

Horses and Embodiment

by Pam Billinge

Pam has worked for 25 years supporting people to grow and meet their potential, as a leader in various organisations and later as an independent coach. She has a Certificate in Body Psychotherapy from the Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre and since 2006 has worked with a small number of clients under supervision. Her passion for horses and their unique contribution to our personal learning led her to train as an equine assisted therapist and she completed the EAGALA Certification Process in 2009 (Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association). She offers equine guided learning solutions to a wide range of private and corporate clients. She dedicates a great deal of time to deepening her understanding of horses and what we can learn from them through the Parelli Natural Horsemanship Programme.

Recap

In the Autumn 2008 edition of this journal I shared my personal experiences with you of healing and personal discovery with the help of horses. In this case it was my experience with one horse in particular with whom I had spent six weeks in Colorado. With him I had learned all about Natural Horsemanship (some call this horse whispering) and even more about myself.

What particularly struck me when reflecting on the journey which I had had was how biodynamic the whole process had been and how strongly it connected with the essence of the work which we do as biodynamic massage therapists and body psychotherapists. If you were not a member at the time and would like to receive a copy of this original feature please contact me, my details are below.

What happened next?

Those of you who read the piece will also know that my personal experience had been so powerful that I was inspired to become accredited as an Equine Assisted Psychotherapist and was nurturing a dream to work in this field so that I could share this special and enriching work with others. Since early in 2009 I have been working with a range of clients in the therapeutic and corporate sectors leading individuals and teams on journeys of self-discovery with my equine co-facilitators after

establishing an equine assisted learning business with my now business partner, Harriet Worthington. Later that year Lindsay Fovargue (body psychotherapist and AHBMT member who some of you will know) and I met by chance and after highly animated discussions conceived an idea to launch a therapeutic project for young clients of Centre 33, for whom Lindsay worked at the time, during the summer vacation, combining room-based body psychotherapy with equine assisted psychotherapy. Lindsay secured funding for ten young people between the ages of 12 and

20 to have six sessions each during the summer and October half term holidays that year. For those who are interested a report on this project is available – please email myself or Lindsay.

From the troubled teenager through to the Chief Executive the power of the horse to bring clients into their bodies and free their spirit has been consistent and magical. In this feature I hope to share with you how this work has unfolded and in particular how working with horses supports a body-centred approach to psychotherapy and personal growth.



Photograph by Coco, courtesy of Pam Billinge

Some facts and fundamentals about Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP)

In EAP a client works with a “therapeutic team” involving two human “facilitators” and one or more horses. One of the facilitators needs to be a horse specialist and one a mental health professional. Sometimes, as in my own case, facilitators may combine horse specialism and therapeutic expertise. Horses don’t need any particular training – but of course must be safe around people and not be prone to kicking or biting.

EAP does not involve riding or horsemanship (although basic horse-sense is taught for safety reasons). The therapeutic process revolves around the client undertaking tasks or assignments with the horse or horses – this can be anything from approaching the horse and stroking it to building metaphoric obstacle courses to negotiate with their equine partner. Activities are generally set out by the facilitators although as clients get more experienced at the work they might design their own tasks or games to do with the horses.

However it is not the task which is important, it is the horses and the way in which they respond to the client, and vice versa, which are central to the therapeutic process which emerges. The human therapists facilitate the session and make interventions at appropriate moments, mostly based on reading the behaviour of the horses and the

subtle energetic impulses to which the horse might be responding.

Having the horses in as natural an environment as possible is an important part of the process so sessions are normally held out in the open field – although if the ground is wet then sometimes they are held in an outdoor enclosed sand arena.

How and why horses?

Horses are prey animals. They survive by being acutely attuned to those around them and being able to sense where danger and opportunity lie. This means that they are sensitive to our innermost feelings and can see through the masks we wear or what is projected onto us by others. They respond to us accordingly. We might be able to fool others, even ourselves, but not the horse! As one client said recently, “With the horses there was nowhere for me to hide.”

Somehow when a horse reflects back to us a view of ourselves it is easier for us to accept than it is from a human. They are masters at offering gentle, non-judgemental feedback with grace and compassion. To date I have observed very little resistance from clients to the process on which the horse leads them. Human therapists also make very little interpretation in this modality. This is done by the client. As such the modality is very empowering and is particularly effective for young clients, for whom intervention and interpretation by adults may be unwelcome and counter-productive.

Reconnecting to the Self

At the most fundamental level, horses need to feel safe around us. This means that they will engage with us only when we are being authentic, congruent and present. And when we are their affirmative response is immediate. They will harmonise with us and follow our lead gracefully and beautifully. To have such a powerful, sensitive and majestic creature accept us with equal measures of trust and respect reinforces our sense of self at the deepest level.

The man approached the horse confidently and boldly, surprising me as he had not spent much time around horses during his life. As he attempted to approach the horse it kept walking away from him. The man persevered for many minutes trying to get close enough to it to get a halter on. When asked how it was going he kept saying “Fine,” although clearly it wasn’t. Finally, he gave up and admitted how afraid he was, not necessarily of the horse but of any situation where he did not know the answers. He walked away from the horse and started talking about how this debilitating anxiety affected his life. As soon as he dropped his false bravado and shared these feelings the horse turned and started to follow him across the acre of field finally stopping to allow the man to put the halter on him at the gate.

Horses and body

Horses call us into our bodies. It is a strange and magical phenomenon. If we are not present they will pay very little attention to us. And we need to be fully present – connected with ourselves, our feelings, our bodies, and the earth beneath us.

The man stood in the field near to the grazing horse, he was trying to touch her but she kept walking away, keeping six feet or so between them. Frustrated, he threw the halter to the ground saying “This is a waste of time this horse just isn’t connecting

Photograph courtesy of Pam Billinge



with me.” “How connected are you with yourself right now? Are you really here?” I asked. “I don’t know what you mean” was the reply. I invited the man to step well away from the horse, to close his eyes, and talked him through a process to bring himself into the moment and into his body; a kind of standing meditation. He stood quietly with his eyes closed and almost instantly the horse lifted her head, looked directly at him, walked across the distance separating them and put her muzzle in his hands. She sensed and responded to that moment in which he came into his body and, for her, he suddenly became safe and interesting.

For many “lay-people” the language of we body therapists can be alienating and foreign: “embodiment,” “sense of embodied self,” “in the moment,” “energetic resonance” etc. What on earth does all that mean? When someone just feels the feeling of being embodied and connected with themselves, as with this client above, there is no need for language or explanation. Once the client has had that felt sense of what it is to be present and in their body and the horse validates the change in them so clearly, there is no need to explain it. A huge shift can take place for a client in a matter of seconds or minutes.

I have found it very rewarding to observe a client over the course of a session find the “life” in their body. I remember vividly one of the young clients we worked with last year – a 14 year old facing suspension from school for violent and chaotic behaviour learned in a violent and chaotic home. Initially her stiff body, awkward movement, drooping shoulders and eyes turned to the ground failed to encourage the horse to move. It dragged its feet, reluctant to follow her. She so wanted to run with the horse that she just kept trying and eventually found the life dormant within. She began to breathe into her shoulders, lifted her eyes to the tree-line, held her head high and ran. Her shoulders started to swing and

she laughed as the horse ran after her. A gentleness emerged with the horse which was soft and nurturing. I don’t know whether she was able to hang onto this spark of life following the sessions with the horses but my hope is that this short experience of joy in her body will have at least helped her for a little while deal with the harshness of her reality.

Teaching us to self-regulate

Horses also call us to complete a healthy cycle of self-regulation. They are experts at this themselves. If you have ever observed horses at liberty you might have seen them grazing peacefully one moment, then lifting their heads and fleeing at a gallop only to come to rest suddenly, realising there is no danger and returning to their peaceful grazing.

One young client came for his fourth session. He was quite depressed emotionally and was seeking distraction from his sadness: “I want a fun session to take my mind off the problems in my life,” he said on arriving. He approached one horse, normally a playful creature, who dropped his head and went to sleep. The second horse he approached did the same. “This is no fun,” the client said. I suggested that perhaps the horses were trying to tell him something and asked what it might be like if he copied what they were doing in his own body. He stood next to my little mare, relaxed his shoulders, dropped his head and half closed his eyes. He copied her slow and steady breathing and put his hand on her back. They stood together like this, peaceful and still for perhaps twenty minutes. Owing his sadness and the need to be still and calm and look after himself – and being held by the horses whilst he did so – led this young person to a big shift. Following the session he was able to make an important decision about the direction of his life which I imagine had a significant impact on his well-being.

Somatic resonance

Horses are socio-sensual creatures – this means they can transmit emotions throughout the herd instantly and in the moment. This helps the herd to stay alive by being immediately and simultaneously alerted to perceived danger. In the same way they seem to be able to resonate with our own emotions and reflect them back to us helping us connect with our deepest feelings. This energetic and emotional resonance is crucial information, too, for the therapist. It is almost as if the horse’s body acts as an amplifier of the emotion in the field (no pun intended!).

Recently I was teaching horsemanship to a client with her own horse. The session was not going well, and ten minutes in, the horse was tense and jumpy. I suddenly started feeling sick and very angry. A split second later the horse became agitated and started gnashing its teeth at his owner and tried to bite. I went over to them and, as it was a horsemanship rather than a therapeutic session, asked her tentatively if there was anything else happening in her life which might be upsetting her. She shared that her husband had been diagnosed with lymphoma. As she expressed this, the horse dropped his head, relaxed his jaw and started licking and chewing – the typical sign of emotion discharging for a horse. My gut also relaxed and I felt calm again.

This kind of “tuning in” to the emotions of our clients through our own bodies is part and parcel of our work as body therapists, and is probably not unusual for you. When I am working with the horses I experience immediacy and great clarity about what is around. I also notice that the resonance passes through me more easily. The “universal holding” of the client’s process helps; the healing space is held by me, the horse, their huge heart and gut and the natural environment around.

Non-verbal process

Another parallel between EAP and our work in biodynamic massage and body psychotherapy is that of non-verbal process. There is so much experience which cannot be adequately spoken or described. Creating an opportunity for non-verbal processing can be transformational for clients and enable them to deal with deeply held emotions and find resolution and healing.

I find that I use increasingly few words when facilitating EAP sessions. Mostly I am using a question here and there to nudge the process along and bring things into the client's awareness as I might with a client on the massage table. Also expression of what I may be noticing at a body level myself. The horse has no need for words and brings the client to the place where he or she needs to be.

The boy had not mentioned the death of his father at all during the four sessions he had had with the horse. Yet, as he sat on the bench after they had finished playing with the horse beside him accepting the loving strokes and scratches, there was undoubtedly the most meaningful conversation taking place between their hearts.

How working with horses is changing me as a therapist

After I have completed an EAP session with a client I invariably feel better than I did before I started. Even if it has been a tough, emotional session. It is as if my heart has been stretched and my diaphragm softened with it. My gut is soft and relaxed and my lungs rise and fall gently and deeply. I am very peaceful. Very embodied. As soon as a session ends, the horses return matter-of-factly to their grazing. I have learned from them to metaphorically and literally do the same.

I notice my own body resonating with what is in the field even more than before. I have also learned to trust what my body tells me. This has helped me to work very comfort-

ably with emergent process and to be at ease with "not knowing," not just in my client work but in my life in general. The horses themselves are so very present as creatures, it is hard not to also be when you are with them often enough.

The horses have also helped me to develop the art of direct, objective and non-judgemental feedback, and of resisting the temptation to make interpretation on behalf of the client. The work has helped to free me from the temptation which I used to have to "fix things" for people and of the need to be a "good" therapist. I can just be myself like the horses are. They also help me and my clients to find joy, even in moments of deep sorrow.

I think that most of all, working with horses has helped me learn about myself. This applies not just to the client work which I do with them but the moment-to-moment experience of being with my two horses daily. I don't always like what I see as they reflect my image back to me. But equally, often I am delighted and surprised at what they show me about myself.

Body, soul and spirit

And of course this is how it is for those who come to work with my horses. The horses bring them, too, into their bodies as they do me. With their deep and soft gaze these

huge beasts shine a gentle light into the dark places of the heart and in doing so warm it, soften it and hold it. Then when the life and spirit starts to stir in us the horse too will move, his ears will prick forward playfully. He will run with us, play with us, reward us for simply being ourselves with such a display of grace, power and majesty that we will never forget what it felt like, for that moment, just to be ourselves.

Workshop

Pam Billinge and Lindsay Fovargue will be hosting a one-day workshop *Horses and Embodiment* on Saturday 9th April 2011. Experience how working with horses can call you further into your body, develop your sense of self, your ability to be "in the moment" and to listen to your intuition on this one-day workshop. The event will be of interest to therapists, counsellors, anyone working with human potential or wishing to fulfil their own potential.

It will take place at a quiet and peaceful location in West Norfolk. For more information please contact Pam Billinge (pam@pambillinge.com) or Lindsay Fovargue (lindsay.fovargue@yahoo.co.uk). Places are strictly limited so early booking is advisable. More information can be found on www.lindsay.fovargue.com or www.pambillinge.com – or email.

Cost: AHBMT and UKAHP members £50, non-members £75.



Photograph by Coco, courtesy of Pam Billinge