

Dear friends and family

So many of you have been as curious as me about the place I'm going to in Sweden. After being here for about three months, I have created a little collection of moments from life here that might be able to give you a feeling of this place, its inhabitants and of why I am still here.

Here is a bit of context for the stories: The place I volunteer for is one of Scandinavia's largest sanctuaries for horses and other animals including dogs, cats, chickens, ducks, pigs, goats, sheep, guinea pigs and steers. There are about 200 animals, from which over 60 are horses. Most of these animals would have been euthanized because they didn't fulfill human expectations, were "inconvenient" for humans to keep taking care of or were part of the meat industry. The sanctuary wants to be a home where these animals can live for the rest of their lives under the most natural conditions possible without having to fulfill any human wishes and without being resold or given away anymore. The sanctuary now includes two farms and the land around them. I live in Surtung in a big old farm house that is also a guest house. But sometimes, when the house is hosting big groups of people, I live in Friskeröd with Emelie who founded this place in 1995 and her human and animal family who all make me feel fully adopted into the family.

Recently, the sanctuary has also become a school for human beings to learn with and from other species about how we may live together in a non hierarchical way, where human needs and wishes are not automatically placed over those of other species. About how to return to finding our place within the web of life, in balance with chicken mites, water, roots, flower petals, spiderwebs, soil, apple seeds, trampling hoofs, wind, emotions and the moonlight. About how it might be possible to be less destructive and more empathic.

Much love,
Selina



In between

In the morning I load the back of the big black car, the old lady I started to call Hilma. The buckets with the extra food for the oldest horses are somehow always heavier than they look. And then I drive from herd to herd. Now in the autumn, the horses are grazing in many smaller herds on many different fields, before they will spend the winter together in two big herds. Hilma's diesel motor spits and shakily awakes to life after the cold night. The orange "check motor" symbol and I wish each other a good morning. And there we go. Gravel roads meander through forests and fields. I started to know where the puddle holes are. And when I manage to drive around the big puddle chain on the way to Friskeröd without touching any of them, there is a proud "Ha!" sounding in my mind. In the meantime, I also know most of the passing places when other cars are coming. The moment when I will have a truck in front of me that needs not a centimeter less than the entire width of the gravel road has not happened yet. Sometimes, when I'm really sure that none sees me, I practice driving backwards. Because I know the truck moment will happen sooner or later. And I'm not looking forward to that. I found a Swedish radio station where sometimes audio books are played. And sometimes I hear a new word in the language soup that I try to figure out with google translate at the next stop. I also started to get to know more and more trees on the way. The dead birch who marks the beginning of the gravel road to Putten. The gigantic larch tree who now slowly turns yellow. The birch gate that has been shining yellow in

every weather for so long and now loses its first leaves. Like that I sink into the flow of doing without being disturbed. When time doesn't play a role, which is on most days, I like to sit on Hilmas trunk lid that is like a bench and wait until the horses have finished eating. Sometimes I drink tea. Sometimes I answer WhatsApp messages. Sometimes I do nothing. And sometimes the most beautiful horse encounters happen in these in between moments when they are least expected.



Time, space and breath

Some weeks ago, a new horse joined the herd. I have the honor to experience how it is for her to arrive. To find her place and herself in a new way. As time passes, her history surfaces in symptoms. Her way of moving and expressing herself changes. The way she is met by the other horses and Emelie show very clearly what this place is about. The herd naturally integrates and supports a new member. On the human side, all automatic interpretations of symptoms and behavior are questioned. Human interventions only happen after being as sure as possible that all human emotions and hidden human wishes are detected. After becoming as nonjudgemental and expectation free as possible. And after listening to the horse and considering the situation from this state of being.

By being a place an animal does not have to leave again, for any reason, time becomes available.
By providing the most natural living conditions possible, space becomes available.
By being a place where animals don't have to earn their right to exist and to be cared for by fulfilling a human expectation, breath becomes available.

With access to time, space and breath and the complete lack of expectation, room is created for healing processes, as individual, incomprehensible, fast, slow and nonlinear as they need to be.

And during those processes, the horses become wild, uncompromising, strong and kind individuals, who urge everyone they meet to find their own integrity and strength. After having studied psychology for 5.5 years and thinking about becoming a psychotherapist, this raises many old and new questions in me. Would I want to become a psychotherapist who is forced to "help" people function in the system again that made them come to me in the first place? Would I want to do this, even when I wouldn't be forced to but it is the wish of a client? As a psychotherapist, I might be able to help create access to breath. But time and space? Those are hardly provided in any setting I would work in. What kind of process would be possible under these circumstances? Would it even be beneficial to be a psychotherapist for the work I would like to do? What do I want to give to the world in this life? How do I want to give? How can I not add to the brokenness? But create more wildness and compassion, like the horses.



About giving up control and finding trust

"Do you want to come on a walk?" Emelie asks. Yes, of course I want! And I think of walking next to the horses, maybe, but only maybe holding a lead rope. It is the first move of a herd I am part of. 7 very energetic ponies move from Friskeröd to Putten. In the late afternoon things start to happen. Fur pads and bridles appear. And then the pads go on all the ponies, except Nino, the smallest one. "Ok", I think, "I guess there will be riding." Emelie gives me the reins of Keilir, a beautiful light gray Islandic pony. "If you want to sit on, you can. Keilir is very confident, so you don't need to do anything, he actually prefers if you don't." Some moments later I find myself sitting on Keilir and the herd starts to move. It is a beautiful late August evening. Golden sun rays find their way through the birches, pines and fir trees. The spots of blooming heather shine in their unmistakable purple rose between moss and blueberry. The gravel road has big gravel and the barefoot ponies tread carefully and slowly. Except for the sound of these well placed steps it is quiet. I sink into the fairytale forest and the swaying movement of Keilir. It has been a long while since I sat on a horse back. After a while the gravel starts to become smaller and easier to walk on. The energy in the herd starts to rise. "Ohoh", I think and the ponies start to trot. "Just lean back and don't try to find a rhythm, there is none!", Emelie shouts from behind. Keilir is not trotting but moving in a mix between trot, pace and gallop. So I hold onto Keilir's mane and lean back. After a while the herd calms again and relaxes into walk. There is a big field opening up to the left. Keilir wants to walk on it. So he goes. And somehow it doesn't worry me and I don't try to stop him. I don't feel the slightest need to control anything. Keilir, the herd and all the other humans who are part of the move emit such a strong feeling of togetherness that I can't do anything but trust. On the field Keilir picks up speed and starts to gallop. All the other ponies who remained on the road happily accept the invitation for a little speed contest. My riding body

memory activates quickly and I manage to find balance in the fast movement. But then the field ends and there is a big ditch between the field and the road. "Ok, I guess I was lucky until now, but I don't think I will survive a huge jump like this", my brain thinks. Strangely though I still don't feel scared. And so Keilir stops, doesn't jump but instead turns around and walks back along the ditch to find a place where it is less wide. A little jump is still necessary but it is exactly the kind I can just stay on. Back on the road, Keilir very pleased with everything, catches up with the herd and the smile on my face goes from one ear all the way to the other. The last bit of the move is on the side of the fast 80km/h road. So close to their destination, the ponies can't hold themselves back. And so they start to run along the road and then enter the gravel road to the field that goes a little downwards and has a curve in it. Exactly what Zintra loves. So we go even faster. Suddenly branches are in front of me, I close my eyes and lean forward. They brush along my body. And then we're there. Heavily breathing, the ponies stop and start to graze. Laughter and happy exclams fill the air. I jump off Keilirs back and hug his sweaty body.

This unexpected test of my riding abilities opened the possibility for me to join many more wild rides. However, looking back, this one first experience was very special and important. From the beginning to the end, I didn't shorten Keilirs reins, I didn't do anything with them. I didn't use my legs and heels in the way I learned in riding school. In letting go of every kind of control, space was created for trust. It was trust in a very undisturbed pure form. I can still feel my mind being a bit in shock from experiencing that.

In the following rides I have become more active again in being part of the discussion on what way to go with the horses I sit on. But this first memory of trust is now imprinted in me and has become the basis for all riding. And I guess, it won't stop with riding but spread to other aspects in my life. Thank you Keilir, thank you herd!

After reading this, you might have the question of how riding and "not fulfilling human wishes and expectations" go together. At least I would have had this question before I came here. I think the most important thing is that horses here have a voice and a real choice. And with that, they are usually very clear about what they want.

Some horses are here since a long time and have no interest whatsoever in being ridden and that is fully respected and never questioned by humans. Some horses are always happy to be involved in riding adventures. And some horses are only interested in very specific circumstances. Riding is practiced with the intention of meeting in equality and friendship and without dominance. Of course most humans, including me, are not able to put this perfectly into practice. But the intention is there and the horses who are interested of interacting with humans in the form of riding are all extremely compassionate, generous and forgiving teachers.

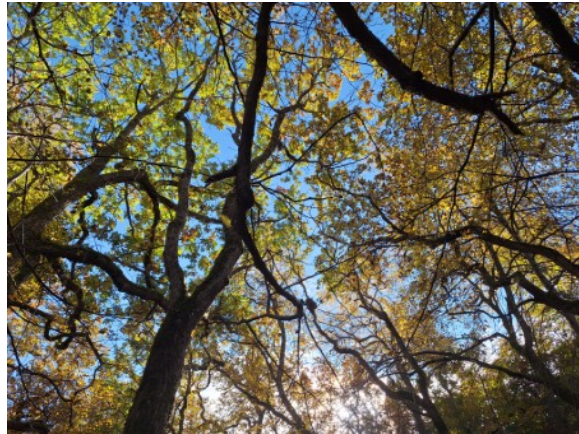


Autumn Awe

Autumn is falling backwards into darkness. In slow-motion with arms spread wide. In the falling, birch leaves turn yellow, chestnut yellow brown, maple red, then larch turn yellow and finally the beeches lit up like little candles. Autumn is falling back into oneself.

I lie on the forest ground. Breathe the night frost still hanging in the air, breathe mushrooms, moss, wet leaves merging with the soil. A tree root is holding my spine. And there she is, the autumn

melancholy. A tear slowly emerges in my eye and relief fills in my chest. Finally, a moment is found in which I can feel the autumn. In which the autumn is allowed to fully spread within me. I look into the colorful tree crowns. See a single leaf fall silently. I imagine how the tree and this leaf have experienced summer thunder storms, shortage of water and sudden temperature swings together. I imagine how many nights and days have passed since this leaf has grown in spring. And now it became old, its entire biological structure has changed. Tree and leaf have celebrated their farewell. So completely that the leaf left the tree without any resistance and now dances towards the ground. I imagine how the old tree under which I lie has said goodbye to all her leaves in this way every single year of her life. And I feel autumn awe.



Bellas time

I remember that I loved the feeling on the sailing boat when we couldn't see any land. I was twelve and we were the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. I would let my eyes follow the horizon line all the way around. It felt like my head was the center point of a gigantic blue disk of water with a blue dome of sky above. It felt strange and beautiful and like the sailing boat and my family were the only things existing in the world.

Some days ago, we were sitting around Bella, the dark brown mare, who has been lingering on the edge of life and death for a while now. She was peacefully laying in the grass. We thought that maybe she would die now. We were stroking her head. She closed her eyes. I heard the wind, the birds. A car passing by. But time didn't move anymore. It spread out wide to all sides. And then Bella wanted to stand up again. So we helped her to sit, find her balance and get up. There she stood, snorting, looking around and finally walking off towards the little stream where the forest starts, lacking all worry. Around Bella, time has become a disk. Invisible but stretching out far until the horizon all around her. And like a sailing boat, Bella gently sways in the waves, between life and death.

Two days later, Stella and I bring Bellas food bucket into the field where she's grazing with some distance to the rest of the herd. It is a warm and sunny November morning. So we sit down next to her and continue a conversation we started the day before. At some point I look at Bella. And I see us from her perspective, like an old wise grandmother lovingly and knowingly listening to two young women with the biggest part of life still ahead of them. I don't think Bella likes being called a grandmother, I don't think age matters to her in that way. But it feels deeply comforting to be in the presence of a being who is at the end of a lifetime in the way she is. With a timeless, ageless curiosity in Emelies words. Equally interested in stepping out of life as stepping into it.



The old path

On the land of Surtung, there is an old path connecting the lower field with the upper field. For many years it has been waiting, hidden and quiet but now it is coming alive again. Today I decided to walk on the old path instead of the much easier gravel road to check the horse herd grazing on the upper field.

Stepping over logs. Big steps. Using muscles. Slippery. Careful. Balance.

Wind rustling. Leafs falling.

Branches poking. Are you here?

Crossing water. Mud pulling feet.

Bending. Stretching my back.

Branches touching. Are you here?

Meandering. Loosing the path. Finding it again.

Seeing, sensing, listening.

Branches stroking along my arms. Are you here?

Mushrooms. Smelling.

Birds.

And finally. The upper field.

I realize why I call the gravel road "easier". I can walk along it without being present. I can walk without feeling my feet. Without connecting to my sense of orientation. Without seeing the trees I pass. Without being in relationship with the path. It is easier because it is the way I have learned to live in Western society.

The observer and the aquarium

The fog is touching the calm sea. Gentle wet grayness. The air is heavy with sea smell. Seaweeds, salt, sand, crab shell. I lie on my stomach on a granite rock close to the water, looking into the universe below the surface. A sea star is holding onto the same rock, creeping its way down, past the little sea snails into the seaweed forest. Two crabs are passing by and a shrimp zig-zags through my field of view. Sometime before a curious seal head peaked out of the water a bit further out. The sea world is connected to so many childhood memories. Exploring the underwater wonders with diving goggles, snorkel and flippers. Diving deep to catch shells. Searching for the little rainbow fish. And I don't know if it is this fairytale place, the deep relaxation of the calm foggy autumn day or traveling back in time to my childhood. But all of a sudden, I fall into it. My body remains laying on the rock but the sea world opens up. Like in a zoo aquarium, where I'm the visitor, the observer, suddenly the window separating me from the water and the sea creatures breaks away and I'm in it, part of it. I belong to it.

And for the seconds this moment lasts, I also feel an ocean full of grief for having been gone for so long.

If I would have to describe why I want to be in this place in the Swedish forest instead of going to a psychotherapy school right now, it is this. The horses, the land, the forest, the cats, the dogs, the humans and everyone else living here, seen and unseen, are creating a place where it becomes easier for me to realize that the window separating me from everything else is not really real.

And it feels utterly important to realize this for everything else I will be doing in my life. Realize it not only in my mind but knowing how it feels in every cell of my body.

