

## **The Wayward Recycle Bin and Other Adventures**

### **By Lynn Acton**

I led my foster pony up the driveway, planning a little stroll to reinforce leadline manners out in the real world. We hadn't even passed the garage when Brandy went on full alert, head high, snorting and tap-dancing. Her attention was focused at the top of the driveway where the recycle bin was overturned, its contents strewn far and wide. A raccoon party perhaps.

Was Brandy being silly? Certainly not. She noticed that something was not as it should be, an essential survival skill for a prey animal. She had no experience to tell her this situation was safe, and no reason to take my word for it. She had been with me for only a few weeks, and when I first met her at the rescue farm, she was afraid to let strangers touch her. At the moment her behavior was telling me that we had already made huge strides in the trust department, because she wasn't trying to bolt back to the security of the barn and the other horses. She was hanging tight to me instead!

Actually she was bumping into me, but under the circumstances she meant no disrespect. It was more like a foal pressing against mama for reassurance, and this wasn't the time to correct her for it. Chasing her away would have heightened her fear, and horses don't learn when they are afraid. This situation was an opportunity to reinforce my leadership by showing Brandy that she could trust me to protect her.

I had the advantage of knowing that Brandy was in no danger from the recycle bin or its wayward contents. Now she had to discover that for herself. Usually, I just let horses observe scary situations, with no pressure to approach, until their natural curiosity takes over. Then they decide for themselves to check things out. That wasn't working this time because Brandy was too far away to see anything useful, and too frightened to go closer. Urging her forward would have increased her fear. Worse, I would have ceased to be her protector and become the source of pressure instead.

Conveniently, my husband was within shouting distance, so I enlisted his help. Calling a cheerful greeting to Brandy, he strolled up the driveway and began slowly collecting the recyclables strewn along the road. Now Brandy's curiosity kicked in. Clearly Jerry wasn't afraid, and nothing bad was happening to him, therefore... She inched forward. Minutes later she was standing next to the recycle bin, happily inspecting each item as Jerry placed it in. Gee, not only was the mess harmless, she got heaps of praise and petting just for looking at it!

Many times we replayed the same theme, different verse: scary looking things turn out to be safe, maybe even fun! The lunge whip looked

awfully suspicious until she watched me tap myself with it, she sniffed and tasted it, then discovered it was good for brushing flies off her back and tummy. Toddler sized grandchildren looked spooky until they toddled over to her stall and served up bouquets of hay. The big exercise ball rolling down the aisle was totally creepy until she earned treats for approaching it, then discovered that she could poke the thing with her nose and make it move. She was in charge of that ball. What a confidence builder!

We had many such planned successes before the next impromptu adventure. Turned out by herself in the arena, Brandy suddenly heard loud noises in the woods followed by a whole tree crashing to earth! She bolted across the arena, looking up toward the barn where I was doing chores, and whinnied anxiously.

“That doesn’t sound good, does it Brandy?” I admitted cheerfully. “It’s just Jerry cutting firewood. Let’s check it out together.” I strode across the arena, leaving her to follow or not as she chose. No deadline, no pressure. Brandy followed me half way across the arena, then hung back, letting me face the possible danger first, as responsible leaders do. By the time I got Jerry’s attention, and he turned off the chain saw to call a greeting to Brandy, she was hanging over the fence beside me, watching him.

By now Brandy no longer bumped into me, even when she was anxious. When she crowded too close, I had simply flapped my elbows like chicken wings, as if suddenly seized by an urge for exercise. She quickly developed the habit of staying just outside elbow range.

Now Brandy hung out beside me, watching as Jerry restarted the chain saw, and resumed cutting firewood. Then she calmly returned to her self-appointed task of scouting the arena perimeter for edible weeds.

Over time Brandy saw the “scary things turn out to be okay” pattern. Her confidence blossomed and her assumptions shifted. Her default reaction to a new situation is no longer, “Look for an escape route.” It’s, “Let’s check it out!” That’s created one small problem. I have to watch what I leave within her reach lest she grab it and play with it, like the time she picked up a flag and trotted around waving it. Then she looks at me, proudly awaiting her reward. But I don’t mind. As problems go, that one’s entertaining.