

*“The test of good manners is to be patient with bad ones.”—Solomon ibn Gabirol, 11th century Jewish philosopher*

*“Manners should be a technique of inclusion, a way of ensuring that in our company no one will ever be made to feel he is an outcast.”*

*—Manners from Heaven*

When my brother and I were small, we had, like most ranch kids, reasonably good manners. We said please and thank you, asked to be excused from the table when we were through eating, and—once telephone service came to our isolated ranch community—identified ourselves whenever we made a call. Though it sometimes took some prodding from our mother, we were conscientious about thank-you notes. (Always loquacious, I tended to be flowery, but my brother cut to the chase. One Christmas, acknowledging the soap-on-a-rope he received from our cousins, he wrote simply: “Thanks for the soap. I needed it.”)

Being kids, we sometimes came up short, but one place we never forgot our manners was in the barn. To this day, I say whoa to announce myself whenever I walk into a barn. A startled horse may strike out in fear; if I was rude or alarming or simply self-absorbed, I could get kicked in the head. It was an object lesson in the purpose of manners: to make another feel safe and at ease.

Although manners and etiquette are related, they are not the same thing. Etiquette has to do with the rules, such as which fork to use for salad or how to address the queen. The word derives from Old French *estiquette*, meaning label or ticket, and refers to the small cards or “little signs” once used at court to codify proper behavior.

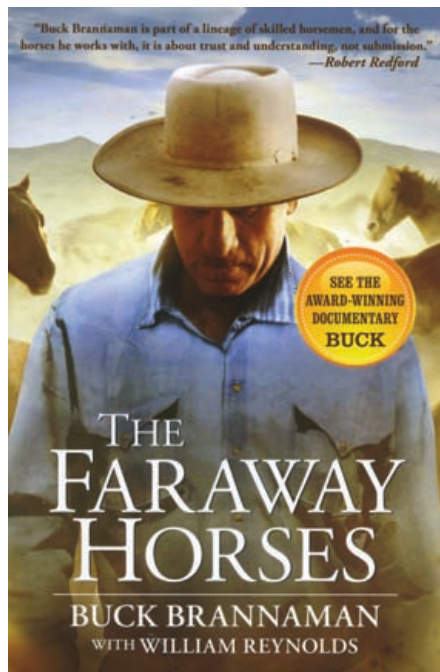
The word manners derives from the Latin word for hand, *manus*, and refers to the “method of handling,” how we handle ourselves and others. As Emily Post put it: “Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.”

A good horseman is called a good hand, and I began to make the connection between horsemanship and manners as I watched “Buck,” the just-released documentary about legendary horse trainer Buck Brannaman. Brannaman inspired Robert Redford’s character in “The Horse Whisperer” and is one of the leading practitioners of what has come to be known as natural horsemanship, a quiet revolution that started in the cowboy West in

# The Good Hand

*Making a horse, Buck Brannaman, and manners.*

*By Teresa Jordan*



the 1960s and is gradually changing the way people work with horses all over the world. Documentary films seldom do well at the box office, but “Buck” is enjoying great reviews and has ranked among the top 25 box-office draws since its release in June—a surprising success when you consider that fewer than two percent of American households own a horse. But “Buck” is as much about how we treat each other as it is about how we treat horses.

However courteous my brother and I were when we stepped into a barn, the sort of horse breaking that surrounded us was not what one would call considerate. We grew up within the tradition Will James described in his famous novel, “Smoky the Cowhorse.” Clint, the hero of the tale, gathers Smoky off the range, ropes and “busts” him (tripping him so he falls hard enough to knock out his breath), and then ties his four feet together to keep him down. After Clint puts a hackamore on the horse, he lets it get up and fight him:

“The cowboy played his rope and held his horse; he’d held many like him before and most all had fought the same as Smoky was now fighting. That pony’s eyes was afire as he seen there was no chance for any getaway even when he was on his feet. He couldn’t at all shake that two legged hunk of terror, and as he snorted and fought the rope that still held fast around his head and neck, he begin to tire some; and came a time when as the cowboy stood still a few yards away he stood still too, and legs wide apart, sweat a dripping from his slick hide, he took in a breathing spell.”

Even the compassionate hero in “Smoky the Cowhorse” used terror to break a horse. After this initial session, Clint ties Smoky to a log so he will learn that pulling back on a rope is useless; later he “sacks” him with a saddle blanket to get him used to noise and touch, and then he slaps a saddle on him, swings on, and bucks him out. In each stage, the horse is terrified and only settles down after he learns there is no escape. Once he quiets, Clint is quick to offer comfort, and over time he earns the horse’s trust. He had broken hundreds of horses this way and “had never made an outlaw.” He is the good guy in the novel, compassionate in comparison to the horse thief who abuses Smoky to try to break his spirit. Under the best of conditions, the traditional method of horse breaking was tough on the horse, something captured by the fact that the art was known variously as bronc breaking, busting, twisting, or fighting. A man who tried to gentle a horse before he threw on the saddle was seen as something of a sissy.

The new horse trainers talk about “making” a horse rather than breaking it and describe themselves as horse gentlers rather than bronc busters. One of their central insights is to make a young or troubled horse feel secure from the start rather than working to exhaust its terror. Another tenet is to arrange things so a horse will choose to cooperate because it is more comfortable rather than because it is less painful, something Brannaman describes in his book, “The Faraway Horses,” as “making the wrong thing difficult, and the right thing easy, as opposed to making the wrong thing impossible through intimidation.”

This is not new. Four centuries before Christ, Xenophon advised the Greek cavalry to handle colts so that they were “gentle, tractable, and fond of man,” and there have always been those who preferred to give a



Horse whisperer Buck Brannaman says, “Your horse is a mirror to your soul, and sometimes you may not like what you see. Sometimes, you will.” Buck travels the country for nine months a year helping horses with people problems. In this photo at Betty Staley’s clinic in Sheridan, Wyo., he’s demonstrating lightness of “feel” with Rebel. Cedar Creek’s production called “Buck” can be found at [www.buckthefilm.com](http://www.buckthefilm.com).

horse no reason to buck rather than taking pride in their ability to ride it out. But leaders in the natural horsemanship movement have been able to articulate their understanding of the horse in ways that have shown people how to relate better not only to their horses, but to each other.

Buck Brannaman and his brother Smokie were terribly abused by their alcoholic father. After their mother’s death, their father’s violence spiraled out of control and several times he beat the boys almost to death. Finally, they were removed to a foster home. “When something is scared for its life,” Brannaman says, “I understand that.” This empathy gives him a special understanding of troubled horses, but he knows, too, that someone who has been abused needs more than just sympathy. He started learning this the first day he met his foster parents, Forrest and Betsy Shirley, and Forrest took him out to fix fence.

“If the Shirleys had dwelled on [our] troubles,” Buck writes in his book, “instead of providing us with discipline and a sense of direction, we would eventually have become spoiled...because we’d have realized that Forrest and Betsy were willing to make exceptions for us because of our situation. Thank goodness they didn’t do that.

“That time in my life...made me understand the needs of horses that have been

treated poorly and are scared or troubled. You can’t just fix things by showing them love.... You have to give them some direction, a purpose, a job. They need...a vision of the future so that the past eventually becomes irrelevant. A mistreated horse has more needs than a horse that has had a nice upbringing. You need to be understanding, and you need to have empathy, but you also need to know that an excess of empathy can get you into trouble. You need to provide discipline without forcing it.”

If good manners—making a horse feel safe and secure—are one half of natural horsemanship, discipline is the other. Having good manners need not mean getting run over, and knowing the difference between discipline and punishment is key. As Buck puts it: “Whether riding a horse or working with a kid, there’s no crime in saying no. But always saying no will take away all the horse’s desire to try, and pretty soon the horse or the youngster will believe there’s nothing he can do right.” Buck teaches the art of redirection, of heading off inappropriate behavior by providing an alternative, a job to do, and rewarding the slightest try. “Whether you’re dealing with a kid or an adult or a horse,” he says, “treat them the way you’d like them to be, not the way they are now.”

It is one thing to talk about such concepts and another to incorporate them into your

own life. The ability that the best of the natural horsemen and women possess to work with even deeply troubled horses, transforming fear and aggression into eager confidence, can seem nothing short of miraculous. It has to do with a respectful way of handling not only one’s horse but also oneself—manners, if you will—that is deeply imbedded in the mind but speaks through the heart and the body. I suspect that one reason natural horsemanship has begun to fascinate people far beyond the horse world is that it suggests that if such growth is possible when we treat horses differently, it is also possible if we change the way we treat each other.

“Horses don’t care what color you are,” says Buck Brannaman, “how tall or short or how small or large you are, or whether you’re rich or poor, attractive or unattractive. None of that means anything to the horse. A horse takes you at face value for how you make him feel at that moment. It seems to me this would be a good way for all of us people to behave with each other, too. Lord knows, in this day and age, the whole world could stand a bit more of that.” ■

*Teresa Jordan lives in Salt Lake City, Utah. This is from her blog, “The Year of Living Virtuously (Weekends Off).” This was week 50. She is in the process of turning it into a book. [www.yearoflivingvirtuously.com](http://www.yearoflivingvirtuously.com).*