

The Promise

In memory of David Moynihan

David was well past his 40th birthday and once more he was rising above the demons of his addiction. His time at The Ranch, an extended care treatment facility for addiction and trauma recovery where I work as the equine psychotherapist, had been a tough, but productive time for him. We had watched him emerge from a life ruled by fear into a comfort and autonomy that he told us he had never before experienced. In his relationship with a leggy Palomino quarter horse named Badger, I witnessed David's transformation. Badger may well have been the best therapist David ever encountered.

After leaving The Ranch, David had struggled from time to time in his recovery, but he had held on to enough of what he had discovered to once again reach out to some of us for help. In particular he called me asking for a reunion with Badger. As I spoke with him on the phone I envisioned a determined fist rising above mounds of crusted earth. David had not given up; he still wanted to live; and he was once more searching for the life-force he had discovered the year before.

"I want to get back up on Badger," he told me. And of course, I agreed. We ended the call with plans to talk again soon to set a date.

Two days later, before we could speak again, David was killed in a car accident. Those who loved him were crushed, including his mom and dad, two brothers and their wives, two nieces and a nephew. The death of such a young man is tragic in any case, but there was something especially heartbreaking about David's death at a time when hope was so prevalent in his life.

The Ranch is a very special place. There is something more than psychotherapy that happens there. And David, a man without a malicious bone in his body, had found his way into the hearts of the staff. As is our way, we decided to gather in memoriam for David. We

invited his parents to join us for our "circle of remembering," and they came, along with one of David's brothers and his wife.

We circled in a garden site selected to honor David and some of us offered gifts along with some final words. I laid a piece of Badger's mane and tail among the flowers, saying that this was my way of keeping a promise to him, my way of reuniting David and Badger. I cried.

At the end of the ceremony his mother, tears in her eyes, came to me and asked, "Could I have some of the horse's mane?"

"Sure you can," I said. "Would you like to meet Badger?"

From her grief-filled face, there was a light in her eyes. "Can we?" she asked.

I took them to the barn and went to get Badger from the pasture. As I was returning with David's palomino friend, these two parents --- no spring chickens --- were hanging on the pasture gate, like eager children waiting for a riding lesson.

What happened next left me speechless. Badger is not, to say the least, the most affectionate or friendly horse in the world. At times, he was just plain grouchy. (David had been one of the select few who had been able to bring out Badger's tenderness.) So, as we walked in from the pasture, I had attempted to communicate to him my hope that he would tolerate our visitors.

As I brought Badger into the barn, David's mother's hand reached out hesitantly to touch him on the neck. Just her fingertips touched the side of the powerful neck. There was so much need in this simple action that I told her that she could come closer, to which she again answered with her question: "Could I?"

This tiny woman stepped closer to the 16 hand horse, stroked his neck and greeted her son's big friend. "Hi, Badger," she said. "David sure did love you."

I saw her standing in the same place where her son had stood loving this horse and I imagined that she was very aware of this too.

“It’s okay to hug him if you want,” I said.

Again, she answered with her question: “Can I?”

I smiled. “Sure you can.”

Another step closer and slowly her arms wrapped around Badger’s neck. She stood, quietly holding him. Badger was being so much more than tolerant; he was actually being cuddly. I touched his nose. “Thank you,” I thought.

Personal recovery work can be sacred. Much of David’s work at The Ranch certainly had been. And so was this quiet, unexpected moment. The rest of the family followed, each making some kind of physical contact with Badger. David’s brother asked if he could take some of the mane

to his children, David’s beloved niece and nephew.

I have been a therapist for close to 20 years, but what I experienced that day was uniquely profound. I did not emerge from my emotions as I drove home that evening and it became clear that I needed to find words to describe this powerful experience and to express its importance.

Later, as I told my husband about what had happened, I came to understand what the family and I had witnessed: with her arms wrapped around Badger’s neck, David’s mother was giving her son a final hug --- an embrace she had not been able give to David.

A grieving mother said good-bye to her son.



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