The field team from the Oregon State University School of Veterinary Medicine just pulled out of the driveway following their second visit to treat two of our horses for injuries they sustained when being transported in a trailer with some unfamiliar mustangs owned by a friend of my husbands. The situation leading up to the injuries was as follows. Our two horses along with Jim’s four mustangs were to be taken into the eastern Oregon wilderness to carry riders and supplies into an area not accessible by motor vehicle. My husband and his friend, along with our former exchange student visiting from Spain planned to go on horseback and set up a camp for a hunting trip the two older men intended to take later in the fall. Since all the horses from each herd were seasoned travelers accustomed to trailering, it was expected that they would abide nicely together and become acquainted along the way. Nobody anticipated what would happen next.

After being loaded into the trailer with travel underway one of the mustangs began biting my mare. There must have been a din of pounding from within the trailer although nobody inside the cab of the diesel truck heard a thing. The offending mustang tore much of the little mare’s mane out and bit her repeatedly on the shoulder within its reach. I don’t know what happened to our gelding but he lost a shoe and suffered a 10 inch cut on his right hind leg by the time the men stopped to check the horses at the planned two hour intervals. Once the damage was detected a local veterinarian was contacted and when the examination was completed it was determined that our two horses should go no further with the trip as planned. The damage was serious enough for the recommendation that they should be returned home and an arrangement was made for first aid as soon as our regular veterinarian was available which turned out to be the following morning.

My husband made a series of calls to me during the four hour trip back home to tell me he thought our precious mare, Chanel, was in shock. I began discussing and researching treatment for shock hours before they arrived home. When they arrived home Chanel was not in shock as much as I was. Where her beautiful thick mane had been in the morning, now was a 14 inch swath of bruised, oozing red flesh on both sides of her upper neck. Her shoulders were swollen by bruising from being repeatedly bitten. Her hair was missing in spots that showed scores of teeth marks. My husband stood by her stall looking in at her and shook with barely controlled sobs as tears streamed down his face. I tried to place my arm around his shoulder to comfort him and heard him mutter, “She endured this for two hours…” as his voice trailed off into breathy heaves of distress.

Chanel began eating hay and drinking water which reassured me that she was no longer in danger of shock. She appeared wild eyed and perhaps confused or agitated but there would be time for calming to set in as she realized she really was safe at home. With the veterinary field team scheduled to arrive early the next morning and my husband and I decided it would serve no purpose to abort the mission to establish the camp. He and our visitor from Spain left the next morning before the field team arrived.

Both horses required sedation to make treatment of their injuries possible. Chance, our big quarter horse and Arabian mixed breed gelding, required a pressure bandage to begin reducing the swelling that had accumulated during the night and caused his cut to gape open. Chanel’s crest where her mane grew from had to be washed with surgical scrub solution. The tissue was bruised and obviously very sore. She wanted no one near her which meant that sedation was our only option for cleansing her wounds. After washing the area she was given an antibiotic injection. I was instructed in the care of both horses for the days to come. Each horse was prescribed a pain medicine to help them be comfortable during the first few days of recovery. The first dose under my watch would be given that evening, hours after their treatment.

The medicine prescribed for Chance was an apple flavored paste. He objected to the plastic syringe being pushed into his mouth but once the paste flowed out it wasn’t too bad and he scarcely minded. The medicine for Chanel was much less palatable and she let me know it by stamping her feet and thrashing around in her stall after the first dose. Her reaction left me with a feeling of dread when I thought about the next five doses I would be giving her.

Twelve hours later it was time for her second dose of medication. I stepped into her stall and she knew immediately what I was up to. Regardless of the pain she was in from injuries she was agitated and self -protective. The foul tasting medicine was unwelcome and she let me know it in very certain terms. Each time I tried to approach her she turned away from me and positioned her head in a corner. My goal was to get a halter on her and get the medicine in her mouth as quickly as possible to minimize any further trauma. She was not having it. Our little dance went on for several minutes and I confess I was nervous that she might lose patience with me and kick out if we didn’t come to some resolution.

The old saying that you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make them drink is very true. Chanel is 1000 pounds of solid muscle and I am no match for her quickness and strength. Without my having a way of communicating the benevolent purpose of the medicine she could only regard me as another being out to hurt her with bad tasting stuff. As far as she was concerned I was trying to poison her. My morale was dropping by the second as she eluded me in her 10X10 stall. Deciding not to add any additional stress to her already ramped up nervous system, I stopped approaching her and I chose to stand quietly by the wall. I was deeply saddened by our situation. Out of love for her I wanted her to take the medicine. I knew that without it she would be very uncomfortable and swollen. With the medicine she would be in less pain and more able to relax and heal from the trauma. I stood leaning against the wall, deep in thought for a long two or three minutes, never letting my eyes leave her. In those few quiet moments I registered all of the emotions passing between the two of us. I softly resolved that whatever the outcome would be that morning, I would not force her to do anything against her will. She had suffered enough. Her trust in the decision making of humans hadn’t worked out so well and I reasoned that she had lost trust in me. I hadn’t protected her. She was injured and now I was trying to force her to take something else that was distasteful. I couldn’t come up with any reason why she should trust me or any other human at the moment. I understood why she was turning away. I really understood.

What happened next still astonishes my mind. While I was still propped against the wall without any idea of what I would do, Chanel turned toward me and lowered her head signaling for me to put her halter on. I was shocked by her gentle, submissive gesture and I immediately began thanking her, reassuring her that I would try to place the medicine far back in her mouth so it wouldn’t taste so bad. She let me push the syringe between her lips and point the tip back toward her throat. She quickly swallowed and we stroked and loved on each other for several minutes afterward.

Two years prior to my encounter with Chanel over her medicine, Chanel had been the equine therapist to a teenage girl and her mother. The pair sought therapy because they had begun having frequent arguments in their home and the mother was desperate to protect her daughter from making what she considered to be “bad choices”. In the context of equine assisted psychotherapy offered through our Horse Power program I had given the mother an assignment to simply spend time with Chanel in the open pasture and to write a paragraph or two about what she felt in the presence of the horse. She dutifully walked out to where Chanel was grazing peacefully and stood beside her, touching her withers from time to time but otherwise leaving her to graze. Twenty minutes or so passed in silence while my husband and I watched intently from a distance for any clues that the human-horse interaction might give us. It is customary for us to engage in conversation with clients following their time with the horse and our hope is to observe subtleties that we may use in the dialogue that might help guide the client to a deeper self-awareness and understanding. My husband and I work together as co-therapists in this endeavor and neither one of us saw anything substantial that we considered sharing with the distraught mother. When we beckoned her to return to us, the four of us sat quietly while she read aloud her musings.

Mother and daughter each read a narrative of their experience with the horse with whom they had chosen to work. As the mother read her poetic penning’s, she began to weep. Her body shook with quiet sobs as the tension in her shoulders melted. The words she used to describe her experience with Chanel were, “perfect understanding. She understands me perfectly.” As mother wept, her daughter melted into her own stream of tears. A battlement between them had been dismantled, at least for the time being. It had been accomplished through a process so subtle that my husband and I neither one saw how such understanding had been communicated. On the day of my trying to give Chanel her medicine, I remembered the words “perfect understanding” and I knew at last what my client had experienced and what my precious little mare had done for her and now for me.

It is difficult if not impossible to describe what can be felt and not seen. In the words of Antoine St. Exupery, “Only with the heart does one see rightly. What is essential is invisible with the eyes.”