

Keeping the Candle Burning

by Jorie Sligh

Does a light bulb flash, a flag wave, or a neon sign blink, saying, " *This* is going to be your passion. What you dream about. Where you work and sweat to be your best."

In my case, it was a performance of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna that brought home just how much I loved classical dressage.

There was nothing in my past to suggest that one day dressage would be my passion, although for as long as I can remember, I've loved horses. My Breyer horses pranced in paddocks made of Nancy Drew books lined up in rows. I played "wild horses" at recess, galloping and whinnying on the hill overlooking the playground. My bookshelves were lined with horse stories that I read and re-read, and I relentlessly begged my parents for a horse. If only, if only ...

My dreams came true. My parents bought our family two mares when I was ten years old, and my world changed.

I rode mostly Western, galloping up the rimrocks overlooking Fort Riley, Kansas, tearing bareback through back pastures that were like rollercoasters. Twenty-meter circles and the disciplined use of the *ménage* were unknowns. My beloved mare was my friend, but the idea of gymnasticizing her was an unfamiliar concept.

In high school, I switched to English; primarily, jumping. Jumping was a whole new world... Fun! Exciting! Conversely, dressage was so *boring* ... those endless circles ... all that sitting trot work ... having to think and focus on Every. Single. Step. And the few people I knew who really "did" dressage were so *serious* about it. As far as I was concerned, dressage was something most people did so that they could event.

The closest I came to appreciating dressage in my youth was when I discovered the Lipizzaners of the Spanish Riding School. Looking through a book on breeds, I came across a picture of a Lipizzaner stallion doing a capriole. I couldn't believe it; this was Pegasus without wings.

Eager to learn more, I read books about the SRS where the Lipizzaners were schooled. Marguerite Henry's *White Stallion of Lipizzan* and Alois Podhajsky's *My Dancing White Horses* were favorites, and I figured that the SRS was a kind of Xanadu ... a hallowed hall of horses and riders, quite removed from mere mortals like me.

I was eight years old, though, and didn't think of the riding in those books as "dressage". It was more about magical white horses that flew.

When I finally did turn to studying dressage, it was for pragmatic reasons, not the desire to experience Zen-like harmony while riding. Perhaps it was also an attempt to change familiar surroundings in order to shake the grief brought on by putting down the older of my two cherished mares that had been bought by my parents so many years earlier. The younger mare was now twenty-two and sound and I wanted her to stay that way. I decided no more jumping—except for cheap thrills over small logs in the woods—and that we'd try dressage.

I started taking lessons and discovered that the retired Prix St. Georges schoolmaster I rode was *really* hard to ride. I'd been riding all my life, but I could hardly keep this horse straight or ride a round circle. We'd be cantering and suddenly he'd veer sideways over the arena boundaries, and I'd hear my instructor say something about "keeping my outside leg on him"...?

Oddly enough, I didn't mind (well, I minded - it was incredibly frustrating!). But what I mean is that I didn't mind the lessons. They were so interesting! The focus ... riding every step ... it wasn't boring anymore!

My analytical mind, which distills everything down to a formula and process, needed more books. Dutifully, I added to my library. I improved my book knowledge, but I didn't feel my riding was progressing.

Any creeping progress I'd been making came to a screeching halt, as having four children ages six and under left me with no free time to ride, and so I took a break from horses. Years. It wasn't until my oldest horse-crazy daughter was ten (whoa ... déjà vu, that) horses again became part of our family.

Through a twisty-turny chain of events, I ended up buying a Lipizzaner. It wasn't because I'd loved and revered the Spanish Riding School and Lipizzaners since childhood. Actually, I didn't think "regular" people could own Lipizzaners. They belonged in riding halls with crystal chandeliers, ridden by men who made the study of dressage their life's work. Not people like me.

Besides, one of my mares had been gray and I'd sworn to never again own a horse that showed every manure and grass stain and didn't shine brilliantly in the sun (those who own/have owned a gray know what I mean!). That pretty much rules out most Lipizzaners.

Yes, it was a convoluted path, but Conversano Blanca I coming to our family was serendipitous. However, he was an older horse with "issues", and although I was learning a lot about how to ride an *extreeeeemely* sensitive horse, I felt like I would be a Training Level rider forever.

Something was missing ... some piece of the puzzle. Why couldn't I connect with him? Why were there so many struggles to keep his attention, ride him so that he was through? Why couldn't we dance?

I was a good student: I studied, I had goals, I was motivated ... but something was not clicking.

It was seeing the Spanish Riding School during their 2005 tour of the U.S. that started a chain of events that changed everything for me.

This was *it*. I cannot adequately express the emotion I felt as I watched. I'd never seen this kind of harmony before - the quiet partnership, focus, and contentment between riders and stallions. And I realized that I'd been missing the true beauty of classical riding.

Since that time, I've been fortunate to have organized U.S. clinics with Bereiters from the School. Once, while I was struggling with an overly-excited Blanca in a lesson, Bereiter Herbert Seiberl told me, "You must show him the way. " Not "take charge, get after him..." Those words reflect the partnership the Bereiters have with their horses. They are guiding, teaching, and sharing in the harmony that ultimately results.

Alois Podhajsky, former director of the SRS who saved the Lipizzaners during WWII, said, "We must live for the School. Offer our lives to it! Then, perhaps, little by little, the light will grow from the tiny candle we keep lit here, and the great art—of the haute école—will not be snuffed out."

I love this sentiment - this is the passion I feel for classical dressage. Not everyone gets it; my non-horsey-but-supportive husband, when forced to watch dressage videos, looks at me and says, "Someone pays you to do this, right?"

He, like probably much of the general population, thinks dressage is boring and the horses look constrained; that jumping is more exciting and the horses look "free". I can understand, since I felt that way most of my life.

OK,, dressage isn't as obviously exciting as jumping — one only needs to compare television coverage of equestrian events to verify that perception — but the connection I feel with my horse when we are tuned to one another is more rewarding and thrilling to me than any other type of riding I've done.

As I follow this long, never-ending road in my quest to dance beautifully with my horse, the inspiration of the Spanish Riding School has helped me in more ways than I could have imagined.

The heart is full; the passion is here, my tiny candle flickers on.