

by Pam Billinge

Parelli and Personal Discovery

How your journey can help you be the person you really are.

In spite of having spent twenty-three years helping others overcome the most complex emotional issues and having invested significantly in my own personal growth, I was blown away by the power of my journey at the Parelli Center in Colorado.



It is often said that embarking on the Parelli journey can change your life. But how? Pam Billinge, leadership coach and body psychotherapist, spent six weeks at the Parelli Center in Pagosa Springs this summer. She hopes that by sharing her experience she can help others on their own journey of self-discovery. I emerged from the six-week program with not only a new level of horsemanship but also new depths of self-awareness, self-belief, vitality and focus, which I

know will change the course of my life. And this is nothing unusual for the committed student of Parelli, whether studying at one of the Centers worldwide or on a home-study program.

Our horses present us with challenges that touch us at the deepest level. They can really get to the heart of our emotional or mental barriers to success and happiness if we are prepared to listen. When our progress with our horse falters, this is often a sign that we are

bumping up against something big in terms of our own personal development. But working out what that something is—and then confronting it—is trickier. Our attitudes, beliefs and behaviors have been with us for a long time. It is likely that we developed them early in life, and they may have been useful in helping us to feel safe. So the prospect of questioning these facets of ourselves and changing them can bring up anxiety and even pain.

My “something big” emerged when I was working on my Fluidity. I had leased one of the Parelli horses, who taught me much (and stole my heart!). At first there was so much brace in my body that I felt like a sack of potatoes on his back. When my bouncing just got too much for him to bear, he would gently come to a halt and, look around at me with big, soft, patient eyes as if to say “Shall we try that again?”

The Parelli faculty team came to my rescue when they began teaching us about how mental, emotional and physical brace in the horse are intrinsically linked. As a body psychotherapist, I do work that is based on the connection of mind and body and the belief that our emotional experience is held somatically. So to hear this was music to my ears.

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Our lesson then moved on to exploring how physical brace in ourselves creates physical brace in our horse. This is a great example of what is called a BFO (blinding flash of the obvious) in Parelli-land. It follows that if we have a physical brace ourselves, it is undoubtedly caused by a mental or emotional issue. So the achievement of Fluidity becomes not a matter of improving riding technique, but one of self-exploration and personal development.

At this point in the course I could no longer deny the fact that something big was staring me in the face, however much I tried to blame my difficulties with Fluidity on the unfamiliar saddle and gait, among other things! And however scary it was, I knew I had to get to the bottom of it if I was to progress in my Fluidity, horsemanship and life journey.

I spent a lot of time exploring what was going on for me by reflecting and writing in my journal. Often I would go and sit in the meadow with my horse grazing while I gazed at the amazing views and scribbled furiously. Many things arose for me. But what became crystal clear was that as long as there is brace—in either human or horse—our relationship cannot be complete. While it exists, our energy cannot flow together with our horse’s; our hearts cannot fully connect; and neither horse nor human can be as beautiful as we have the potential to be. The same can be applied to human relationships—and identifying where our brace is and what is causing it can transform how we relate to ourselves and to others.

The source of my emotional issues was in the areas of trust and bereavement. For others it might be about fear, anxiety, loss of control, lack of assertion, self-image, self-worth, over-controlled emotions. Exploring this territory is not easy.

As we build a wonderful relationship with our horses they offer us the truth. If we can be brave enough to accept this gift from them without self-recrimination or shame, we can become the people we really are, and our lives will truly change as a result. 🐾

Fundamentals to guide you on your Journey

- Keep a journal. It doesn’t have to be a work of art! Just capture key words and phrases that describe your experience and feelings. Also jot down any questions that come up but you can’t answer; the answer will emerge later. Journaling helps to deepen your thought process, bring things alive and lessen the chance of your brooding on things.
- Create the right environment. Making time and finding the right environment for reflection is important. That may be somewhere spacious and peaceful, or people-watching at a café—whichever suits your personality best.
- Become more aware of your body. Where is the brace? Which muscles? When do you first notice it? What happens before it happens? What makes it feel more or less severe? Are you aware of any feelings associated with the brace (for example, annoyed, sad, ambitious, angry, resistant, competitive, excited)? What feelings emerge when you start to loosen the brace?
- Track your emotions. How do you feel about yourself in relation to your horse (for example, not competent enough, inadequate, afraid, ambitious, controlling)? What sort of self-talk do you have? Are these messages your own, or are they what someone else in your life has said about you?
- Involving others. If you are finding it tough, seek the support of someone who is professionally qualified to help. And of course, you can always rely on your horse for authentic feedback. He will let you know when you are on the right track!
- Be kind to yourself. Processing the emotions that come up as a result of your journey takes energy and courage. Use approach and retreat as you would with your horse when tackling any of your own emotional issues that are difficult or painful.