

Shouts and Whispers

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"You can't train a horse with shouts and expect it to obey a whisper".

This little gem came to me at a most unlikely time in a most unusual place.

The Scene: A busy, bustling Malaysian Restaurant in suburban Sydney - Sunday night dinner - (a long way away from my horse herd) - a great meal that finished with a fortune cookie each. And mine contained the above quote. "The universe at work again," I mused.

Whether or not this saying is Chinese, Malaysian, Tibetan or universal, it is so obvious to me. And I would like to think it is obvious to everyone who comes within twenty metres of a horse. Sadly this is not the case though.

To 'shout' at a horse in the context of this story includes such human behaviour as shouting, growling, strong eyeing a horse, ear twitching, nose twitching, neck skin twitching, hitting, slapping, patting, aggressive body language and the doozie of them all - growling at a horse to "STAND UP" - which would have to be the most useless, silliest, least effective and dumbest thing for a human to say to a horse - unless of course, the horse is sitting down. In the same class is the widely used "AARRRT".

I have never yet seen a horse who has been told to "stand up" or who has been told "aarrt" stop fidgeting and settle down and get on with the job at hand. Ineffective communication at its best, as are the others on the list above. You may have some more to add to this list too. I hope you don't use them but have just observed them being 'shouted' at a horse that doesn't understand what the human wants.

Just this past week I spent a day with a horse specialist veterinarian doing the rounds of a few thoroughbred studs. On such an occasion it is hard to not compare. To compare the life that these 'elite' horses live and the life my herd lives. Some of these horses were supposedly worth a lot of money (and with the vet bills, I can see why). But their living conditions, their general health and their demeanour gave me the impression that their needs as horses were not being very well catered for. To top that off these horses are/were regularly shouted at!

I am sad that this type of human behaviour goes on day after day and creates problems in horses such as being head shy, not trusting humans, exhibiting over-sensitivity, kicking, or just shutting down/turning off or tuning out. And the thoroughbred is widely known for being a 'scatty' horse. Is it any wonder why?

(Another side bar story)

Neck skin twitching. An observation. I was asked by the vet to twitch the neck skin of a horse he was administering a medicinal dose with a nose tube. So I did but very gently. I also used my breathing and my thoughts to get the horse to calm down and to accept this rather invasive procedure. Job done and I got to thinking "just what is the logic behind this sort of treatment?" Well today I got the answer. I served brunch to the herd (a weekly or so concoction of minerals, herbs, apple cider vinegar and mixed chaff) and sat back and watched.

Ben, the old fellow, asserted himself over one of the young ones who wanted to share his feed bowl. He did this by grabbing the young horse in a neck skin twitch (firmly but not aggressively) with his teeth. And the young one moved

away very quickly. So a horse uses a neck skin twitch to get another to move out of his/her space and humans use the same technique to try and get a horse to settle down. Weird eh? And horses will scratch and groom another's neck as a sign of affection in mutual or solo grooming. Would it work to calm a horse down by rubbing its neck? It does for most of the horses I know.

It is now well understood that aggression and violence often comes from those without the knowledge and skills to deal with the situation at hand. Just look at the current war in Iraq or observe a good old-fashioned pub fight. The perpetrators of aggression and violence are good at instilling fear and using intimidation too. Gee, one would have thought that people with a lifetime of horse handling experience *would* have the skills to effectively communicate with a horse and to clearly read the horse and know generally what it is thinking about the moment that is being experienced. But sadly, the reality is a lot different. Some of these people talk the talk but stumble when it comes to the walking bit. Oh they can justify all sorts of things whilst standing on the outside of the yards having a yarn and a smoke, but the truth really comes out when they are in the yards handling the horses. I guess these are 'normal' horse people doing 'normal' horse handling and producing 'normal' horses. (I am also including a lot of veterinarians in the 'normal' category too).

It's not something *I* aspire to.

However these people often quickly dismiss other approaches to teaching and communicating with horses. The type of communicating that creates willing, curious, playful, brave, loyal, approachable, fun horses. They brush aside 'that horse whispering' stuff as if it is irrelevant or some sacrilegious voodoo stuff. Ahh. "If only" we dream. If only these people could open up and consider that there may just be another way that produces better results. You and I know there is another way and if only we could get the rest of the world to 'listen up'. What a nice place it would be for horses then.

It is hard for me to empathise with what these 'industry' horses represent and what role they play in the world of horse racing or the high level dressage, showing or eventing and even endurance sports. In these disciplines, the horse is 'made' to do things and live in conditions that given a choice, they would not. But the human wants to win a million bucks, a high level competition, a lucrative sponsorship deal, a place in the state, national or Olympic team or just another ribbon to add to the collection. And horses are the vehicles for this desire to 'win'. And in this level of horse endeavour it seems that more 'shouting' is required to get the horse to 'perform'.

In another sad case of 'shouting' at a horse, an email forwarded to me recently outlined what I consider to be a gross insensitivity to the needs of a horse. I have edited out the detail to protect certain parties –

"She was floated about 3 weeks ago to XXXX for the XXX Equestrian Games. Whilst at the Equestrian grounds she developed colic symptoms and was taken to a vet who stomach drenched her with (I think) linseed oil and about 20L electrolytes. She showed signs of improvement and competed in some events. She was floated 3 hours home two days later. The owner felt that the mare may have been poisoned and queried the Event organisers re: ground spraying for weed control. Organisers said no spraying took place prior to the Equestrian Games.

Within a couple of days she showed signs of lameness so the owner rested her and put the lameness down to the trip. A vet was called early this week as her

lameness appeared to be getting worse. The vet did the pincer test on both front feet (OUCH!! – my comment) and told the owner the mare was suffering laminitis and she would need to consider putting her down”.

Anyone spot the problems here?

Horse and owner go off to competition. Horse has a bad journey or doesn't like competitions. Horse has no say in either. Owner wants to compete. Horse gets colic and is treated. Owner still wants to compete and does (with a gutful of linseed oil and electrolyte). Horse has no say. (Isn't colic in horses serious?) Horse is finally taken home (another stressful float trip on an already compromised horse) and develops severe laminitis. (Laminitis is caused by a number of causes. Roughly only 50% of laminitis is related to feed and around 30% of laminitis is caused by medical intervention with a small percentage of laminitis cases being caused by stress and/or colic). Vet is called in and suggests the horse be put down.

Now *I* feel like shouting.

Oh oh. Here's Glenn getting agitated again. If the truth be known, I'm not so much agitated but more disappointed. I'm disappointed that many humans who have the care of horses just don't get it. They don't get the fact that caging horses, handling horses roughly, shouting at horses, not allowing the horse to be a horse produces just mere shadows of what a horse can be and what a horse can do.

It's not all doom and gloom though because there are a number of horse people who do 'get it', who are doing it, who do feel it and who are sharing it with their horses. I believe the reasons these people have a horse are as many and varied as the horses themselves. However there is a common thread. There is a general healthy level of understanding in these horse/ human partnerships, and more often than not there is a happy horse and a happy, more satisfied human. The human's satisfaction often comes not from the fact that they are a great horseperson but from the realisation that they are on a pathway that feels right. A pathway that allows them to learn about just what the horse is, just what makes him tick and what makes him tock; and about which buttons to push, how hard (or soft), when and why, as well as which ones to leave alone. This pathway is one of learning and discovery and not just about the horse.

Of course that is good for humans as well as horses. So there is hope. There is light at the end of the tunnel. But there is work to do and there is change needed.

So why does the situation exist whereby you and I can see the problem (and the solution) but many others can't? What can be done about this less than satisfactory situation? What can be done about this 'shouting'; this less than polite and largely coarse way of communicating with horses?

Where to start?

I feel it is as simple as meeting the horse's needs.

You and I are probably doing something already. We are giving our horses natural living as well as we can. But can we do better? We make sure the horse is sound before we 'do' stuff with him/her. We regularly maintain the bits that

need regular maintenance, like teeth, hooves, eyes, bellies etc. We ensure there is adequate feed of the 'right' type to ensure the horse is well fed and that the feed contains, in the correct amounts, the minerals, vitamins, trace elements, carbs and proteins (and we serve dinner at ground level). We make sure their water supply is fresh and abundant with even a dam to swim in or soak hooves in during the dry or summer. We make sure they have horse company and are given the room to move around and express themselves in and can play with each other and get away from one another when they need to. We provide natural shelter from the sun and the wind and the heat and the cold (natural shelter doesn't include rugs!) And we make sure they are not too bored. Don't we?

Compare this above scenario with the photo. (Picture of TB horses at a racing industry trainer's establishment)

If I were a horse, which life would I choose? If you were a horse which life would you choose? It's a no-brainer really; unless you have a masochistic tendency, that is.

Is it our role to try and 'change the world'? I really like the saying "be the change you wish to see in the world". And that's about all one can do. I doubt that those with interests in the racing industry are about to liberate the horse and no amount of screaming, lobbying or protesting by the horse liberationists will effect a change (then maybe it will – thoughts create reality). The RSPCA seems little concerned by the plight of horses unless they are starving or bleeding. In reality many horses are starved of their natural existence and are 'bled' for their willingness to perform. Still, we may just have to 'let it go'. We may have to accept that too many horses are bred, too many horses are badly handled and badly trained (subjective assessment here) and there is not enough time and energy to 'save' them all.

This may all sound a bit harsh and uncaring. It is not meant to be. What I'm trying to formulate is a concept of planning to have a horse hit the ground with a future; a healthy, happy and naturally satisfying future. A planned foal started off on the right foot, so to speak. Instead of spending a lot of time undoing the damage created by some ill conceived 'shouting', why not spend a fraction of that amount of time and energy playing with and training a good'n. Fertilize the good paddocks, so the saying goes.

But where does that leave sooo many sad and sore horses then? Ah yes, the satisfaction of 'bringing one back'. The joy of repairing a damaged or injured horse and seeing him healthy, happy and sound. It is a gamble though. How do we know the extent of the long term damage that is present in the horse? The lack of healthy development in hooves that has been inflicted with steel shoes whilst the hooves and bones are still growing and maturing. The arthritis that has besieged the joints due to over stressing beyond the natural limits of the horse body, the ringbone in the pasterns from too much polocrosse, the bowed tendons from too much jumping, the ski tip pedal bones or P3 osteitis from too much collection and toe first landing, the ulcers from too much Bute or rich feed or just the weird behaviour that has developed in the horse because he wasn't allowed to just be a horse. And so the list goes on.

I have a couple of these 'survivors' in my paddock. They are nice horses. I spend money and time on them. I couldn't put them down. I can't do much with them either. They are just allowed to be horses. I think they are happy.

For more solutions to this widespread, less than nice way of interacting with horses perhaps we should turn to our best teachers on the subject – the horse.

What sort of shouting and whispering do they use to get their message across? Horses shout (not too loudly) by swishing their tails. Warning number one! The next level is perhaps laying their ears back, which makes them look pretty mean (and the volume goes up considerably). If the intended recipient of this behaviour still chooses to ignore warning number two, then at full volume, the horse often charges with teeth bared or striking hooves armed and ready to fire. (Very Loud!!!) And this can all happen in a matter of seconds and we observing humans can only guess as to why some horses get pissed off with others. And then it is all over. Life goes on.

If we are in the loop and we are pee'ing the horse off then they often react similarly with us. The biggest problem is that we can't hear the whispers that come before the aggressive horse behaviour. Often the result of humans being out of sync with horses during such expressions of emotion can be damage, injury, fear reactions or retaliation. Ever see a horse retaliate with another horse? Hmmmmmm.

Mostly horses communicate with very subtle whispers. Some humans call it telepathy, some call it mental connection and others just don't understand it at all. If anyone thinks that mental communication is not possible then I would say "try listening". Just listen to the thoughts that come into your mind when you are with the horse. Forget that someone may be looking on; forget that this type of behaviour is considered by many people to be a bit weird, forget what happened last night with the kids or the partner and just tune into the silence. Then you'll most likely hear some whispers; some thoughts and some idea of what the horse is thinking and trying to tell you.

I believe it is the horse that most likely has the solutions to changing the shouting we humans do to them. They are not the shouting type so they are whispering to us to get *us* to listen up; to be nice to them; to be fair and to let them be horses as only they know how. As we are in control of their lives it is up to us, you and me, to help make those lives as fulfilling as can be.

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Another Hoofnote, this time by Lee: {I believe that the most significant driver that shapes both individual relationships and society is people's core values. And, while there are many flavours, nuances and mixtures, at root there are just two fundamentally contrasting core values. The brilliant systems thinker Riane Eisler calls them partnership/respect values and domination/control values. In *The Power of Partnership* Riane Eisler observes: In the domination model, somebody has to be on top and somebody has to be on the bottom. Those on top control those below them. People learn, starting in early childhood, to obey orders without question. They learn to carry a harsh voice in their heads telling them they are no good, they don't deserve love, they need to be punished. Families and societies are based on control that is explicitly or implicitly backed up by guilt, fear, and force. The world is divided into in-groups and out-groups, with those who are different seen as enemies to be conquered or destroyed. In contrast, the partnership model supports mutually respectful and caring relations. Because there's no need to maintain rigid rankings of control, there is also no built-in need for abuse or violence. Partnership relations free our innate capacity to feel joy, to play. They enable us to grow mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. This is true for individuals, families, and whole societies. Conflict is an opportunity

to learn and to be creative, and power is exercised in ways that empower rather than disempower others.}