



“Whoeee, what a ride!”

is the 10th in a series of Labor Day essays
inviting reflection on living a more meaningful,
more mindful work and personal life.

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About the photographer: Tony Stromberg is a Santa Fe-based photographer who travels throughout the western U.S. and Europe in search of the elusive and mysterious spirit of the Wild Horse. In Tony’s view, technology and the pace of modern life have caused a disturbing separation between people and the natural world, and he hopes that his work may bridge this gap. He also believes that horses can be profound teachers for us, bringing a deep wisdom to a world that is out of balance. In Tony’s words, “Horses teach us about honesty and authenticity because they know no other way of being. They teach us to respect and honor the unknown, rather than fear it and try to destroy it.” Tony has just completed his first book of equine photography, *Spirit Horses*. More of his work can be seen on his website: <http://www.tonystromberg.com>

About the poetry: Text reference to the poem “When Death Comes,” by Mary Oliver, in *New and Selected Poems*, Beacon Press, 1992. I could not locate the source of the cover quotation; if anyone knows, please share it so I can acknowledge the author appropriately.

Graphic Design and Illustration: My friend, artist Christine Wendel Farrugia, surprised me with the creation of a cowgirl icon for this piece. Thus you find me “riding with my fear” on both a bucking and rearing bronco in these energetic images. Thank you, Chris, for enhancing my essay with your imaginative spirit! To contact Chris, visit www.cwendelfarrugia.com



Life shouldn’t be a
journey to the grave
with the intention of
arriving safely in an
attractive and well-
preserved body, but
rather a skid in sideways,
Champagne in one
hand, body thoroughly
used up and worn
out, screaming,
“Whoeeee!”
What a ride!”

“Don’t look down!” our trail guide warns. We are horseback riding in the Alpujarras mountains of southern Spain, following precipitous rocky foot-paths once traversed by Roman soldiers and Moorish shepherds. Picking our way along the edge of a gorge, I grip the saddle, white-knuckled with fear, hoping Porthos, my massive Andalusian gelding, will not get a sudden urge to buck me off in the ravine; he’s already kicked the horse behind me. Through clenched teeth, I vow that if I survive this, I may kill my girlfriend who led me to believe this was a ride “for beginners!”

My eyes are glued to Porthos’ ears, which I’m told will reveal any sign of distress. Horses are sensitive to energy and supposedly he knows he’s got a Woman in Serious Panic in his saddle with no clue what she’s doing. I try to relax my adrenalin-soaked wariness and trust him. I’m pretty sure Porthos doesn’t understand English, so I repeatedly squeak out the mantra *“bueno caballo,”* hoping he’ll take pity on me and spare my life. Clinging to his mane, we emerge from the steep climb into a meadow where the landscape softens. As the fog of fear lifts, we pass a herd of sheep — a rippling, bell-tinkling wave of white wooliness grazing in the high Andalusian pasture. In the background, we can see Morocco across the Mediterranean and far below are whitewashed hill towns hugging the mountain side. The fragrance of wild thyme envelops me and I am swept up in a moment of beauty that overrides my fear.

Realizing I’ve traveled too far to spend my vacation concentrating on the triangular flickers of a horse’s ears, I begin to focus on my breath to calm down. The tension doesn’t completely dissipate, but more and more I become aware of the rhythm of Porthos’ movement, of my body moving in synchronization with his gait. I pretend I’m a cowgirl. There is a whole world of experience available to me once I let my anxiety subside. At the end of the day’s ride, I astonish myself by stepping into the corral with nearly a dozen horses gamboling freely around me, thrilling to their energy and joy — feeling not fear, but exhilaration and appreciation for their power, exuberance and fierce grace.

It’s then that I am reminded of the elation that can lie on the other side of fear. It’s why people ride roller coasters or sky-dive out of airplanes. As much as we may instinctively want to retreat from fear, there’s a part of us that also wants to meet it in our longing to be totally alive. In Spain, this is known as being a *“disciplo de la vida”* — a disciple of life. Or as poet Mary Oliver writes,

*When it’s over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.
I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.*

Everyone fears something. My daughter is terrified of spiders. A close friend worries that her new business will go bust and she’ll become a bag lady. A manager I coached cringes at the thought of making a presentation to executives. Our fears are different. It could be apprehension of confronting someone about a problem. Or maybe we dread loneliness, failing, getting hurt, bungling an assignment, looking like a fool, losing our health, being needy or having an empty life. It doesn’t matter what the fear is: what’s important is how we respond to it. So much of fear is purely imaginary as understood by Mark Twain who remarked, “I’ve died a thousand deaths — none of which ever happened!”

We cannot make fear go away through distractions, dissociating, trying to minimize or attack it. The key is to stop struggling, to notice fear but not let it run away with us. Like a marshal artist, when we step closer into what confronts us, we often disable its power: the Buddhist teacher Rinpoche describes it as leaning into our sharp points. There is a truth in each moment that we can only discover by riding with the fear — not by trying to transcend it. This year, I invite you to think about how your fears blind you to what’s around you. What possibilities are you forfeiting by allowing fear to hold the reins of your life? Where are you missing the opportunity to be married to amazement? Ask yourself, “When is the last time I could shout, ‘Whoeee, what a ride!’”



“Fierce Grace,” photograph by Tony Stromberg, © 2002

*“The spirit of the horse reminds
us of a freedom that many of us
have forgotten” — Tony Stromberg*