

The Job Nobody Wants

He was big, athletic, energetic, very aggressive, and set in his ways. This eleven-year-old Thoroughbred gelding was a hand-me-down from one trainer to the next. He had earned his name, Rowdy. Even with a chain over his nose, he was quick to rear, strike, and bite. He could take a cue stick or a whip out of your hand faster than you could use it.

Because of his experience as a teaser stud, along with his manhandling, Rowdy's apparent concept of being controlled by dominance alone left anyone at the end of the lead rope in a tug of war. After many years of experience with this type of critter, I still handle them with much fear and trepidation. It is very easy to find myself in a defensive posture. My mind races to many traumas of others that I could quickly see myself in - the coach who has the difficulties in facing the premedona athlete at the risk of losing parental support or his or her job, the boss who has to face the bully employee at the risk of an angry reaction, or the parent or spouse who finds themselves constantly in a reactive position toward an aggressive party.

Whether I liked it or not, I seemed to have inherited the position of the gunslinger. In fact, I began to wonder if I had a sign on my back that said "kick me." In working with this horse, I soon found myself being emotionally reactive - feeling like I just wanted to take his head off, as he was frightening, dangerous, and quick. The owner said that this was his last chance. Though Rowdy was a very skilled athlete, and could earn his keep, this was his last chance because he was becoming insufferable in his aggression. The attempt to demand respect from this horse proved fruitless. In fact, it only affirmed the Scriptures which say in Proverbs 9:8 "Do not reprove a scoffer, lest he hate you." Proverbs 27:22 says, "Though you pound a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, yet his foolishness will not depart from him." In Proverbs 26:4-5 it says "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves, that he not be wise in his own eyes." Thus, the reacting, demanding approach proved useless both in his past, and in the present.

The question is, how do you go about winning the heart of someone who is skillfully and dangerously defensive? "Like apples of gold in settings of silver is a word spoken in right circumstances. Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise reprover to a listening ear" (Proverbs 25:11-12). Though the verses sound optimistic and rewarding, they are difficult words to live out. How can we come to the place where we've earned the right to be heard, and are able to speak an apt word that penetrates deep into the soul, liberating the heart of the hearer? This unique transformation begins with a clear understanding of the need of the hearer. Rowdy screamed in loud protest with every defensive gesture. Through his insecurity, frustration, and despair, he was fighting for his life. So also is the need of many individuals who are angry, retaliatory, and crude. They are starved for love and security.

The change begins not with the horse or with the other party, but with the trainer purposing to be proactive. While the horse came with a chain and a crop, it would be my goal to ultimately tear those walls down, and to have him led without any lead rope. Something would have to change, or both of us would be in great peril. He was threatened by too much intimacy, and I was endangered by too much vulnerability. In

order to win this horse, I could not afford the luxury of being either reactionary, or passive and naive. The change would begin in my own commitment to live consistently and within the jurisdiction of my effectiveness. Instead of working to change Rowdy, I worked to become very consistent with my body language and the use of my cues so that the horse could have a pattern of consistency and resolve that he could begin to trust and expect both reward and consequences from. This would be the foundation from which he would begin to understand true love.

He was dangerous even to touch, let alone hug. If I was going to earn the right to do surgery on the things that were offensive and distasteful, then I would have to build a framework by which he could trust and know how to please and honor me. Jesus took the same approach, having been referred to as one who spoke with authority. His authority was the result of his character, compassion, and commitments. The most influential factor in gaining a hearing from my cynical and skeptically, angry friend would be passing the test of consistency. His need for security would mean that he would have to have some figure in his life that would help him to know right from wrong - someone to help him know and experience the pleasures of making wise choices, and allow him to experience the consequences of his foolish choices until he could humble himself and make wiser, clearer decisions. Thus allowing the grey, vague, uncertainty to dissipate in light of clearer, obvious choices to either do right or honor others, or to be selfish and experience the pain of his foolish choices. Consequences would come from the physical stress and withheld honor; a lack of release, a lack of verbal praise, and the sweat of continuing to work until he took responsibility for his own person.

As the framework became clearer, I was able to tear the walls down that stood between us. Within my first encounter, I took the chain off of his nose, replacing it with a bit in his mouth and a cue stick. With continued progress, I used only the lead rope and halter with a cue stick. When I noticed he focused more on the cue stick, always trying to protect himself, I moved him to the round pen and used a flag instead of a lead rope or a cue stick. Ultimately, the horse began to honor my personal presence, therefore allowing me to work with him in a round pen without any form of restraint. These are tough assignments, and there have been a lot of days of discouragement and times when I felt vulnerable and ineffective. My emotions sometimes ranged from wanting to be reactionary to quitting on him altogether. I had to often distance myself in order to gain perspective both of his need, and of my commitment. I've found no better test of my convictions than the accountability that this horse offered me. The only hope I had cultivated for a listening ear was that I was consistent and innocent from being antagonistic and provocative.

Did that mean that I did not face him with truth and the hard reality of taking responsibility for himself? No, I firmly stood against his aggressive behavior and gave him a consistent fence by which he could make clear choices. Ironically, we understand through the negative implications of the harlot in Proverbs 7 that man is first engaged by his eyes and then his hearing. Scripture says that faith cometh by hearing. However, before one hears, they need to see something demonstrated in the life of the messenger. So, too, it was in this case, in order to command, rather than demand Rowdy's respect, he needed to see consistency, to experience the hope of love and affirmation, and know that

I was committed to allowing him to make decisions, even though they were potentially embarrassing or threatening.

The key comes out of Hebrews 12:5-6 where there are three levels of communication: discipline, reproof, and chastening. Discipline is not punishment - it is a focused commitment to do what's right. Reproof is correcting error in judgment. Chastening is the resolve to face an individual who deliberately employs his will against what is right until they are able to humble themselves and effectively be restored to a place of fellowship. These levels are not without cost, effort, and risk. However, to naively think that they will come about without investment of energies is to think that a car will run forever without preventative maintenance. Every relationship that is worth a grain of salt requires investment. We must determine whether we want to be reactive, spending our time and money in repair damage, or proactive, and invest our money and time wisely in preventative maintenance. Either way, we must invest!

Although there were times when I lost hope in winning Rowdy's heart, I continued to invest by faith and by the encouragement of others. Sometimes there seems little hope of reward for the enduring sacrifices many of us are called to make regarding a difficult situation. As it is often my position to talk to somebody about an area of negligence in their life, I often find myself with the queasiness of facing someone who might reject me and not hear me. Recently, I had the responsibility and privilege of addressing a young lady regarding the image and effects that were created by her dress and appearance. Though ignorant about the message that others perceived, and in denial about her own need, I was able to convince her of how much I loved her, valued her, and needed her as an ally in this ministry. Her partnership with me, example to others, and willingness to cultivate inward beauty were a great motivator for her to lay down her life in this area and take up the responsibility of being a clear example for others to follow.

She later wrote me a note of how this personal encounter had literally given her great freedom and had changed her life.

The fruit of those rewards are what cause me to continue to face the things that I want to run from. Proverbs 24:25 says "But to those who rebuke the wicked will be delight, and a good blessing will come upon them." Indeed there is a reward for those who will take on the responsibility to become a wise reprover, and cultivate a listening ear. They truly will be looked upon as apples of gold in settings of silver. However, the job is often threatening and distasteful. Yet, when we truly win the heart, there is little comparison.

I found myself after a few weeks really loving this needy horse, who longed to be encouraged, loved, and given hope. Study and prepare yourself. You'll improve your success rate at winning the hearts of others toward the high calling we have in Christ Jesus. – Lew Sterrett