

Language Learning

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Some of you reading this may recall your early days with horses. For many of us it was a real challenge. It was like trying to have a conversation with an alien - a four to six hundred kilogram alien who could spook, kick, bite and go off like a bomb. Those 'early day horses' were made of very scary stuff indeed.

That we came from this place of little or no knowledge, meagre understanding, scant meaningful communication and progressed through to a place where we can almost sing and dance with horses (all right then, forget the singing bit) is pretty amazing - for both horse and human. It never ceases to amaze me; and I am on that journey, loving it and leaning how to dance. Not the male pony dance either, I might add.

The challenge with being new to horses and having a real drive and passion for getting good with them is similar to learning a new language; only I feel it is more critical to get it right with horses. The first step is a need or desire to learn, then a few simple words are learnt and remembered; then a few more, and a few more. Once a small collection of words are locked away in the memory, we might try to string a few of them together. "The cat is black", *de katz ist schwarz*, or, *el gato negro*. Not really a conversation piece but a starting block or a foundation; like learning how to put a halter on a quiet horse.

As the learner progresses and increases the number of words and the number of sentences learned, remembered *and* understood, then a paragraph may be strung together, much to the enthusiastic amusement and supportive encouragement of the subject, teacher or 'victim'. In the case of learning 'horse'; when horses get it that you have 'got it' sometimes they give you a look. People who have had that 'look' from a horse will know exactly what I mean. But all this takes time, much study, constant practice and focussed concentration. It's pretty hard yakka. Learning 'horse' is just the same as learning Hungarian, apart from the aforementioned fact that horses are big and scary. Although I am led to believe some Hungarians are too.

It's not so much that this learning horse language is difficult, it is just new, challenging and requires focus and dedication - as well as desire and a particular type of hunger for learning something different.

Then one day you feel confident enough and your horse understands and trusts you enough for you to put the halter on her while you are kneeling beside her front left leg. All those little 'particles' of knowledge you have acquired have come together and you are able to communicate really well with your horse. She stands still and drops her head and waits for you to do what you'd like to do. This is good! You feel proud of her and proud of yourself for stepping up, for trusting and for teaching her to understand what it is that you'd like to do.

'Horse' is just another language. It is simply another language embedded in another 'culture', that being the species *Equus*. Imagine telling a story in Swahili or having a conversation in Greek or ordering lunch in Polish or courting an Amazonian rainforest dweller and being completely understood. Imagine having an in depth conversation with a horse and the horse tells you their inner thoughts and secrets and you tell him yours. Imagine the horse understanding exactly what you wish to do this afternoon with her because you have first told her, then shown her and she has given you her two bobs' worth, told you how she feels about it and even suggests better ways to achieve what you had planned! How

good would that be? It's effective communication at work; two-way communication involving talking as well as listening. How good? As good as you'd want to make it, I'd say.

I am also in awe of visitors who come here, to my horse paddock, from European countries. They are generally young backpackers from countries like Germany, France, Sweden, Holland and other EU nations. Their English is fantastic. Many of them express themselves better with English than many young Aussies I know whose mother language is Aussie English. Another amazing thing with these young Europeans is the ability to speak three or four languages quite fluently - and they want to learn to speak with horses too. This week I have had two Germans here to help me with farm work and to play with horses. To them, German horses were 'big and scary', however these girls thought the horses here were friendly, nice, curious and willing.

So we tried an experiment.

Based on my belief that horses (and all living creatures) can read our minds, (and we theirs too, for that matter) I asked Katherine to stop nattering to a young standardbred gelding, called Murphy, in English and start 'thinking' to him in German. I also suggested to her to 'listen' to what Murphy had to say back to her - and maybe it would be in German as well. Initially it was a lesson on how to confuse a young German girl. The thoughts came in thick and fast and to her not many of them made too much sense. But she very quickly learned to filter all the background noise and the static and listen clearly.

Then she said "He wants to come with us". "In German or English?" I asked. "In German", she said, totally amazed at what had just happened. "Good" I thought. "It works". We then proceeded to the round yard (or 'play pen' as I like to call it) to further surprise and fascinate these young budding horse listeners.

The horses for this exercise, Will, Katie and Murphy, are all pretty good at this language and communication stuff. Willoughby taught me, in a peak defining moment, that he knows what I know when I know it. He knows my thoughts. And a few years back Katie taught me that we *can* communicate without waving fingers, sticks and ropes. Using body language with Katie is seen by her as a pretty crude way of getting a message across. She still responds to it but is really much more dignified than that. She 'knows'. But the really nice thing is that she does put up with it when that is what is presented to her. She doesn't put up with crap though and neither does she tolerate less than honest people, or people who are not trying. Murphy, on the other hoof, was raised by a lovely caring human after his mother died giving birth to him - so of course he understands and communicates well with humans and would rather hang out with us than eat grass sometimes. A more willing and gentle horse would be hard to find.

Once the girls learned clear body language and became aware of how their feet and their arms and their ropes and their belly buttons were placed and where their thoughts were, and their eyes, and what they had planned for the exercise (quite a bit of choreography when one thinks about it) it eventually all came together. Imagine a person with the desire to play with horses; who thinks that they are big and scary but the desire overcomes this; who can get a horse to circle around them at a walk, or a trot, and then come into them when they ask. To some horsepeople this is just 'circle game'. To both these girls, this was pure and amazing magic. Then they both achieved with their chosen horses the 'standing up on the stump' game and finished with a couple of Frisbees in the sand with the chosen hoof firmly placed and kept on the Frisbee. This last 'game'

was the best! It was proof enough for them that if the focus was on the horse placing a particular hoof on the Frisbee and giving them that message and helping the horse (and maintaining focus) to do it, then maybe this level of communication can and does really work. I reckon it does and it's all about learning the language with which to effectively communicate with the horse.

So how does one really learn this language – this way of communicating directly with our horse's mind? Perhaps to answer that we could consider my understanding of the story of how one true master became enlightened.

Firstly he wanted to become enlightened, so he began his journey of learning. He gave up his 'normal' life and replaced comfort and riches with all sorts of physical and mental trainings and disciplinary hardships. He studied with many masters and did as they told him. After years of this, still no bananas. He was thin and tired and hungry. So he decided to sit under a tree and do nothing until he 'became' enlightened.

Suddenly after some time doing nothing; no meditations, no fasting, no nothing apart from just sitting there, Buddha sat up and declared "I am enlightened". And to those who sought his secret of becoming enlightened, he stated, "There is nothing you have to do or be or have - just decide that you are – and you are".

If you decide you are going to be a great person with horses, just that decision is the starting block. Position yourself in that starting block and be ready for the learning and the experiencing and the successes and the other things (some people call them failures – I call them great opportunities to learn). And then 'Go for it!' Seek your goal, be better today than you were yesterday and be fantastic tomorrow. Do what it takes and enjoy the experience. Both your horse and you have nothing to lose and everything to gain. It is that good.