Unemployed Horses

I went through a rough patch. A long, excruciating, narcissistic, self-pitying rough patch.

For more than a decade, I had a job that became a career. I had a position that I enjoyed, worked with and for people that I adored, and had challenges that were tailor made to fit my talents and passions. And then, almost overnight, it was gone.

I'm sure that someone, (or, perhaps several someones), somewhere has done intensive and well-funded research about depression among the unemployed. It's a no-brainer, really. Our national society is geared toward one identifying one's own self-worth in relation to what one does for a living, and how financially successful they are doing it. So, it really came as no surprise to me when I awoke morose and went to bed somber, day after monotonous day.

When I grew restless and accepted the fact that there was no magic job solution anywhere in the near future, I had to do something to get out of my funk. This was not a radically new concept; any Google search will tell you in no uncertain terms that the best way to feel better about yourself is to get *out of* yourself.

I looked for volunteer opportunities that interested me. Even in being of service to others, I still selfishly wanted to find something I thought I would both enjoy and be intellectually stimulated by. The local volunteer webpage advertisement that caught my eye read, "Help horses by assisting us with our afternoon chores. Every evening we dump and refill waters and distribute hay and grain to stalls and bring in approximately 35 rescue horses awaiting adoption, being rehabilitated, or in sanctuary care." Why this struck me I have no earthly idea. I had not lived on a farm a day in my life. Nor did I have any experience with farms and certainly not farm animals. I rode a horse on a sand dune once on a family vacation in Provincetown, Massachusetts when I was ten. My knowledge of horses was limited to, "I think they're pretty."

I suppose it was the uniqueness factor. When I sought out volunteer work, I imagined soup kitchens and clothing drives, Goodwills and Salvation Armies. Whatever my reasons, I signed up at the link I was directed to and waited a couple of days to hear back from the volunteer coordinator. Of course, when I did hear back, my fear of all potential change and all things different kicked in, and I began to imagine that I was much too busy to make such a commitment. I wasn't working, I wasn't writing, and I was perpetually waiting for the most recent season of something or other to be released on Netflix. Try as I might, I could not conceive of a rationalization that would hold water.

The day before my first day to volunteer, I drove out to the farm to make sure I had my directions clear. (I am nothing if not an obsessive planner.) The day of, I arrived 20 minutes early to find the place deserted, save for the three dogs that ran up and surrounded my car as I parked. They were friendly and excited to see me. I walked with them around the several barns and outbuildings until I came upon a man tossing bales of hay from a tractor into a pile on the floor. "I'm here to

volunteer?" I said, more a question of one hopelessly lost than a statement. "Linda not here, wait and maybe other volunteer will be here soon, yes?" he said in broken English. I had no idea who Linda was, nor did I ask. I went back out to my car and played with the dogs until someone else arrived.

The next arrivals were a man, his young daughter, and his borderline elderly mother. They were welcoming and friendly, told me all about the rescue, introduced me to several horses in their stalls, and pointed out many others in the fields. I followed them around and did what was asked of me, which was largely as advertised: emptying and filling buckets of water and tossing hay into both empty and occupied stalls.

I was amused by the little chalkboards tacked to each of the stalls advertising each horse's name. They had typical racehorse names: Beauty, Thunder, Chief, Dancer. They had human names: Molly, Sissy, Oliver, Jack. They had comical names: Macho Man, Keno Reno, Kiwi. There were pintos, quarter horses, thoroughbreds, Arabians, Appaloosas, Missouri Foxtrotters, and one enormous Belgian. There was also a small army of barn cats, accustomed to these human volunteers trampling around their home, they were as friendly as the dogs had been.

Volunteering with horses is not for the physically weak. I watched in stunned silence as the grandmother flipped buckets of stale water weighing at least 30 pounds. I myself was a bit short of breath hauling new bales from the wall to the center of the barn. As I worked, other volunteers arrived, some vet students, some teens, others my age range. I seemed to be the only new recruit as everyone else looked as if they knew exactly where to go and what to do. The more seasoned volunteers did higher level tasks; harnessing and leading horses out of their stalls, administering medication for those horses that needed it, and working on training exercises.

The grounds of the shelter were enormous, and there were five barns to visit. I walked with a man who said, "Wanna come with me to feed the colts and fillies?" I knew that roughly meant "younger horses" so I nodded enthusiastically and trotted after him. I was amazed that more volunteers did not go to this area of the rescue and remain forever distracted from their other tasks. If you have never spent time with young horses, I would suggest doing so at your earliest opportunity. They are playful as puppies, bright eyed and curious, innocent and beautiful. Being with them made me happier than I had been since I lost my job, perhaps even much longer than that. The thing about being with animals, any animal, is that they are always in the moment, constantly present, a rare feat for any average human, try as we might.

When I got home from my first evening of volunteering, I had spent 3 hours at the rescue. I was exhausted, but I was also altered. The experience changed me. For the first time since having a large part of my identity as a professional taken away, I felt something that resembled peace. I went back to the website of the rescue that night and read everything. (Admittedly, I was a little obsessed.) I read about the founding of the rescue and its solely volunteer staff, the owner of the land and the property (the elusive Linda), the remarkable fact that the entire operation was financed by donations. I read all of the rescue stories, some about horses I had met earlier that evening. I learned that many of the colts and phillies I'd cared for had been abandoned nurse

mare foals from Kentucky. Several of the older horses had been quarantined initially because they suffered from everything from rain rot to pneumonia. Two of the horses from the most recent rescue were blind and one had a club foot. A few were saved during their literal ride to the slaughterhouse. Gratefully, the site also listed endless success stories. What I found the most striking about these horses was that they could learn to trust humans again. I didn't trust most people that had never even done anything to me, let alone left me in a field to starve to death.

For the rest of the summer, I bonded with these animals. I watched new rescues being brought in, and older rescues being adopted out. I began to relate to them, for I felt as if I had been abandoned, neglected, by my previous employer. Logically I knew I could not take the closing of a company personally; it was a business and sometimes businesses fail. I suspected that the farms and breeders that had surrendered these beautiful animals were the same. It wasn't as if their neglect was intentional (except in the case of the nurse mare foals from Kentucky, those greedy bastards were just evil). Equine care is extraordinarily expensive, and I suspected that was the root cause of most of the abandonment and failure of care. The horses, like me, were victims of circumstance. Brood mares, racehorses, ranch working horses, trail horses, hunting horses, they all had been *employed* in a manner of speaking and now they weren't. Still, it is difficult to not take such things personally as a human. I do not know for certain if horses have the brain or emotional capacity to take things personally, but I bet they do.

I went to the horses three or four times a week. Eventually I learned how to do more than toss bales and empty and fill water buckets. I began to make recurring monthly donations to "sponsor" one of the blind horses named Lily. I did not care that my income was only the pittance I was receiving from unemployment checks because I had been inspired by Stan, Lily's brother. Stan had his sight, and he would not go anywhere without Lily. He led her because he knew she was blind and needed help, and watching him walk ahead slightly, with Lily's cheek gently touching his hindquarter, is quite possibly one of the most touching things I have ever seen. Stan did not expect anything in return, and, in my financial sponsoring of the blind horse, neither did I.

When the evening air had turned crisp, I was having a quiet moment with a shy cattle driving horse in one of the barns. He seemed reluctant to go out the open barn door and roam in the fields with the others, even though he was looking longingly at his rescue brothers and sisters, milling about, thinking their horse thoughts. I understood. Sammy was afraid that if he joined a group of new pals, they too would abandon him, as the cattle had done. At least, these are the imaginings I had as I stood stroking his flank. I was reluctant to rejoin the world of the working too, stifled by a crippling fear of corporate abandonment.

I stayed with Sammy and let him nuzzle me, then put my arms around him for several minutes, listening to and feeling his hot breath on my back. They say horses are gentle giants, and although that might not be true for all sizes and breeds, it was certainly true of this beast, resting his enormous chin on my shoulder. Everything was quiet, all the volunteer hands were elsewhere. Just then, I had what I sometimes call a "god moment." I am not at all a religious person but lack any other words to describe these occasional occurrences. These moments are pure perfection, an instance free from thoughts and worries of a material world and a palpable connection to

something greater, some force, the mystery of the universe. This is an instant in which you know beyond any doubt that everything, including yourself, will be OK. Some can achieve this through meditation, but I have never been able to, for me they come unexpectedly and without any willful effort on my part. There I was, petting this magnificent creature, the only sound the breeze in the trees and nearby light trotting of hooves. I looked out of the open barn door and saw the setting sun, the bodies of the horses in silhouette, a postcard image that would never again be repeated. The volunteer opportunity of a lifetime had altered me again.

That night when I got home, I was browsing the classifieds online, as I had been doing casually for several weeks. The horses had brought me so much peace that I did not want to mindlessly hurry back to the rat race, nor did I want to fill out applications with any sort of desperation. I trusted, because the horses had taught me to trust, that I would be led in whatever particular direction I was now supposed to go. On the third page of the ads, I saw a help wanted ad that began: PALOMINO ENTERPRISES. COME JOIN THE HERD.