



NAVIGATING ETHICAL TENSION IN EQUINE RESCUE

Tiffany Ring • Gentle Spirit Horses Rescue

HOMES FOR HORSES COALITION • 2026

We have already made hundreds of decisions.

Rehoming ↔ Sanctuary

Horses only ↔ Education / youth / public programs

Owner surrender • Law enforcement • Auction • Kill pen

Lifetime care ↔ Adoption

Medical limits • Training standards • Contracts

And we rarely make the same ones.

RESCUE HAS NEVER BEEN ONE MODEL

Different organizations. Different answers.

**Experience can make us better.
It can also make us more certain that our way
is the right way.**

“I wouldn’t do that.” → “A good rescue wouldn’t do that.” → “They are unethical.”

Before we dive into how we can get back to respecting each other and our differing decisions...

What color is this shoe?



The real shoe is Pink and White



**The same input does not always produce
the same interpretation.**

Nobody is lying. Nobody is stupid. Nobody has bad intentions.

That's easy to laugh about when the stakes are a shoe.

Why am I talking about this?

Tiffany Ring

Founder & Executive Director
Gentle Spirit Horses Rescue • South Dakota

15 years in equine rescue
Web development • digital strategy • organizational
leadership

**A career spent making
decisions with imperfect
information, competing
priorities and limited
resources.**

15 YEARS IN RESCUE

Experience can make us better. It can also make us more certain.

We know more. We expect more. Our standards have improved.

But certainty can turn “I would do it differently” into “That’s unethical.”



NAVIGATING ETHICAL TENSION IN EQUINE RESCUE

Tiffany Ring • Founder, Gentle Spirit Horses Rescue

The framework is the tool. Grace is the goal.

Assume positive intent — long enough to get curious

What might they know that I don't?
What might they be working with that I'm not?
What matters to them in this decision?

When I don't know someone's motive, I don't have to invent the worst possible one.

NOW RAISE THE STAKES

Horse. Suffering. Money. Donors. Capacity. Public scrutiny. Responsibility. Identity.

When failure threatens something we value, “I see it differently” can become “You’re wrong.” And “you’re wrong” can become “you’re unethical.”

Meet Whitney

**Small jaw growth → removed and biopsied → benign sarcoid →
rapid aggressive regrowth**

At this point, doing nothing was no longer a responsible answer.

1. INFORMATION

EUTHANASIA • CT FIRST • SURGERY NOW

More information has value — but it also consumes resources.

What we knew before Decision #1

**CT: ~\$1,100–1,200 • Surgery: understood as ~\$2,400–3,600 • 6 hours
each way • 3–4 day stay**

CT would treat nothing. It would buy information.

2. RESOURCES

Money • travel • 3–4 days • remote work • free lodging • board approval • recovery capacity • existing horses

Could you responsibly absorb what looked like a ~\$5,000 case?

WHAT MATTERS ENOUGH TO SPEND THOSE RESOURCES?

3. VALUES

INDIVIDUAL CARE • STEWARDSHIP • EDUCATION •
UNCERTAINTY

Different weighting can produce different responsible answers.

NOW MAKE THE CALL.

DECISION #1

EUTHANASIA • CT FIRST • IMMEDIATE SURGERY

GSH chose CT first.

WE WERE CONDITIONALLY WILLING TO PURSUE SURGERY.

Why CT?

But we wanted to know whether bone or vascular involvement changed the prognosis enough to change our answer.

We also applied for an HHC Emergency Relief Fund grant. We did not know whether we would receive it.

Then we got new information.

No vascular involvement • No prohibitive bony involvement • Strong surgical prognosis

Potential recovery: 1–3 months stall rest • bandage changes every 3 days • substantial follow-up

THE TREE NARROWED.

DECISION #2

EUTHANASIA or SURGERY

Our medical committee discussed it for about two hours. GSH chose surgery.

FINAL HOSPITAL BILL: ABOUT \$2,500

Then the numbers changed.

20% nonprofit discount we did not know about • estimates were totals, not additive • later: \$2,000 HHC / Zoetis grant

None of that information existed when we made the decision.

YOU CANNOT JUDGE A DECISION USING INFORMATION THE DECISION-MAKER DID NOT HAVE.

Outcome $\neq$ decision quality

A lower bill does not make surgery “right.” A failed surgery would not automatically have made it “wrong.”

Judge the process — then reassess when the inputs change.

FAST HEALING → CISPLATIN → PROUD FLESH → MONTHLY REASSESSMENT

The story wasn't over.

Whitney was comfortable. Treatment burden remained manageable. Vets remained confident it was proud flesh, not recurrent aggressive sarcoid.

Having a framework did not make me confident.

SEPTEMBER: PROUD FLESH REMOVED + CAUTERIZED • WOUND NOW NEARLY HEALED

We still don't know the ending.

If it regrows again, we believe we have reached the end of the responsible treatment path. Whitney will be euthanized.

Continuing treatment yesterday does not obligate us to continue treatment tomorrow.

You just used the framework.



Get the information. Figure out what you actually have. Know what you value. Make a decision. Pay attention to what happens. Repeat.

I know. Please hold your applause.

Where does the disagreement actually live?

INFORMATION

Are we working from different facts, diagnoses or prognoses?

RESOURCES

Do we have different money, people, time, expertise or capacity?

VALUES

Do we understand the same situation but weight legitimate priorities differently?

Different disagreements require different conversations.

Now turn the arrows around.

WHEN WE MAKE OUR OWN DECISION

INFORMATION → RESOURCES →
VALUES → DECISION

WHEN WE ENCOUNTER SOMEONE ELSE'S

DECISION → VALUES → RESOURCES →
INFORMATION

We see the decision first.
We usually do not see everything that produced it.

What might they value? What constraints might they have? What might they know that I don't?

“

**Forward is decision-making.
Backward is grace.**

When you hear a judgment, look for the value underneath it.

“Spending that much on one horse is irresponsible.”



RESOURCE STEWARDSHIP / MAXIMIZING IMPACT

Now we can discuss the value instead of attacking the person.

This isn't just about euthanasia.

Go to auction?

Owner-surrender fee?

Retain ownership?

How much training?

One stall, three horses?

Case fundraiser?

Graphic images?

Facilities vs. direct care?

Same framework. Different decision.

AND IT ISN'T EVEN JUST ABOUT RESCUE

**Hiring. Remote work. Elder care. Budgets. Houses.
Trucks.**

We are surrounded by decisions other people made with information we don't have, resources we don't understand and values we may not share.

From individual decisions to organizational policy

“What would Tiffany do?”



“How does our organization make this kind of decision?”

Repeatable • Teachable • Explainable • Consistent

Once we understand our reasoning internally, we can communicate it externally without defensiveness.

“

We spend a tremendous amount of time asking people to give horses grace for the experiences and circumstances they can't see.

Maybe we can extend a little more of that grace to each other.



Before you decide someone is wrong, ask:

**What would I need to know
before I decided?**

Different doesn't automatically mean wrong.