

## **INTRODUCTION TO A HORSE-FACILITATED COACHING SESSION**

### **SOME BASIC THINGS ABOUT HORSES**

Horses are flight animals who have evolved to survive in a dangerous world full of predators. They are highly sensitive to predators' intentions and motivations. They are capable of feeling and expressing a wide range of emotions and are very aware of the emotions of others around them. They don't like human incongruence or attempts to disguise emotions, and they are difficult, if not impossible, to deceive.

Their highest value is safety, and when they feel safe then the other values common to social beings come up such as love, affection, play, companionship etc.

As social animals, horses are interested in social order and are excellent communicators. One way in which they assess hierarchy within a group is by moving each other around. This is done by force of personality, not size: a Shetland pony may move a Shire horse. It's normal for a horse to relate to a human in this way, too, by trying to move the human around; the horse is not being rude, simply trying to identify who is in charge and therefore responsible for keeping everyone safe. For a horse to accept your leadership, he or she must be able to trust you and respect your ability to lead.

Horses appreciate courtesy. As highly sensitive beings, acutely aware of human emotions and intentions, they don't enjoy being treated rudely or roughly. It is possible to communicate with a horse by thought, intention and feeling. There's seldom a need for physical or verbal harshness, although you may need to stand up for yourself and insist on your point in an assertive, not aggressive, way. Indeed the horse's own leadership-assessment process is likely to test your ability to do this.

### **SAFETY POINTS**

As flight animals, all horses are easily startled, and when startled they will jump or shy, and may even run away. If scared, they will tend to move towards open space – and they can move very fast! Consequently, as a general principle, you are safer between a horse and a fence than between a horse and open space. It is also important to ensure that the horse knows where you are at all times: don't alarm a horse by suddenly popping up behind him or her without warning. Chatting to the horse in a conversational way about what's going on lets the horse know where you are; even better, chatting about your own feelings and intentions helps to bring them into your own conscious awareness, which will greatly enhance communication between the two of you.

If horses accept your leadership they will take their lead from you; they will trust your judgement and follow your example. If they don't accept your leadership they will rely on their own judgement, which may mean deciding to leave what they perceive as a dangerous situation in a hurry!

Since horses assess hierarchy by moving each other around, you'll want to stand your ground under normal circumstances. However, you'll still need to get out of the way if a frightened horse is in flight. You will also need to keep your feet clear – it's no fun being stepped on.

### **THE USUAL FORMAT OF A SESSION**

Although it isn't essential to work on a specific issue, doing so can help to focus the session. This may seem extraordinary, but you can project an aspect of your issue onto a horse, and, if the horse agrees to work with you, he or she will behave accordingly. So if you want to explore a relationship problem, the horse can play the role of your partner or child or colleague or whoever. Or if your issue is not about a personal relationship, the horse can play the role of an inanimate object (I once asked a big black mare to represent a filing cabinet, which she did perfectly!) I know this sounds weird but it is true.

We begin the session with a bare minimum of theory, starting with the psychology of horses and how their flight animal responses are so helpful to humans.

The descriptive model of the 'fried egg' works well for most people. This depicts our experience of being in the world in terms of two concentric circles, the outer one being the conditioned zone, the inner the authentic zone. The conditioned zone includes our fears and pretences, beliefs and identities, memories, hopes and fantasies; here are other people's criticisms and expectations of us; here are our strategies and techniques, habits and limited past-based reactions; this is the realm of separation, comparison, attachment, aversion, confusion, duality, concepts of self and other. The authentic zone is space and spontaneity, present-moment pure responsiveness; genuine creativity; connection; love and joy. Horses can help us to find that authentic zone and meet them there – a glimpse of a different level of being and a wonderful experience for both human and horse.

Moving swiftly on from the theoretical bit, for most people the practical part of the session usually falls into three phases.

1 We find a way to venture beyond the comfort zone by choosing a task for you to do with the horse that will stretch you. This allows you to explore various things that come up when you're stretched, such as success criteria, beliefs, default habitual programmes, and various strategies of the conditioned zone. You're encouraged to notice and assess what's going on with yourself, with the horse, and with the interaction between the two of you, while the human coach plays a minimal role. This first task may range from simply approaching a horse, which is a huge challenge in itself for someone who is nervous of horses, to me really scratching my head trying to find something that will stretch someone who is very experienced with horses and has lots of expert techniques at their fingertips!

2 Next we bring in some coaching. You have an opportunity to experiment with 'doing things differently'. The horse will give you continual, immediate feedback as to how he or she is experiencing your presence and your behaviour and this will enable you to monitor your own process. You may find some new, more effective strategies – or you may find yourself moving to a different level of being altogether that is beyond strategy and technique: the authentic zone. This is where experienced horse-people gasp with amazement as they watch a complete newcomer make a connection of such purity with the horse that the horse responds by doing something extraordinary that horses 'just don't do!' However the shift manifests, we make sure that you really get the physical experience of it and we anchor it by word, posture, and gesture so you'll be able to find it again.

3 Step three is about establishing the learning and being able to apply it amid uncertainty. We may work with the horse at liberty; after all, you'll want to take your learning home with you and the other people in your life are not on the ends of ropes! We'll also do some future pacing to help you to apply your learning in your life situation.

Below are some accounts of people's sessions with the horses.

#### HOW BRIGIT AND CAIT HELPED ME TO KNOW MYSELF BETTER

*by Elizabeth Medler*

I travelled to Cait's home at Timberscombe on Exmoor on a wet, windy weekend in March – although the weather could not detract from the beauty of the scenery and Cait's lovely horses, Brigit and Rowan. I love all animals, but have very little experience of horses.

We were confined to the barn for our session as it was so wet outside, but it didn't seem to matter. Cait began by taking me a little out of my comfort zone, asking me to watch her put a halter on Brigit and then do it myself. I thought I had watched carefully but it turned out I hadn't. It was as if my attention had been frozen by events and I couldn't really take things in. I asked Brigit if it would be okay if I put her halter on. I wasn't overly confident, but I felt it important to ask the horse's permission. Later, Cait noted how conciliatory my language was and that made me think about my habitual approach to people and situations. The idea is that the horse mirrors back to you your way of being in the world and your authenticity – or lack of it. It turned out that it was right to talk to Brigit gently but also confidently and sincerely. Apparently horses will not 'play ball' so to speak if they sense a person is lacking in confidence and doesn't mean what they say.

Despite watching Cait no fewer than four times, each time I tried I failed to put the halter on correctly. Repeatedly I placed it over poor Brigit's eye, which couldn't have been very comfortable for her. Cait suggested that I use a pen and paper to note things down and it turned out I needed to! First, Cait pointed out that when she asked me to put on the halter she had not said I couldn't ask her for help, yet, despite the fact that it could have hurt the horse, not once did I ask for help. This seemed to me to reveal a certain pride and a lack of humility. I wanted to do it myself unassisted! There were other things too. For instance, it seemed that I had persistently tried to put on the halter in the same way and had not varied my approach. Another interesting insight – the experience was full of interesting insights! At this point, Cait suggested I recall a moment in my life when I had achieved something and done it well. Inwardly I recalled learning to play the piano and the feeling I had when I played a piece for the first time. She now suggested I apply this feeling of confidence to putting on Bridget's headcollar. I did so and on this fifth attempt I managed to get the halter on – after a fashion!

The next task was to clip Brigit's rope on and ask her to walk a few steps towards me and then ask her to step back. With calm assurance Cait showed me how to do this. I watched carefully, and noted Cait's firm but loving voice. I tried myself but Brigit would not walk forward. At last she did so, but when I stood tall and looked into her face – as Cait had done – and asked her to step back, she wouldn't budge! Cait's voice jolted me when she called out, 'Mean it! Take yourself seriously! Take Brigit seriously!' Suddenly, I meant it! And Brigit stepped back! To hold up a hand is also a signal to the horse to 'step back'. I did this but did not put my hand down quickly enough as she responded, so the poor horse was probably left feeling that she had not accomplished the request. As soon as Cait pointed this out, I put my hand down.

Finally, I completely stepped out of my comfort zone by ducking under Brigit's belly, right under her girth. I am sure that most ordinary horses would have objected, but Bridget is a loving horse whose potential has risen to its summit under Cait's unique training and tender loving care. I felt so thrilled and elated after springing up the other side of Brigit's body.

When Cait left me alone for a while to share my vulnerability and problems with Brigit, Brigit began to lick my hands which was just lovely. Cait said this was a sign that she was aware of and processing my feelings. It certainly felt like a special bond had been forged and I felt confident to be alone with Brigit.

Cait suggested that I frame a simple affirmation to embody the essence of what I had learned during the session. When I said it aloud I could hear myself sounding a bit weak and watery. Cait's strong voice bellowed out the words I had chosen and I realised then that I needed to affirm with my vocal cords as much as the words themselves.

I can see how important this therapy is and would recommend it to anyone wanting to grow in self-understanding and consciousness. After all, if the world is to be a better place, we must start with ourselves! Thank you, Cait and Brigit!

## FOUR CLIENTS

### **J meets Rowan**

J came to me on the recommendation of her therapist, who accompanied her on her visit. J was experiencing a lot of fear and anxiety, had extremely low self-esteem, and was prone to bouts of weeping. When she met Brigit and Rowan, she was drawn to Rowan. Rowan is naturally sweet and gentle, also very bright with a mischievous sparkle. J took a while to find the courage to approach Rowan, although he was tied to a fence and standing quietly. Gradually she was able to move closer to him, and as she relaxed enough to be open to his friendliness, she asked if she might groom him. She spent most of the session brushing and talking to Rowan. She also talked with her therapist, although once or twice she asked her therapist to step back so she could just be alone with Rowan. During the session Rowan was apparently processing J's quite intense emotions (horses have the ability to do this for humans: they seem to be able to allow the emotions to pass through their bodies and dissipate), and J was becoming calmer and happier and more able to simply enjoy being in his presence; she also greatly enjoyed his evident appreciation of her caring for him, and was able to connect with him emotionally. Subsequently, J's therapist reported that J found that the session gave her the opportunity to experience simply allowing her emotions to flow through her without her becoming distressed, which was a revelation for her; she also found Rowan's steady acceptance and appreciation of her deeply reassuring – he provided a model for her to relate to herself more steadfastly and kindly; and she was able to relax and simply enjoy herself in his company – again, an unusual experience for her.

### **S meets Brigit and Rowan**

S wanted to work on a particular issue: following an extended period of intense domestic difficulties, she was aware of having protected herself from the trauma by distancing herself from her family; now she wanted to explore reconnecting emotionally. As she was an experienced horse-person we started with both horses at once, both at liberty. At the start of the session, the horses ignored S: they went over to the furthest corner of the arena to chat with some other horses who were the other side of the fence. S and I sat down and talked for a few minutes; then ran through a simple NLP exercise that enabled her to make an emotional shift. As she made the shift, both horses swung round and looked straight at her, then together they walked over and nuzzled her, resting their heads in her lap as she stroked them. The horses recognised the emotional shift S had made and provided her with their external corroboration of her inner experience; their loving response and physical contact also enabled her to go more deeply into the shared experience of emotional connection that she was seeking.

### **S meets Rowan**

S was experiencing stiffness, aches, and shooting pains in her legs, especially the knees. She felt she had been the primary support for a family member for a long time, and she was exhausted. She was aware of feeling unsupported herself, and in desperate need of some kind of nurturing. As we sat in the barn with the horses, who were munching on haynets as we talked, the image of a rearing horse came up for S. The horse was fixed in a levade posture, like a warhorse, but although it looked noble and strong its hind legs were trembling with exhaustion. When I asked S what prevented the horse from moving from the levade, a cobra emerged, hood extended, looking fierce. At first S found this a frightening image, but when I remarked that the naga, appearing as cobra with extended hood, is a Buddhist icon often portrayed as protecting the

meditating Buddha, she realised that it might represent a protector part of herself. We asked the cobra to allow the rearing horse to lower its forefeet to the ground, and it agreed. As the horse lowered its feet, S found herself relaxing and breathing deeply. At this point Rowan looked up from his haynet, walked over to where we were sitting, and lay down next to S. S then lay down next to him. A few moments later, Rowan stretched himself flat on the ground and placed one foreleg over S's body, holding her. They lay like that for maybe 10 minutes before Rowan moved, and they both got up. On getting up, S noticed that the pains in her legs had diminished and she felt relaxed and peaceful. Before ending the session we discussed how she might find different ways of supporting the family member and of getting the support she herself needed.

#### G meets Brigit and Rowan

G was attending a workshop with several other people. She revealed on arrival that she was very frightened of horses and that one of her main aims for the day was to work with this fear.

We allocated some time at the beginning of the workshop for each person to meet Brigit and Rowan individually, and, although normally the horses would not be wearing halters or be in any way restricted for this particular type of workshop (a deep ecology day), on this occasion I put halters on them to reassure G.

We all went into the field, and the humans sat on the ground in a circle; G and a couple of other people chose to sit in chairs. The horses were wandering around, coming into the circle to join in with the activities that interested them. Both horses were very gently attentive to G throughout the morning, and she was visibly relaxing in their presence. I removed their halters towards the end of the morning session.

After the lunch break, G chose to sit on the ground for the afternoon session. Brigit and Rowan walked up together to stand on either side of her, just behind her, as though guarding her. G spontaneously lay back and stretched out her arms; the horses stepped even closer to her so they were standing over her outspread arms as she lay flat on her back on the grass. A stillness and silence arose among all of us, and we all stayed as though spellbound for several minutes. Then both horses moved slowly away from G, stepping carefully over her arms, and began grazing peacefully nearby. When G sat up, tears were running down her smiling face – we were all moved and a bit tearful.

A week or so later G emailed me to say: 'Phew – that weekend – I have tried to reply to you so many times and words just seem inadequate. It took several days for me to assimilate it all... the momentous shifts in awareness I had made. I released some really old tarry gloopy nonsense that had been holding me back and am definitely ready for our next session as I feel some more beginning to bubble up. I am humbled and awed in working with Rowan and Brigit – they are beautiful and amazing and powerful and graceful. I thank them every day. It has changed my world for the good – I am realising my purpose, my strengths, and the areas that need tending and am full of joy and wonder at the prospect of it all.'