

My Therapist Lives in a Barn

By Bill Brown

This is a story of Equus Medendi. The story of how horses and humans communicate with each other experientially for emotional growth, learning and the understanding of how to address some of the severe problems that confront the veteran whatever the veterans age or state in life.

Both the late Winston Churchill and Ronald Reagan were quoted in a similar fashion saying, "There is something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." Many veterans are finding out what these two gentlemen meant about our equine friends.

Disease Control

Not all returning veterans are handicapped with problems such as Post Traumatic Stress Disease, depression, substance abuse, communication and relationship problems including deeply hidden anxiety. However, there are large percentages of American veterans who are living out their lives heroically trying to conceal their struggles. There is help for these veterans. Help comes to the veteran in the memorable form of Equine Assisted Therapy and Learning. Beside the help it is fascinatingly fun.

The combination of Certified Equine Specialists, veterans and horses becomes a source of healing for the veteran's heart and soul. Each client is helped to think "outside the corral" to see the lasting, healing solutions some obstacles in life require. This is accomplished through a program whereby the veteran becomes acquainted with and even friends with a horse.

Equus Medendi

As a veteran who has been acquainted with more than one of the ailments mentioned above, it was a privilege to go through the Equus Medendi program. Sharing this story can be an additional source of therapy for me. I would not have had the guts to share it with anyone except for Equus Medendi. This story speaks partly of the things I learned and the

friendships I gained while taking the course. The title of the program relays the mission of the program: "Equus," for horse and "Medendi," for healing.

This Equine Facilitated Therapy program is locally run by Angie Sheer, a Certified Equine Specialist with the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA). Sheer utilizes her certification to its fullest while working with clients and horses alike to address treatment goals. Some of the horses, as rescue animals themselves, have been through as much as the human being. Sheer has worked with horses for over 20 years, rescuing many.

Sheer is assisted in the program by Jeff Allen who is the Chairman and 3rd Dist. Member of the Veterans Advisory Committee. These two are exceptionally adept at understanding the mood of the horse in the training session as well as the person who is making the attempt to take communication with the horse to a higher level.

Equine People

I have known my share of horses. Riding them in the Arlington National Cemetery I knew the horses that pulled the Caisson during the funerals for General McArthur, General Eisenhower, President Kennedy and Astronaut Edward White. The nobility of the Caisson was matched by the calm poise of those majestic horses that carried the caskets of hundreds of fallen heroes as well as national dignitaries. Even over 45 years later I still remember the personalities of the horses I was most familiar with.

However, what was learned when I recently enrolled and took part in this program has made a difference in how I see solutions to tasks. It has helped me step back and take a calmer approach to problems I have to face; to look for patience in dealing with dogs, people and, yes, even some politicians. Connecting with the mind of a horse quite often gave me a relaxed security allowing breakdown of the fences that have kept me from tackling some of my personal challenges.

As a veteran, this confidential program took me through a session a week for six weeks. Some of the ways the sessions opened the mind to new possibili-

ties to consider solutions to life's complications and difficulties. The Equus Medendi corral is a safe place for the veteran. Anything said by an open mind and heart stays in the corral. Except in cartoons, horses do not gossip, lie or deceive. However, they can read human beings' intentions instantly. The following is a session that exemplified how these horse's intuitions affected one of our day's meetings.

Session Collapse

This day we were working with two horses, Skye and Bentley. Their intuitive ability was demonstrated during a particular session. They weren't responding to us at all. The exercise was to have them follow us into a spot between two posts that were leaning against the corral fence. This was to be done without ropes or halters as if Skye and Bentley were free range horses. In fact, all our sessions were run without any physical attachments or restraints. This was totally psychological. The ropes and halters were purely mental.



Trust to Gain

Building trust was paramount. How do you acquire the trust of a horse that has the freewill to turn tail and walk off? That day the horses were **not** responding to us. In fact they did turn their tails towards us and put their heads out over the corral fence as if to tell us we were, well, "horses-tails" ourselves.

How does a 200 pound human get a 2000 pound animal to budge purely from the animal's own mindset? Unlike dogs, horses don't follow people around just because we think they should, kind of like politicians and teenagers.

It took over a half hour before we exhausted everything we knew to get them to even move. Then, Allen and Sheer interrupted the session mercifully. They were standing there with "the look." We learned to recognize their "look" when we were doing everything we should, except thinking. We weren't finding anything new. I was so concerned about not breaking the rule, the only rule of the session, that I didn't

think of other permissible ways to handle the situation.

We tried everything we had learned in earlier sessions thinking it would be enough to get Skye and Bentley to be as responsive as they had previously. Then Sheer and Allen broke their silence with, "What are you thinking **or are you thinking?**" Oh, man. That was harsh, or so I thought. Of course I was thinking; trying to find a solution to get the horses to move between the two poles.

The only rule in this session was to get the horses between the poles, simple enough, huh. We could not break the rule nor even bend it. They needed to be between the poles. We pushed, prodded and coaxed but today, even politicians would have responded better.

Responses

Our leaders gently opened a discussion regarding what was going on with us human types that may cause the horses to refuse to respond to us as they had before. It turns out that I, for one, didn't have the calm assertiveness I needed to command the

situation. I didn't have the right energy.

Under the expert guidance of the leaders I was able to open up the feelings I had that day that were bothering me; feelings that prevented the desired communication. Eventually, at the moment I took a deep cleansing breath releasing my frustrations, something amazing happened. Bentley turned his head around and looked at us.

The Object

Both Bentley and Skye turned to look at us as we began thinking "outside the corral" and realized the solution. It was not against the rule to allow the horses to stand next to the leaning posts as they were. It was not against the rule to move the poles. So the answer was right in front of our faces. All we had to do is pick up one pole and place it on the opposite side of the horses from the first pole. This positioned the horses between the poles, the object of the session,

without having to even move the horses.

The sessions Sheer and Allen present allow the veteran to learn to think healthier and “outside the corral.” The program owner, Angie Sheer, has been working with horses for over 20 years and trained under Monty Roberts in Solvang. Roberts is widely known as the original “Horse Whisperer” and the bestselling author of “The Man Who Listens to Horses.” Sheer must have been a good student.

Open Air

Since the late 1960s the world has heard ever increasing amounts of statistics, information and evidence regarding the damaging effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disease. Veterans who have issues needing psychological therapy after spending time in war zones are given such therapeutic aid outdoors in the fresh air and in confidential country settings with the assistance of certified equestrian people and some very intuitive horses. Trust isn’t easy to come by in this era. These sessions are held in the open fresh air. The horse ranch gives a person the feeling of calm. The program helped me learn patience while seeking higher trust levels including understanding what that means. I was definitely challenged but not in a threatening way. For the veteran the ranch is a place of greatly reduced tension, except the fact that horses are bigger, stronger, somewhat intimidating and can mash down on your foot.

Leadership

Anger and hostility are also released here as well. Advancing toward a horse in these states is counterproductive and causes the horse to run away. The additional benefit is the inclusion of a certain awareness of one’s own body language, non-verbal communication and (best of all for me) energy levels. Brought out in the open, these issues facilitate empowerment to build trust and leadership. Learning trust, leadership and patience at the ranch

showed me that it is possible to learn these characteristics at levels I had not known before. Capturing and connecting between the intellect of a horse and my own mind is experientially unforgettable. Before all this, I felt the only way to communicate with a horse was a bridle, reins and spurs that jingle jangle jingle. The first day Skye followed me around the corral wherever I went was remarkable. It was as if he wanted to be with me. Imagine that. I went fast so did he. If I turned corners so did he. It was an extraordinary moment. Learning to be the “herd leader” and have a horse do something I wanted it to do, without the force of a bridle or rope, was liberating.

It is easy to see why, in the Old West, a man was shot

for stealing another man’s horse.

As printed on the Equus Medendi brochure, “Horses are dynamic, powerful, curious, social and highly sensitive living beings. By utilizing these characteristics this therapy can be highly effective. Like humans, horses have distinct personalities, attitudes and moods. They provide vast

opportunities for metaphorical learning possibilities.” Whether the need is to overcome depression or develop confidence, this equine assisted program shows that working alongside a naturally intimidating animal such as a horse will “create confidence and insight when dealing with intimidating and challenging situations in life.”

Acceptance

“Over the past few years Equus Medendi has gained acceptance and support from the mental health community at the Loma Linda Health Care System as well as the Department of Veteran Affairs and Disabled American Veterans in San Bernardino County. Currently Equus Medendi provides veterans with free equine assisted therapy sessions throughout the Inland Empire and High Desert areas. The primary clients are military veterans and their families.”

Equus Medendi is without charge to any American veteran who asks. 

