

PRESENTATION:

“Natural Horsemanship and the Art of Mediation”

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When Ellen asked me to talk on Natural Horsemanship and mediation, I was somewhat puzzled as to what I could say. As you know, in mediation there are opposing but willingly parties *and* an independent facilitator, whereas in Natural Horsemanship, there are only two parties: One is the horse, who is there, whether or not he wants to, and the other the mediator, who has a vested interest in the outcome and is the authority over all disputes.

Is there a fundamental connection between these two procedures that merits discussion?

Let me put the question another way: how can the practice of Natural Horsemanship be of any help to you as future mediators?

Well, up until now, I have resisted trying to apply insights from horse work to human relationships. After all, they are not only animals of a different species, but in addition, are separated from us by the prey-predator opposition, which has made us natural enemies.

There is a somewhat facetious question I am frequently asked at gentling demonstrations: “But will this work on my husband?” I usually brush the question off with some comment about how horses and humans are quite different in their psychology, and leave it at that.

But, when I really began to look into the matter, I discovered that there is a veritable industry of equine groups helping individuals and corporate managers to become emotionally more aware, and to integrate this awareness into their behavior patterns.

This kind of therapeutic work is also currently in use in prisons and in programs for “at risk” adolescents. I recently read about an inner-city teenager, in one of these programs, who upon succeeding at an assigned task said: “this is the first time I ever got something I wanted without having to fight for it.”

Well, finally, it dawned on me that the most important connection between mediation and natural horsemanship lies not in any specific training method, but in the quality of leadership that is required of the horseman and the mediator.

It is this connection that I want to discuss today:

I will start with a few prepared remarks, and then present a PowerPoint illustration of work I have done with horses and other prey animals.

At this point I want to give you a working definition of Natural Horsemanship.

Briefly, “Natural Horsemanship” is the term most generally used to describe a style of horsemanship that is centered on the needs of the horse and asks the human to do most of the changing.

It began in California during the 1960’s and now has spread around the world. Practitioners of this method seek to gentle and gain control of horses through methods that are as close as possible to those used by horses in a natural herd setting.

This requires the use of restrained pressure, timely rewards and calmly applied discipline. It is very much an *intuitive method* that relies what is called “*feel*” to guide the handler in his calculation of appropriate ways to approach a horse in a particular situation.

Leigh Shambo, founder and lead therapist for the *Human-Equine Alliance for Learning*, has put it this way:

*The art of horse whispering
is really the art of letting intuition
guide us in choosing the actions and methods
that gently guide the horse
into a collaborative training experience.
This art depends just as much
on letting the horse teach us what he needs,
as on communication to him what our desires are.*

When carried out with insight and empathy, the horse comes to regard the handler as a reliable and trustworthy leader. Mentally, he gives himself over to the handler in an act some call “Joining Up,” or “Hooking On,” or “Turning Loose.” Even with the wildest horses, this approach involves the horse voluntarily coming to the handler or allowing the handler to approach him, after being driven away in a 60-foot circular pen for only a few minutes.



Once the horse allows contact, the handler turns and slowly walks away. The horse normally follows him, in a relaxed way that says: “I respect you enough not to challenge you, and trust you enough to follow you.”

This is often a rather dramatic encounter, because a horse must overcome much of his natural fear of predators to be able to stand calmly in the presence of a human.

In Natural Horsemanship, the relationship between the horse and the handler is given priority over any training goal, and, it is argued,

by doing this not only will you help the horse,
but you will get better results later, during formal training in a particular discipline.

Finally, Natural Horsemanship is also non-coercive in the sense that it always allows the horse a choice, and allows him to learn from his mistakes. The handler never forces a particular option on him, although he will block any dangerous behavior. It is axiomatic in Natural Horsemanship that the handler and the horse not get hurt, and that the horse emerge from a session calmer and more focused on the handler than he was at the beginning.

For Example, when we are trying to saddle a horse for the first time, we don’t hold him or tie him. We allow him to stand by us, unrestrained, and choose to accept the saddle or move away. If he chooses to run, after a few laps, as if by magic, the saddle seems much less scary, and finally, he will choose to stand and accept it.

More relevant, however, to the challenge of becoming a skilled mediator is the development of *Equine-Assisted Therapy*, which is based on the principles of natural horsemanship. I have found that this isn’t just another quick-fix form of “pop-psychology,” but is a serious effort bring about deep emotional change by using the horse as a catalyst. In this way clients are able to experience both their emotional strengths and weaknesses in an environment where they don’t risk damaging important relationships by experimenting with alternative ways of behaving.

In this effort to gentle a horse, qualities of leadership that are needed by horsemen, mediators, and anyone involved in teaching, psychotherapy or counseling, are made very evident.

To be as effective as possible, anyone in these roles needs to be acutely aware of his or her emotions, and be able to con-

trol and direct them under pressure.

Since success in the mediation process depends largely on satisfying the emotional agendas of the parties, the mediator must be emotionally nimble enough to avoid being drawn to one side or the other. This concern with what Daniel Goldman has called “emotional intelligence,” has begun to work its way into our general culture through social and emotional learning programs.

In *Equine Assisted Psychotherapy*, this demand on “Emotional Intelligence,” is usually handled something like this: In a tightly controlled setting, the client is asked to approach a 1,200 pound, uncooperative horse that is running loose in a 60-foot wide round pen. The task is to get the horse to accept a halter. Other tasks include teamwork competitions to saddle a horse, or to separate one horse from a group. On the sideline are a qualified natural horseman and a professional psychotherapist, ready to be of assistance at any moment. The participant’s overall approach and behavior become material for interpretation: What he does or omits to do, as well as how and when he asks for help, is all up for discussion. For example, in a project set up to develop teamwork, there is a focus on how the parties organize themselves, and, at what point they ask for professional help or look to other groups for ideas. The really important things here are the emotions that are experienced by the participants, as they try to cope, without adequate skills, in an unfamiliar setting, with an animal that would like nothing better than to be as far away from them as possible. The frustration caused in this situation pushes the participants out of their normal comfort zones, and pressures them to think and act in creative and imaginative ways.



For more details, see the *New York Times* article, May 17, ‘08, on *The Horse Institute* in NY State. Also available on the web: thehorseinstitute.com.

One attribute of horses that makes them particularly helpful in therapeutic situations, is that they are able to act as mirrors of the approach we take with them. If they are approached with gentleness conveyed *in way they understand*, they will respond in kind. If limits are set for them, or if they are disciplined in a way that is normal in herd life, they will accept it without resentment. However, if you punish them using anger, or treat them unfairly, they won’t understand, and will either be broken in spirit, or try to avoid you as they would any dangerous predator.

Let me give you an example of the range of social values horses can be helpful in reflecting. Think, for instance, that if you were the head of a voracious company during the late 19th century era of “robber barons,” you might want executives that could be exceedingly ruthless in carrying out business dealings. You might want to select prospective executives from a group that performed well in the traditional way of breaking horses, individuals who could put aside softer or more empathetic feelings and force themselves into positions of dominance. The ease with which a prospective executive could subdue and dominate a horse through the use of fear and pain might well give you an indication of the kind of executive he or she would make.

By way of contrast, today we search for “*team players*” who have all the virtues associated with cooperation and deference to the goals of the larger group. A detailed list of these qualities would also include: Self-confidence, persistence, calmness under pressure, emotional awareness and self-motivation. We want our team leaders to be able to set and enforce goals, and simultaneously to be compassionate and understanding. We want them to evoke a sense of trust and respect in all who deal with them, while at the same time, not be intimidating.

In short: Leaders today are called on in an unprecedented way, to be skilled in handling human relationships, and imaginative in the approach they take to their job.

The problem lies in getting individuals to *internalize* these qualities and be able to act on them, whether we are talking about mediators, horsemen, or business executives. In Natural Horsemanship, personal qualities that affect the ability to develop cooperative partnerships quickly become apparent. In my experience there are many individuals who simply cannot be effective at natural horsemanship because they resist making the emotional changes necessary to becoming a

leader. When I see students go day after day, allowing horses to challenge them and go uncorrected, I get a fairly clear sense of how they are probably treated by their kids, their spouses or their bosses. If a person has problems with controlling his temper, establishing goals, setting limits, or expressing affection, it will be reflected *in the behavior of the horse*.

A horse will remain emotionally *unsettled* until the issue of leadership is decided, for there is no democracy in a herd of horses; they will challenge each other until one leader emerges, and then all relax. So, if you do not assert leadership, the horse will, and that soon becomes a dangerous situation.

Jim Collins, A researcher for *Axilient Corporation*, a world-wide business consulting firm based in Houston, puts the problem of *cultivating leadership qualities* this way:

I would love to be able to give you a list of steps for becoming a first rate leader, but we have no solid research data that would support a credible list. The “inner development” of a person remains a black box.

Following this perspective, much leadership training is *cognitive training*. This focuses attention on behavioral changes to help improve personal relationships or work related performance. This, however, is much like general advice on how to diet or quit smoking. Laudable efforts, inspired by reason and good information often have little staying power without a change in basic motivation.

In Equine Assisted Psychotherapy, it is this *inner development of the individual and his motivations* that becomes the focus of attention. Along with more traditional psychotherapeutic work, equine assisted psychotherapy makes an effort to bring about *fundamental emotional change* through putting clients in situations where *deep emotions* are triggered. Clients then become aware of feelings that are limiting their ability to take a leadership role with horses, and, by extension, at work or in personal relationships.



An aphorism in natural horsemanship points out that: *Traditional trainers train horses, Natural Horsemen train themselves. You work on yourself and play with your horse.* Sir Edmund Hillary, the mountaineer who first climbed Mt. Everest, made a similar comment when he said: *It's not the mountain we conquer but ourselves.* And, Mahatma Gandhi was in agreement when he observed: *You must be the change you wish to see in the world.*

The advice here is the same: *The problem lies within*, and we had better seek change in ourselves before we go demanding it of others.

So, when Natural Horsemanship work begins, as it does, on the ground, individual changes that are necessary for the human to become leader of this herd of two become immediately obvious to the trained eye.

It is *natural* for us humans to chase and try to subdue any animal that we want for our use. It is likewise natural for prey animals to try to avoid any predators they can. In the past we have primarily relied on force to achieve our ends. However, more and more today we are turning to “feel” and an educational approach with horses to bring about willing cooperation. To achieve this requires that we develop patience, compassion, empathy, as well as a sense of appropriate discipline.

Horses are extremely adaptable: They can be turned into slaves through force, or become highly sociable partners when handled in a way that is natural to them. They can become bonded to us or broken in spirit; it's really up to us, and the approach we take.

In Natural Horsemanship, as in all relations in life, if we do not want a relationship based on fear and intimidation, we must learn to stop acting like predators; stop forcing and subduing, stop being *confrontational*. When we do this with horses, when we check ourselves, and begin to behave more like a horse in his natural herd setting, the horse gains the possibility of *not having to act like a prey animal*, and can come to regard us as leaders of a herd of two.

A truism of Natural Horsemanship is that *it is not what we are but how we feel and act* towards horses that either makes a cooperative partnership possible or not. We must convey the message that we use only the degree of pressure necessary to insure the hierarchy of the herd, and to maintain safety through discipline and clear communication.

What I am suggesting is that as prospective mediators, you need to take every possibility you can, to gain insight into your emotions and values, in order to minimize the role these may play in unconsciously determining how you relate to others, not only in a personal way, but professionally, in the judgments you will be making.

In short, Natural Horsemanship can offer a “baby step” toward improving your human relationships. As part of the life-long task of coming to know ourselves, Natural Horsemanship is no magic bullet, but it can provide a start toward a deeper sense of self-awareness.

It can help convey an honest reflection of unconsciously held feelings, and offer you a chance, with the help of others, to make significant changes in both your personal and professional lives.

Thank you.

This talk was followed by a PowerPoint presentation of my work with horses and other prey animals.
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