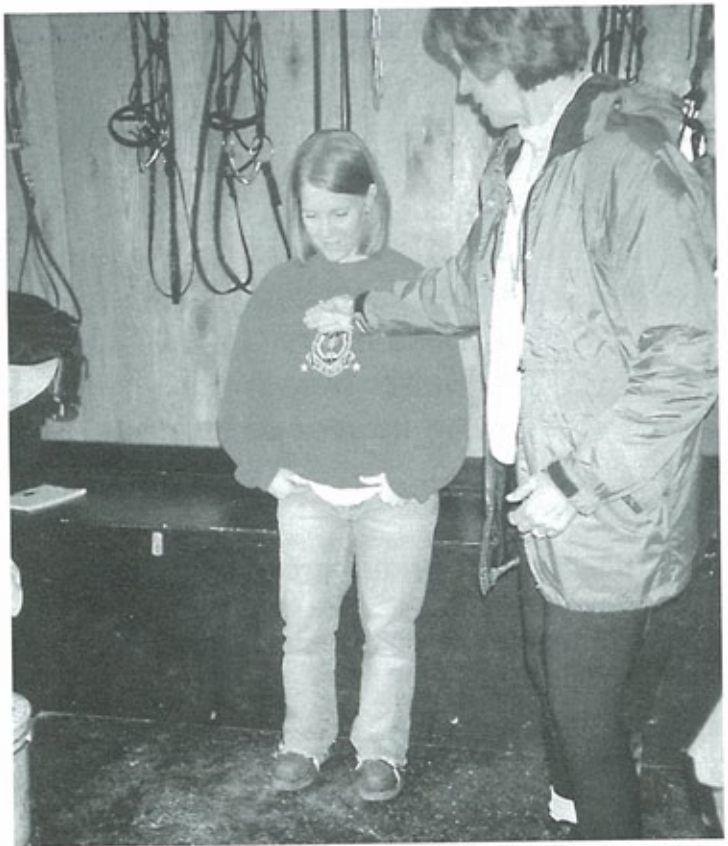
Charlie with Peggy, explaining some aspects of bodywork for the horse, while Noonan (the dog) and Pam listen. Bodywork is for making sure your horse is able to dance, and for adjusting his kinks or stuck places - not chiropractically, but with stretches, TTouch, energy, walking in serpentines, etc.

(L to R): Barb, Deb, Peggy, and Pam practicing the "meet and melt" slow release - a 'gee whiz' sort of moment to feel and understand the difference between a melting release of the reins vs. an 'open the trap door and drop him through' sort of a sudden release.

strong, and balance is achieved.

It's all energy work. Each exercise Peggy teaches is designed as part of the overall choreography of the dance. When the rider is in the correct position - neutral - she is in a position of collected inner power or energy. It is this powerful energy summoned by the rider that connects with the energy of the horse. If you find your power core from Pilates, remember to find that same core to reach out to the energy of the horse. This is where connection takes place. When the rider is balanced in her neutral position of collected energy, she has the power to meet the energy of the horse and influence that energy, and ultimately lead the horse to his own neutral position of collected energy. At that point, the rider and horse melt into one flow of energy and the dance begins.



Peggy testing Amanda's balance. When the rider is balanced - standing or seated - she is very strong and can't be pushed over from the chest or back. Amanda is poking her fingers into her hip flexors to be sure they are relaxed.

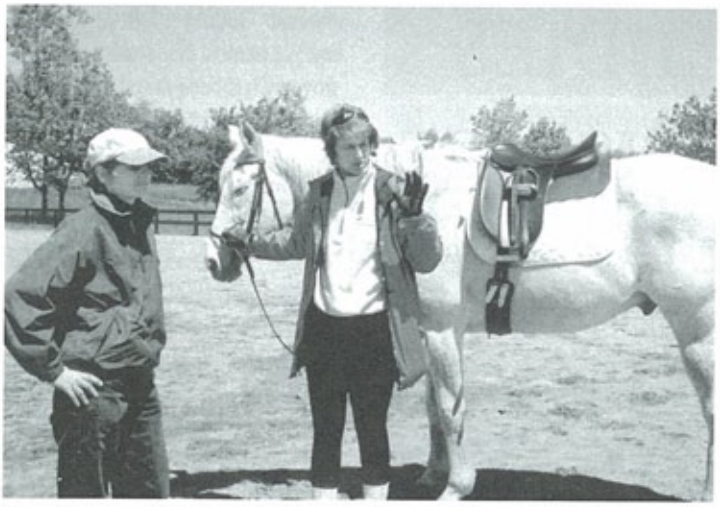
Riding may not feel as graceful as dancing initially, however. For many riders, the feeling of balance in the saddle is a foreign one. The body wants to return to habitual postures; the feeling of a connected seat is not necessarily in the rider's comfort zone. Add to this the new and unfamiliar feeling of a horse moving more freely, and a rider can feel a bit disconcerted until she adjusts to the new feeling of connected riding.

Peggy also uses the word in the phrase "meet and melt" when she talks about meeting the energy or resistance of the horse and then slowly, carefully releasing in order to rebalance the horse. It is a powerful concept and one that is not taught in traditional methods of training. We've been taught that the release is the reward for the horse, but without the "melt" in the equation, the release is less rewarding than it should be and is not the energy balancing tool that it becomes when "melt" is applied. Each time you meet the resistance of the horse and melt, you find that he has adjusted his level of resistance to a lesser level - as soon as you melt, you meet again and you find the horse is at a lesser level of resistance. After a series of 'melts' you reach a point of meeting that is an acceptable connection for riding.

Connection is what happened surprisingly quickly for one student and her mare - Barb and Charlie. Charlie was a give-away horse due to temperament problems on the farm where she was living. Barb had only ridden her a few times before the clinic, and never in a group setting. On the first day, Charlie was very high-headed, bouncing off the walls, and very 'out of her body'. Barb was able to do the bodywork, however, and rode her. The surprising thing was that, on the second day of the clinic, Charlie was just as mellow as could be - head down, and responsive to the little exercises Peggy had shown us.

The rider always has the responsibility to lead the dance; that is, she is the one who must consciously balance and rebalance herself and thereby influence and allow the horse to find his balance. In this way the rider leads the horse, but the two are one in perfect harmony.

"Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." This old saying is



Pam (L), Peggy demonstrates holding with Smokey, holding the noseband of the bridle to facilitate clear and immediate communication with him.

proven false over and over in the horse world. We are all very fortunate to have so many teachers with so many insights. Our horses and our riding have benefited greatly from each of them.

Peggy Cummings is one such master. She has profound insights into the mysteries of equus and willingly imparts them to those who are open to receive. One need only watch and listen.

And, if you should individually achieve calmness and harmony in your own person, you may depend upon it that a wave of imitation will spread from you, as surely as the circles spread outward when a stone is dropped into a lake. - From *The Gospel of Relaxation* by William James

For more information:

www.peggycummings.com
www.connectedriding.com
800-310-2192
"Connected Riding - An Introduction" by Peggy Cummings

About the author:

Kate Hester is a freelance equine journalist and regular contributor to Natural Horse Magazine. She is caretaker of their many horses from miniatures to drafts, cows and calves, chickens, llamas, and other animals at Lazy Dog Farm.

Deb, Connected Riding Instructor and clinic host, helping Pam 'melt' her tail (soften her back), riding Smokey

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