

MELINDA FOLSE

Author of *The Smart Woman's Guide to Midlife Horses*

A close-up photograph showing the right eye of a woman with brown hair and the left eye of a dark horse. The woman's eye is looking slightly to the left, and the horse's eye is looking towards the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

# RIDING

FEATURING  
Body Image,  
Fitness, and  
Riding Experts

THROUGH  
THICK & THIN

Make Peace with Your Body and Banish Self-Doubt—In and Out of the Saddle

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*Have you always kind of known what you need to do better in order to ride better? Do you have a hard time letting go of habits and behavior that don't serve you, even though you know you "should?" Do you find it difficult to be gentle with yourself—and yet get the job done?* In this chapter you'll find all the ways the tools, strategies, and insights offered up in this book can become your own, and a permanent part of who you are and how you ride. This is where this book becomes a living credo for each of us—a trail map that evolves as we do to take us to new places with our horses, our riding, and our sense of who we are.

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*Have you always sort of suspected that if you could do better you could ride better? Are old habits and behaviors still calling the shots, even though you know what you "should" do differently? Are you struggling with the dance between being gentle with yourself—and getting the job done?* In this chapter you'll learn how to turn the key on the tools, strategies, and insights offered up in this book for permanent change to how you think, feel, and ride. This final stretch of our trail is where you can make positive changes to your life and life-with-horses credo, and begin a quest that will evolve as you discover new places with your horses, your riding and your sense of who you are. Welcome to the lightness of self and spirit we've all been yearning for!

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## **3 | Get Clear on What's Real**

**N**ow...Be Honest...did you really take the test at the beginning of the book (p. 15)? If so, you've already asked yourself a number of questions and answered a number of prompts that may have started you thinking about how you view your own body, especially when it comes to riding.

Are we right in these self-assessments? Is how we see ourselves, or how we feel in the saddle—or in our breeches or jeans—what's *real*? The answer is... maybe. And just as likely, maybe not. As we've already discovered there's a whole lot to the issue of self-image and what we can do to feel better about how we look. Let's start to peel back the layers.

### **You're More Beautiful Than You Think**

"Real Beauty Sketches," a compelling social experiment conducted and recorded on video by Dove® soap, was a response to researchers' estimate that only 4 percent of women around the world consider themselves beautiful. That's right, 4 percent. *In the whole world.* Dove decided to speak out about the poor-self-esteem epidemic through its "Real Women" campaign. (And no, this is not a product plug.)

The intro to the video states that it intends to "prove to women something very important: you are more beautiful than you think." (Watch it at <http://realbeautysketches.dove.us/>.) Its premise is simple: A series of women sit down behind a curtain, and each one describes her own face to an FBI-trained forensic sketch artist, who then creates a portrait based only on her self-description. Then researchers

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bring in random strangers—behind the curtain with the women—and ask the strangers to describe each subject’s face. From these external descriptions, the artist creates a second portrait.

The difference between the sketch created when each woman described herself and the sketch of her as described by a complete stranger, displayed side by side, provides a staggering and undeniable substantiation of the researchers’ findings: We *are* far more beautiful than we think.

A little more investigation into the phenomena of how our thoughts define us, if even to ourselves, revealed an important side effect: Our thoughts have power to influence not only our self-esteem, but also our choices. In a post-sketch interview, one of the women, Florence, reflects on what she calls “really bad life choices” that she says were a reflection of her lack of self-esteem: “I chose the wrong job, the wrong husbands, blamed everybody else, and defined myself by what people thought of me instead of being my *authentic self* and doing what made me happy...I didn’t get the emotional comfort I needed, so I thought there was something wrong with me.”

After working hard on her self-esteem over and above everything else, Florence found her relationships improving, her perceptions shifting, and people commenting that she seemed like a new person.



## **Exercise for the Soul: Meet Your Authentic Self**

*Authenticity* and *authentic self* are a couple of somewhat fuzzy members of that category of terms we see, hear, and toss about, but when it gets right down to it, are just a little wiggly. As far as I can tell, the quick definition of *authenticity* is keeping your thoughts, words, actions, and choices firmly aligned with the core values you were born with.

So, then, is your *authentic self* just the most honest and real version of yourself you can possibly be? And if so, *who is she*? What’s important to her? How do you know when she’s in charge—and when she’s not? Is there a light that comes on somewhere in your consciousness when you find the “sweet spot” of authenticity,

**Deandra**

“I would rather someone say to my face, ‘Don’t you think you’re too heavy to ride?’ than whisper about it to everyone but me.”



like the one in the drive-thru car wash that tells you to stop right where you are, because this is where you need to be?

Knowing your authentic self—and being able to define in real terms what she values—helps you understand what really drives you at the deepest level. What brings you true joy? Where do you find inspiration? What do you want more of in your life? By building your life and lifestyle around these *authentic values*, you can create an existence that is more satisfying and meaningful.

So what are *your* authentic values? (Even though they may change or shift somewhat over time, they will deepen with your effort to understand them, and therefore, get to know your authentic self a little bit better.) Ask yourself: If someone were giving your eulogy today, what words do you hope he or she would use to describe you, your character, and how you lived your life? (Find a great sample list at [www.lifehack.org](http://www.lifehack.org): [www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/3-easy-steps-becoming-your-authentic-self.html](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/3-easy-steps-becoming-your-authentic-self.html)). Here is my personal Top 10, in no particular order:

- Kindness
- Creativity
- Excellence
- Family
- Integrity
- Intuition
- Passion
- Patience
- Spirituality
- Tenacity

- 1** Your turn! Make a quick list of 10 words that sum up or describe who you are at your core, in no particular order.
- 2** Now, allotting a single page for each word, free-journal (write as fast as you can in a notebook or on your computer or tablet) any examples you can think of from your life right now that demonstrate how you are living that value.



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- 3 Draw a line underneath your example(s), then beneath that make a list of actions you'd *like* to take or goals to pursue to live out that value.
- 4 Sit back and take a look at your word list, and then your actions and goals, and ask yourself some hard questions:

**What activities in your life right now do not align in some way with this list of values?**

Keep in mind that your values change over time, and this list may be completely different at different times or phases of your life.

**Who or what relationships in your life take you farther away from your authentic self?**

I'm not suggesting you jettison anyone or anything that doesn't fit; just be aware and make choices accordingly about where you put your time and energy.

**LIKE WATER RUNNING INTO A TRENCH**

Here's where we make the turn toward understanding not only why we are where we are in this body image conundrum, but how our mental, physical, emotional, and lifestyle habits are keeping us stuck. How we habitually think about, talk about, and compare our bodies to others' not only sets, but perpetuates our body image. Habit, you see, is like a trench water runs into—and if you've ever been camping and dug that little trench around the outside of your tent when it looks like rain, this image will be as vivid to you as it is to me. (And truthfully, I've never been camping when it *didn't* rain.)

Regardless of how our real life body image realities are playing out for each of us, it is our myth understandings, false ideals, and negative comparisons that have helped us dig our own body-image-habit trenches. Years of related thoughts, actions, and choices in our behavior have formed the unconscious habits that keep these trenches full. While we may *talk about* change and *want* change, until we figure out how to stop filling our trenches (creating different habits of thinking, believing, and behaving), *nothing is going to* change.

**FJ Thomas (cowgirlswithcurves.com)**

“I would love to hear the words ‘you are beautiful’ (referring to my physical appearance). I am blessed to get kind words about my personality, which I KNOW is the most important, but deep down every woman wants to be beautiful inside *and* out.”



Where do we begin? Body image, it turns out, is about much more than *how you think you look*. It *is* that, yes, along with a whole complex, multifaceted range of mental, physical, and emotional connections that drive how you actually experience your life in the body you have. Remember Thomas Cash and *The Body Image Workbook* from the RT<sup>3</sup> Test we took earlier (see p. 15)? In his book, Cash uses a series of exercises and self-evaluations to help pinpoint habitual thinking and emotional responses to this body we live in. Then, step by step, he explains how to repair the damage we may have inadvertently done to our body image, which he defines as: “More than a mental picture of what you look like, your body image consists of your personal relationship with your body—encompassing your perceptions, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and actions that pertain to your physical appearance.”

Taking Cash’s book into the riding arena, it is clear to me that there’s a whole lot of habitual thinking going on of which we are most likely unaware. With these thoughts, feelings, and actions (behavior) keeping our habit trenches full, even our mastery of technical riding skills is no match for what lies beneath whatever confidence we have in our proficiency. How we feel in our bodies when we ride is precisely *where* our body image connects to our riding.

Cash says that as much as one-third of your self-esteem is related to how positive or negative your body image is. “Often a poor body image lowers self-esteem,” he writes. “Poor self-esteem means feeling inadequate as a person; it means you have low self-worth and don’t highly value yourself.” Knowing what we do about how our horses read and mirror us, it’s easy to understand the unwitting cycle a

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negative body image sets off in how we ride, how we feel about our riding, and in our relationships with our horses. The good news Cash shares through his work is that by changing our habitual thinking we can make improvements in our body image that will not only bolster our self-esteem, but also bring comfort and contentment to our relationships (especially, I'm sure, with our horses!).

### **THE MESSAGE IN THE YO-YO**

Many of us (myself included) relate all too well to this quote from the famous late humorist, Erma Bombeck: "In two decades I've lost a total of 789 pounds. I should be hanging from a charm bracelet." The truth is many, if not most, people who lose weight regain it again. When we're heavier than we want to be, losing weight always seems like the answer. However, losing weight is rarely the panacea we imagine it to be. What drives the yo-yo cycle of gaining and losing the same weight over and over seems to be the reality that even when we lose weight—even significant weight—*our body image may not change at all*. It's only a matter of time until the interconnected cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors around that same old body image kick in—and pop goes the button on our skinny jeans.

### **INTERIOR REMODELING**

Like a posting trot, the up and down of yo-yo dieting may have become the rhythm of our relationship with our body image. While for some this does serve to keep actual weight within a certain range, for others chronic dieting can spiral into more serious issues, such as escalating body image distress and eating disorders, wreaking havoc on metabolism that eventually makes it next to impossible to lose any weight at all. And what's worse, it's all for naught. In one of Dr. Cash's studies, for even those whose body image *did* change after losing 50 or more pounds, when they regained as little as 5 pounds their self-esteem and body image reverted right back to where it was *before* they lost the weight.

When it comes to weight loss, many experts now challenge the dieting solution completely, and move us more toward effective weight management through lifestyle change (the kinds of lifestyle changes this book is all about). And, surprise,



## **Anne**

One of my barn friends, we'll call her "Anne" (not her real name at her request), had a medical condition that arose, in part, due to her excess weight. She already rode a very large horse and was in good enough shape to show at a very high level, and she did very well (some might say *in spite of* her weight). However, when her doctor put her on a medication with a side effect that made her dizzy to the point of vertigo, it became clear to her that if she wanted to continue riding she was going to have to lose the weight—and tend to her overall health in such a way that she could quit taking this medication.

She opted for bariatric (weight loss) surgery and a whole slew of lifestyle changes, including improved nutrition and exercise and breathing and meditation, and she dropped 80 pounds in a record (but reasonably healthy) amount of time. Of course, her main motivation was being able to ride her breathtakingly beautiful horse again, so her commitment was solid and unwavering.

Here's the funny part, though: After her first time back in the show ring following her weight loss, she reported feeling *exactly the same* minus the dizziness brought on by the medication. She had always been "all business" about her riding and nothing changed there. She knew she was wearing smaller clothes (she was, in fact, now wearing that elusive size 6), but overall, everything else felt the same.

It was only when she saw pictures from the show that she realized how different her body looked. She had been looking at herself in the mirror for months, watching her size steadily go down. She had bought new clothes in a downward progression from size 20, to 18, all the way to the 6s she was wearing on show day. When she examined the photo of her whole show class, all the horses were about the same size and color, and all the riders were dressed in traditional black-and-whites with standard, pretty much identical helmets. She looked and looked and then looked up, puzzled. "I can't find myself!" she said.

Then she looked again. "Oh, wait!" she exclaimed at last. "I had to change out my chin strap and it was flesh-colored instead of black." Tears filled her eyes. "There I am!"

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surprise, significant and permanent weight loss tends to show up as a side effect. Citing a University of Vermont study that provided clinically obese people with body image therapy similar to what Cash offers in *The Body Image Workbook*, Cash reveals the myth-busting truth: “People who need to lose weight to improve their health should separate the goals of weight loss and body acceptance,” he writes. “By first learning how to have a positive relationship with your imperfect body instead of a relationship full of loathing, desperation, and abuse, your ability to shed excess weight may be strengthened.”

Translating Cash’s advice to us as riders brings forth the overarching concept behind this book: while “exterior remodeling” is well and good if that’s something you want to do, it is far more important to work on the “interior problem.” For us as horsewomen this difficult “beneath the surface” work means addressing every choice we make in how we ride and work with horses (as outlined in the chapters that follow). At the trail’s end, we may or may not still want to lose weight. The point is, if we do this work well, *weight* becomes a nonissue. When we decide that we do want to make physical changes, our “interior remodeling” will set us up for success that will retire that yo-yo for good and make us much more likely to reap the emotional benefits of reaching and maintaining a healthy weight and lifestyle.

“The more invested people are in their appearance,” Cash writes in *The Body Image Workbook*, “the more it preoccupies them—in their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.” He adds that while people think this preoccupation will help them raise their sense of self-worth, the opposite is actually true: It turns out that the more we fret about the size of our seat, the more our self-esteem decreases.

I don’t know about you, but I’d much rather spend all that time and energy on my horses.

## **IT'S YOUR CHOICE**

In his book Cash explains that people tend to deal with body image challenges in three basic ways:

- **Appearance Fixing** This is anything we do to try to change our looks, from fretting about the offending characteristic to trying to cover it up or otherwise make it look better. (This, I would assume, includes my stretchy jeans, oversized t-shirts, and hoodies.) This also includes always being in some stage of planning your next diet—or continuously adding to your exercise DVD collection (Argh! Got me again!).

Another appearance-fixing tactic, Cash tells us, is called *compensation*: the things we do to “make ourselves feel better” that don’t address the issue we’re really concerned about (I’m guessing a new haircut, different makeup, and long red acrylic nails all put me back in the “yep” column again). While these things may make us feel better momentarily, the underlying angst remains. (Even worse, those nails backfire when you’re trying to tighten a cinch!)

We might also always seek reassurance about our looks (“Tell me, really, does this saddle make my butt look big?”). We, of course, hope to hear “No!” to “fix” our concern, although rarely does this appease for long. Even when others *do* tell the truth, we probably won’t believe them!

- **Avoidance** Just as you may guess, this tactic means we’ll go to any length to squelch any sort of body image discomfort. (In my experience, this could include drowning these worries in hot fudge.) Often sporting some version of “I’m just not going to think about it,” we avoid all mirrors, photos, and video. Unfortunately, however, while refusing to think about “how big my thighs look in these breeches” or “how my belly bounces during sitting trot” may offer *some* temporary relief, it’s kind of like telling yourself not to think about pink elephants. As we’ll see later, our brain doesn’t register the negative—so what we’re trying not to think about is still in there, front and center in our subconscious, walloping our self-image. Sometimes avoidance keeps us on the sidelines and out of situations that may invite any sort of body discomfort. (This is what makes some plus-sized riders quit showing—and others even stop riding completely.)

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- **Acceptance** A far better course, our assembled experts agree, is to accept those negative feelings instead of just avoiding them (we're going to learn how to do this, beginning on p. 47). Does this mean giving up on losing excess weight and resigning ourselves to being a plus-sized rider? As we'll explore in detail later on, the shifts we can make in our lifestyle and habits will likely set a new course for our thoughts and emotions around our appearance on horseback.

### **SEPARATE FACT FROM FICTION**

"The whole issue of weight and dieting and self-image is a tangled one," says Jill Valle, a Los Angeles-based, licensed family therapist who specializes in body image and weight issues for women and adolescent girls. Because we are so influenced by what Valle terms "media mythology," it really *is* hard to separate truth from pure fiction when it comes to resolving body image issues and settling in at our fit and healthy best.

Valle agrees with what we've already pinpointed: The key to success here is looking at this process as a *lifestyle change* that reaches beyond any "diet" or "exercise program." What we're talking about here is getting in touch with the physical realities of our bodies, regardless of size, and exploring the connections between thoughts and emotions around what truly is "healthy" and "ideal" for each of us as *unique individuals*—not according to some intersection of numbers on a chart.

"What is prevalent right now is a lot of differing opinions of what's 'healthy,'" Valle says. "'Ideal' weight doesn't always correlate with ideal health, just as 'overweight' doesn't always mean 'unhealthy.' Some women may be larger," she adds, "but in touch with reality, and they may actually be healthy *and* heavy."

Valle recommends that for those who need to make lifestyle changes, as she prefers to call them, it is extremely important to make the distinction that what we are pursuing is *very different* from what the multimillion-dollar diet industry sells as being "on a diet" or "off a diet."

"The question we must ask instead," she emphasizes, "should be, 'What are we putting *into* our bodies, what are we doing *with* our bodies, and how does that

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align with or conflict with our goals?” (In our case, “Is sitting here on the sofa and eating this cupcake moving me closer or farther away from being a healthy and athletic rider?”).

Valle concurs that the controversy—even in our own minds—about what our own “ideal” or “perfect” weight and conditioning is makes it very difficult to sort the real and healthy from the “media mythology.” (I was amazed at how her observations and thoughts as a therapist working with all kinds of women on these issues meshed with what I had discovered in my own research among coaches, trainers, and women riding at all levels and disciplines in the horse world.) Together we looked at the normal body image issues most women face through the lens of a woman who also wants to ride horses (and ride them well), and we agreed on the three key places where body image and riding intersect—and you’ll recognize them! Yep: thoughts, feelings, and actions or behavior. Because these three are, in fact, a continuum (a shift in any one of them affects the other two), Valle explains that it really doesn’t matter where you “jump in.” (We’ll delve into how to ride this magical continuum in the coming chapters, but for now just know that the realm of strong, healthy connectedness is waiting at the end of this trail for each of us.) In addition, we named three “types” that demonstrate these continuum intersections (each of us may find ourselves inhabiting one or all of these, at one time or another):

- **The Floppers** These women have no relationship with their own bodies *at all*. Deeply mired in some of the “body mythology” we’ve already explored, they have no idea what is or is not true about their bodies, or even where their body parts are in space and relation to one another. You’ve seen them or been them in the saddle: They come in *all* sizes and shapes and tend to “flop around” as they ride, with no idea how their poor balance, lack of body control, chaotic energy, and chattering minds and mouths are putting themselves and their horses in danger. What these women see, feel, and understand about their bodies has nothing to do with objective reality.



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- **The Fighters** These are the women (and sadly, many teenage girls) who have been dieting for so long they don't even remember how *not* to obsess over their latest diet and exercise regimens. They may have had some successes in the past, but they've failed so many times that they've all but given up on the idea of ever getting to their goal weight and staying there. They're riding, but not as well as they think they could without what they consider "extra bulk." They worry about their horses and feel guilty (and a little bit defensive) over just about everything to do with their riding: form, style, and how they might seek to improve.
  
- **The Dancers** These women are few and far between, but somehow they've turned the corner. They understand, take care of, respect, and are at peace with their bodies, and have learned to make the most of their physical attributes to overcome whatever challenges happen to be "riding along with them." They know how to use a powerful combination of clean-burning nutrition, a conditioning and strengthening regimen they can live with, and a mindful connection with their energies and abilities that allows them to move with their horses like dancers across a ballroom floor. (By the way, we're going to learn how to use these, too!)

I don't know about you, but at the moment I've got one foot planted in the Fighter camp and the other tentatively tapping its way toward the Dancers. The question, I think most of us would agree, is how in the world do you get right up on stage with the Dancers? After talking to more experts than I can count and poring over all the latest sports nutrition and fitness data I could get my hands on, here's the best answer I can give you: We each have to *make the shift* in our minds (and in our lifestyles) that will connect our mind, body, and spirit in a whole new way, and on our own terms.

## **Beware the "Trance"**

When our real or imagined shortcomings begin to define and delimit our experience of life, we can become paralyzed by a "waking dream" that author Tara Brach calls the "trance of unworthiness." In her book, *Radical Acceptance*, Brach

## Myths of Description



If for now we can just agree that it's really okay to be *whatever size and shape we are*, as long as we don't hurt our horses, let's talk about the mythology of body description. The self-proclaimed "Evil Queen of Comedy" Joy Nash takes deadly aim at the perceptions attached to the term "fat" in her million-plus-hit YouTube "Fat Rant" (watch it here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUTJQIBI1oA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yUTJQIBI1oA)). In it, Nash reframes "fat" into a descriptor no more offensive than "tall," "short," or any other word you might use to physically describe a person without inferring it makes him or her good or bad.

"I personally feel like 'fat' is a descriptive word," Nash explains in her video. "So, therefore, it has no negative connotation for me. I know that there are many out there who choose to use it as an insult or derogatory term, but to me—it simply is not. 'Fat' takes less time

to say than 'overweight' or 'plus-sized' and, since I am a writer by nature, and I have affixed neither a negative nor positive spin to the word myself, it is the word I use. The insult, 'Yeah, well... you're FAT and STUPID!' makes about as much sense to me as the insult, 'You're TALL and STUPID!' or 'You're DARK and STUPID!'"

The word only has as much power as we give it, Nash says, and if it is just a descriptive word in your vocabulary...well, then, it's perfectly okay to say, "I am a fat girl." Or, as I heard a young woman say just the other day, "I am not fat, I *have* fat. I also have toenails, but that doesn't mean I *am* toenails." Finding this brand of solid self-acceptance and self-compassion can be key to letting go of the negativity about your body that could be bogging you down as much, if not more, than excess pounds.

describes this feeling of futility and inertia all too familiar to those of us who have ever struggled with “yo-yo” weight.

“I know I should be able to handle the problem,” she writes, “but no matter how hard I try, I can’t get where I need to go. Completely alone and shadowed by the fear of failure, I am trapped in my dilemma. Nothing else in the world exists but that.”

Think about it. How many otherwise wonderful moments in your life—and



## Myths of Shape

**MYTH:** “My (choose one) legs are too short, boobs are too big, thighs are too thick, arms are too short, upper body is too long, muscles are too dense, hips are too narrow, shape is too lopsided for me to ever ride well.”

**TRUTH:** According to Wendy Murdoch, “People with long torsos, short legs, and short arms are going to have a center of gravity that’s higher—and maybe not quite enough leg to get around the horse, but this is a challenge of physics, not weight.” Speaking in equations, she adds, “Weight is mass times gravity. Pressure is weight times force. Proportion, however, is linear: ‘this’

length versus ‘that’ length. And above all, gravity is the law.”

Susan Harris agrees, adding, “You can’t change short legs, a big frame, a long torso, and so on—it’s the body God gave you! And while you *can’t* change the fundamental shape and conformation of your body, you *can* learn how to work with your body’s characteristics to maximize your effectiveness in the saddle.”

“Any body shape can ride to success,” concurs Coach Daniel Stewart. “You just have to find your own definition of what success is for you—within reason.”

As an example, let’s discuss thighs for a minute (which I usually try not to, unless I’m talking about

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especially in your *horse life*—have been tarnished by your self-consciousness over weight or appearance? As a young teenager, I remember watching the other girls at my boarding stable ride their horses bareback, wearing tank tops and cut-off shorts, galloping in like free spirits, turning the hoses on one another as they rinsed off their horses after a ride. I'm not sure whether it was more the fear of galloping bareback or dread of how I imagined I looked in shorts, but these otherwise halcyon days were times of misery and longing. Longing to be free. Longing to feel

chicken). Veterinarian and saddle-fit specialist Dr. Joyce Harman says the main thing to consider about our thighs is not their size but whether we are able to get our legs into the correct riding position. For example, Dr. Harman says that a problem she frequently sees that increases load and pressure on a horse—and therefore his discomfort—is improperly adjusted stirrups. This is particularly problematic for people with long thighs, because too-short stirrups can push the rider's weight too far back in the saddle—a problem for any horse with even the lightest of riders (we'll discuss this stirrup issue at greater “length” on p. 168).

Dr. Harman says it is actually the thickness of your thigh—and

the location of this thickness—that is a very important factor in finding not only the right horse, but also the right saddle, the right stirrup position, and your body's place of perfect balance. To determine thigh thickness, it's important to look at how much fat and muscle (yes, muscle counts, too!) is on the inside of your thighs. She says you can “have a lot of ‘backside,’ and that's not as much of an issue,” and she emphasizes that we need to be looking to *balance* the thickness. Again, as an example, when you have thick thighs, you're going to want a more narrow horse (more on this on p. 59); if you have thinner thighs, a wider horse will work just fine.



**Liz**

“As the mother of a teenage girl I see daily how society’s expectations of girls and women has made it so hard for girls (women, too, but for teens it’s excruciating) to accept their bodies and not constantly criticize and demean themselves.”

the pure joy they exuded, which I was certain had something to do with looking the way they looked. I realize now, looking back, that it was only my perception that was holding me hostage. This was the “trance of unworthiness,” putting my joy on hold until I dieted a little harder, exercised a little more, and somehow “earned” the freedom I craved. In truth, no amount of dieting or exercise would bring me the carefree abandon I saw in the other girls’ full-throttle *joy* in riding and being with their horses and one another.

This feeling of unworthiness, Brach explains, creates a vicious cycle: The more unworthy I felt, the more separate and vulnerable I felt. “Underneath our fear of being flawed is a more primal fear that something is wrong with our life,” Brach explains. “Our reaction to this fear is to feel blame, even hatred, toward whatever we consider the source of the problem: ourselves, others, life itself.”

**SNAP OUT OF IT!**

After spending a lifetime working with the sick and the poor and the hopeless, Mother Theresa observed that the biggest ailment and cause of suffering she observed was not a registered disease, per se, but rather, “the feeling of not belonging.” In our own society, Brach says, this condition has now reached epidemic proportions. “We long to belong and feel as if we don’t deserve to.” This seems as prevalent in barn



Tara Brach’s *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha* (Bantam, 2003).

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aisles, show rings, and on group trail rides as is does in any of the areas where we may compare ourselves to others. Whether or not it's justifiable, when we feel this isolation and fear of rejection, we're ripe for the sort of self-loathing that perpetuates our suffering itself in a continuous loop until something comes along to snap us out of our "trance."

"We learn early in life that any affiliation—with family and friends, at school or in the workplace [and especially, it seems, in the show barn!]  
—requires proving that we are worthy," says Brach. "We are under pressure to compete with each other, to get ahead, to stand out as intelligent, attractive, capable, powerful, wealthy. Someone is always keeping score."

In our riding, this scorekeeping becomes all the more compelling when our own "flaws" hit our radar screen, and it's "game on" to try and manipulate our bodies—and therefore our appearance—to fit into whatever "perfect picture" we have bought into. And then, when we think we don't "measure up" (by whatever measuring stick we pick as our poison), the "trance" sets in, and we are locked in a struggle that may well stay with us for life.

Looking back now, I'm both amused and saddened at how my perception of falling short of my own "gold standard" measuring stick of worthiness—galloping bareback in cut-off shorts (and laughing all the way)—kept me isolated from the *joy* I could have felt in riding horses with friends in the summer sunshine. What's worse, that wasn't the only time my self-consciousness over a bigger (but by no means fat) body forced my budding adolescent awkwardness into full bloom. That was when my own dance with the "trance of unworthiness" began. And yours?

## **THE WAY OUT**

Brach says that when we allow ourselves to become entrapped by our feelings of self-judgment, anxiety, restlessness, and dissatisfaction, the "trance of unworthiness" can hold us captive for years in a cage of our own making. Usually we're not even aware we're in it; it's only in looking back (like I just did) that we see the waste of precious moments we'll never be able to get back.

The answer? Accepting everything in our moment-to-moment experience

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without judgment or plans for changing it. That's right. *Everything*. Thunder thighs and all.

“The way out of our cage begins with accepting absolutely everything about ourselves and our lives,” Brach writes. That doesn't mean we should put up with anything harmful, she is quick to add. The way out of our “trance” begins with simply allowing ourselves to *feel what we're feeling* without resisting, judging, or feeling compelled to *fix* it. Seeing ourselves—possibly for the first time in our conscious lives—with a big, open, kind, and loving heart is your trail marker for making the turn toward what Brach coins *radical acceptance*. And this is both the beginning *and* the culmination of this journey we're now on together.

I know. You're skeptical. As we say in Texas, “This ain't your first rodeo.” You've tried other solutions and come up empty-handed (and empty-hearted). All I ask is that you sit deep, stay centered, and commit to what's ahead. Don't spook when you recognize some too-familiar shadows and scary objects. As we move along this trail together, our first concern is identifying and then letting go of whatever has been stopping you. As our friend Coach Daniel Stewart (we'll hear a lot from him in coming pages) is fond of saying, “Most often what we struggle with as riders mirrors what we're going through in life. The solution is to expand our self-image beyond what is troubling us—and troubling our riding.”

Does that mean we're not going to make any changes? Hardly! Am I telling you, “It is what it is...accept it and get over yourself?” Not at all! Are we going to ignore real and serious issues that could be impeding your riding or even putting you or your horse at risk? Absolutely not! You'll see how your own issues in the saddle connect with other areas of your life, and that it doesn't seem to matter which one you approach first—or which responds first—the others inevitably come along.

## **#Hoofpicks**

In this chapter we explored the concept of “interior work” and how it affects our exterior appearance.

This will help us in our work with horses because in order to “show up” as our best selves, we have to stop fixating on our bodies and pay more attention to what really matters most in our relationship with our horses, ourselves, and others. This is a new and different game-changer in the battle against negative body image because when we learn to accept our bodies *first*, just as they are, a whole new world opens to us.

Your Chapter 3 **#Hoofpicks** include:

- 1 Use the right measuring stick (or tape).** It may be okay to weigh more. We DO more. Charts are just guidelines for the undereducated. The real measurements are:
  - How do you feel?
  - Are you healthy?
  - Do you have enough energy to do what you want and need to do?
  - Are you strong, effective, and safe in the barn and the saddle?
  - Is your horse happy and healthy?
- 2 Go for quality.** We choose only the highest-quality feed for our horses, carefully matched for the level of activity they do. We measure carefully and religiously add whatever supplements they seem to need to be healthy and look their best. We feed them on time and make sure they get enough roughage and drink plenty of fresh water. We only give them healthy treats. We exercise them, stretch them, warm them up cool them down, make sure they have adequate rest, and keep their health care on schedule. Why do we have such a hard time doing the same thing for ourselves?



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- 3 Start putting it together.** As you start to tie what you *think* about your body and your riding with your actual physical realities, give yourself permission to stick with this quest. Follow each trail of new information a little way, and consider the possibility that perhaps you've been given a bum steer or two by well meaning others, the media, or your own fears.
- 4 Be open.** To change, to acceptance, to whatever it takes to learn what is real, authentic, true, and right—and let go of all that's not. This means facing your issues squarely and figuring out your own best answers. This may mean taking others' observations to heart. It may also mean (lovingly) telling them to go jump in the nearest lake. Only when you sit with your own *authentic truth* can you begin to separate what's real from what's not.