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— JOE CAMP, author of *The Soul of a Horse*
and creator of the films starring the canine superstar Benji

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Horses with a Mission

Finding My Passionate Purpose with Spring Thaw

Christianna E. Capra, New York, New York

I have been horse-crazed since I was two years old. It wasn't until adulthood, though, that I found a horse named Spring Thaw who would lead me to my life's calling.

My family couldn't afford a horse, so when I was young, I became one. I walked diligently on all fours and made my relatives hand-feed me. My mom who supported my horse craziness was happy to "loan" me her hairpieces for a tail. As I grew past toddler age, we lived in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, so I tormented my mom to make friends with our neighbors who had horses. I became a helpful "barn rat" just to be around horses and earn an occasional ride. I was always just as happy to groom, care for, and be with the horses as I was to ride them.

After I turned six, we moved to Seattle, and I had to find new horse-loving friends. Every day I wished for a horse of my own. When I was eleven years old, my dream came true. Against my father's rational judgment, my mother knew how much it would shape my life and worked overtime to purchase a horse for me. In order to keep her (and prove that I could be responsible for her) I got a paper route, cleaned a doctor's office, and worked at the barn. Life was perfect when I finally had my own horse, Lochi's Cin (Cinnamon), or Cin for short, a 14.3-hand Appaloosa quarter horse mare who led the way for a girl to become a young woman. She came with tack, but we rarely used it. Instead we spent most of our time riding bareback in the woods and fields, swimming in the lake, and even a taking a forbidden jaunt across a golf course. We would frequently make a pit stop at McDonald's on the way home, because Cin loved French fries, and the staff was always excited to see her at the window. I had to pay for my food, but Cin's fries were always free.

After Cin and I had spent a blissful couple of years together, Mount St. Helens erupted ash all over the Northwest and compounded a respiratory illness, a temporary infection

curable with antibiotics, that Cin already had. The illness turned into a chronic respiratory disease that burst several air sacks in her lung and eventually ended Cin's life when I was thirteen. After I lost Cin, my parents divorced, and the next couple of years were a confusing, frustrating time for me. A rage grew within me as I left my father's house to live with my mom and stepfather. In the summer of my junior year in high school, I was told we were moving to New York City. I didn't want to move. I had friends, and the thought of starting all over and being the new kid in New York City scared me. Plus there would be no horses there, right? Reluctantly, in 1984, at age sixteen, I moved from Seattle to New York City.

I knew I could not do just a little bit with horses — for me it had to be all or nothing — so this cross-country move started my ten-year hiatus away from them. I finished high school and college without horses as a physical part of my life. In 1990 I graduated from Marymount Manhattan College on the national dean's list with a BFA in theater arts. I began an onslaught of auditions while waiting on countless tables. As time went on I began to realize that deep within, some piece of me was missing or lost. One day I came across a photo of Cin and me, which immediately brought tears streaming down my face. This reaction made me realize that without doubt or further delay, I needed to rekindle my relationship with horses.

Meeting Spring Thaw

On Easter Eve in 1995, I wandered around my neighborhood and found myself on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The thought struck that I must be near Claremont Riding Academy, where anyone could rent a horse to ride in Central Park. I decided to try to find it. My soul was hungry to be with horses again, so I figured that if I could just see or even smell a horse, this alone would serve as a spiritual meal.

When I arrived at Claremont, on West 89th Street, the barn had closed for the day, but there was a loose horse in the tiny arena, probably turned out to get exercise. I noticed a sign in the window that said, "Help Wanted. Part-time Groom Needed Weekends."

"Hey," I thought, "this is a way for me to be around horses again and even get paid for it." I applied and got hired for the job. I went to work by the following weekend, realizing that

the \$4 an hour would cover a sandwich and the subway ride. But the important payment would be that I'd spend my day surrounded by approximately sixty horses. A perk of this job was that I could ride them on Mondays.

Over the next six to eight months, I worked at Claremont every weekend. I rode just about every horse in the barn. One day, I rode a horse named Spring Thaw, a 16.1-hand Appaloosa and Thoroughbred-cross gelding. His left eye was a striking blue color, and the right one was light brown. He had a deep red coat that glistened like copper in the sun, complemented by two white socks and a white blanket with red spots over his hindquarters. His outstanding physicality was served up alongside quite a personality. Spring Thaw had a bit of a bratty reputation with the staff. He hadn't passed the tests to give lessons in the tiny arena for children or for jumping. He could go to Central Park with riders. Later, I learned that this was part of his shrewd master plan to avoid working twelve- to fourteen-hour days.

When I had my first opportunity to ride Spring Thaw, I was warned to not canter him in the park. If he did canter, I should beware of a maneuver he had perfected. He would drop his shoulder and then spin 180 degrees in order to safely remove his rider. With the rider gone, he could graze for a while and then cross four blocks of city traffic, trotting by himself back to the barn.

Indeed, on our first ride Spring Thaw tried to canter and remove me, but I did not fall. From that point on, we formed a quirky friendship. I think that we both realized that we could get along with each other. Spring had a sense of humor and a humanlike quality in the way he'd look at a person. Sometimes it seemed that he knew what I was thinking and wanted me to be aware of it. We had fun together; it reminded me of the enjoyable times I'd spent with Cin. Spring Thaw soon became my favorite horse to ride, as we regularly strayed from the bridle trails and explored the rest of Central Park.

I came to know more about Spring Thaw as we spent time together. He had been at Claremont for only about six months when I met him. He was young, eight or nine years old. He was ornery and a little bossy. Being slightly mischievous, he'd never be mean but always managed to keep me alert and often made me laugh out loud.

I concluded that Spring Thaw had been beaten or mistreated in his past. If I made sudden movements near his face, he quickly shrank away as if he feared being hit in the head. He became very frightened of anyone coming into his stall with a pitchfork. He also was terrified of black garbage bags. I later learned that Spring Thaw was a “ridge-ling,” which means that he was a fully developed stallion before he had been gelded. This explained his oral fixations and occasional stud-like behavior. But it also contributed to his great survivor instincts and true stoic presence with regard to pain or suffering.

There were signs that he was starting to reach out to me emotionally. He’d lick my arms when I was in his six-by-eight-foot stall. Then he’d block the door if I tried to leave. He didn’t do these things with anyone else. I could feel a presence whenever I was around him. It was as if he was in tune with a part of me that housed my deepest desires and fears. I felt a strong sense of security and peace when we were together and even if I only thought of him.

Spring Thaw Becomes Mine

One day I arrived at the barn and heard the owner talking about liability and saying he had to get rid of that horse. I asked whom he was talking about. It was Spring Thaw. He had once again left a rider in the park somewhere, grazed on the public lawns, covered four blocks of busy traffic, and returned, sans rider, to the barn. Only this time, he had company after convincing another horse named Milky Way that running away was the cool thing to do. So both horses had traveled among the taxicabs and fire trucks, landing the attention of a radio news reporter who shared the story with the rest of New York City. The unwanted publicity prompted Spring Thaw to get his walking papers from Claremont.

“What will happen to him?” I asked. “Where will he go?” The owner said that he would ship Spring Thaw to a horse dealer on Long Island. From there I assumed, a family, another barn, or worst of all, a horsemeat buyer could purchase him.

I ran home, feeling panicked. Somehow I had to find a way to save Spring Thaw. My boyfriend, Michael, asked, “Why don’t you take him? You talk about him all the time and you seem to like him a lot. They will probably give you a deal.”

I thought this was a crazy idea. I know what a commitment is required to have a horse. It’s a lot of responsibility, and especially difficult since I live in the city.

Within two days the owner and I had worked out a payment plan. In six months Michael and I had paid for Spring Thaw. We hunted for a farm in New York State or New Jersey that had open fields and grass so that Spring Thaw could live a life with more freedom. I wasn’t totally sure why I was getting a horse at that point in my life. I thought, “What if I can’t take care of him? I can hardly take care of myself.” But there remained a quiet, persistent voice inside me that kept saying it would end up okay and that this was the thing to do.

Claremont is now closed. In many ways I believe that is a good thing. Although a landmark building, serving as the oldest working livery stable on the East Coast, it looked every bit its age. While it served as some semblance of a home and the horses were fed and watered, they were boarded in dark, narrow stalls. They didn’t usually get to run in a field or eat grass. Only Spring Thaw had devised a way to graze in Central Park when he threw off riders.

I found a barn in Warwick, New York, and brought Spring Thaw there to live. The day I turned him loose in a field, he ran around and around with his head high and his tail up; he whinnied and snorted with sweat running from his face. The sight brought tears to my eyes. After stopping he came to me and softly put his nose on my shoulder. I looked into his eyes and saw a calmness that had not been there before and felt him say, “Thank you.”



Over the next ten years Spring Thaw and I became the best of friends. We competed in lower-level eventing for four years. Eventing is an equestrian sport that resembles a triathlon, combining a total score from three separate phases — dressage, cross-country jumping, and stadium jumping. We struggled a bit with the dressage, had a blast on cross-country, and generally went clear on the stadium jumping. We won a few of our events and placed in many others. But mainly Spring Thaw was teaching me to trust him and myself.

Spring Thaw demonstrated an unusual intelligence. One morning, the barn manager came in and found the barn an absolute mess, with things strewn all over the place. Most of the stall doors were open and nearly all the horses were loose outside the barn and grazing, except for Spring Thaw. He stood quietly in his stall with his door ajar and the most innocent look on his face as if to say, “What? Do you think I had something to do with this?” We later caught him in the act of setting himself free and concluded that, yes, that incident had been entirely his doing. This new trick earned Spring Thaw an extra security clip on his stall door.

Ultimately this horse is my friend and teacher. From him I have learned patience, confidence, trust, spontaneity, perseverance, true unconditional love, and that nothing beats a sense of humor. I know that Spring Thaw has had an effect on others as well. I would often find notes taped to his stall door from complete strangers, thanking me for my horse entertaining their son or daughter or dog.

Spring Thaw has helped me through some of the toughest times and decisions, mainly by just being the one constant I could count on. Right around the time that he came into my life at Claremont, I had lost a pregnancy. As I look back on that difficult time, I realize that Spring Thaw in many ways became my son, teaching me responsibility, faith, and tenacity. After the stable closed for the night, Spring Thaw offered me great comfort when we were alone. One time I started to cry about the miscarriage, and he wrapped his head and neck around my torso, giving me a horse hug. I felt so much warmth and love at that moment. Through job losses and very uncertain times along with a search to find my calling in life, no matter what happened, he has consistently been there to frisk me for a carrot, make me laugh, and keep me engaged in the present moment.

Illness Brought Change

In late 2004, Spring Thaw contracted Lyme disease. He started acting old, and I noticed his growing apathy about things that he normally loved. He probably had suffered from Lyme disease for a long time until he couldn't hide it anymore. At this point I retired him from competing and riding. This was a little sad for me, but as I witnessed his deterioration, I wanted only for him to get well.

We ran through three courses of drug treatments, including a twenty-one-day IV treatment, which started to tax his kidneys and had to be stopped. We tried varied drug dosages over more than two years. After each treatment we would rest his body from the drugs and use these breaks to see if the treatments had worked. Each time the Lyme disease roared back worse than it had been before.

I began to despair but couldn't stand the thought of losing my dear friend. Then in 2007, a colleague introduced me to a very special veterinarian, Judith M. Shoemaker, DVM, who is internationally known for her successes in restoring horses' health. She includes alternative methods and holistic therapies in her practice. Dr. Shoemaker had seen a scenario like Spring Thaw's before, and she classified him as both chronic and drug-resistant for Lyme. She wanted to put him on a regimen of herbs, acupuncture, and oxygen, or ozone, therapies. At this point I had nothing more to lose and agreed to her suggestions. For the next

nine months I witnessed a steady and noticeable improvement in Spring Thaw. Little by little, my boy was finding his way back to me.

As of October 2008, I am very relieved and happy to say that Spring Thaw is well and back 100 percent to his mischievous self. He is estimated to be twenty-two years old but still insists that age is only a number. He spends his days grazing next to an eighteen-year-old Arabian and runs, rears, and plays with the younger horses in the fields where he lives. His energy has returned along with his zest for life and fun attitude.

Spring Thaw knows he is loved and cherished. I ride him now for enjoyment, mostly bareback, in the woods and trails. If he wants to canter, I let him and soak it up as a gift. For his retirement I made a deal with him — I decide the path we travel, and he decides the pace. Every now and then, he takes off and throws a few bucks in for good measure to keep me on my toes. Or maybe he's just reminding me that he isn't finished with life yet. We have a second chance together, and we are loving it.

Spring Thaw Led Me to a New Career

I have always wanted to create a career with horses but being a trainer, professional rider, or veterinarian didn't appeal to me. During our therapy with Dr. Shoemaker, she recommended to me, "Eagala.org [Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association]. Check it out. This horse would be a brilliant equine-assisted psychotherapy [EAP] horse."

EAP is a form of emotional balance treatment using three treatment team members to help people with emotional problems, imbalances, and healing. It can successfully treat addiction problems, eating disorders, behavioral and performance problems, at-risk youth, families and couples in need of therapy, and so much more. The team consists of a credentialed mental health professional, who also becomes EAGALA certified; an equine specialist, who works with the horses; and the therapy horses. All the therapy work is done on the ground with no riding involved. The horses are generally loose and interact with clients on their own herd terms. The horses are free to mirror emotional states and use nonverbal metaphors to illustrate issues for the treatment team to address.

Following Dr. Shoemaker's advice, I have become an EAGALA-certified equine specialist as part of the EAP treatment team.

On this journey, I have found my spirit guide in Spring Thaw. Through him I have discovered my life's work, or my passionate purpose. Spring Thaw has a tremendous gift for this therapy work in that he is extremely sensitive to the energy around him. When given the freedom to express himself, he won't let clients hide behind facades or masks. He gently helps them to see what he sees and begin their self-healing. He has never been wrong and never lies. He may shake things up a bit but will offer a soft place to land.

Now I see that Spring Thaw's illness caused us to shift gears. It enabled me to find EAGALA and the path for the rest of my life. This is my way of serving others while working with horses. How fortunate I am to be able to do EAGALA with my truest and best friend as my partner and master teacher.

I am so very grateful for the day that I wandered into Claremont and met Spring Thaw. It seems that no matter where we are — in the midst of New York City traffic or lost at dusk in the woods — he always knows how to get us home. He remains the one truth I can believe in.

MEDITATION

Spring Thaw made it clear to Christianna that he possessed the will to live and his life has purpose. What are the signs that you are longing to fulfill your passionate purpose?

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Horses With A Mission ~ Contributor Bio:

Christianna E. Capra, “Finding My Passionate Purpose with Spring Thaw”

Christianna is an Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA)–certified equine specialist with more than thirty years of experience working with and riding horses. She is completing the requirements for advanced certification and currently building an equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP) practice, called *Spring Reins of Hope*, www.springreinsofhope.com in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. She lives and works in New York City and has more than fifteen years of sales, marketing, and public relations experience. She cohosts a monthly radio show, *Animal Matters: Reflections of Ourselves*, on www.healthandharmonyradio.com. Her horses, Spring Thaw and Dane, a nine-year-old Lipizzan-cross and competition horse, reside in New Jersey and are a big part of her life and happiness. cecapra@aol.com

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