

"IKNIGTDVD"

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"I know natural, I've got the DVD". Yep, someone actually said that to me once. And they meant it. It was not a joke. This 'someone' had a horse who would not step over a timber sleeper garden border, let alone walk into a big open carport out of the rain. "Yeah, right", I thought as I mused at the only two positive words in the English language that put together make a 'negative'.

The word 'natural' is coming under a bit of pressure and scrutiny lately when it relates to horses and horsemanship and I believe this a healthy thing. Instead of sitting up on our 'high (natural) horse' looking smugly down our noses at the others, we can invest a little time looking introspectively or refelectingly at what, how and why we do what we do.

Well known horseman, Monty Roberts recently wrote on using the term 'natural horsemanship' in one of his email bulletins. He takes slight issue with the word 'natural' and writes *"On the subject of natural horsemanship (NH) let me be crystal clear that I have no problem with anyone using the words natural horsemanship to describe how they work with horses. It seems a very nice title, and I feel that it implies that a main set of procedures are employed to complete a task. Those who would suggest that their system is natural horsemanship are slightly mislead, however, if they believe that modern-day horsemanship is natural in any way. With this in mind, it seems that the global horse community has become slightly confused about what is natural horsemanship and what is not natural horsemanship"*.

He has a point. Monty's feelings on the use of the word 'natural' relating to 'horsemanship' are echoed by many other teachers in this line of training today. It is an interesting development. It could be called evolvement and is symptomatic, or dare I say it, natural, with just what the 'natural horsemanship' movement is all about. When it became all the rage in the eighties (last century), it was not a new concept, it was just popularised. Doing things gently and gaining the co-operation of the horse has been done for a long time. It just wasn't very common.

Comparing the approach Pat Parelli publicly took back in the eighties when handling horses, to what he does now, clearly shows evolution. Doing less and achieving more is the key for Pat and any other 'enlightened' horse person. The term 'natural horsemanship' was a great delineator, a great slogan and a great marketing tool for this way of dealing with horses as compared to more traditional and often harsh ways. Despite the clear similarities and the obvious influence Parelli has had on the horsemanship world, many teachers and disciples today wish to distance themselves from the influence and 'savvy' made so popular by this entertaining cowboy. There seems to be little recognition by some people of the huge impact Parelli and others had back then and still have today. Or maybe it's just sour grapes.

Perhaps the popularisation of this way of doing things with horses was a classic example of an idea whose time had come. It was embraced by many, on several continents all around the world, at about the same time. It is only ego and competitiveness that drives people to declare "I did it first", or "my way is best", or being pedantic about what words to use or what tools to use. The horse doesn't care (and for that matter, neither do I) because nowadays the horse is generally much better off.

Even though there are cases of 'bad natural horsemanship' as well as people in yards and round pens still beating up on horses and dominating them and pulling their ears and whipping them and kicking them calling themselves 'horsemen', there are many hundreds of thousands of cases of 'good natural horsemanship'. There are more and more people today treating horses with understanding, dignity and respect. They too call themselves horsemen and horsewomen. These days many horsemanship teachers have dropped the use of the word 'natural'. Most of them talk about 'good or bad horsemanship' and generally teach that there is not much natural about what we do with horses. But does it really matter what it is called? We can discuss just what *is* natural later in this article.

I tend to agree that technically, the word 'natural' is inconsistent with the word 'horsemanship'. But if I say I do "horsemanship", it sounds quite awkward. It doesn't mean much. If I say I do "natural horsemanship", people usually know that I have a softer, gentler and nicer way of being with a horse. "Are you a horse whisperer?" they often ask, to which I reply, "No, I am a horse listener". They may not really understand what it is that I do but they get the drift. Calling it 'good or bad horsemanship' is even more awkward and is probably a bit judgemental.

"A horse, in nature, would never allow another species to ride on its back", says Monty. Well if we are going to get picky, why then am I discovering bird poo on my horses' backs sometimes? Let's not get too caught up in absolutes here – because as soon as we do; as soon as things are perceived as black and white, there is often an example or situation that breaks the rules. A lot of things happen in nature that defy logic; magic, extraordinary and bizarre things. Just have a look at some of the stuff on You-Tube. It all gets back to just what *is* 'natural' and who is doing the defining.

Humans climb on the backs of all sorts of critters: from dolphins to donkeys; from camels to dogs; from elephants to cows and of course, horses. Granted most of these passenger carrying animals are trained to take us for a ride, but some aren't. And if it wasn't to be 'on', it wouldn't be. Conversely I have seen birds, wild and domestic, perched on human shoulders, dogs strapped to pilots of hang gliders, snake necklaces, cats in laps and guinea pigs up jumper sleeves. What makes a dog enthusiastically jump up into the arms of its human, time and time again? (And one day while I was in the garden I watched fascinated as a Crimson Rosella flew straight towards me, towards my face and promptly parked on my head. He checked out my thin spot, surveyed the view and after about ten seconds, left - left me dumbfounded and thrilled). Natural animal behaviour? Dunno, but they seem to enjoy it - even the flying dog!

Perhaps it *is* natural for cross species interaction, play and sharing? Maybe we are limiting our understanding and our experiences when we get locked into linear thinking. Could it be that there is some magic in the world after all and that we humans in our efforts to conquer nature and make it 'serve us' have totally missed the point - of nature. Remove the 'A' and replace it with a 'U' and we almost end up with 'nurture'. If we nurture nature and learn how to get along with it and play with it and respect it and reconnect with it, then a lot of our human suffering may just vaporise into the atmosphere. Thankfully it has been proven that this will not increase greenhouse gasses though.

Look at what happens when we nurture and learn to 'get along' with our horses. Look at what happens when we begin to use their language to communicate with them or even the universal intuitive way of communicating with them. The horse doesn't care whether we call it natural, unnatural, good or bad. He doesn't care who claims to be the best, who invented it, whose making the most money out of

it or who has the most 'followers'. No, the horse doesn't care how much you know about all this at all. He's much more interested in how much you care - about him.