



HORSE SENSE
— of the Carolinas —

**MORE THAN A
MIRROR**

Horses, Humans, and Therapeutic Practices

by Shannon Knapp

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Horses Changing People

RESCUING HORSES, FINDING PARELLI, AND FINDING EA WORK

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate how horses can create change in people is to tell you a few stories of my own. If you're into horses long enough, eventually that One Horse shows up in your life: the one who gives you fits, the one who challenges all your supposed experience. The one who makes you realize you don't know *anything*. This horse becomes what I call a "Waterloo Horse" unless we seek help and grow beyond our current boundaries. And, sometimes, this is the horse who leads us to unexpected places.

This is the story of my "Waterloo Horse".

After taking a few years off from horses for college and grad school while in my 20s, I moved to Texas and officially got back into horses. Susan Denero—or 'Black-Eyed Sue'—came to me the summer of 1998 as a 4-year-old registered dun paint broodmare. When I saw her for the first time at a horse show, I thought she looked great. Her owners were there to help her acclimate to the show environment. I was so excited to see her that I didn't stop long enough to consider the twisted-wire snaffle bit they were using—and why they might be using it. It should have been my first clue; it's the classic "normal" bit for the hard-to-control horse.

The more important thing to know, however, is Sue was actually my second Waterloo horse. I had sold her predecessor, named Brandy, because I kept hitting one wall after another until finally, out of sheer frustration, I sold her. Of course, I was convinced the issues were Brandy's fault, not mine. In the back of my mind I suspected differently, but everyone around me knew more, so I listened with relief to their suggestions that I sell her and get another horse more suited to me.

I really wanted this relationship with Sue to be different—I was tired of leaving the barn crying—but in no time at all I started having the same issues. How interesting! An unhappy truth started to surface: Maybe it wasn't the horse; maybe it was me.

Around the same time a significant event developed in my life, where a family crisis swiftly evolved into a personal crisis. I became painfully aware of the disconnect between who I was and who I wanted to be, and knew these were far bigger issues than anything I could resolve alone.

I decided to stop my life to seek help and, once I made the decision to take action, I also made a clear decision to stop trying to ride my horse until my issues were resolved. I just simply went out to the pasture and sat with Sue for hours on end (what I know now as Undemanding Time). Without knowing it, my horse became the most visible element in my recovery, helping me see I could never change the things that felt wrong in my life without changing me.

*This period of growth marked a really difficult time in my life, and there were moments when I wasn't motivated enough to get better for myself, but I **was** motivated to get better in order to have a good relationship with Sue. She motivated me when nothing else did.*

And so Black-Eyed Sue—along with her predecessor, Brandy—became the first examples in my life of how horses create change in humans. Sue's response to me became a powerful reflection of my issues and an even more powerful catalyst for healing.

Sue is now a wonderful EAP/EAL horse: great with kids, great with ground-work. She still has significant challenges under saddle, but her gifts to clients and to me have been innumerable.

My experiences with Sue were only the first steps toward realizing how horses generate change in people. I was still a long way from finding equine-assisted practice as a form of work, much less developing a concrete system for working with horses as professionals. My belief system and principles manifested through a combination of incidents, experience, intention, and osmosis to become a natural extension of *Horse Sense*.

In fact, I didn't actually plan to operate an equine-assisted practice at all. My husband Richard and I finalized our decision to move from Texas to North Carolina in 1999. Ten months, multiple trips, and thousands of details later, we were there. After our move, the original

intention was to become a rescue and rehabilitation farm. We'd spent the Texas years doing rehab for large dogs, and wanted to do the same for horses in North Carolina. We found horses through the local horse rescue organization, Hope for Horses, and the North Carolina Equine Rescue League (which is now the United States Equine Rescue League) and worked to bring each horse back to health before finding them a new home.

As we assessed each horse who came to us, we would also often receive a laundry list of issues from those involved: the owner, the vet, the barn manager or whomever. This caused me great frustration. Humans were subjective; we needed something objective to measure horse behavior, but I had yet to find anything reliable, and there was no way to do so in the timeframe I needed, given my age and the hours necessary to become a true "outlier" (a la Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers*, who asserts that the key to success in any field is, to a large extent, a matter of practicing a specific task for around 10,000 hours). And, while I could see what the horse's body was doing, I recognized I couldn't understand the mental and emotional picture that body presented.

Another point of frustration was seeing the rescue facilities fill up with healthy but unrideable horses who couldn't be placed. Few people wanted a horse they couldn't ride. It was fairly easy to place a young, rideable horse who only needed some training or retraining, and the additional groceries. It was also fairly easy to place a retirement-age horse. But a young, healthy, unrideable horse? There were very few good options for placing that horse.

There wasn't anything truly "wrong" with these horses; it seemed arrogant and species-centered to judge them worthless simply because they couldn't be "used" for riding. The question of how to help them began to plague me, perhaps because I've always somewhat questioned the philosophical appropriateness of riding. In my early years, I'd

Natural Horsemanship

PARELLI AND EQUINE ASSISTED PRACTICE

It was a very personal journey that led me to discovering how horses act as agents of change for people, a serendipitous set of circumstances starting with my own transformation, which led to rescuing horses, which led to discovering a much larger purpose for my life and the lives of horses we “rescued.” But after those initial serendipitous occasions, development and growth became very intentional. As a teacher and a student of learning, once I found the trail leading to equine-assisted work—I became a devoted researcher.

Part of that journey—and the rationale we’ve used to integrate the multiple disciplines of Natural Horsemanship and equine-assisted practice into our work at *Horse Sense*—comes from first understanding the underlying principles and concepts inherent in both disciplines. We established our equine-assisted practice at *Horse Sense* based on these principles, and use them to continually evolve the skills of our Equine Specialists. But before we delve into those aspects, it seems appropriate to pause here and take a closer look at both the history and formation of equine-assisted practice and Natural Horsemanship in general, and Parelli™ concepts in particular, as part of our “groundwork” for future chapters.

How do equine-assisted practices and Natural Horsemanship merge? Do the principles overlap? How might Natural Horsemanship skills serve to enhance the Equine Specialist beyond the limits of “normal,” or traditional horsemanship? The similarities are deeper than you might expect. Not only do I believe recognizing these common overlaps makes us better Equine Specialists, I believe the evolution of Natural Horsemanship itself was a catalyst which resulted in the field of equine-assisted practice being even conceivable in our time.

NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

From Equipment to Leisure Activity

During the past century, the status of horses in our culture changed drastically. Their primary roles evolved from those of essential field equipment and transportation to leisure and expensive hobby assets to valued therapy partners—quite a spectrum! In each case, their essential value developed from, and corresponded to, a cultural mindset.

The “horses as equipment” mindset came from a very traditional and practical time in our country’s history. Horses were necessary for getting work done, crops planted, wars won. Therefore, it was a matter of economic and physical survival to train a horse for these duties in a quick and expedient manner, with little consideration for the horse. This old method of training was efficient, singularly-focused, and could be brutal. During that period, it was quite unusual for people to even consider the horse as an emotional, thinking being. Therefore, horses who were unworkable in serving as either equipment or as breeding stock for more equipment, were expendable.

If you think about it, most of our equine pleasure activities evolved from these earlier, more utilitarian uses: the tactical maneuver training of war horses became the sports of dressage and show jumping; cow work became the sports of reining, cutting, penning, and roping. And the “get ‘er done” practice of horse breaking became the sport of bronc riding and rodeo. We spend little time thinking about it, but even the way we groom, saddle, and mount horses today developed from centuries-old military traditions grounded in very practical considerations.

Once the mechanical engine prompted development of other modes of transportation and work production, the role of horses in society changed. The role shifted from one of utility to pleasure, entertainment, and sport, perhaps revealing that first glimmer of possibility where a horse’s value would be considered from another perspective. Up to that point, the average person in our society spent very little

time questioning the rather unfeeling methods for training horses.

Yet, from the time of Xenophon, there were people taking the horse into consideration, and thinking about what was in the best interests of the horse-human relationship. Led by Antoine de Pluvinel (b. circa 1552), dressage and other English trainers like Walter Zettl, Alois Podhajsky, and Nuno Olivera were thinking about the horse as a partner, as were cowboys like Tom Dorrance (born in the early 1900's), Ray Hunt and others. Whatever style of saddle they used (English, Western or none at all), "Natural Horsemanship" practitioners sought to utilize a horse's natural instincts, psychology, and herd behavior rather than using pain, dominance, and fear to develop the horse for human endeavors.

THE EARLY INFLUENCERS OF AMERICAN NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

While some contemporary camps ostracize Natural Horsemanship as soft, faddish, and ineffective, its roots are, in fact, very deep. The Greek mercenary soldier, historian, and writer Xenophon (c. 430 – 354 BC) was among the first to document and advocate sympathetic horsemanship in his writing, *On Horsemanship*. Centuries later, Natural Horsemanship proponents trace roots of the concept to the California vaquero tradition, which in itself was influenced by Native American methods, Spanish and even Hungarian traditions. A parallel tradition of "horse whisperers" has roots in the British Isles and Eastern United States.

Using today's pop culture terminology, the early Natural Horsemanship advocates in the U.S. would be called "Early Influencers." Most practitioners today reference Tom Dorrance as the earliest modern practitioner, who then influenced Ray Hunt and a whole host of others, including Troy Henry, and Ronnie Willis in the 1960s and 1970s. Veterinarian Dr. Robert M. Miller brought a new level of credibility

to the practice through his books, the most important of which are *Understanding the Ancient Secrets of the Horse's Mind* and *The Revolution in Horsemanship*. The circle then grew to include the likes of contemporary practitioners Mark Rashid, Buck Brannaman, John Lyons and Pat and Linda Parelli, among many others.

In the earliest days, the number of people interested in practicing Natural Horsemanship was small, and advocates were far-flung, with little to unite them but a sparse handful of random clinics and little communication. Slowly, clinicians developed more sophisticated marketing techniques. Some, like Parelli™, created student curricula enabling people to learn, explore, and make progress on their own between or in place of clinics. Today, the internet has contributed greatly to the Natural Horsemanship revolution, increasing reach, awareness, and community, and allowing students to communicate and interact more easily with other horsepeople. Natural Horsemanship is now within reach of nearly anyone who has the desire to participate. There are a host of students who have become instructors in their own right, teaching and expanding the circle further.

During this period, the educational understanding of the Natural Horsemanship student and the number of students greatly increased. We're able to communicate with other like-minded souls easily, and can even reach across oceans and continents to Australia, Africa, or Iceland. Natural Horsemanship today is no longer a trend; it's the rare horseperson who hasn't heard of it.

FOUNDATIONAL IDEAS & BASIC PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP

What distinguishes Natural Horsemanship from “normal” horsemanship? What are the key concepts? Natural Horsemanship has served to create some major shifts in the awareness and understanding of horses and horse behavior, even for those not following the practice closely.

As I see it, there are five key principles:

1. **Horses are prey animals; humans are predators.** Prey animals' natural characteristics allow them to detect the most seemingly insignificant incongruity in their environment and flee before danger strikes. For horses, this incongruity can be either emotional or environmental. Prey animal psychology differs greatly from predator psychology, and this creates many of the fundamental misunderstandings between humans and horses. Horses, as Parelli says, are "cowards, skeptics, claustrophobics and panic-a-holics by nature and varying degrees." That defines the term "prey" in just one sentence!

By disregarding or under-acknowledging this significant aspect of the horse, or by understanding this but primarily using it against horses, humans tend to interpret everything only from a predator mentality, and have little patience for understanding the prey animal's unique point of view. It is the nature of predators to exploit the weaknesses of another creature to survive. If you extend this into human nature, this translates into "might vs. right," exploiting another creature because it's expedient, because the human needs to get something done, because it needs to be my way.

Understanding the predator/prey relationship is key to understanding why horses do what they do. Interestingly, it's also part of what makes horses effective as therapy animals; the horse's innate ability to detect incongruity (shifts, changes, conflicting information all constitute a kind of incongruity) makes him or her ideal for recognizing it in the client during session. Horses have to be able to tell, from a great distance away, the difference between a lion who is sleeping and one who is stalking: both present as hunched down in the grass!

2. **Cause your idea to become the horse's idea.** Simple, right? Again, the human tendency toward direct-line thinking is

From the Inside Out

DISCOVERY, SKILL BUILDING, AND REINFORCEMENT IN EAP

One of the greatest challenges we have in equine-assisted practice is making our work understandable to the outside world. While we understand something significant is happening when our clients work with horses, what we think happens and how we think it happens varies from practitioner to practitioner. Equine-assisted practice is a field with a highly experiential dynamic, making it a challenge to explain. How do you describe something designed to be felt? Understanding involves the whole body: head, heart and gut.

There really is no singular definition that fits all expressions of equine-assisted psychotherapy and learning practice. Although more and more people now understand that equine-assisted practice is not simply riding lessons or participating in horse shows, most people still have only a vague understanding of what actually occurs during an equine-assisted session. In response to this challenge, the language and messaging around our practice has slowly evolved.

Ariana Strozzi captured the essence of this evolution nicely in a private communication back in 2008: “If you said you were a ‘coach’ twenty years ago, people assumed you were coaching Little League, soccer, or football. Nobody knew what a ‘business coach’ or ‘personal coach’ was or, if they did, that wasn’t their first thought upon hearing ‘coach.’” However, today, if someone says they’re a “coach,” many interpret the duties through a much broader definition: life coach, business coach, or weight loss coach. We are in this same process of evolution with equine specialists and equine-assisted practices.

It’s difficult to explain the theory, interaction and outcomes that are such a large part of equine-assisted practice to the public. But, in this same vein, I wonder just how well those of us in the field really

understand all the different layers and how they work together. While we might understand basic aspects of the horse/human dynamic, new research on social and emotional intelligence is evolving, and emerging science is building a much bigger picture to deepen our understanding. This same science might eventually help us develop more credible, definitive language and support regarding what we already know happens in the arena between horse and human.

First, before we explore these behaviors and emotional concepts, it seems most practical to move our journey forward by taking you, the reader, through the steps of a typical client experience. By establishing this basic understanding, we can then step into the deeper aspects of what takes place when horses become involved in human therapy and learning. Before you can fully understand the ability and insight an equine-assisted practitioner should have in order to be successful, everyone would benefit by having a rough idea of what takes place in client sessions at *Horse Sense*: how we shape a client's progression, and how a client can move through the learning and therapy experience to a greater understanding of his life and choices.

So, I'll offer a glimpse into what typically happens at *Horse Sense*, reminding you that the practice we've evolved from our years of experience is only one snapshot of what happens globally at centers throughout the industry. We'll review a fairly typical progression of treatment from a high-level perspective.

As my own understanding matures through both practice and study, I believe that horses truly excel at teaching and modeling social and emotional intelligence. Within their own natural behavior and by attuning to the human client in session, horses create the ideal context in which our clients can—no matter the issues—adapt and enhance their own emotional and social intelligence as it relates to their self-awareness and self-management in the human world.

What does our practice look like? How do we progress with a “clas-

sic” client (if there is such a thing)? How would we introduce activities that promote awareness and then use that awareness to build new skills? Let’s step through the process together. Keep in mind the following anecdotes represent a composite profile from hundreds of client experiences; care has been taken to obscure identifying details. It’s also helpful to remember that the kind of intervention described in this chapter is predominantly intended for clients over the age of eight years old, whether developmentally or chronologically. Our approach with younger clients would be different.

There are three distinct stages in the client process: Discovery Phase, Skill Building Phase, and Reinforcement Phase. When we provide equine-assisted psychotherapy at *Horse Sense*, much of our time is spent in the first two Phases: Discovery and Skill Building. In the Discovery phase, the client is focusing on discovering identity, what’s happening in his world, and how he feels and reacts to circumstances. Equine-assisted practice is a wonderful discovery tool to access information about one’s thoughts, perceptions and emotions without needing the cognitive and language skills necessary to share this information with another person. It’s also a great way for more holistic learners to integrate information. Equine-assisted work allows the client access to this information cleanly, without the interpretive lens of someone else’s experience or thoughts. It also allows the client to better see the “filters” on his own lenses.

THE CLASSIC CLIENT SERIES, SESSION ONE TO COMPLETION

The Discovery Phase: The Client and Her World

In session, we begin in Discovery, and may stay in that phase for a long time. As a client develops awareness and insight, we’ll likely move on to more Skill Building-type activities. The beginning of the Discov-

ery Phase, for us as facilitators, is also an assessment phase, where we seek to discover what is presenting itself as the most pressing issue(s). But first, before any arena/horse time, an office intake/assessment is completed.

Most of our individual clients begin the therapy process in our office with a mental health professional, working through some form of intake procedure. Before coming into contact with the horses, we try to determine if equine-assisted work is a good fit and an appropriate strategy for helping a particular client with his issues. Although there are a number of reasons why we might suggest that EAP is not a fit for a client, some of the situations under which we've actually referred a client out include: clients who were actively delusional and not taking prescribed medications, clients who were actively using drugs or alcohol, or clients who had a pattern of arson or of assaulting their therapist. Oddly enough, a pattern or indication of past animal abuse perpetrated by a client is not, by itself, grounds for referral out of our program. To some degree, if such a person is not working with a group of professionals like us, then this important interaction may never take place. Of course, I don't want to put my horses in harm's way, but I also believe horses might be the most viable opportunity for a client facing these challenges to experience a shift in perspective.

The assessment/clinical intake process determines what the issues are, what's stuck, and what brought the client to our door. After this initial session, subsequent sessions take place at the barn. Oftentimes, the initial office visit will end with a brief tour around the farm, an introduction to the Equine Specialist, and a time for questions from the client.

OBSERVATION

Once we move on to horse session work, the full team takes shape: the mental health professional, the Equine Specialist, and the horses. Virtually every client will start out with the same initial activity: Obser-

vation. The client is invited to observe several (often 2-3) horses loose in an arena on one side of a partition while the team and the client watch from the outside.

Although the mental health professional and the ES have already shared fundamental information regarding the client and the client's issues/challenges, this initial Observation session is a great opportunity for the ES to evaluate what's happening with the client with his or her own eyes. With limited information regarding potential diagnoses or the client's "story," this "clean read" can create the foundation for supporting change for the client. The ES takes note of anything observed during this exercise, documenting it for use in future sessions.

Instructions for the client during Observation, and often throughout the entire treatment process, are extremely simple and open-ended. The client is asked to observe the horses. We may or may not offer a lens through which to observe, such as, "Watch how the horses interact with one another," or "Notice what you can learn about them by watching how they communicate." We'll encourage silence from the client during this Observation activity by maintaining our own silence (sometimes for a couple of minutes, or for a whole session, or more). Sometimes we'll invite the client to carry out this activity using "horse rules," which we explain as not speaking to the horses, to herself or to us. Sometimes we invite the client not to touch the horses unless the horse touches her first—which is much more difficult to do than it sounds!

This simple Observation exercise reveals an incredible amount of information to the trained treatment team, and sometimes creates an epiphany for the client as well. Through silence and simple observation, this activity allows everyone to become present to the moment in the arena, to their senses and to their environment. The client has the opportunity to get used to the horses from a comfortable distance, so

From the Outside In

THE SCIENCE AND THEORIES IMPACTING EQUINE ASSISTED PRACTICE

Now that we've formed a baseline understanding of the "classic" or typical client progression through equine-assisted therapy and learning at *Horse Sense*, it's time to dig deeper and explore some of the concepts at work when clients interact with horses. There's a Robert Cooper quote I think is significant as we explore the dynamics of client-horse interaction, "The dinosaurs of tomorrow will be those who keep trying to live and work from their heads alone." (2002, p.17) This quote embodies the essence of why horses (and animals in general) excel at being present to their environment. They live and experience life with their whole body, not just their heads.

We tend to treat the concept of the horse and his/her congruency to both the present moment and the environment from a simplistic point of view, and it is simple. But that doesn't mean there still isn't quite a bit going on. Increasingly, the concepts we utilize in our work with EA practice—like congruency—are no longer just theory. Neuroscientists are busy documenting the multifaceted components which serve to help integrate the social, emotional, and physical into our lives. Science is defining concepts like attunement and social intelligence at a whole new level and helping us better understand how humans can become more functional (and less dysfunctional) in their lives.

In developing my own understanding of the science at work in our practice, I've spent quite a bit of time over the past years reading more science and neuroscience as they focus on cognitive and behavioral aspects. Through this process, I've come to understand more about what is happening when we're helping clients. I think it's beneficial to examine and understand some of the scientific theory surround-

ing these concepts. Although many ideas I'm going to reference in this chapter are considered controversial or not as yet completely proven by science, I'd like to promote discussion on these ideas as they impact equine-assisted practices.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE IN EQUINE-ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY AND LEARNING

In his books *Emotional Intelligence* and *Social Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman defines the four core competences for emotional and social intelligence:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Social facility

As you can see from this list and from the preceding discussion of an average series of sessions in EAP/EAL, this is largely what is happening throughout the equine-assisted psychotherapy and learning process. With this in mind, a deeper examination of emotional and social intelligence is in order.

There are multiple resources that discuss the components of emotional intelligence. According to the model first developed by Peter Salovey and John Mayer, emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to utilize this information to guide one's thinking and actions. Another definition states that emotional intelligence is the ability to notice, understand, and draw on our emotions in order to have a range of options and choices in any given moment or interaction. I believe that many client issues have their basis in emotional/social intelligence components.

Next, let's look at each of these competencies in an equine-assisted psychotherapy and learning context. As we discuss what happens in the arena with the horses, I don't mean to suggest these processes—of moving a client through self-awareness to empathy, skill building, and other elements—are one hundred percent linear. We move from where the client is currently into the areas that need attention. An early goal for many clients is present-tense self-awareness, or mindfulness. In fact our first two activities, Observation and Meet and Greet, are key, primarily because of their ability to increase clients' self-awareness.

Throughout this first section on emotional and social intelligence, I'll refer by name and by number to the corresponding *Horse Sense Skill Card* we might utilize when working with a client. You can find a complete list of our Skill Cards, by number, in the Appendix.

Early Client Goals: Building Self-Awareness

The first core competency of emotional intelligence—internal self-awareness—entails being aware of and naming one's own emotions, thoughts, impulses, and physical sensations. It also includes gathering information about internal drivers that may be influencing our behavior and decisions. The capability to pause and ask, "What is motivating me in this moment?" requires the ability to listen without managing, analyzing, or judging ourselves. In other words, internal self-awareness is the ability to read our own emotions and recognize their impact on us.

For many people, reacting without thinking is a prominent default pattern. This is often referred to by mental health professionals as "impulse control." With equine-assisted practice, we help a client examine the available choices between stimulus and response. To paraphrase Viktor Frankl, there is space between stimulus and response, and in that gap is power and freedom. In EAP, we seek to help clients extend the space between stimulus and response, to make a more

informed choice. We want clients to examine the options in front of them and choose the option that will bring them what they seek.

If a client has no awareness of self, they have no options from which to make different choices. The first and greatest opportunity to help them is to become more cognizant of the forces, driving emotions, and concerns motivating their actions. Sometimes self-awareness is overarching and must be brought back into balance, as with a client who virtually cannot move for fear of implications or repercussions from her actions. And sometimes the client has absolutely no awareness of her impact on the world at all. Our focus then becomes how we can help a client to better access self-awareness of the physical body and the physiological reactions to changes. As a starting point, we'll invite him/her to notice where sensations take place in the body, and to draw connections between the body and experiences.

Humans are “pattern animals.” I doubt you woke up this morning thinking about trying out a new, unique and different way to brush your teeth. For the most part, we don't seek out new ways or new patterns of doing things, even when our current patterns may not serve us. What happens in equine-assisted psychotherapy brings these habitual, repeated patterns into focus through the client's interaction with horses. We encourage clients to take time to listen and to notice these patterns, whether they be physical, mental, or emotional. For this reason, our first three Skill Cards are: *Observing my Environment*, *Knowing What My Body Is Telling Me*, and *Paying Attention to My Thoughts*. We encourage clients to disengage from any emotional charge and notice the pattern itself without managing, analyzing, or judging what they are noticing about themselves or the horses. Which door to walk through first—mental, emotional, or physical—will depend on the client. Once the client has a sense of her own pattern, we may move to Skill Card 30: *Learning When Not To Do What You Have Always Done*.

We set up this dynamic very early on for clients through the manner

in which we encourage them to “see” the horses: Skill Card 1: *Observing My Environment*. We spend time inviting the client to share her observations of the physical behavior of the horses rather than asking her interpretation of the horse’s behavior. A client might say, “That horse is angry!” I might respond, “As evidenced by...? What do you see in the horse’s body that tells you she is angry?” Or I might say, “If I were a Martian who just landed on earth here in this arena, what would I see in the horse’s body that would let me know he/she is angry?” Many times, clients can’t articulate what they are seeing or sensing about the horse, or they will point out what they see in the moment, not being sure themselves if that represents “angry” or not. As mentioned in the previous chapter, at this point we’ll invite the client to become a detective during the course of the session or throughout their entire time with us: “See if you can notice what the horse is doing with his body each time you feel or think he might be angry.” We’ve set the client up to be attentive observers, first of the horse, and ultimately of himself/herself.

That doesn’t mean the client’s interpretation isn’t relevant. But first we want to provide an opportunity for the client to “see” the horses, to examine the horse’s body language. After we introduce the idea of “clean viewing”—a phrase which owes its genesis to David Grove, founder of Clean Language—which I define as viewing as free of bias and subjective interpretation as possible, we can then invite the client to examine where she finds evidence of her assumptions. This process starts to disclose how quickly the client moves from seeing a situation to interpreting it. Interpretation can reveal a great deal about the internal state of the client, but the impulse to interpret, regardless of evidence, and the pattern of that impulse, provide a great teachable moment as well. This also creates disengagement from the emotional charge of the observed behavior which, when done first with the horses, allows clients to then better disengage from the emotional charge in their own lives.

All About Horses

Equine-assisted practice is a team effort, but its power comes from one key team member: the horse. It's the horse that drives the client sessions, the horse who possesses the instincts and reactions informing us and the clients, the horse to whom our clients respond.

As we begin talking about the horse, one key idea needs to remain ever-present: “When it comes to the interior life of any other being (including humans)—but particularly beings of another species—there may always be a point beyond which we cannot see or measure or know” (Bekoff, 2008, p. 117). I strive to be clear about my own limitations in understanding horses, knowing that I'm continually bumping up against what I don't know!

PREY ANIMALS

There is one basic concept every Equine Specialist needs to understand about horses: horses are prey animals. Being a prey animal affects everything; it dictates how horses are built, how they learn, how they react to their environment, how they protect and defend themselves, and how they socialize. I repeat this often, in this book and to myself and others, to continue reinforcing this fundamental difference in perspective between humans and horses. Humans are predators, and coming from that predator stance, we often misinterpret horse behavior and actions at the most basic level, and then throw our own anthropomorphism into the mix. No wonder our relationships with horses can become so confused!

It's largely understood that horses survived over time because of their highly-developed sense of perception. They pay constant attention to their environment, acutely attuned to both the physical movement around them and to changes in energy. When they sense change

or incongruency in their environment, horses go on high alert and are ready to react. So sensitive is their perception that an entire herd can spook in an instant, seemingly seconds before an event even occurs. Horses don't stand around questioning when change enters their environment; they react first, and investigate later. The horse tunes into this information because he/she has to—it is pre-programmed, for survival.

It's this prey instinct which is a very valuable tool to us in session. Horses pay attention, not to what's coming out of our mouth, but to what we display in our body and in our energy instead, our paralanguage and body language. As herd animals, horses are constantly sensing the emotional temperature of beings in close contact with them, whether human, horse, or other. They're constantly looking to other members of their herd for a sense of what's going on and what needs to happen next.

The manner of response in today's domesticated horse can differ widely from one horse to the next, depending on his/her Horsenality™ (see Chapters 2 and 3 for more discussion on Horsenality™ and how it impacts sessions and clients). It's the task of the Equine Specialist & equine-assisted professional to interpret this response.

When you consider all the elements at play, the complexities of equine psychology, the complexities of social intelligence and other neurobiological factors, we understand that our job as equine-assisted practitioners is much more involved than we initially thought in the first place. I think it also becomes more apparent that the “normal” or “traditional” horse education most of us bring to the field is not nearly enough; it's not broad enough and sometimes it's not even accurate. It is imperative that we search for ways to expand our understanding of horses and their world.

The most critical role of the Equine Specialist is that of interpreting the horse and understanding his responses to the client in session. By

necessity, this requires a deep understanding of horse psychology, as it manifests in body language and by personality type. Like people, the circumstances of the horse's upbringing, the traumas in his past, and the handling by humans over time integrate with an individual persona unique to each animal.

HORSES HIERARCHY OF NEEDS & OTHER BASICS OF HORSES

Parelli™ Natural Horsemanship tells us the first element in understanding horse psychology comes from understanding the horse's basic hierarchy of needs: Safety, Comfort, Play, and Food, often in that order. While the need for Food and Play might be interchangeable among certain horse personalities, Safety and Comfort are core aspects of the equine mind, central to every horse and how he shows up in the world.

A horse responding to a perceived lack of safety is a horse triggered at the most primal level: survival. A perceived lack of safety causes the horse's rawest, most primitive response—namely flight—often heedless of surroundings or anything in his way, making this potentially the most dangerous horse to have in session. On the other hand, a horse responding to the less intense aspect of the spectrum—the need for Food or Play—triggers a different, sometimes less intense reaction.

Knowing where the horse stands within his hierarchy of needs, both fundamentally and on a situation-by-situation basis, becomes a primary aspect in our assessment of a horse and our response to him. This hierarchy should influence how we proceed from his basic care to his development and/or training, and to his suitability and behavior in client sessions.

The professional Equine Specialist, especially, should understand the implications of the equine's hierarchy of needs as it pertains to client sessions, and recognize when a horse's response and body lan-

guage point to issues of Safety as opposed to Comfort, Food, or Play. The ES needs to know each horse's unique and most probable response as a result of where he might be within the hierarchy of needs at any given moment.

Dr. Robert Miller's book, *Understanding the Ancient Secrets of the Horse's Mind*, is a gold mine for providing many keys to understanding the hierarchy of horses and its implications in our relationship with them. Miller's material is so relevant, in fact, that we'll examine several of the "secrets" to horse psychology as he discusses them:

First among the secrets is the understanding of the concept of flight. The number one, primary response of a prey animal is Flight: run first, ask questions later. If a horse is unable to run, the Flight response can morph into a Fight or Freeze response. A Freeze response is more typical of a donkey or mule, but still a possibility for the average horse. A Fight response is more typical of a highly confident horse, or one who is "backed into a corner," either physically or emotionally/mentally. But, usually, Flight is the more common response.

One of the things that is really helpful and important to know about your horse is the concept called 'the flight line.' A horse, when frightened, is generally going to take off and run. The "flight line" is the relative distance a horse will run before stopping to turn and re-assess the situation. For an Arabian that distance could be several miles, even several hundred miles. The flight line for a common Appaloosa breed might be twenty feet. Horses with longer flight lines have a stronger tendency to flee in the first place.

What's important about the flight line? It's good to have a sense of the flight line for each horse in your herd, and to know that the Appaloosa's twenty-foot flight line indicates just as strong a response as the Arabian's miles. In other words, while we're tempted to think the Appaloosa isn't reacting or responding as strongly because its flight line is appears to be short, it is actually as significant as the hundred-yard

response from another breed. Another “secret” of the horse—response time—amplifies the instinct to flee, in that a fleeing horse rarely moves in a slow or plodding manner but, instead, is responding swiftly.

How are flight and response time important in session? If a horse feels unsafe enough to flee, that’s a significant marker for me and my treatment team member for what’s going on with the client. Flight line is also important for me to know in order to better support the horse in the EAP/EAL process. Subjecting the horse to challenging situations again and again is likely to have some impact on the horses over time. I need to be aware so I can manage this response appropriately, hopefully minimizing the impact on the horses or figuring out another way to reach similar ends. As an Equine Specialist, I also need to be aware of flight and response time to maintain safety for the client and facilitators as well.

Horses possess an acute sense of perception. Horses are perceptive to everything in their environment: people, places, changes, and things. They read all the nuances; they’re reading what’s different in comparison to what was there before. They look for patterns and any divergence from the pattern. This aspect of horses becomes incredibly helpful in session; we can draw a deep understanding of a situation by utilizing the horse’s heightened perceptions to his/her surroundings, including changes in the client from one session to another, or within a session. In short, the horse can offer up information we fail to see or sense.

How horses learn is another “secret” that impacts our work in EAP/EAL. Horses are a precocial species; they are mature and mobile, full-faculty learners at birth. Prey animals have to be precocial learners to react and respond to danger from the moment they are born. Horses learn seven to ten times faster than people do, with the ability for rapid desensitization and acclimatization. Horses excel at learning via repetition. Repeat something three times and it becomes a pattern;

The Equine-Assisted Horse Professional

At this point, we've come to a much deeper understanding about the horse and his/her role within the equine-assisted profession. This chapter brings us to the second part of our equine-assisted equation: the Equine Specialist. With this enhanced understanding of our equine partners, what goals should we strive towards as professionals? As a collective group of professionals, where do we stand today? Where do we need to go as a profession?

This chapter is organized by survey and interview topics, centering around the role of the Equine Specialist. I'll share my experience and point of view on each topic, then review results from the surveys, one-on-one interviews, and conference audience feedback in each of those areas. It's my hope the research and the studies conducted for this chapter help illustrate where today's Equine Specialist stands within the profession, and where we need to go from here.

My questions regarding the Equine Specialist included: How would we describe the current average equine-assisted professional today? What is the self-perceived skill level prior to coming into the field? Are there any theoretical underpinnings that unite us as a group, in terms of horsemanship? Are we all life-long backyard horsepeople? What do the actual numbers look like, in that regard? I wanted to get a better view of the Equine Specialist "forest," rather than of the "trees."

Similarly, I was curious about the role Equine Specialists play once they are working in the field. How many are backyard practitioners? How many are making a living at this profession, or even getting paid? What kinds of certifications do we, as a group, tend to have? And what do we perceive our role to be, both in and out of session? Finally, where are the common challenges and continuing education opportunities for us?

Today's Equine Specialist, Prior to Entering Field *Survey Results*

Over 90 percent of the Equine Specialists/horse professionals surveyed are between 30-70 years of age, with over 50 percent being between 51-70 years old; over 95 percent are female. Around 30 percent of all respondents identify as coming from a competitive horse background, predominantly involved in dressage and jumping. More than 50 percent of all respondents identify as English riders; about 30 percent identify as Western, and the remainder identify as “neither/nothing” or as “other.”

Over 40 percent of EAGALA Equine Specialists surveyed consider themselves “Advanced” horsepeople when they began in the field; 35 percent reported “Intermediate,” and 10 percent selected “Novice.” The remainder identify themselves as “Expert.” On the PATH side, 14 percent feel they are “Experts” while 33 percent feel they are “Advanced.” Just over 29 percent of PATH respondents consider themselves “Intermediate” and 22 percent classify themselves as “Beginners/Novices.”

In regards to how long they have owned horses, EAGALA respondents indicate that 42 percent have owned horses for over 20 years and 18 percent have owned horses 11-15 years. About 33 percent of total respondents are lifelong horse owners, caring for horses in their own backyard. The next largest group, 26 percent, have come back into horses later in life after having been involved as kids. Interestingly, 18 percent were not into horses at all in their youth, but came into it later in life and now have backyard horses. Just over 33 percent of respondents have been involved in the horse world for more than 20 years (without having any personal horses).

For PATH respondents, 45 percent are 20+ year horse owners, 14 percent are owners of 11-15 years, and 12 percent are owners of 6-10 years. Equal in measurement are those who consider themselves “lifelong horse owners” (32 percent) along with those who “got into horses later in life” (32 percent), a much larger number than for EAGALA.

Overall, the profiles of the Equine Specialists coming in via EAGALA or PATH are quite similar.

When asked how many years they had worked with horses before working as an Equine Specialist, both EAGALA and PATH responses were similar in that there was very little middle ground: 29 percent reported they had worked with horses less than 5 years, and the same number (29 percent) reported working with horses more than 20 years, the two largest groupings in the survey.

When asked if they subscribed to a particular school of horsemanship, 36 percent of EAGALA respondents primarily identify with Parelli™, a result no doubt skewed by the *Horse Sense* mailing list, which includes a large number of Parelli™ practitioners. John Lyons and Ray Hunt were next in order; 30 percent of respondents chose “Other” in the survey, and selected from a miscellaneous host of names. Practitioners which could be chosen on the survey included: Tom Dorrance, Bill Dorrance, Ray Hunt, Richard Shrake, Sally Swift, Carolyn Resnick, Pat Parelli, Mark Rashid, John Lyons, Clinton Anderson, Buck Brannaman and Klaus Hempfling. A similar dynamic was present with PATH practitioners; a very large number chose “Other” as their response, with no clear leader in the subsequent identifying field.

Today’s Equine Specialist, Specific to the Field Survey Results

Of all the 250 or so respondents, about half identify themselves as practicing EAGALA EAP/EAL, while the other half are PATH practitioners. When asked how long they have been doing equine-assisted work, almost 50 percent of EAGALA practitioners have 2-5 years of experience, 33 percent have less than one year experience, while only 15 percent have experience of six years or more. For PATH practitioners, 38 percent reported 2-5 years of experience, 19 percent have less than 1 year of experience, while 19 percent have six years or more.

Practitioners with 2-5 years in the field appears to be the largest group, regardless of organization.

The large percentages (33 percent for EAGALA and 19 percent for PATH) of those working less than a year in equine-assisted practice speaks to a significant period in the evolution of our field. When you combine high percentages of inexperienced horse people with large numbers of relatively inexperienced practitioners, it's reasonably easy to assume a high variability in the quality of service we provide, and my experience and the experience of the interviewees for the book bears this out.

Are Equine Specialists getting paid to do this work? A large number—well over half—indicated yes, although an exceedingly small number are doing this as their sole source of income (less than 10 percent). Only 15 percent of the EAGALA folks who answered are not seeing clients, while 32 percent of the PATH respondents are not actively seeing clients at the time of the survey.

How does today's Equine Specialist practice? The choices available for this question included:

- a.) My horse, my farm. Sessions happen where I live
- b.) Predominantly with one therapist at his/her farm/barn
- c.) Predominantly with one therapist at a barn where we rent space and horses
- d.) Equine Specialist for hire...I go to multiple programs and serve as ES
- e.) Other

For EAGALA, 55 percent answered that they are offering services on their own farm, presumably with their horses. After that, 34 percent did not respond to any categories (Other), but largely listed things like work at a facility with horses that offered the service, like a non-profit or residential program. The next largest category (24 percent) work primarily with one mental health professional, and rent facility & horses

from another barn. For PATH respondents, 36 percent live and work onsite, as in response “a” above. Over 42 percent work at a non-profit, and 55 percent listed Other. The take-home message from all this, about the Equine Specialist and the way we are currently practicing EAP? Although a large number of practitioners are practicing in their own backyards, there are as many if not a few more that are practicing in a variety of ways.

A Few Thoughts on Equine Specialists, in General

In my experience, perhaps the most dominant characteristic of the average horse professional coming into this field is a lack of information, or the right kind of information. This leads to a whole host of other problems, including a) not being able to recognize what’s happening in session, b) not “maximizing the power of the horse,” as Patti and Randy Mandrell call it, c) not being able to communicate with their co-facilitator effectively (if they are working with a co-facilitator) and d) not being able to translate their awareness cleanly.

Many people who are interested in pursuing work in this field enter without either the necessary mental health degrees to work as therapists or the skills to be an Equine Specialist. For many, the Equine Specialist/horsemanship route appears (and is) the easier, faster point of entry. The horsemanship side is broad in terms of credentials, and relies on self-assessment, whereas there’s a strict set of skills and credentials necessary to qualify as a mental health professional. Because the bar is lower, many come into the work as an Equine Specialist.

Even amongst “horse people,” some enter the field with no formal education or a less-than-applicable education. She could be a lifelong trail-rider, or be showing horses at high levels and still have very little understanding of horse behavior, psychology, and body language. Or she could be a lifelong student of the horse, with a deep understanding of herd dynamics and nonverbal behavior. The playing field is so