

# 'Horse Listener'

## *How Horses Taught Me to Work*

**By Felisa Holmberg, Certified Rolfer™ and Equine Guided Educator, in conversation with Anne Hoff, Certified Advanced Rolfer**

**Anne Hoff:** Felisa, how long have you been practicing Rolwing® Structural Integration (SI)?

**Felisa Holmberg:** Twelve years, since 2005.

**AH:** How long have you been involved with horses and animals?

**FH:** I was born with a connection with horses and all animals.

**AH:** When you trained in Rolwing SI, did you know you wanted to work with horses?

**FH:** Yes, Horses in particular. Animals are in the breath of my bones. Horses, however, have a special place in my life. I saw my first horse at the tender age of four. It was a little black and white pony. I remember the moment; I felt in a way something I never felt before. My mother says that little horse was my first real love. As a Rolwing client, when I went through the series, my personal experience was so profound, I just knew it would work on horses also.

Many horses are athletes. They are ridden hard, at times with poor-fitting equipment, and sometimes expected to perform beyond their capacity. When I attended the Rolf Institute® I already had the intention to

bring the work back to the horses and other animals. Something amazing happened though, while I attended the Rolf Institute, I fell in love with working with people. What? That was not my plan! What is even more amazing is that since my Rolwing training, horses have taught me how to work with humans.

**AH:** I'm excited to get to that, but first, let's talk about how you applied your training in working with people to working with horses.

**FH:** Right before I started my training at the Rolf Institute, I adopted a three-and-a-half-year-old colt named Cool Linx, nicknamed "Bay Boy" (see Figure 1), who was quite traumatized, emotionally and physically. He has been my greatest teacher on so many levels. I had planned to bring my knowledge back from the Rolf Institute to help this horse. Prior to my Rolwing training, I had watched a couple Rolfers working on horses, they were chasing the horse around. The horses weren't just standing still for the work. I thought, "There must be a better way to do it."

A year later, working with my now four-and-a-half-year-old horse, I discovered how sensitive he was. I needed to ask his body for permission. When I put my hands

on him, I had to do it in a very subtle way without the intention of doing something to him. Then I got it, I needed to listen to his body. I began to place my hands softly on his body and allow them to gently sink into his tissue; he would stand very still and just drop his head to the ground and enjoy the work. He started welcoming the work. My horse taught me when I was trying to do something or putting too much effort into the work. I let go of thinking I was going to correct a hip issue or a shoulder issue, or thinking I was going to fix his structure.



Figure 1: Felisa Holmberg and her horse "Bay Boy."

He taught me how to have a better touch, which dramatically improved my touch in working with people.

**AH:** Interesting. Some human clients will tell us when the touch doesn't work, and others just assume, "Oh, this is what Rolfing touch is supposed to be like." But he taught you.

**FH:** I found if I really connected with the horses nonverbally, asking them if I could touch them and where they needed help, giving them the time and opportunity to respond, they did. The horses starting participating in a very intelligent way, becoming very interactive and showing and teaching me what they needed.

We can learn a lot from various animals. However, horses are quite special. These beautiful four-legged creatures can reflect back to us about ourselves. I've had encounters that left me wondering if they can read our emotional states and subtleties, that they can incredibly somehow discern what is buried deep in our hearts, our individual personal truth. Horses can teach us how to read unspoken communications through body language. In the horse

world we hear so much about being a 'horse whisperer', a term used in natural horsemanship training, a method where we get the horse to do what we want. The horse responds to our body language. What I'm speaking about provides us an opportunity to become a 'horse listener' and really hone our intuitive listening skills.

**AH:** And this has changed your work with people?

**FH:** Extremely. I still see through a Rolfing's eyes. It is the foundation of my training and I know the value of Rolfing SI. I remember in my Rolfing training hearing that Dr. Ida Rolf said, "It isn't where you think it is," and I find that to be true. I ask people's bodies to show me what they need, show me the patterns of strain. The way the horses taught me to work at the subtle level is to really open my own intuition and connect with the client's body wisdom. Anne, I opened to a higher level of listening. That's what I would say. Listening to the body, the horses responded so honestly and so quickly whether it was right or wrong, and I found that I could do that same thing with a human. I still access visually what appears out of balance, but now I listen with my hands and all my senses, allowing the client's body to tell me what it needs.

There are two different ways of connecting with horses, where they become the teachers. First, Rolfing SI or bodywork, where they have taught me a more skilled and intuitive connection with the intent to release body issues. I witnessed they can carry emotional trauma along with the physical trauma just like people. I don't go into any session with the intention of processing or going after emotional trauma. I'm listening to the body and asking what it needs. I found at a visceral level, the organs, nerves, arteries, brain tissue, all really want to be connected and released, drawing my hands in a deeper internal level than just thinking about the structure of the body. The second way is learning to connect to the horses on a level where they become a reflection of us, showing us what it is we need to release and learn.

**AH:** This way of 'listening' and working with people, is all nonverbal between you and the client's body?

**FH:** Yes. Sometimes clients talk about it, but I wait for them.

**AH:** Did your clients notice that you were doing something different? Did you get

different sorts of things happening than before you used this way of working?

**FH:** Yes! Shifting to this way of working, I find I gain energy during my workday, when before I was drained by the end of the day. My clients have become the type of clients that want the more subtle work. A lot of them feel the changes happening all over their body even though there's hardly any movement. They'll say where they feel it. I found that huge changes are happening and I don't have to work so hard for the changes. I'm not disrespecting Dr. Rolf's work at all because I credit her for so many different levels of me being where I am right now. I don't want it to look like I don't believe in Rolfing SI.

**AH:** Do you still work within the Rolfing idea of aligning the body in gravity, and do the visual assessments?

**FH:** Yes. And then I let it go when the client gets on the table. It's all still in my awareness but I'm now listening to the body.

**AH:** The conceptual framework is there, but the way you're using your hands is different than what you learned at the Rolf Institute?

**FH:** Yes, very different. The roots of my work and ways of seeing are deeply rooted in my Rolfing training and I don't believe I could do the work I'm doing now without that foundation. Working at a subtle level in the deepest layers of the body, whether in the abdominals or in the shoulder girdle, asking the body what it needs and waiting for the body to draw my hands in completely, has changed my work and my effectiveness.

**AH:** What helped you in terms of developing your touch?

**FH:** Working with the horses' within the two levels I described earlier and studying the more subtle side of the work like biodynamic craniosacral work and visceral manipulation. Over the years, I have witnessed how powerful Rolfing SI is and how it changes people's lives. However, for some people, including my own experience, the body is not able to hold all the structural changes received from Rolfing sessions; this left me seeking help and asking, "Why?" Visceral trainings helped me feel deep patterns of strain, release them, and free up space for the organs. Working in the fluid levels along with Rolfing SI hydrates at every level, releasing, unwinding, and freeing up space. As I began feeling the deep patterns of strain, nerves and arteries that are trapped

in the tissue began to 'pop' into my hands. Once space is created in the tissue, I can feel the nerves and arteries settle back into the body. I remember asking Jeff Burch, the instructor, "Why this is happening?" He said something like, "The body is showing you what it needs, very gently release the tissue around the nerve or artery." It was like magic. I have a strong kinesthetic sense of touch and working with the horses on both levels has giving me a broader and more sensitive awareness and my hands are pulled into strain patterns.

**AH:** Let's talk about horses more. If you had a new horse to work on, how would you go about making contact?

**FH:** My preferred way is to have the horses come to me and be left with me for about a week. I prefer to be in a round pen where they are free to choose to be worked on. When I travel to work at someone else's place, time is more an issue and usually I use a halter. Some horse owners can stand back and just allow me to do the work, and some are really distractive to their horse. Maybe a horse is fidgeting, pulling me, not being connected with me when the owner is there. Often, I can get a deeper connection with the horse if the owner steps away.

Your horse gives a really good indication of what you need to work on in yourself. Observe your horse. Horses mirror us. If you have poor boundaries, most likely your horse will too; same with being overly emotional, the horse will reflect that. Even if the horse comes into your life already with underlying traumas, emotions, etc., there is a reason it has come into your life, to show what it is in us that needs healing. Angry people often own or ride an angry horse. The horse isn't really angry, it's a reflection of how it's being treated. Just like in humans, there is often pain and fear behind the behavior of anger.

**AH:** So when the owner leaves, you can work with the horse at a different level, but what happens when the person comes back and is still angry or still fearful?

**FH:** The horses will eventually reflect the same behavior once back in the hands of the owner. An example is, I got called to work on this big paint horse, and the owner was the woman's husband and he wasn't there but the woman was. I like to hold onto the lead line myself, and this big old paint horse is pulling on me and jerking on me and not allowing me to touch him in a way that I could be effective. Every time he'd

pull away, I would gently pick up the lead line and ask him to come back to me. He reminded me of a child with ADD in a way. I'm a small woman and he's just a great big horse, and if he wanted to, he could flip me around like a fly.

I stayed really present with him and, all of a sudden, he stopped and he looked me right in the eyes, and I felt him shift and connect in a higher consciousness. His whole body just melted back into my body and he softened. He started allowing me to touch him and he started showing me what he needed. At one point, he was so connected with me that he wrapped his head and neck around my body and just hugged me



Figure 2: The response of a horse who has settled and come to trust the touch and connection.

(see Figure 2). He turned into a completely different horse.

**AH:** When you said his body melted into your body, was that an energetic sense? You weren't touching him?

**FH:** Yes, I felt the energetic shift in my body, and he actually drifted back and pressed his body gently up against mine. It was an incredible feeling, he became very cooperative, gentle, and loving. It was a complete personality shift.

**AH:** Do you know if he was able to stay that way?

**FH:** No. They brought the horse back for a second session, and the owner, the man, was there this time. The horse was reflecting that behavior, again, like he had ADD, really distracted and pulling me around instead of being present and being there with me. I actually had to ask the owner to go out of the area I was working because the horse wouldn't settle down and let me work on him. It was much easier when the

owner backed away, but the horse never settled completely with the man around.

**AH:** If you have a horse to work with, do you try to work on the owners as well?

**FH:** Definitely. That is ideal. I really prefer to work with the horse and the owner, and do a more in-depth perspective where the owners can look at the way they present themselves to their horses. Not everyone is open to it.

**AH:** You are taking your work in new directions. Tell us some about that.

**FH:** Yes, I founded a new business, Horses Hope For Humanity, LLC, where the horses become the teachers for us (Figures 3A and 3B). Teaching us about boundaries; communication styles, spoken and unspoken; connecting with one's own intuition; and reflecting what we need to heal within ourselves. I'm at a point in my life where I'm shifting my practice and ready to incorporate the bodywork and horses into a healing center here on my property, allowing the horses to bring even more wholeness into our work. It will be a place where, among other things, other bodyworkers can come and find the deeper connection themselves. When we give them an opportunity, horses will show us what we need to work on within ourselves. They can help us become better people and better practitioners.

**AH:** How do you develop and connect to this place of consciousness that you connect with the being of the horse? Will you be able to train others to do it?

**FH:** When I begin, I shift into a deep connection with the horses and the person or people that have come to participate. The horses become interactive with us. I guide you through, watching closely, reading body language, listening quietly, and allow the process to happen and people to find their own truth in the experience, only stepping in to guide the process when needed. I believe everyone can if they choose to let down barriers and be open. Many of the people that have come to do this work are my Rolfing clients. It makes sense since the Rolfing process removes barriers and protection within the body. The people that have come [to work with my horses and I] have been able to understand and say it is a life-changing experience.

**AH:** So you can work with the horses and their owners, or you can use the horses to educate bodyworkers about



Figures 3A and 3B: My horse helping my client Brenda in model-building work (part of Horses Hope For Humanity, LLC) to work out what is next in life.

touch and communication, or you can use the horses to help people uncover more about themselves?

**FH:** Yes. As far as how this all has affected my bodywork sessions, it's about incorporating listening skills and combining all modalities and asking what the body needs. Bringing a greater awareness and listening to everything we do.

**AH:** So in that it's not really a shift away from Rolwing SI but bringing greater awareness into Rolwing SI, which many people are doing in many different ways.

**FH:** Agreed. And the horses can teach us how to do that really well. To be honest, the horses have helped evolve my touch and helped me learn to listen to the body, human or animal, to allow my hands to be drawn into the body rather than *trying* to make space for change. I have had some clients whose bodies just cannot tolerate even gentle Rolwing SI. They're very sensitive and often are still holding trauma. Even with horses and other animals, it helps to do a softer healing touch and slowly release layers of trauma. I feel that, human or animal, ask the body what it needs, always.

**AH:** Do you see that kind of touch as potentially part of the Rolwing spectrum?

**FH:** Yes, I do. Rolwing SI will always be the root of my training and how I see. However, the changes I'm experiencing, working from the subtle level, are profound. I incorporate the touch of visceral manipulation and biodynamic craniosacral work and bring the awareness of truly listening to the body. Some clients who kept going back into their patterns seemed to need this work even more. I still consider this Rolwing SI. I experienced that in my own body, not

holding the Rolwing changes. Visceral work was huge for me in my healing process. The reason I became a Rolfer it is because it is so effective. I'm just including other ways of working and expanding my work into a listening mode.

**AH:** To me, the bottom line of what Ida Rolf developed is this idea of aligning the body in gravity through working with the fascia, organizing fascia. To my thinking, if you're doing that, you're doing Rolwing SI.

**FH:** I think you're right. I think there's a lot of doorways that can enter into that, different ways to get there.

**AH:** There's a famous story in our Rolwing community, you've probably heard it, about Emmett Hutchins asking Dr. Rolf whether it was Rolwing SI if he whistled "Dixie" and the client's structure changed. He said he thought it was, and she allowed that he might be right.

**FH:** Perfect.

**AH:** That's the furthest reach, and many would disagree. But I think most people in the Rolwing community would accept that you are doing Rolwing SI if you're still working with fascia, hands-on, and you're working to affect the integration of the body in gravity, whatever spectrum of touch you are developing and working with.

**FH:** I've done many trainings since my original Rolwing certification. Many teachings from other Rolfers, and I've also studied with osteopaths from the Canadian College of Osteopathy. My work has developed from those teachings, including visceral manipulation and craniosacral teachings. How to feel the organs, their rhythm, what to do with the nerves and arteries as they pop

into your hands when they need help . . . it is all embedded in fascial layers. Obviously, it's important to have training before we touch these other layers.

However, the greatest shifts for me came from how horses taught me about myself, the things I needed to let go of and heal so I could become a better human being and bodyworker. Most importantly, they taught me about having a great touch, listening skills, better boundaries – and much more. It's about asking and not forcing. Try to force anything on an animal, it will move away. I feel the same way. We want the body to openly receive and create change. The greatest gift has been understanding unspoken communication, to see and feel the truth and trust what I'm hearing and feeling. There is only truth in the world, once you can see it.

Becoming a Rolfer was the beginning of a journey. Not only in my own healing process, but being able to witness so many people heal and rise above their own trauma is a heart-opening and fulfilling way to be in the world. It has completely changed my life. It opened doors that I had no idea even existed. My work has evolved but Rolwing SI will always be the foundation of my seeing.

**AH:** Felisa, what's the best way for Rolfers to learn more about your work, and to come study with you and your horses?

**FH:** I hold workshops in Missoula, Montana, and people can also come for private study. You can learn more at [www.therolfer.com](http://www.therolfer.com). You can also read about my horse work for non-bodyworkers at [www.horseshopeforhumanity.com](http://www.horseshopeforhumanity.com).

*In her passion for deep healing to the bodies, minds, and souls of people and animals, Felisa Holmberg – a Certified Rolfer of twelve years – has adapted Rolwing practices for healing horses and incorporated the healing power of horses for the healing of people. She has integrated her bodywork expertise with her lifelong love of animals with amazing results. And, in her quest to integrate horses into her Rolwing practice, Felisa has paradoxically gained greater skill and ability in working with people. Felisa works and resides in Missoula, Montana and also offers services Washington State. Her websites are [www.therolfer.com](http://www.therolfer.com) (Rolwing SI and horse work for bodyworkers) and [www.horseshopeforhumanity.com](http://www.horseshopeforhumanity.com) (horse work for personal growth).*

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