

How Centered Riding Saved My Life

By Dr. Stephen J. Padalino

It's been more than a year since Centered Riding saved my life. If it weren't for my riding instructor Susan Kelley of the Big House Stables in Geneseo, New York who taught me the fundamentals of centered riding I would most likely be dead or very badly injured right now. In large part I'm writing this article due to her encouragement and perhaps because it is a story worth telling. You might be thinking that some catastrophic equine event nearly took my life however it is quite the contrary. Susan's skills as a riding instructor are superb and there was little chance I would have been injured either on the trail or in the ring while she was teaching me. Her horses are excellently trained. On several occasions they have kept me in the saddle when by all rights I should have been lying face down in the mud. So if it wasn't horseback riding that nearly killed me what was it and how did Centered Riding play a role in saving my life?

During the summer of 2008 I began Centered Riding lessons with Susan. At an age of 55 I was a late starter to riding. I took to centered riding immediately. It fit me philosophically and physically given my 30 plus years experience in the martial arts. Its common sense approach to riding and the fact that Sally Swift's books and videos often made reference to the physical laws of nature were attractive to me as a physicist. But most of all I discovered horses and I enjoyed being in their company. After a year of instruction Susan was teaching me how to canter on the trails in a densely wooded area in Geneseo, New York's, hunt country. Part of this training was to recognize the hazards that could be encountered by horse and rider in this type of environment. As a neophyte I was surprised to learn how easy it is to be injured on the trail. Susan spent considerable time explaining how and why horses spooked in the woods and the rather unpleasant places a rider could land if he or she wasn't careful. Her many years as a member of the Genesee Valley Hunt Club gave her a vast inventory of stories to draw from as examples. She would often show me places along the trail or in the fields where someone had been thrown off his or her horse and been injured. Her diagnosis of the events leading up to the accident helped me understand what to watch for and avoid. On this occasion, while we were riding, she was telling me what I should do if my horse spooked. She told me that I should sit deep in the saddle, maintain my balance, stay centered, be calm and get my horse under control by turning him in a circle if he indeed bolted. Not a moment after she had finished speaking a cross country runner on a path perpendicular to mine ran out from behind a bush. My horse jumped sideways a dozen feet and then took off. He ran for 20 paces or so, I slowed him by turning; he stopped and calmed right down. I'm sure he sensed that I was okay with his quick exit after I gave him a reassuring pat on the neck. I did what Susan had told me and I was fine. What a ride I thought to myself! Actually I rather enjoyed it and wanted to do it again. This happened on other occasions when deer suddenly jumped out in front of or to the side of me. The entire idea of using my peripheral vision, staying balanced, being deep in the saddle, centered, maintaining my awareness of my horse and surroundings was a wonderfully designed response to such a potentially dangerous event, thus was great training for what would soon happen to me.

During this same period of time I took up motorcycle riding, again. It had been over 30 years since I had ridden dirt bikes in college. I had given it up after a couple of nasty falls on the trails which could have killed me but I had been lucky. I figured I should quit before my luck ran out. Interestingly enough I began riding motorcycles again because of my horseback riding experiences. The confidence I gained from riding horses translated into a realization that if done correctly motorcycle riding could be relatively safe too. I gave up on the idea of trail riding and took up street riding. If I was going to ride trails I'd rather do it on a horse anyway. Riding horse and motorcycle are now an important part of my life. I really enjoy both but I do like horseback riding better. I often say that a really great day is when I get to ride Thunder my Harley-Davidson Sportster to the stables and then ride King Arthur my favorite horse, a half Percheron-Thoroughbred mix, on the trails. Horseback riding has made me keenly aware of the dangers of riding horse or machine. Centered riding has helped me to mitigate these dangers in both types of riding and reduce potential damage to my body due to poor posture, incorrect seat or erratic body motion. For example I ride my motorcycle very much like a ride my horse. Balance is obviously required, but being centered while moving helps with the dynamics of motion especially when accelerating, turning or stopping. Having the correct curvature of my spine reduces fatigue and stress on my back and increases the elasticity of my body under vibration especially when I bounce over holes in the road or even worse speed bumps in parking areas. Using "soft eyes" enhances my peripheral vision giving me a wider view of the road yet simultaneously allows me to see far down the highway. It has also helped me to maintain an awareness of my surroundings and the condition of my bike and the road.

So how did Centered Riding save my life? During August of 2009 I was riding Thunder in the hills of Spring Water, NY. It was approximately 3 o'clock in the afternoon and the weather conditions were excellent. It was sunny and warm with a slight breeze. I was riding several hundred yards behind a car with plenty of breaking distance ahead of me. A second car followed behind me at five or six car lengths. I was traveling at a speed of 50 mph slightly under the speed limit on a two lane state highway when I approached a curve that bore to the right. A thickly wooded area loomed up on the right of the road. The trees and bushes came to the edge of the road obscuring my view of the traffic far ahead of me. I was sitting comfortably with good posture on my bike looking ahead but not focused on the car in front of me as I had been trained in my Centered Riding lessons. At that moment, out of the corner of my right eye, I saw motion. A very big doe was poking her head out from behind a large bush by the edge of the road. It is pretty unusual to see a mature doe in the light of day near an active highway. Statistically deer accidents occur at dusk or night in our area but not in broad day light, so this was quite a surprise. She clearly had been waiting in the woods to cross the highway. After the car in front of me passed she hesitated and then leaped out in front of me. It occurred so quickly I had no time to think. At that moment my training kicked in and I simply reacted. I sat deep, stayed centered, kept calm, maintained balance and focused on what I needed to do. I down shifted and simultaneously braked my front and rear tires. My bike responded quickly and I decelerated rapidly but not nearly enough. I could hear the squealing of tires of the car behind me as the driver began to break. At that moment I was hit with what appeared to be large droplets of dark green stuff that made loud splatting noises of different frequencies as they struck my face shield, riding leathers and head light. I missed the doe by only a foot or so. As she passed me without colliding I looked right into her widely opened left eye. She looked very frightened as she darted safely in to the woods on an unknown trajectory on the other side of the road. I

slowed only to 40 miles an hour but did not stop for fear of being hit by the car behind me. I picked up speed and continued onward. While I drove the image of the doe stayed with me. I kept thinking that I had been very lucky to have learned such good habits from my Centered Riding lessons. I could have easily dumped my bike and slid down the road into a tree or have been hit by the car behind me if I had responded poorly. Fortunately, everything had clicked into place just as I had learned. Later I determined that the dark green drops that hit me were, you guessed it deer poop. Yep, I scared the poop out of that doe and she really sprayed me with it. What surprised me most was that the entire event felt identical to the spook in the woods while on my horse except at an accelerated rate. So I guess I have Centered Riding and Susan Kelley to thank for saving my life. ... By the way my new motto is, *Ride Safely: Ride Centered.*



Me, Susan Kelley, Val and King Arthur in the Hunter Pace



Me and Thunder in the finger lake region of New York

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