I think that one of the reasons that riders find dressage so intriguing is that you can never totally learn "it". Every stage in a horse's development as well as each new horse with his particular physical challenges and emotional quirks teaches you something else about training, and the whole process becomes a lifelong learning adventure.

Learning, however, means change and sometimes change can be scary because it forces us to step outside of our comfort zones.

Your comfort zone. -- The place where you feel safe, secure, and non-threatened. We come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid having to step outside our comfort zones. You know what I mean. Things like. "Gee. I'd love to qualify for the Regional Finals, but my horse isn't fancy enough to be competitive." or "I know I could be a much better rider if I could afford to take lessons on a regular basis." or "I can't progress because I'm too busy to ride consistently."

The reality is that we need our excuses because we're not crazy. Excuses allow us to rationalize why we don't stretch ourselves and take some risks. For example, when you despair over the fact that you'd like to be competitive, but you don't own a big, fancy Warmblood and will never be able to afford to have one, your friends probably agree and nod sympathetically over your plight. Then you can feel justified staying in your comfort zone and not going after your dreams.

Since your comfort zone is so cozy, you might ask why you should ever be tempted to leave it. Well, for one thing, never feeling challenged gets boring. But even more enticing is the awesome sense of accomplishment you feel when you stretch yourself a bit. Think about the first time you cantered...the first time you rode in a clinic...the first time you competed at a higher level. What a rush, huh? In hindsight I'm sure it was definitely worth the discomfort you felt in anticipation of the big event. So why don't we "go for it" more often? You might discover the answer to that question as you examine your internal thermostat.

Your Thermostat

We have lots of different thermostats. Each one has a range within which we're comfortable. For instance, my "temperature thermostat" is happy between 64 and 70 degrees. Most people find that temperature to be a little on the cool side. But if I walk into my house and the temperature is 75 degrees, I immediately turn on the air conditioner. On the other hand, if I walk into my house and it's 58 degrees, I turn the
heat on. I regulate the room temperature so that I can stay happily within my comfort zone--neither sweating nor shivering.

Each of us also has a "self-image thermostat". This thermostat defines how you see yourself as a person, rider, and trainer. Are you confident, relaxed, and self-assured? Or are you insecure, tense, and impatient? The bottom line is that your self-image has a direct bearing on how successfully you ride and train.

Let me give you an example of this self-image thermostat. Awhile back one of my students was trying out for a 3-Day event team with two different horses. Early in the season she was doing spectacularly. She won or placed in every single event she entered. Her success, however, made her uncomfortable. She started to doubt herself and wondered how she could possibly keep this pace up. She thought she was just lucky and couldn't "see" herself doing so well every time out. She reasoned that it was only a matter of time before she blew it. So in order to get back into her comfort zone, she deliberately but unconsciously sabotaged herself at her next event in order to take some of the pressure off. Once that was done, she felt she could attack again at the next competition.

The reality is that she didn't need to sabotage herself. She's an extraordinary rider who is well prepared and so are her horses. There really isn't any reason that on any given day, she shouldn't come out on or near the top. But your comfort zone doesn't listen to reason or logic. It reacts to your self-image whether that image is realistic or not. In order to feel more comfortable with her success, my student needed to change her self-image so she could enlarge her comfort zone. She needed to see herself as perfectly capable of being a tough, consistent, formidable competitor.

The Trained Flea

To make my point, I told my student the story of the trained fleas and I'd like to share it with you here. If you want to train fleas, the first thing you need to do is get a glass jar like a peanut butter or mayonnaise jar. Make sure you clean it out really well or things can get messy. Next, find your neighborhood dog and get a bunch of fleas from him. Put the fleas in the jar and just observe them for a while. You'll see that they jump around very enthusiastically, and before you know it, they jump right out of the jar. Of course, then you have to go find another dog and get some more fleas. But this time put them in the jar and place the lid on. These fleas will start to jump around as well. And as they do, you'll see that they hit their heads on the cover of the jar. Pretty soon these fleas realize that if they jump just a bit shy of the lid, they don't hit their little heads and get little flea-concussions. Once this happens, go ahead and take the lid off the jar.
And guess what happens? Yup! The fleas don't jump out of the jar! The lid is off and they're perfectly capable of doing so. But they think that they can't because they believe that the lid is still on. The lid, however, exists only in their imaginations.

And this is what my student did. She didn't see herself as being able to "jump out of the jar" although she was certainly capable of doing so. She placed a ceiling on her abilities. She needed to understand that her perception of her limits wasn't real. It existed only in her mind.

So, the moral of the story is that you don't need to be like the trained flea. Use the "as if" principle to change your self-image. If you can't see yourself reaching for the stars, act "as if" you're a rider you really admire. Then since you are no longer you, with all your preconceived notions about your ability and skill, you can go beyond your self-imposed limits and jump out of the jar!

And as you begin to venture outside of your comfort zone, keep in mind that you don't have to be overwhelmed by doing it all at once. Each tiny effort will be one small step for man, one giant leap for your self-image.