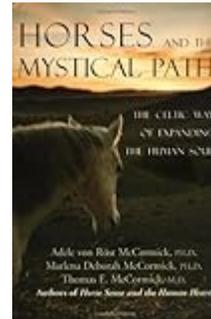


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Adele von Rust McCormick, Marlena Deborah McCormick, Thomas E. McCormick. *Horses and the Mystical Path: The Celtic Way of Expanding the Human Soul.* Novato: New World Library, 2004. 167 pp. \$21.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57731-450-9.



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“Far Back, Far Back in Our Dark Soul the Horse Prances”—D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (1931)

Because I had until recently lived in the company of horses, and have a particular curiosity about Celtic ways, I was intrigued by the McCormicks’ new book. (They are also the authors of *Horse Sense and the Human Heart*.) I knew from the earlier volume that they were psychotherapists as well as horse lovers and had discovered that their horses had gifts that made them unique professional as well as performance partners. Since horses have served as therapeutic presences in so many lives, my own included, their discovery seemed sensible enough. What troubled me about the new book was the suggestion that horses might enhance human souls as well as human bodies and minds. Frankly, I had always considered my equine friends above the petty concerns that absorb the institutional religions I am familiar with.

After reading *Horses and the Mystical Path* and doing some additional research on the pre-Christian Celtic way, I have come to see that what the McCormicks, deeply influenced by Jungian theory, understand as “mystical” resonates with me as “interspecies communication.” For me the authors’ use of language proved to be a translation problem that would undoubtedly not have existed for our horses or dogs or cats who, despite domestication and association with humans, have never created or be-

lieved in any boundary between themselves and the rest of the natural world. They are, simply by existing in the world, a reminder of how newly evolved humans understood their relationship to themselves, other species, and all of nature.

Among the peoples who came to comprise Western culture, the Celts, partially because of their special affinity for nonhumans, especially horses, retained more of that original wisdom than other Western societies. I think sensing that (and perhaps some genes and memes) explains my love both for horses and things Celtic. Without question, horses have been my teachers as well as my friends, companions, and responsibilities as a caregiver. Reading *Horses and the Mystical Way* made me appreciate even more why my equine companions have been such a deep emotional part of, as well as a powerful intellectual influence on, my life.

But enough of me and my expanding comprehension. The McCormicks’ story is more to the point here, although their journey, too, began with finding their roots. On the Isle of Mull in the Scottish Hebrides, searching for the thirteenth-century McCormick castle, their ancestral seat, they found themselves on what they thought was a detour. As we all would be, they were annoyed when their progress was halted in the heather-rich highlands by a herd of shaggy-coated sheep who, when they

opened the car doors, not only surrounded them but climbed in beside them. Finally, annoyance overcome by the creatures' attractive looks and friendly ways, the McCormicks "accepted the fact that there was nothing ... to do but succumb ... and make friends with them." Perhaps never before, although they had long owned and valued horses and other domestic animals, had nonhuman will and skill so overwhelmed their own, a fact that was driven home when the herd's shepherd appeared, jovially commenting to the flock: "You found them!" Later, the authors would realize how prescient his words were, but at the time they had no idea they were lost, not only geographically but intellectually and spiritually, and by what seemed serendipity had "come to the right place" to be reabsorbed into the flock (p. 2).

Later that night, in the shepherd's hut, they heard stories about the Celts, their ancestors, in the Hebrides, opening them to a "way of life" they had "never imagined," a way that years later led to the rediscovery of cultural roots they had indeed been unconsciously seeking when they set out to find their genetic heritage. Thanks to "the shamanic influence of the ... old shepherd," they came to understand why horses had to be central to whatever they did. Horses were the messengers or animal guides of their Celtic forebearers: "Celtic shamans call [such a guide] an *anam cara*, or 'soulfriend,' in Gaelic" (p. 6). Much of *Horses and the Mystical Way* shares the stories of the healing and/or enlightenment that the McCormicks and their clients experience once they bend their wills to those of their equine *anam cara*. These experiences are glossed by their growing knowledge of the role played by horses "[t]hroughout the millennia" in human "religion, spiritual development, and ... search for inner wisdom" (pp. 15-16). Their research focuses on the Iberian Peninsula of Spain, the original home of the ancestors of the Peruvian Paso horses they breed and love.

The Celtic influence can be traced through most of Europe, the Near East, as well as the British Isles and Ireland, all of which retain the myth of the lost island of Atlantis which we inherit through Southern European classical roots via the likes of Plato. All these myths describe Atlantis as having "reached a spiritual apex" marked by a special relationship, a "highly developed state of compassion and respect" to all nonhumans. They particularly revered the golden-maned, bronze-hoofed horses given to the Atalantans by their patron god Neptune/Poseidon. In Atalantan mythology these horses represented "the cosmic forces of primordial chaos," serving as well as the conduits to those forces. The forces themselves, the source of all beings, were also recognized as the source

of all wisdom:

"Indo-European history and traditions make clear that the relationship between humans and horses once honored in ways have become clouded by contemporary life. These traditions demonstrate that working and living with horses, within a spiritual framework, puts one in touch with inner truths and balance that contribute to the evolution of the human psyche. Still today, the special spiritual and emotional bonds between horses and humans are cultivated in Iberian horse communities, which contain wisdom traditions tens of thousands of years old" (p. 33).

"As one becomes more deeply involved with horses, one begins to have the vague sense that there's another level of communication, another reality just beyond our reach.... This is where the journey into the mystical realm with horses begins" (p. 109).

The wisdom gained comes from working in partnership with a larger mammal whose contribution to the work is not equal to, but in fact greater than, the rider's or driver's. In this context the human passenger finds herself in a situation where only respect, balance, and cooperation succeed. As the McCormicks write, to work with horses modern Westerners are required "to radically shift ... perceptions and attitudes—to stop thinking things must go our way or as planned" (p. 40) and to acknowledge that "in a natural setting, animals take the lead and humans follow" (p. 46). The goal here is not to become passive passenger but "to become centaurs (part human, part horse) ... to *commune* with their horses" (p. 48). Certainly this communion has what might be called mystical implications with resonances to the shamanic traditions suggested by their encounter with the shepherd at the beginning of the book. The Celtic cross "had its roots in communion," a tradition more ancient than Christianity that provides heightened communication with others based on love. According to English mystic Evelyn Underhill, "We know a thing by uniting with it, by assimilating it, by interpenetration of it and ourselves. It gives itself to us in so far as we give ourselves to it" (quoted p. 163).

To become a centaur is to shapeshift, to become more-than-human, to become one, flesh and blood, with the horse and thus to perceive the world through its senses and mind and, beyond that, to share the world that lies beyond the fortified boundaries human cultures have constructed around themselves. "Even in modern times," the McCormicks explain, "the Celtic people ... practice shapeshifting ... the ancient shamanic art in which a per-

son sheds his or her human identity to become an animal, thus melding with creation. In that respect, this practice is a form of communion. It is the exercise of the imagination, often marking the beginning stages of the mystical quest" (p. 81). It follows that "The Celts' idiosyncratic love of travel developed into their passion for making pilgrimages to 'thin places' ... places of discovery ... where humans might catch glimpses of the invisible dimension. Traveling on horseback was particularly important ... for animals were physical and spiritual guides" (pp. 68-69).

The horse, also recognized as the source of human creativity and imagination, was also perceived as the fountainhead of the rich tradition of poetry, "drama and storytelling" that the Celts used to connect or reinforce the connection to the natural world. In the introduction, the McCormicks write: "Imagination, according to famous psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott, is entering the experience and situation of another being without seeking selfish gratification, pleasure, or notoriety. The imagination is the key to a vibrant life" (p. xii). The imagination is yet another conduit through which the horse reminds us "that we, too, are a part of nature, equal to other animals and other living things, and equal to one another ... in a universal community whose truths supercede sociopolitical hierarchies" (p. 90).

The lives of Celtic Christian saints provide the McCormicks with examples of how significant animals remained in the Celtic way. A Christian version of the myth that survives on the walls of the stable of an order of Carthusian monks who bred Andalusian horses is "an inscription [that] reads, 'Leap into Heaven.'" It is important to note that this is not, like "rapture," a leap out of either human nature or the natural world, abandoning Earth for some "better" place. According to the

McCormicks, the recorded goal of these Celtic monks is "achieving harmony with all Creation." Such harmony is, in fact, what they see as the soul of the Celtic Way. "The intimate connection between animals" and these early holy men and women "taught the saints about ... the reality of being a creature," making them appreciative of rather than appalled by their creatureliness and defining the natural world as a 'spiritual ecosystem'" (p. 87).

I was convinced of the importance of the horse to the human long ago, but I had a question in mind as I read *Horses and the Celtic Way*: What was in it for the horse? Was our seeking its company for therapeutic as well as other reasons purely selfish on our part and perhaps even abusive, depriving them of a life with their own kind? Was their patience with our need simply equine magnanimity? Perhaps they saw domestication as an easy bargain to assure themselves of hay and grain, apples and carrots, and that consciousness explained their willingness to work with what must often seem the world's dullest students. Then again, perhaps horses, too, gain imaginative reach as well from their role as *anam cara*, from their communion with humankind, from becoming centaur. The McCormicks conclude: "By following where the horse leads us emotionally and spiritually, we begin to expand our view of life. Horses give humans a broader perspective ... a keener appreciation of how intelligent and sensitive other creatures are, and this helps develop our own humility ['prune back our Egos'] and compassion" (p. 98). Perhaps, where I had felt both gain and loss whenever I have returned from the company of horses to my human self and human company, the horse too returns to stable or pasture and the company of horses renewed by something more than relief at shedding human physical and spiritual nearsightedness. I hope so.

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