

# The Parallels Between the Skills of a Horse Whisperer and a Psychotherapist



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In 2005, I left a busy career on the Trading floor of a US investment bank and began training as a Psychotherapist. A Psychotherapist is someone that works with human beings to help increase their sense of choice in the world. Just as in the horse world, there are many different styles of Psychotherapy to choose from. Around the same time, I discovered the work of Monty Roberts, the internationally acclaimed 'horse whisperer', famous for 'joining-up' with a wild mustang called ShyBoy out in the Nevada desert. From the beginning, I couldn't help but feel a connection between what I was learning in the Psychotherapy training room and what I was learning from the Monty Roberts method of horsemanship. In this article, I ask how the skills of a Horse Whisperer align with those of an effective Psychotherapist.

## **Setting boundaries**

Just as with human facilitators, good horse handlers know that negotiating the terms of the contract with their horse in the early stages of the relationship will mean an easier time in the long run. If we don't do this consciously, then chances are a vacuum sets in and the horse may feel the need to fill it. With more challenging horses, just as with more challenging human clients, the terms of the contract are constantly being negotiated and boundaries are continuously being defined and redefined. Sometimes, this is the very essence of the work.



I recently worked with a horse called Bertie that didn't like to stand for the mounting block. A short video you can see here <http://www.lairagold.com/troubled-horse.html> shows that he would dart around, spinning his hind quarters away from the mounting block. There was no way you could mount him when he was in this state of mind. When I went to work with him, the first thing I had to do was give him the freedom to explore his options and allow him to find out for himself where my boundary lay. I then created a contract with him where if he agreed to stand still, my obligation to him was to make everything comfortable - the lead rope was slack, he got a rub on his forehead, everyone stood still and no one would ask anything from him. I had to repeat this a couple of times but he quickly understood and I think the results speak for themselves.

For psychotherapeutic work with people, the skills required are very similar. I once worked with an 8 year old Nigerian girl whose family was suffering from extreme financial hardship. To begin with, she presented as a polite, socially well adjusted, intelligent little girl. I thought I had been sent the wrong client. About half way through the year long programme, I began to see and feel another part of her. This was a part that hadn't been given much airtime until then. So when it did surface, it was infused with rage and expressed itself with physical violence.

Just as I had to allow Bertie to express himself, my job with the little girl was to create a space where the enraged part of her could show up in the room. To do this, I had to maintain what Carl Rogers refers to as an 'unconditional positive regard.' However, I also had to be very clear that certain behaviours were unacceptable while she was experiencing this part of herself. Just as with some horses, she didn't like the feeling of crossing over a boundary, but to find out where the boundary was, she had to behave in a way that would test it. Through testing it, she could also find out whether I was consistent and whether she was safe or not.

In my experience, many horse 'problems' come from insecurity. Take Bertie in the above video clip. He wasn't moving because he was deliberately seeing what he could get away with. He was unsure. No one had ever been clear and consistent enough with him to show him what was expected. Once he understood his end of the contract, both the owner and I heard him breathe out a huge sigh.

Being boundaried sounds simple but it isn't always easy in practice - I think any mother will agree. Deciding early on where our own person boundaries are; giving the client (human and horse) the freedom to discover where they are; finding a way of communicating the boundary in a way that feels right for you; responding in a timely fashion; and being consistent in that communication. These are all important skills in their own right.

## **Being in the moment**

Horses are always asking "who is leading now?". From the horse's point of view, we are unable to lead unless our sensory channels are fully open, aware of every little rustle in the bush and movement in the shadows. Within the herd, this is a matter of survival where the lead mare's job is to take the herd away from danger to safety.



Part of my job as a Contemporary Psychotherapist is to meet and work with the client's experience of 'this now'. In the Psychotherapy culture I come from, great emphasis is placed on working with the client's ever-changing somatic experience, perhaps more so than on past analysis or etiology. This only really happens if we are truly present, gaining rapport through observing and responding to all the non-verbal information happening within the client in that moment.

## **Meeting the client (human or horse) in the moment and then leading**

In NLP, it is said that you can't lead before you've paced. This means that we first need to acknowledge the client's current experience (pace), do it again (pace) before leading with a thought or suggestion of our own. Hypnotherapists use this all the time. It's what is sometimes called a hypnotic suggestion.

With the horse, if we were to ask him to do something unfamiliar, for example, putting on the first saddle of his life, before acknowledging his natural flight instincts, we are much less likely to have a willing partner. By creating a training environment where he can be encouraged to explore his flight instincts safely, the trainer (or therapist) can stand back and feel at ease no matter what the horse does. In a short video clip here <http://www.lairagold.com/index.html> you can see me working with a young horse called Dodge, a Quarter horse yearling who, until the day before this clip was taken, had not been touched by human hand. In the clip, you can see him going through a dilemma. Should he stay true to his natural instincts and stay away from predators or should he take a chance on me? The reason he goes against his instincts and accepts my invitation to Join-Up with me is because I first acknowledged (or paced) his natural flight instinct. In other words, I met him in the moment and then I led.

### **Internal state management**

Horses attune to our inner truth. They are constantly scanning for this somatic information. Their ancestors have had to as a matter of survival. In a recent piece of research I carried out in the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy field, many practitioners believed that there is an underlying process taking place within the client which is different



from their spoken communication. For EAP practitioners, the horses gave them important clues about what the clients' processes or inner truth might be.

One of the most extreme examples I have come across of this was when I was facilitating a Life Skills Course, involving horses for young people that had been expelled from school. One of the clients on the course used to alternate between an egocentric state and a victim state of being. In the egocentric state, she made jokes to the rest of the group, spoke loudly and showed no fear, even though it didn't match her somatic experience. In the victim state of being, she spoke very quietly, felt she had no choice, and would often assign blame for all kinds of things to other members of the group. One of the ponies we used for the riding part of the course was particularly expressive when relating to this client's different emotional states. When the client was in either of these states, he used to strike up a nice canter and then come to a grinding halt and stick his head on the floor simultaneously. Not easy to stay on regardless how well balanced you are! And then there were other times that he went beautifully, despite that she had only been riding for a few months. What was the difference that made the difference? It was an internal state of authenticity and congruency.

### **Setting an intent but releasing attachment to the outcome**

There is an old saying in the horse world - 'horses need patience, go about something like you have 15 minutes and it will take all day. Go about something like you have all day and it will take 15 minutes'. Its the same in the therapy setting - it's a paradox - the more impatient the therapist, the longer the client's process takes because we get in the way of the client's system.

### **Breaking down the outcome into bite size pieces**

The terms 'incremental learning' and 'shaping' are used by Monty Roberts to describe breaking down an outcome into bite size pieces and rewarding each step until you reach the final goal. It makes it easy for the horse to understand, takes the pressure off the handler and creates a fun and rewarding learning environment. Here you can see me habituating a young horse to plastic bags which will help prepare her for the first rider of her life. I haven't got a lead rope clipped on to her but to get to that point, I had to reward each successive approximation while keeping in mind the end goal.



In the NLP world, we use the term 'chunking down' to describe the same phenomena. One of the great Psychotherapists that NLP was inspired by was Dr. Milton Erickson. He had a way of congratulating and utilising each incremental sign of progress from the client. He believed that if we can change one single thing, then this will naturally change the rest of the system at work.

### **Respecting the robustness of the client / horse - Not rescuing or colluding**

This is the skill I feel most passionate about, possibly because it's the one I find the hardest to cultivate. When I do have it, I notice a real difference in my effectiveness with both my human and horse clients. I think one of the biggest misconceptions about the Psychotherapy profession is that you have to be very understanding and sympathetic to be a good Psychotherapist. In the Psychotherapeutic culture I come from, we try to work with a faith that the client has all the resources they need and can cope! We aren't buying into the victim role. Paradoxically, the skill is to cultivate a dual perspective where we are meeting and truly accepting the client's reality in that moment, while believing that they are capable of much more.

For the horse in the Monty Roberts method of horsemanship, we respect his robustness by actively encouraging him to explore his options and allowing him to make mistakes. Instead of hanging on tightly to his head collar and pleading with him to stay, we unclip the lead rope and give him the freedom to be on the edge of the pen on his own. It may not always be comfortable but he learns more if we give him the chance to try things out



for himself. The horse is always looking for that dependable stable leader. In an unfamiliar situation, we can't be his rock if we see the world only from his eyes (saying "good boy" while sharing in his panic!). Equally if we ignore his current experience, we aren't going to be successful either. Just as working psychotherapeutically with humans, what's required is having that absolute conviction that the horse (or human) can, while gently holding the client's current experience of what is. It sounds simple. In practice, though, it's not always an easy task.

## **Laira Gold - Biography**

A Certified Monty Roberts Instructor and a qualified Neuro-Linguistics Contemporary Psychotherapist, Laira Gold has worked with a variety of challenging clients - horses and humans. Exploring the connections between NLP, Equine Guided Psychotherapy and the Monty Roberts method of horsemanship was the catalyst that led to her traveling the globe for three years to study Monty's methods in-depth. Today, Laira uses her Psychotherapy and Equine Behaviour skills to provide Equine Guided Psychotherapy; solve equine behavioural 'problems'; and run horsemanship courses featuring Monty's principles.

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