

Equine massage therapy aimed at healing more than horses.

Geary Whiting is the first to admit that his Equine Massage School for Horse & Rider isn't for everybody. Located in a rustic Big Sur setting, the school is as much about learning to heal oneself as it is about healing horses. "My program really lends itself to massaging the person's heart as much as the horse's body and heart," explains Geary, who was inducted into the Massage Therapy Hall of Fame at this year's World Massage Festival.



Taught as a five-day course at his beautiful Willow Creek property in the coastal mountains, or through a three-part DVD series, the Equine Massage School includes basic health and nutrition for horse and rider, Shiatsu massage training, horse stretching techniques, saddle fitting, natural hoof care, equine anatomy and strength training for horse and rider. The Big Sur course includes hands-on horse massage experience.

Geary has been offering the course for 20-plus years and the clientele base has shifted in that time. In the last five years or so, an increasing number of students don't plan to get certified or work on other people's horses. About 40 percent want to learn massage skills to work on their own horses, a trend Geary sees as part of a larger shift in horse owners becoming more proactive about their horse's well-being and comfort. Whatever a student's intent on attending, they receive instruction that gets at the heart of the matter – literally. That's because, in Geary's view, honesty, clarity of intention and calm are essential to effective massage.

"What I am after is for students to soften, to appreciate and to come to their horses when they are calm inside," he explains. That's opposed to a state of agitation, frustration or uncertainty. Geary sees that in many students, whether they are aware of it or not, and it always inhibits the delivery of therapeutic benefits no matter how skilled and knowledgeable the practitioner.

Geary recounts the story of one student who came to the school already a "very skilled massage practitioner." He was a body builder, a martial arts expert and an attentive student

who took extensive notes during all presentations. “Everything seemed to be OK with him, but when he got around the horse, the horse pinned its ears and got agitated. That tipped me off that something was not right.”

Be Calm & Carry On

He asked the student to stop working with the horse and took over the task himself. The horse’s obvious transformation to a peaceful state within a few minutes spoke volumes. “I asked the student what he was so angry about and a lot of things came out. It was a case in which the horse revealed a lot about the student and that’s what I want in my program. The horse usually has us figured out before we even see the whites of their eyes.”

In that way, the Massage Therapy School has much in common with equine assisted therapy programs in which people from all walks of life identify and address their own issues through what’s revealed in their interactions with horses.

The benefits to the horse are equally powerful. Geary’s favorite equine patients are those others might consider dangerous. Often, he notes, such behavior stems from discomfort or “dis-ease” and it’s remarkable how quickly their “training issues” reduce or disappear when the physical issues are discovered and addressed through massage. For those reasons, his program is very effective for trainers and owners working with “problem” horses, who are often, instead, just good horses in pain.

His way with horses is unconventional by some standards. “There are a lot of places that teach you how to be with a horse, but I teach students how to play the horse like a piano.” He doesn’t agree with schools of thought in which the horse is trained not to enter the handler’s space. “I say, ‘Yes, I want that horse in their space, as long as it’s done respectfully,’” Geary explains. “A horse has feelings and they need to be connected with you. That’s what I’m looking for in students: those who want to be connected, heart to heart, with their horse. If you have the horse’s heart and he has yours, you’ll have all of each other.”

As for the actual massage techniques taught, Geary says they are simple enough to be learned during the five-day course. He’s had students ranging in age from 11 to 74 and with widely varying degrees of knowledge about equine anatomy and bodywork techniques.

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In addition to on-site courses at his Big Sur property and the DVD series, Geary plans to hit the road with his teaching in the near future. He has an “iron horse” and he’s not afraid to ride it in order to spread his teachings to a broader audience. Geary welcomes inquiries from facilities interested in hosting his clinics.

For more information on Geary Whiting Equine Massage Therapy School, call 530-410-5270 or visit www.gearywhiting.com .