



THE DIRT ON CHEWONKI NECK

Twitching Wood

MEGAN PHILLIPS

It is a fine February day for twitching wood, cold enough that snow sticks to the ground and the footing is secure, and warm enough that the snow is slick, the friction low. The afternoon will include two hours in our 150-acre woodlot with one draft horse and two semester students—Maggie and Eleanor—on Work Program, tending to the long-term gardening project that is low-impact forestry management. All winter we selectively weed out trees suited for firewood and open access to space and sun for straight trees with long-term lumber potential. By winter’s end, we will have felled, twitched, bucked, and hand-split 30 cords of firewood for Chewonki.

Sal, our 17-year-old Belgian mare, responds to verbal commands used in conjunction with changing cues on the long lines that attach to the bit in her mouth. I hand over the lines to Eleanor and launch into a set of instructions about how to hold presence in Sal’s mouth (“Like holding someone’s hand in the dark to let them know you’re there”) without holding pressure (“That’s like gripping the hand: scary, uncomfortable, unnecessary”).

This is our 20th year of horse-powered farming and work at Chewonki. Sal came to us in the winter of 2001—our third horse after Nell and Duke—so she is an old hand with semester students. I watch her head now as the girls take turns driving. Sal tosses it up just a bit as Maggie takes in the slack of the lines, asking her to step forward. Maggie could get the same results by doing a bit less. Sal is accommodating these green teamsters behind her, listening to their cues but also telling them—if they know how to read the message in her head toss—that they are “speaking” too force-

fully. I watch for a few minutes before asking, “Where could you loosen? Could you let go of some tension in your shoulders? Could you give Sal a little more slack in her mouth?”

During each round trip, they move with more fluidity, easing into the dance of horse-powered woodwork, and the connection from hand to mouth becomes less straight and more of a kindly slackened arc. Our conversation flitters through many topics, alighting on poetry and relationships with non-human animals. Each of these young women had a sister in Semester 46, and we speak to their sisters’ recollections of Sal and the ways she has mellowed in recent years.

Late in the Work Program I take the lines back, wanting to check in with my sweet beast: the most simple form of communication between us is this, a moment or two of work without outside influence.

“Oh, you barely have any presence in her mouth at all,” one of the girls observes. It’s true: after so many hours in the woodlot, Sal and I move together with a seamlessness that makes it necessary to *remember* our inherent separateness at the end of the day.

I hand the lines back to Eleanor. The work moves forward. This winter is a season of reclamation as we re-enter the woodlot after a few years away, as we resettle in to the intimacy of a relationship between horse and human that shimmers with elements of the sacred and yet is rooted in the grounding nature of real and necessary work. ■

Farm manager Megan Phillips and Sal were recently accepted as Low-Impact Forestry instructors by the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association. Megan says she carries the words of former farm manager Mark Albee into her daily work with Sal; Mark once wrote that “[Sal] becomes a better horse to the degree that we become better humans.”

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