

departures

HOOKED

Alone With My Thoughts ... and a Horse

An unfiltered account of my weekend at the Miraval Berkshires retreat.

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“PLEASE DON’T JUDGE ME,” I say. “Or fracture my skull. I want to connect with you. I just don’t know how. Or what I’m even doing here, really. But I’m trying.”

I say this all to a horse, standing before me in a ring. I say it in my head – I’m not supposed to speak out loud to the animal, or touch it. But I must get it to move. It’s part of Common Ground, a unique wellness course offered at the Miraval Berkshires Resort & Spa, and it is the main reason I’m here.

Maple, a roughly 1,000-pound creature, and I stand together in the center of the ring, an ample distance between us. Jen, the course instructor, watches me closely from outside. Horses, she explained before I entered the ring, speak their own language: “Today, you will be learning how to speak that language.” She painted a visual of two soap bubbles with respective perimeters of spatial energy, rotating around and bouncing off each other. Through firm but respectful arm gestures, guiding movements, and an antenna-like tool almost resembling a flimsy toy whip (that never, ever touches the horse, she explained, only points and gestures), she was able to lead the massive creature around the expansive pen. It was a dance of partners.

Watching was one thing. Being in the ring is another. Maple’s rippling musculature tenses and flexes. I’ve never been so close, so alone, with a creature so powerful and foreign. How the f*ck am I supposed to move this animal ... by sheer gesturing? I turn to Jen outside of the ring. “I feel like I need to go up and touch her,” I say, voice strained. “Greet her first. When I greet people, I shake their hand. That might make this feel easier. Before trying to tell her what to do.”

With Jen's go-ahead, I slowly approach Maple, watching her face for any micro expressions. She side-eyes me (apparently the only way a horse can eye you — their eyes are on the side of their head, and directly in front of them is a blind spot). Maple's coat is a gorgeous reddish auburn, slightly wet from the frost. I tentatively reach my hand out to her shoulder. Her coat is cold; her skin below is warm. I stroke her for what feels like both a moment and an eternity. There's no one but us in the barn, in the property, in the state of Massachusetts. In my mind I feel her say, "It's okay. You're good. We're cool." I tear up, in spite of myself.

After this handshake of sorts, I feel more comfortable attempting to get her to follow me around the pen. I try to lead, ambling around in circles, weakly waving her along with my arms. She follows but remains quite close, periodically backing me into the sides of the pen for a nuzzle. I'm giddy that she feels comfortable with our proximity, happy she moves when I do — but Jen challenges me. "Are you leading her? Or is she leading you?" Smoothing Maple's hair down, I explain that I don't know how to now get her to maintain distance between us (and maybe I don't want her to?). But that's not what this course is about.

I stride away from her and realize what I need to use. I pick up the long lead and use it to point while I circle the inside of the pen. Maple follows along the perimeter. When she nears, I push the air out between us with the tool — widening the radius of our respective “soap bubbles.” Afterward, we come back to each other. “And does she seem mad at you?” asks Jen from outside. “For taking space? For taking the lead?” I shake my head no. Space, movement, direction — things so socially coded with implicit meaning and passive aggression in the human realm — is simply the straightforward language of horses. The real challenge of this course, I realized? Putting my own Sophie-centric socialization, biases, and insecurities aside. No, Maple the horse isn’t annoyed I’m taking space. She’s not resentful I’m taking the lead. And my desire to feel endeared to her before asserting myself? That wasn’t for her, that was for me. Horses aren’t cuddly; they’re mobile, and they communicate with distance.

I think about how our wiring warps our perception of the world. How much we hyper-anthropomorphize every comment, gaze, and movement, injecting it with meaning. But every organism has their own language. So why grip onto pretenses? My eyes cloud once again, for different reasons — at the power of such a pure exchange. Stripped of these pretenses of modern life — the self-conscious yet calculated email speak, the agonizingly overthought dance between deference and assertion, the endlessly performative body language — I feel a disarming connection.

The impact of this first course stays with me throughout the rest of my time at Miraval. I have my aura captured, a process in which you place your hands on two machines and a special camera photographs the colors of your energy field. I laugh at the colors revealed by my photo — orange and red — feeling terribly seen. Orange: “very childlike, playful, artistic, and creative, exhibiting short attention spans; their emotionality is a double-edged sword providing higher highs but lower lows.” Red: “focused on security issues in their lives, i.e. career, finance; very action-oriented; well-grounded existing in a world of tangible and tactile experiences.” My two energy fields feel a bit at odds with each other, I notice. Curious.

I take a yoga nidra class, which feels a lot like liminal napping. Apparently one hour of yoga nidra is equivalent to three hours of REM sleep. I hate stillness and have never been able to meditate. This is equally challenging. However, during this 45-minute class, there are 20 of which I sort of black out. I’m not asleep, but I stop hearing the instructor’s voice. I’m not sure where I mentally travel to. But I do feel exceptionally rested afterward, despite sleeping very little the night before. The next morning, I go for a swim in Miraval’s large, beautiful lap pool and have the entire space to myself. Miraval’s property is massive and labyrinthine, so finding private spots and nooks is not uncommon. I do the backstroke as sun streams through the vaulted hall, then take a class on bone broth with a captivating chef named Adrian. A rich, savory scent fills the industrial kitchen as he talks us through the healing properties of this restorative liquid. We then sample the broth. It’s full-bodied and delicious.

On my last day, I say goodbye to Adam, Miraval's VIP specialist. He instructs me on what paths to take for exploring the landscape. "The only thing that calms me is nature," he says. "We're like the babies of the world. Everything else has been around so much longer than us. I trust in its wisdom — I trust nature more than people." His words stick with me as I walk through the silent, snow-covered paths. And that's the funny thing about this place. Even now on my next story assignment — as I sit overlooking a lush South American jungle, nothing remotely similar to Miraval — its teachings, its people, and its energy stick with me. I actually visited some stables earlier today full of gorgeous, regal stallions. They all reminded me of Maple. ●