

HORSE/HUMAN PARALLELS

Setting Boundaries

WHUK is delighted to welcome **Laira Gold** to our panel of contributors. Her exciting work into the parallels between human psychotherapy and horsemanship is truly thought provoking



LAIRA GOLD

Laira Gold is a Certified Monty Roberts Instructor and a qualified Neuro-Linguistics Contemporary Psychotherapist and 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 her to travel the globe for three years to study Monty Roberts' methods in depth.

For more on Laira visit www.lairagold.com/ www.humanthroughhorses.com or call 0780 153 8088

In 2005, I left a busy career on the trading floor of an investment bank and began training as a psychotherapist, helping human beings to increase their sense of choice in the world. Around the same time, I discovered the work of Monty Roberts, the internationally acclaimed 'horse whisperer,' famous for 'joining-up' with a wild Mustang in the Nevada desert.

Just as in human psychotherapy, there are many forms of training in the horse world yet from the beginning I could see a connection between what I was learning in the psychotherapy training room and the Monty Roberts method of horsemanship. In the next few issues I will ask how the skills of horsemanship align with those of an effective psychotherapist. I start with a skill I believe is key to both professions - setting and maintaining 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 at the mounting block. As you can see below, he would dart around, spinning his hind quarters away from it. There was no way you could mount him when he was in this state of mind. The pictures show his owner working with him. At first, she gives him the freedom to explore his options, which in this case was backing up. She allows him to find out for himself where her boundary lies by making it uncomfortable

when he does back up. She does this by taking the lead on this manoeuvre, backing him up further until she decides to stop. She also makes it comfortable when he stands still by giving him a rub, slackening the lead rope and not asking anything else from him. Timing and consistency are everything.

Through these stages, they created a contract where they both win by fulfilling each of their obligations to each other. In three days, Bertie was mounting beautifully even in busy show-like environments.

For psychotherapeutic work with people, the skills required are very similar. I once worked with a young 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 get another part of her. This was a part that hadn't been given much

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airtime until then. So when it did surface, it was infused with rage and expressed itself with physical violence. Just as Bertie's owner and I allowed him 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 (a founder of the humanistic approach to psychology) 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 – 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 of relief.

Being 'boundaried' sounds simple but it isn't always easy in practice - I think any mother will agree. Deciding early on where our own personal boundaries are; giving the client (human and horse) the freedom to discover where they are; finding a way of communicating our 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.

Monty Says

'When I became aware of Laira as a student in the Monty Roberts concepts, I was humbled by her decision to set aside a budding career in an important industry. I was particularly interested in her desire to utilise my concepts in the world of human to human relationships; not just equine relationships. Anyone who knows me realises how important this is to me personally. Many students have expressed the desire to direct their learning to this area but to be honest very few have followed it through.'

Many students are drawn to this field of study because it seems interesting and glamorous but when the real work sets in, the interest must be genuine. I am astonished by the level of understanding that Laira seems to have for what my concepts can do for the world of human behaviour. It is my hope that I can remain closely involved and observe the achievements that I feel certain will come her way.

While horses have dominated my life, each of us is, first of all, a human being. My life was a series of challenges outside of the world of horses. I often tell my students that they won't get their horse right until they get themselves right. It is essential that an effective student of horsemanship must have a balanced psychological outlook before achieving optimum performances from their horses. My congratulations go out to Laira for this, the first article of her series in Western Horse UK, and for the hard decisions that she has made to follow her dream.



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