THOUGHTS ON HOW OUR ENERGY AFFECTS THE WAY HORSES LEARN AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP & TRAINING

*From my up-coming book ‘How to Create Real Heart Connection with Horses’*

From an empathic and energy psychology point of view when people talk about methods of learning for the horse they tend to forget building relationship first is so important and are swept instead straight into training mode which tends to have connotations of dominance, human superiority as a given, and with the horse needing correction of some sort. This is only one point of view but one that we have bought into over millennia. It’s not the reality the horse knows either. There’s a quote from a study of dolphins which I use on my testimonials page to illustrate this point.

*"I came to the realization," says Spong, (Dr Paul Spong) "that at the same time I was manipulating their (orca) behaviour, they were manipulating my behaviour. At the same time I was studying them and performing experiments on them, they were studying me and performing experiments on me."*

An amusing but sobering thought as this can be just as easily applied to horses and anyone who has had ponies will know that this is especially true with these highly intelligent and witty little equines.

When we have relationship i.e. connection and rapport, agreeing to trade ideas with common ground and mutual respect, regardless of species, then training becomes easy. Any conscious tutor or parent will know this and horses do too. They are sentient beyond our general awareness so to think of them learning only in mechanical universe terms using brain alone, is at odds with their innate nature which is highly energetic in the main. The work of Dr Bruce Lipton makes it perfectly clear that we get out information from the environment through the cell wall and that the way we process and react to this information relays all round our bodies.

Horses think and translate our actions and requests into pictures when you prod one end and expect it to move then the rest will do anything to stay in balance but if you give the horse the entire picture you’ll get the entire picture in return. Pictures are the language of the heart and when you operate from the heart with horses, or humans for that matter, the rapport and understanding is far deeper than just through the logical mind and individual blatant body signals. Before a horse responds to our body language he’s reading the energetic signature of our intent and that’s something we can’t hide. Tension in that ‘ask’ is loading the energy with negative reinforcement before we’ve even had time to think about it or what we might be doing and the effect it has on the horse.

This is a huge subject but in short, negative emotion is a disruption in the body’s energy field and when we’re stressed the horse tends to know far more about it than we do. We think we’re giving a simple signal but we’ve virtually thrown a pantomime at the horse if we’re struggling with anger, frustration or fear.

Example: when teaching shoulder in on the ground from the front you automatically have a confrontational picture which the horse has to get over before he can relax and give you the heart of the idea. Fine tuning then is easy and the horse knows you’re accepting his offering rather than banging your own on the table. People often say that my horse learns quickly and I put it down to this approach. When I first started with her I hadn’t come this far and being steeped in classical dressage from my youth I asked in the way I had always asked and got an explosion of indignation from this very intelligent soul. It was her flatly refusing to do anything at the start that involved a lateral movement that made me think again as to how to ask. There were no physical problems other than a general tension which welled up when we were in the school. She was watching me and training me to ask more politely. While I thought I was the teacher the boot was on the other hoof so to speak.

So I owe all of this learning to this lovely mare who had chosen me as her student. A painful process at times but exquisitely rewarding at others when I gave her credence for her apparent stubbornness and asked myself – how can I put this differently? How can I make this idea more attractive and why exactly doesn’t she care for my approach, I began a life journey no person could teach me. Yes, horses do bite and kick each other and roll in mud and eat thistles, chew wood etc. but there’s another dimension to them waiting for us to explore now.

Any resistance from the horse is usually founded primarily in relationship, or rather the lack of. Whether it’s manifested as physical or emotional or a combination of both it’s usually as a result of some gap in translation and therefore a gap in understanding and quality of relationship between horse and human. For example a horse with a stiff high head carriage when ridden is either being pinched at the withers or is alert to something predatory in the distance or even both. He’s also listening very hard with anxiety to whoever and whatever is behind him which makes sense.

With no disrespect to any empirical studies and good people doing good work but we do need to take a long hard look at how we regard the horse in our modern world and what the hangover is from an era when they were just a means of transport or haulage - let alone supper. There will be a time when we see this more clearly and releasing the need to dominate will help the walls of our tunnel vision to dissolve. After all we now look back on slavery with horror whereas it was acceptable in earlier times at least for some members of so called civilization.

Perhaps a look at how we teach children, or adults for that matter, will help. With humans we aim to create a safe and supportive space and make sure our student is comfortable. We wouldn’t dream of using any sort of bondage to achieve this. We aim to interest our pupil, to inspire, to illustrate with imagination and above all to make our subject matter relevant and worth noting rather than something to learn in order to avoid any fear or pain we choose to feel we have the right to inflict. We enjoy being challenged to find new and exciting ways to impart our lesson if our initial plan isn’t the one that brings clarity to the student. We may use some of these ideas to train our household pets too but when it comes to horses bonding almost always starts with some sort of bondage we’d never use on a dog although the dog is a predator by nature and the horse a gentle herbivore.

So my point is that if you want an equine friend then don’t drill them. Learning by drilling goes into the cellular level as an ‘or else’ lesson, dulling the brain to retreat from thinking for itself, which in turn produces a negative fear based energy and eventual apathy and depression. It produces ‘indians’ as opposed to ‘chiefs’ and no creature can be both at the same time.

We, as living organisms, are constantly either in plus or minus cell states and in the plus state we’re in growth and blossom while in the minus or negative state we’re in protection or fear which doesn’t allow growth. It’s one or the other at any given time. This is born out with the study of how disease is triggered by emotions and it’s a very precise science. A simple blanket example is lower back pain. Whether in humans or horses relates in general to self-evaluation and if this is negative, perhaps from outside source feedback that we buy into, then pain will occur. How many horses have ‘a back person’ in attendance (if they’re lucky) and that’s not just the effect of inappropriate saddling although almost always a major contributing factor which in turn relates to relationship and being heard and sufficiently nurtured. We do this to horses when we put this herd animal into solitary confinement. It’s significant to horses and either convenient or inconvenient to us. The significant negative emotional conflict sets up an organ-brain-environmental relay which may be triggered at the optimum time. I won’t go further into this now but if this subject interests you there are a couple of great books on how this works in humans to study. One being ‘Why Am I Sick?’ by Richard Flook who I trained in Metamedicine (now also called Meta Health) with. Personally I have witnessed the same effects with horses and to some extent other animals and not just with back pain.

So instead of thinking training - play give and take games, gain respect by being aware of as much as your horse is (this is an almost impossible feat by the way as horses have multi-dimensional awareness through their physical and energetic bodies way beyond what we consciously recognise as ours - but a good exercise to practice nonetheless and the ones in this book will certainly help), be pleasingly surprising, think in terms of gratitude not punishment or reinforcement – open your heart and have some fun. This has a totally different energy signature which the horse reads, understands and greatly prefers; and before you say that’s positive reinforcement at play, I will say that when we do this with absolutely no agenda then the only reinforcement is that the horse can still be a horse and not an automaton to our button pressing.

The other point to bear in mind is that communication is just that and it’s not control. Occasionally when I’m called to communicate with a horse in person the human wants me to make the horse ‘do’ something. When I explain that communication is not control but with relationship in place we can use invitation their whole outlook and connection changes and for the better. I never get involved in training nowadays unless there is relationship in place.

Here’s a short story to illustrate this point. I recently went to see a horse whose owner was concerned that he never seemed to relax and was constantly ill at ease, and indeed studying him at liberty in his own arena this was very evident. His human and I sat on a pallet in the middle of the school while I explained that we were just going to ‘invite’ him, to ‘relax’ from a distance with no body language or signalling a request of any sort. After a moment or two he sat down like a fawn in the wood, calmly attentive, with his legs tucked under him and remained motionless until we had finished our exercise, some ten minutes later, then he got up and came over to us voluntarily.

It was a beautiful space of time that we shared but there was no instruction to the horse, merely an invitation to let go of his tension in our presence. We then were able to play at liberty and ask him to partake in a few little games. This sweet horse revelled in picking things up and even managed to put on a hoola-hoop that happened to be lying on the ground. It’s not the first time this sort of thing has happened during a session and I honour the trust and joy these horses display when it does occur. We’re all being called to recognise a different level of awareness and I welcome everyone on this path and feel proud to assist in creating greater connection between them and their horses.

*‘How to Create Real Heart Connection with Horses’ © Safaya Salter 2014*