

Darkey

*A report by the Always Right Reverend Doctor
Isaiah J. Trin (Doc Trin, for short)*

Darkey was a horse. As you may surmise, he was a black horse. And he was very large. And he was very gentle. He had one little spot of white on his nose, but other than that, he was solid black.

He was my grandfather's best friend – probably because my grandfather spent more time with Darkey than with any other living thing. My grandmother was always asking questions like “I wonder what in the world he is thinking?” – referring to my grandfather. Darkey never had to ask those questions. The animal seemed to know exactly what was required of him at all times. I can't ever remember seeing the two of them having a disagreement. Of course, Grampy didn't have disagreements with many people, because he didn't talk. Two or three words at a time was a real strain.

In the spring, Darkey pulled the plow. Later, he pulled the harrow, and then he pulled the tiller. He was multi-talented, and cross-trained to be useful. He pulled the mowing machine in the summer, to cut the hay, and then the hay-rake to roll it up into long rows. After the hay was piled up, he pulled the hayrack. He pulled hunting supplies in the fall, and logs in the winter. But back to the hayrack.

The hayrack was a big, wooden-wheeled wagon with hand-made wooden spool sides. Of course, I was smaller back then, but I would say it was about 20 feet long and eight feet wide. Darkey would pull it slowly between the rows of newly-piled hay, while grampy (and anyone else he could get to help without having to say anything) would use a huge pitch-fork to toss large mounds of hay into the wagon. No-one had to tell the horse what to do, how fast to go, or when to stop. He would stop at the end of the row and await instruction. Grampy would gently take the halter, lead the animal to the next row, and the process would begin again. It was about as perfect a partnership as one could imagine.

When the hayrack was full, Grampy would say something unintelligible and the horse would head for the barn. That, of course, was his favorite spot, but he never complained about being anywhere else, as long as Grampy was there. Darkey would pull that hayrack to the barn door and wait patiently while someone went in through the barn, unlocked the big sliding door, and opened it so the horse could pull the wagon in. Once in the barn, the hayrack's cargo was unloaded into the hayloft – a task once again accomplished by using those huge forks.

One day, while I was out at the barn when it was time to go get the hay, Grampy looked over at me and said quietly “Would you like to drive ole Darkey out to the field?” Grampy never said anything to me, so I wasn't really sure he was talking to me. But I looked around and didn't see anyone else there so I figured, as surprising as it was, he must be addressing me. “Sure,” I said, not wanting to let anyone know that I had just stepped into a condition known as mortal fear.

“Well, let’s go,” he said, and took off walking. Now I had to decide how to get Darkey where I wanted him to be. I looked up at the horse (way up), and the horse looked down at me (way down). I climbed up the wheel into the wagon, and onto the little platform where the driver was to stand. I thought I heard a snicker from Darkey, but maybe it was just the wheel creaking. I took the reins, which were draped over the wooden T-bar and said “OK, let’s go, Darkey.” I thought if I called him by name, it might give him the idea that I was in charge. I don’t think it worked.

But, amazingly enough, the horse began slowly moving. He seemed to know that there was someone up there with the reins, and that the someone needed some help. He started out toward the hay field, with me “driving” along. You could interpret that as “going along for the ride” in a modern translation. But he wasn’t going to let me get away with doing nothing. As we headed out the path to the field, there was a “Y” in the trail. Darkey pretended he didn’t know which way I wanted him to go, so I had to do something to let him know that I wanted him to turn. I tugged gently on the starboard set of reins. Nothing happened. We were headed straight for the brush, and Darkey seemed uncaring. By the time I decided I really needed to do something, we were past the point of an easy turn. I pulled on the right reins and Darkey, out of respect to my ignorance, I suppose, began to turn. We turned about 270 degrees, but we made it. Grampy was waiting when we pulled up at the first row of hay.

“Where were you going?” he asked gently, as if he thought I would answer. I gave the same answer that my children give every time I ask them that question. “I don’t know,” I heard myself say. I’ve heard that many times since then, and I often think of that very instance when I hear it spoken. (Well, except if I think of the instance when I drove the car out over the rocks beside the garage, and my Dad asked me the same question.)

Darkey gave Grampy a wink, Grampy took the halter, and we headed for the first row of hay. I was thrilled to be able to say I had driven the hayrack. But I was relieved it was over. And Darkey and I both knew who really had control. Control is not found in a multitude of words, or a lot of commotion. It is found in knowledge, and assurance, and silent strength.

Darkey and I used to talk some after the long day’s work. He would stand in his stall and listen as I spoke of things I did not understand. He was a great listener.

Darkey fell one day in his stall and couldn’t extricate himself from his predicament. He was old, and had served many years with dignity. Dad got four of five men to try to put ropes around him and help him up, but all efforts were unsuccessful. He died in his favorite place. Grampy was on his death bed when Darkey died, and we never told Grampy he was gone. Grampy asked about him every day, and we lied and said he was OK. I think Grampy knew we were lying, but he was not one to make accusations. He preferred to live in days gone by, and remember the years of working together – just him and his best friend.

I wouldn't mind having a friend like Darkey. Someone who would let you think you were in charge. Someone so big that, if you stopped to think about it, you would know you weren't in charge. Someone who knew what you needed, even if you didn't say a word. Someone strong enough to be gentle, and secure enough not to have to make a lot of noise. Someone who had everything in control. Come to think of it, I think I have a friend like that.

Darkey taught me more than I ever taught him, and he didn't have to say a word to do it.

As I get older, I think sometimes about what influence I am having on others. How do others view my demeanor? How am I teaching others? Am I trying to do it with noise, or do I have what it takes to do it with character? What memories will others have of me? When I stumble in my stall, will anyone come to help? Have I helped others, by being at least a consistent, dedicated friend? A good listener? One that allows others some freedom to make decisions, while still staying on the right path? One could do a lot worse than be a friend like Darkey. And I still remember.

Doc Trin