

Interview with Dr. Lew Sterrett

Author of
Life Lessons from a Horse Whisperer

1. HOW DID YOU FIRST GET INVOLVED WITH HORSES? AT WHAT POINT DID IT BECOME YOUR LIFE'S PASSION?

I was but eight when my neighbors got horses and then my sister followed suit. Somehow it struck a chord with me, for I had already been infatuated with the likes of Roy Rogers, Stony Burke, the Rifleman, etc. I rode my sister's horse looking more like a peanut on an elephant than a cowboy on his steed, but I was hooked. From that time on this fantasy began to become a reality.

When I was 14, I was asked to train for someone else. It was all downhill after that. In part because of my intense enjoyment of horses, in part it was my safe place from family issues, and in part because I began to experience affirmation from others in what I did.



2. SOME PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED BY HOW MUCH HORSES CAN TEACH US ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. WERE YOU EVER SURPRISED BY YOUR HORSES? WHEN DID YOU FIRST REALIZE THAT THE SAME DYNAMICS THAT ENABLE A HORSE AND TRAINER TO WORK TOGETHER CAN ALSO APPLY TO PEOPLE?

Having no established model for such a thing, I was first caught off guard when riding a horse named Ribbon at Miracle Mountain Ranch. Having learned to play the expected Christian role, and having come to MMR to serve the Lord with a sincere heart, I was shocked and dumbfounded when, upon seeing her negative but subtle attitudes express themselves, I was convicted that I was very much like her. It was not a pleasant experience; though she was pretty to look at, I was very bothered by her sour response. I thought, 'Surely I couldn't be that difficult of a person.' It was not a perspective I wanted to tell others about. Little by little as I was faithful to His Word, to regular investments in people, and to the training, I began to see more and more relational principles that could be illustrated by the horse/trainer relationship. As it was a convenient tool in my



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hands, I began to get my nerve up and share it with others. It wasn't long until others began to request it.

3. YOU LOST YOUR DAD AT A PRETTY EARLY AGE. HOW DID THIS AFFECT YOU? YOUR FAMILY?

To be honest it affected me so significantly that even this week – some 52 years later – I am learning to embrace it and benefit from it. Loss and grief are not always issues understood by the mind. God gives us grace to cope with pain as a child, but eventually He wants us to process it with Him, in Him. In order for us to become fully alive, God must be allowed to touch such pain. Like a horse, we need to yield it to Him, so He can turn a potential defeat into power that will eventually be harnessed for good works. This is the very process of turning an angry defeated man like Moses into a meek or powerful man of God. He truly becomes a Father to the fatherless!

4. IN CHAPTER ONE, YOU MENTION THAT THE OLDER HORSE TRAINERS BECAME SURROGATE FATHER FIGURES FOR YOU. HOW SO?

The need for approval runs deep in a man's heart, and every boy wants to be the delight of his father's heart. I wanted and needed approval from older father-like figures. They were far from saints, yet even in their coarse way, they revealed a love, concern, and confidence in me that was much needed. These men were used of God to provide some protection, manly identity, and fatherly concern. My mother, knowing of my vulnerability, was grateful for the role they played and did much to help me see their strength of character, without being naïve about their faults.

5. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A 'WANT TO' AND A 'HAVE TO' HORSE? CAN THE SAME LABEL BE APPLIED TO CHRISTIANS?

'Half to' horses are a dime a dozen! A 'half to' horse always needs motivated and requires constant prompting. They rarely see the job and are always looking for a way out. Because of that, trainers expect very little of them. Horses or people whose trust is violated often develop a callousness to requests and are usually seen as dull, reserved, reluctant, half-hearted, self-protective, and unable to reach their potential because they interact defensively. On the other hand, a 'want to' horse is known for being alert and taking initiative. They act upon seeing a need without coercion. 'Want to' horses make you want to ride them; that quality brings them to the winner's circle. Romans 6:17 says, "But you became obedient from the heart". A person or horse who truly processes his coaching healthily enters in with more and more heart. Thus he ends up being twice the player, because he plays with body, mind, soul, and spirit. Unfortunately the same applies to believers who do not forgive from the heart, or who tolerate a little root of bitterness, who justify a little leaven, or who constantly make provision for the flesh.



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6. THE TITLE OF YOUR THIRD CHAPTER IS 'ANYTHING WORTH DOING IS WORTH DOING POORLY' – WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Of course this statement opposes the more popular line that 'If anything is worth doing, it is worth doing well'. However we must understand that no one ever starts anything at the top of their game. Starting is often clumsy, messy, and many times, *embarrassing*. The key is 'get started' for you will never learn any younger, and you really have no place to go but up! The emphasis here is to learn how to take the initiative and to keep getting up when you fall.

7. YOU'VE WORKED WITH AND SPOKEN TO A VARIETY OF DIFFERENT AUDIENCES - AT RISK YOUTH, HOMESCHOOLERS, CORPORATE RETREATS, AND OTHERS. HOW CAN HORSES SPEAK TO SO MANY DIFFERENT PEOPLE ALL AT THE SAME TIME?

Our audience is a broad spectrum. It includes all ages and ranges from very secular to very Christian, and total horse enthusiasts to non-horse observers. But we do share things in common: we are all people and we all share the same relational situations. The very principles that profit a horse/trainer relationship help humans to see their needs more objectively. Illustrating these with horses helps people appreciate God's greater purpose for their lives from a relational and not necessarily "religious" perspective. The context is fundamentally sound, pithy, yet entertaining and non-threatening.

8. YOU SUGGEST AT VARIOUS POINTS IN YOUR BOOK THAT TRAINING HORSES IS ABOUT TEACHING THEM TO TAKE SIMPLE STEPS. WHAT LESSON CAN CHRISTIANS TAKE FROM THIS TRAINING?

'Obedience is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams' (Isaiah 15:23). Man often pursues unhealthy habits and poor decisions with impulse sacrifices. Perhaps people can be bought off for a time, but God values faithfulness over impulsiveness because faithfulness results in confidence. Little steps that are taken consistently bear far better fruit over the long haul than great talent; character prevails over skill. When applied to the home this produces harmony and growth.

9. YOU GREW UP IN THE CHURCH, BUT THEN STOPPED ATTENDING FOR A WHILE. WHAT BROUGHT YOU BACK?

Growing up in church no more makes one a Christian than standing in the barn makes one a horse. Without a personal intimate relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit, Christianity is nothing more than a religious shell. I grew up in that void and until I came to Christ as a college student, none of it made a lot of sense. After my new awakening in Christ, I found a new hunger and thirst for the Word, for fellowship and sound teaching.



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10. TELL US ABOUT MIRACLE MOUNTAIN RANCH. WHAT FIRST BROUGHT YOU TO THE RANCH? WHAT MADE YOU COME BACK?

In all reality, I had a girlfriend while I was a student at Penn State Univ. and she kept telling me about MMR. As she witnessed my growth in the Lord and my consideration of serving Him, she saw the correlation between my interests and skill sets and the uniqueness of the ranch she had attended for years. After a bit of time I applied to be a summer counselor and went with my friend to visit MMR in 1974. Believe it or not my 'girlfriend' would introduce me to the woman who would become my wife a year later. After our wedding, my wife and I went to California where I taught at a vocational college. Two years later, we were asked to return and assume the directorship of MMR (1977).

11. YOUR EARLY YEARS AT MMR WERE DIFFICULT. WHAT DID THAT EXPERIENCE TEACH YOU ABOUT LEADERSHIP? WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO CONTINUE?

The very nature of the work at MMR is 24/7/365 and mandates living in a fishbowl. I soon discovered that leadership is more about responding responsibly to crisis than about position or perks. Reading II Corinthians 10:8, 13:10, I learned that the authority the Lord gave me was for building up and not for tearing down. I began to realize that when we face resistance or criticism from either an animal or person, it is a great temptation to react and use whatever power or position we have at our disposal to protect or save ourselves first. The result is usually unsavory both to our own palate and to others. Leadership is all about crisis and the more prepared we are for win-win results the more satisfying the job. Though often tempted to quit, I am still integrity bound to a "response-able" mandate.

12. HOW DID SERMON ON THE MOUNT (SOTM) GET STARTED? WHAT IS YOUR MISSION WITH THIS ORGANIZATION?

At first it was simply God dealing with my own heart as I saw my own values and character mirrored in the horses I worked. Then I began to accumulate small insights that helped others see a clearer picture of God's good purpose for their lives. However, as with the collection of small amounts of gold dust, soon the wealth and riches of God's Word became clearly evident to all through SOTM. As the word got out, invitations came from all over the country to come and share it with others. Our mission is simple: to teach and illustrate through the horse/trainer relationship both God's plan for redemption and abundant living. It is our belief that God has just begun to use this tool and that a global opportunity is yet before us.

13. IN CHAPTER SIX, YOU MEET BERRY AND DESCRIBE HIM AS "THE HORSE THAT WOULD CHANGE MY LIFE." HOW DID HE CHANGE YOU?



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Berry, though outwardly beautiful and inwardly kind and cooperative, came to a place in his training that seemed impossible to surpass. As chapter 6 tells you, we thought Berry had reached his pinnacle. Finally, instead of trying to force the issue, I went back and started some basic training to increase his flexibility. Eventually, he overcame the physical challenge that was holding him back before. What I learned from him impacted me. Character is a reflection of the heart and will always surpass natural beauty and talent in the long run.

14. WHAT IS THE “10,000 HOUR RULE?”

When I use the phrase *“It’ll take a lot of wet saddle pads”* my coaching audience looks baffled. However when I tell them that the only thing their team lacks is sweat equity, then the lights go on. I am very quick to emphasize that practice never makes one perfect. Otherwise we would not repeat the same dumb arguments with our spouse or kids. But it is essential to rehearse repeatedly in order for us to react automatically in crisis...kind of like forgiveness.

15. WHAT IS A SOFT ANSWER? HOW IS IT USED IN HORSE TRAINING? CAN WE USE IT IN OUR LIVES?

Often an action provokes a reaction, such as a harsh reaction to a harsh statement. It would be like jerking the horse’s mouth because he doesn't respond well. Whenever a trainer or parent reacts to an immature action he or she loses perspective and becomes childish. Soon the child or animal begin to push the buttons of the authority and thereby exert their will over the parent. A soft answer is not one of low volume; rather, it is a response to the need that keeps the real objective in view. It actually turns away wrath and provokes a responsible response. It includes seeing and responding to the need and not merely reacting to the words.

16. YOU'RE A DAD TO TWO ADOPTED SONS, BOTH OF WHOM HAD TRAUMATIC UPBRINGINGS. HOW DID YOU FOSTER GOOD RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEM? WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO DO SO?

My two sons grew up in the foster care system and lived in an average of five different homes every year until the ages of 7 and 9 when we adopted them. Besides the mere instability of their youth, there were innumerable messages of rejection. My wife and I were drawn to them when the oldest attended MMR and then were introduced to the younger via Social Services. God gave us an immediate love for them. Needless to say, our lives changed as we decided to homeschool both for the sake of bonding with them but also to try to equip them with what they never received from the public sector. They needed to learn firsthand about God’s love for them and the healing hand that He extended to them. There were lots of very painful episodes in our journey, yet God has truly gotten a hold of their hearts and we are much encouraged by their growth and



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stability in Christ. If the truth were told, I think we learned more from them than they did from us.

17. WHAT DOES THE PHRASE “ASHES TO BEAUTY MEAN” TO YOU? AND HOW HAS WORKING WITH HORSES TAUGHT YOU THIS?

God the Creator is always in the business of redemption. In my opinion, we were a pretty poor purchase for the sacrifice of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. With all respect, I see Him as a garbage collector: He takes our garbage and in exchange offers forgiveness and cleansing. He gave His life as complete payment for our sin offering eternal life to all who would receive Him. What a deal!! Only a fool would turn it down and that is precisely the point. Furthermore, He takes the ashes of broken lives and gives us a purpose to do His good and perfect work. The testimony of His regenerate work in a person's life parallels seeing that of a horse whose life was headed for destruction being restored to a place of useful and honorable service.

18. IN YOUR BOOK YOU WRITE, "WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, GOD SNUCK UP ON ME." TELL US ABOUT THAT.

Growing up, I avoided attending church with my family as often as I could. I was attending school, working fulltime at a horse training facility and showing on weekends. In addition, I was the president of my 4-H club and was soon to become a national winner in several different venues. I kept busy. When I was seventeen, I was awarded the privilege of attending the 50th Anniversary of National 4-H Club Congress in Chicago, Illinois. I was looking forward to a good time and already had my eyes on a 'hoped-for girlfriend', a Miss Rodeo from another state. Irony of all ironies, she along with a whole group of my friends opted to go to the Moody Bible Church that Sunday morning. It was there in that service that I was convicted by the words, "What hath a man gained if he gains the whole world and loses his soul, or what shall man give in exchange for his soul?" Though it would take time for me to come to terms with that penetrating challenge, there was a definite crack in the concrete of my heart!

19. WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WATCHING SOMEONES ACTIONS AND WATCHING HIS/HER REACTIONS?

If the truth were told, we all have two personas: the first is the role we portray and want others to see us in. The second is that which comes forth when we are caught by surprise. I learned this about myself when I was faced with my own reactions and realized that my true character shows up in crisis. It is often thought that when push comes to shove we will always 'rise to the occasion.' In reality, when a crisis comes we will always 'fall to the level of our true character and training.' This can certainly be unnerving, yet represents all the more the need for a work of God in our hearts. A horse's true relationship with his trainer is revealed when he is frightened suddenly or



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when he is given the liberty to act out his true self. We like the horse are the person of our *reactions* not our *actions*.

20. YOU WRITE A LITTLE BIT ABOUT WRITING TO YOUR STEP FATHER TO ASK HIS FORGIVENESS. HOW DID THAT EXPERIENCE CHANGE YOU? IS THIS ALWAYS THE CASE WITH FORGIVENESS?

I am embarrassed to say that I was married and living in California before I realized that my bitterness and rebellion toward my step-father had truly made a slave out of me. Forgiveness had far less to do with my step-father's faults than it did with how I processed hurt and disappointment. Blaming him and rationalizing the anger and resentment I felt only festered into an angry vengeful messy abscess in my heart. Though I professed to love God, in truth I could only focus on myself. Not only did I forgive my father from my heart for the wrongs I felt were done to me, but I also wrote and followed up with a phone call to ask his forgiveness for my anger and disrespect I'd acted out toward him. To his credit—and my surprise—he not only readily and completely forgave me, but truly conferred his blessing upon me. Not all situations come out this way, but God puts the emphasis upon us taking responsibility for our offenses before Him, for if we do not forgive, neither will He forgive us.

21. IF THERE IS ONE MESSAGE YOU WANT READERS TO TAKE AWAY FROM YOUR BOOK, WHAT IS IT?

Every trainer wants a relationship with the horse. Man's ways are opposite to God's—we are deceitful and addictively self-absorbed—but God wants a relationship with us. To get there, God often has to corral us and get us to face the futility and deception of our own reasoning. Like the horse, we can't 'save ourselves.' The story of this book is that not only does God want a relationship with every reader, but He has already sent the trainer, the Lord Jesus Christ, into our arena to speak our language and to elevate us to fellowship with him. It is our privilege to respond to Him in humility (repentance) and trust (faith) in His offer of forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe in Him for salvation.