

Constellations

Constellations in the Field

Shivaun Woolfson

Where the Horse Comes in

In recent years, horse-guided therapies have grown in popularity and are now widely used as an adjunct to psychotherapy, in mental health treatment, with youth and families, with children on the Autistic spectrum, in corporate teams and organisations and in countless other settings. There are some – most notably Ruud Knaapen in the Netherlands, Sarah Fancy in the US, Ingrid Bunby in New Zealand and Alexandra Sitch, internationally – who have incorporated family and systemic constellations into the process.

So why horses, some might enquire?

Equine Specialist, Linda Kohanov, suggests that horses easily see through the social masks people wear. Of her own horse Noche, she writes:

“If he felt sadness lurking behind the smiles of my clients, he would step forward and not only dislodge the emotion but create a safe space where the tears could finally be released... In his strong compassionate presence people are able to mine the depths of despair and come out the other side.”

As herd members and prey animals, horses exist in an ongoing, ever-present state of *now*. Primed to ensure the survival of the whole, they assess others swiftly: do they pose a danger or threat? Are they trustworthy, faithful companions for the journey ahead? Highly attuned to the subtle variations in the energy, behaviour and intention of all those who enter their Field, their immediate responses – movements, sounds, actions, overall demeanour – can be regarded by facilitators as a precise gauge of an individual's levels of presence, authenticity and congruence in any given moment.

This innate sensitivity has much to offer both facilitator and client: Horses are non-judgemental. They excel in non-verbal communication, which helps us humans bypass the machinations of the busy, doing mind. Interaction with the horse is experiential, received on the pulses and thus more readily embodied. Studies have shown that connection with animals and with horses in particular, given their enormous vibrational Field, improves trust, communication and confidence in individuals. On a physiological level, simply being in the presence of horses can reduce cortisol (stress hormone), blood pressure and heart rate, while increasing oxytocin (feel-good hormone). The adaptive behaviours that horses deploy, as they pendulate back and forth across their own windows of tolerance – extreme stress at one end and deep relaxation at the other – model, for us, how to widen our internal capacity and return more speedily to homeostasis. Not only can they meet us where we are, wherever that may be; they can lead us back.

It's tempting to consider the horse, in the therapeutic setting, as a kind of souped-up, 3D biofeedback mechanism. However, Ingrid Bunby of *Potent Coaching* in New Zealand, warns against such easy classifications of the horse as mirror/metaphor for a client's experience.



Shivaun Woolfson is a published author and historian who has taught in both academic and community settings. She is a trained counsellor, addictions specialist and certified Systemic Constellations practitioner who has worked extensively with individuals, families and groups. She conducts individual and group, as well as equine-assisted constellation sessions. Shivaun's qualifications include a Ph.D. in History (University of Sussex) and B.A. in Social Work and Counselling (Union Institute Miami). She trained at the Centre for Systemic Constellations UK, with Ruud Knaapen in Systemic Horse Assisted Coaching (Wind Organisatie Ontwikkeling, Netherlands) and with Emma Ross as an EAPD (Equine Assisted Personal Development) facilitator (Intuitive Horse, UK). She is a member of the Complementary Medical Association (CMA) and International Systemic Constellations Association (ISCA).

Shivaun offers horse-guided one-to-one sessions and group workshops, remotely and in person. She will also be offering a bespoke mentoring programme in 2021 for those wishing to work systemically with horses.

shivaunwoolfson@aol.com
www.creativeconstellation.net

Viewing it like this, she asserts, lessens the potency of the exchange, potentially devaluing the horse's autonomy and sense of being in their own right. True healing occurs through the relationships between horse and client, horse and facilitator, and client and facilitator, in a three-way dynamic of equal parts. In this exchange, the horse offers more than mirror or metaphor; in their flesh-and-blood fullness, their vast auric presence, they create a space into which we, as humans, can safely ease into our own wholeness. In that space, we enter a *now* that enfolds all that we bring, such that we can be fully present with it, nothing left outside. The hallmark of trauma is that it is borne alone, its repetitive cycles and iterations invading our days and spiralling into our nights. What the horses offer is accompaniment on the journey, a sentient being who sees and stays. In response, our capacity for holding trauma expands.

A Space for Grief

During one of my earliest sessions, as a newly minted horse-guided systemic coach, I had the opportunity to work with Jane and to witness, first-hand, the above process in action. A genteel lady in her mid-seventies, Jane had noticed my ad in a local magazine and was tickled by the notion of spending time in nature with the horses. But more than that, she was seeking comfort. Since her mother's sudden passing, some months prior, she had been drowning in a sea of overwhelming grief that no amount of bereavement counselling seemed capable of driving back.

As she stepped out of the car, I immediately clocked the sandals. "Don't worry," she said, catching my eye, "I've got my mother's boots in the back." Pulling them out, she plunged dainty feet into a pair of oversized wellies. A sadness washed over her as she glanced down. The constellation had begun.

As she entered the paddock to meet the horses, our lead mare Porcha clambered over and stood stock still beside her. Overcome by her grief, Jane barely registered the horse's presence. Eventually, she glanced up, briefly stroked Porcha, before almost immediately descending back down. Porcha stayed calm, still and steady, as if waiting for her to emerge again. Gradually, through gentle questioning, Jane revealed that her father had been the lone survivor of an extended family, exterminated by the Nazis in France. As she expressed this in words, Porcha let out a loud snort, by way of relief. In response, a glimmer of life fluttered through Jane. She smiled then and, for the first time, looked Porcha directly in the eye.

I invited Jane to walk the periphery of the field and, if she so felt, to pick up items – branches, stones, earth – to represent the grief that she was carrying so heavily within. As she walked, collecting a twig here, a stone there, a flower, a feather, Porcha accompanied her every step. Eventually, Porcha stalled by an ancient oak tree, glanced at Jane, then lowered her head towards the tree's wide, gnarled base. Jane stopped in her tracks and slowly, solemnly began depositing the items at the tree's base, naming, one by one, the family members for whom these objects of nature now stood. As she placed them and whispered the names, the mare lowered her head, each time, as if she too were laying them finally to rest. When Jane was done, her hands empty, Porcha moved towards the edge of the field, glancing back several times, appealing with the slightest lift of the eye, for Jane to follow. They stood there, gazing out on to the horizon, horse and human, side by side in silence. When I asked Jane what Porcha might be looking at, she said: "The future. I cannot walk there today, but I can see it ahead of me."

The client did not 'overcome' her grief during the session but she was able to acknowledge that she was carrying, not only her own natural grief, in the wake of her mother's sudden passing, but also that of her entire system in the aftermath of their decimation. And through the actions of speaking aloud, walking, naming and laying down – the horse a companion to that memorialising journey – the load lightened just a little. After the session, she sat in our yard; Porcha stood directly opposite her, quietly holding space, her gaze intent. They stayed

As herd members and prey animals, horses exist in an ongoing, ever-present state of *now*. Primed to ensure the survival of the whole, they assess others swiftly: do they pose a danger or threat? Are they trustworthy, faithful companions for the journey ahead?

like this, locked in an intimate energy exchange, for some time. Eventually Porcha shifted. The woman thanked her. Porcha went back to grazing. The session was over.

Later that evening, I received a text from Jane, explaining that the care and love Porcha bestowed had touched her deeply and that the session marked the first time she had experienced any comfort since her mother's passing. I went to check on Porcha late that night. She was calm, centred, quiet. Watching her I felt – although of course I could not be sure – that something of Jane had stayed with her. Not in a heavy, burdened sense, but something of the love, the healing Jane had so viscerally experienced had rubbed off on Porcha, her coat shining luminously in the night light. What transpired between Porcha and Jane that day filled me with awe, not least because of its positive impact on each of them, but also because it had occurred on our land, with our horses. How had I, a self-proclaimed city girl, who'd owned a pony for all of six months during childhood and admired them pretty much from afar ever since, transformed into a farm owner with a rescue herd of four and created a horse-guided systemic coaching practice on top?

My Journey

This journey began with a surprise birthday gift from my partner in 2014: a three-day retreat at Intuitive Horse Farm with Emma Ross in Hastings. I had forgotten what it felt like to be around horses, perhaps misplaced the memory of how as a child, their soothing balm had so often swept through me, no matter how chaotic the circumstances. Poet and Wild Soul life coach, Mary Reynolds Thompson speaks of the quest for wholeness that lies at the heart of every spiritual journey. How, she enquires, might we proceed? "How do we remember who we are? What path will carry us home?" It was my mother who loved horses, who painted them endlessly, rode them and doted on them, and taught me to do the same. It was my mother who brought Mr Ed (my pony) into our home. When she left six months after his arrival, he went with her.

On the last day of the Intuitive Horse retreat, when Spot – a large Appaloosa – stood in front of me, then buckled his knees and lay down at my feet, I returned instantly to my mother, to an essence of her I had once known and held so tightly. Smiling at the memory of her, I snuggled a little closer to Spot, to the fearlessness and wild abandon my mother had so willingly bequeathed but that I, through my own challenges, had lost sight of. Spot gave me back something of my mother in that session, and also something of me. I left with a broad grin plastered across my face and vowed to return. And I did.

The next retreat was followed rapidly by enrolment on the facilitator training programme in Equine Assisted Personal Development (EAPD) work with Emma. This, in turn, was succeeded by a move from Crystal Palace, London to Robertsbridge in East Sussex and the purchase of a smallholding and the rescue of a herd of four. Being a novice horse-owner is not for the faint of heart. That's before even considering working with them therapeutically. Hay – how much, where to buy, green or aged; shavings, bedding – wood or paper or straw or cardboard or.... Fields – harrowing, rolling, muckspreading... hard feed – compounds, supplements; turn in, turn out, muck out; check weather – to rug or not to rug; then start all over again. Baptism of fire doesn't quite cut it. Through that year, as my partner Fran and I grappled with all of the above, I began seeing my first clients. The EAPD training, in my case, sat atop a varied background of counselling, social work and addiction specialisms, family and systemic constellations training and years as an academic/writer focusing on life story and ancestral legacy. In truth, they would all come to play their part.

In the broadest sense, EAPD helps individuals to achieve deeper levels of connection to and awareness of the self via an interaction with a horse or herd. During a session, the facilitator assesses/interprets the interaction between horse and human: does the horse move away or shut down when the person approaches? Do they walk right into the person's space? Does the horse approach quietly, lowering its head? Is the person restlessly analysing and verbalising or quiet and still? Where appropriate, the facilitator may interject with further

On a physiological level, simply being in the presence of horses can reduce cortisol (stress hormone), blood pressure and heart rate, while increasing oxytocin (feel-good hormone). The adaptive behaviours that horses deploy, as they pendulate back and forth across their own windows of tolerance – extreme stress at one end and deep relaxation at the other – model, for us, how to widen our internal capacity and return more speedily to homeostasis.

questions, offer frameworks or suggest an activity. In the case of a horse disregarding a client's personal space bubble, the facilitator might ask the person to put their energy firmly into their feet and to create an energetic bubble around themselves. Typically, the horse will honour this boundary once intentionally created. Invariably it transpires that establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries has been an ongoing issue for the client. Equally, a horse might nudge at someone who it later transpires has felt frozen or paralysed, unable to take action. The horse might block a person's path or point them in a new direction. Often, these movements from the horse, further extrapolated by questioning from the facilitator, will spark an insight or awareness in the client around negative, self-limiting patterns and belief systems. When illuminated and recognised, these can then be addressed and released. Consider the terminally ill man who attended to address his escalating anxiety in the face of his own mortality. Several times he approached the horse he had chosen to work with and each time the horse responded by moving closer, lowering his head. Each time, the client moved away. After several such encounters, I asked the client what was going on for him. He told me that the horse didn't seem that interested in spending time with him, so he didn't want to invade his space. Having pointed out that this was not actually the case, from my perspective, I asked him why he had arrived at that conclusion. He replied: "I guess I've never thought anyone would be that interested in me." As soon as he uttered these words, the horse let out a huge sigh and moved towards the client, his head lowered directly in front of him. For the remainder of the session, the man stroked the horse's head, bent into him bodily, and allowed himself to completely rest and find comfort in the presence of the horse.

Having worked with the horses in this way for some time, it struck me that the Orders of Love, as understood and expressed in systemic practice – belonging, equal exchange and social order – could all be actively witnessed in the herd: Each horse has a place and a right to belong. Indeed, herd survival depends on the safety and cooperation of each of its members. The balance of giving and taking is evidenced daily in actions of mutual grooming, tail swishing to ward off flies for companions, standing guard while others sleep and so on. Any new horse must be accepted by each of the existing members before entering, as the elders take precedence over newcomers, just as with access to food and water. Herds exist in the 'we' rather than the 'I' state, operating as a fully-fledged system at all times. When faced with a perceived threat or danger, all members of a herd will turn and run spontaneously towards safety, just like a murmuration of migrating birds switching direction, en masse, to fly towards warmer climes. When any of the Orders of Love are violated or disrupted, the herd adapts and reconfigures to restore harmony, cohesion and interconnectedness. In light of these naturally occurring movements in the herd, it seemed a logical step for me to intentionally incorporate a systemic perspective into the work.

After some research, I found my way (via Facebook, which having realised that I clicked on a lot of horse training videos, kindly placed a TED talk right in my line of sight) to Ruud Knaapen of *Wind Organisation* in the Netherlands, one of a small number currently offering training in systemic coaching with horses. During a five-day retreat, we explored our own 'inner herds,' conducted practise horse sessions for each other and undertook various activities as a group with Ruud's herd. On one of our last days, Knaapen suggested that we, the human herd of nine individuals from around the globe, should accompany his equine herd of four across several fields and byways on a circular walk around the outskirts of his farm. Having recently suffered a broken ankle and anxious about undertaking a gruelling trek, I enquired how far we would venture. Ruud encouraged me to start the walk and promised that if I got into trouble en route he would send someone to collect me.

As we ventured away from his farm and out into the open field, I soon found myself bringing up the rear. The others walked ahead at a steady pace, horses in tow, one taking the lead rope for a stretch, another seamlessly replacing them, horses and humans exchanging places as if swapping dance partners. I watched from a distance of some thirty to forty yards. Every so often, one or another of the crew would cast their gaze back briefly, checking to ensure I was still there. The pace never slowed or wavered; by the time we had reached the halfway point, I had yet to lead one of the horses. I can recall now, viscerally,

The horse does not respond to the story – to the particularities or specifics of the narratives passed down, recycled and carried anew, one generation to the next. They do not, according to Knaapen, respond to how the problem is formulated, or to our analytical explorations and definitions of it. Rather, they answer viscerally, instinctively to that which surfaces in the *now*.

the sense of resignation that ripped through me, the nagging realisation that this was my lot: to follow behind, unaccompanied, no horse in tow. While these thoughts surfaced, I noticed that one of the geldings⁷, Staeph had slowed down. In response, the other horses slackened their pace too. Suddenly, I was no longer so far from the centre of the action. Staeph turned his head in my direction several times. Eventually, the person leading him extended the rope towards me. I took hold of it lightly and started walking beside Staeph. As my ankle, by then, had begun to grumble, my pace decelerated even further. Staeph slowed right alongside me, such that our feet began to travel in step, one behind the other, our breathing synchronised, our movements in harmony. Gradually, the entire group, both horses and humans, walked as one, guided in their stride by Staeph and me at the rear.

On a surface level that day, a group of people went for a walk in the countryside with a few horses – two herds joining forces to take in the fresh air. And yet, the exquisite, nuanced ushering that Staeph offered, represented for me, the most profound and affecting experience of the entire training schedule. On a deeper level, we were all, however unknowingly, activating the three levels of conscience on that walk: personal, collective and spiritual. I cannot rightly frame in words today the depth of healing that I experienced during the trek, only to express that the person who arrived back at the farm was not quite the one who had left only hours earlier. This is how horses can tap into the levels of conscience and consciousness and steer us through them.

Entering the Systemic Realm

Knaapen stresses that an equine, when faced with a human, will respond not only to the individual but to the entire system, the inner herd, as it were, of that person. An example of this occurred during my session with Mary. In the consultation, she explained that of late, she had been beset by recurring nightmares surrounding the fate of her husband while he was away on frequent business trips. These nightmares, about the tragedies that were sure to befall him and his impending death, had begun to seep into her days, causing undue worry. The horse she elected to work with – Willow, a small Welsh pony – typically reticent and reserved around humans, raced into the arena at full speed. She bucked and kicked, pawed the sand fiercely, then forcefully poked Mary in the belly several times before darting off. She thrashed through the arena, hind and front legs arching in a disturbed, distorted pattern as if to rid herself of some unwanted weight. As this constituted highly uncharacteristic behaviour, it seemed entirely possible that Willow was responding to something in Mary's system.

Eventually, I led her out of the arena as her antics had become increasingly explosive. I asked the other two attendees to stand behind Mary who was, by now, experiencing a level of distress, as support and resource for her. As they placed their palms on Mary's back and her breathing slowed, her brother came to mind. Long suffering from psychosis, he had recently met a tragic, untimely death, she explained. As she spoke, the energy in the yard shifted viscerally. Willow, who had been pacing up and down on the other side of the fence, stalled and stood to face Mary. Taking in the horse's concentrated gaze, Mary spoke then of her mother, whose dementia had deteriorated to the point that she was rarely able to recognise or communicate with her daughter. In response to this information, both women standing behind Mary relaxed visibly, palpably. Willow lowered her head; her ears flopped to the side and her breathing slowed. In that moment, it felt to me that in the face of her mother's diminished capacity, Mary herself had become the placeholder or memory bearer for her brother's fate. I asked her to repeat the phrase: *"I come from a system where psychosis has played its part."* Nothing to drop, leave behind or give back, a simple assertion of truth.

This acknowledgement of what Knaapen terms the 'a priori consciousness,' or what some might refer to as source or universal consciousness – that which has always been, is now and will always be – has the effect of somehow wiping the slate clean, not as a dissolving of truths but rather as an emphatic assertion of their irrefutable presence. In this space of

The horses' responses can be swift and sometimes so infinitesimal as to go unnoticed. And that is one of the challenges of working with the horses – to train the eye and the heart to catch the movement: the sigh, the snort, the swish, the stomp. At the other extreme it's important to resist the urge to instantly make meaning of everything the horse does. In a desire to provide an answer, resolution or slice of magic for the client, there's often the temptation to assign meaning too quickly.

consciousness, there are no perpetrators or victims, no innocence and no guilt. In stepping into the realm where there is no need for answers because there are no questions, where all beings, all experiences merge and blend, the *I* becoming the *We*, the space in which the horses reside always, the charge loosens its grip, like a thread disentangling from an old, worn jumper. In the days that followed, Mary's night terrors receded and eventually dissipated.

A subsequent session with a woman called Carol brought these ideas around consciousness into even sharper relief. She attended to work on blocks to her creativity and to find a way forward with her musical practice. Within moments, it became clear that sexual abuse was a hallmark of her family dynamic. Yet, it was not until her mid-twenties that she – when extolling the virtues of her father, to whom she was very close – was informed by her elder sister that he had abused her repeatedly between the ages of seven and sixteen. That day, she explained, cut her life in two: a before and an after. Her sister went on to marry and have her own family, while Carol had struggled with intimacy and maintaining relationships. Now, in her mid-fifties, she found herself alone, disconnected from both her mother and sister.

I invited Carol to walk around the perimeter of the arena, with an awareness of her role or place in the *before* dynamic uppermost in her mind until she got to the midday point, where I suggested she might consider crossing over to the *after* realm. As she ventured, our three ponies followed her closely, intersecting, blocking, edging her this way and that, antagonising each other such that she could make little progress moving forward. Eventually, I asked her to say the phrase: *"I come from a system where childhood is not protected."* As soon as she uttered these words aloud, the space opened and she was able to continue into the *after* area. As she crossed over, a realisation, almost like an electric current, coursed through her: "I took it all on," she revealed. "Maybe it was guilt, maybe shame, or out of wanting to help carry the load, but from that day, she was free and I was trapped."

The ponies who had continued their antics, passing back and forth between spheres, stalled as she spoke, caught in their tracks. Glancing around the arena, I asked Carol if there was a movement she would like to make. Suddenly, off to the side, we both noticed Porcha, the grand dame of the yard, over by the stables. She loomed large and powerful in all her fullness. Carol walked towards her. I motioned for her to lay her hand across Porcha's heart centre. She stood for a few moments, next to the mare, her hand touching into Porcha's aliveness. When I enquired what the sensation felt like, she said: "It's like the vibration of love." This is what I imagine Sarah Peyton refers to as *resonance*, or the flow of love, as she explains, when two cellos stand side by side – one being played, the other not – the vibration of the music reverberates from one into the other. Carol noticed however, how quickly she was pulled, energetically, from this vibration by the ponies' actions in the arena – riling, provoking, sometimes alienating. Yet, when she returned to the flow of love, one hand on Porcha's heart, the other over her own heart, she was able to maintain contact with divine source, or consciousness. She stayed in that position for some ten minutes, inviting, receiving and returning the reciprocal flow of love from Porcha and sending it back again, one cello into the other. The ponies quietened, reactivated, calmed and set off anew in a kind of circular spiral, an energetic merry-go-round with no 'off' button. Through it all, Carol kept her hand steady on Porcha. Porcha remained absolutely still, her eyes soft, her head lowered, her breathing tempered and even.

The Horse Leads the Way

In her book *Riding Between the Worlds*, Kohanov (2007) poses the question: Does the horse have a Buddha nature? Was that, in fact, what Porcha was modelling? Kohanov writes of her horse Noche:

"Without the slightest hint of pity or judgment, Noche elucidated the restlessness humans feel. Like every other two-legged creature I knew, I was constantly

The benefit, for me, of working with horses rather than people or with horses and people rather than people alone, is that the horse arrives at the situation without judgement, agenda or bias. They are not inclined to fix us, but rather, as suggested above, to reinstate the whole, to complete the herd, including all its constituent parts; their very survival depends on the whole. Thus, they function with a cut-through immediacy, borne out of natural instinct as prey animals. Put bluntly, horses don't mess around.

chasing after so-called positive emotions and running way away from the negative. Yet by example, Noche gave me a kinaesthetic sense of how to live the Buddhist ideals of nonattachment and nonaversion ... I have seen this horse stand in the rain, the snow, the sun at 110 degrees with the patience and equanimity he carries in the face of emotions that would send most people running for cover. Does Noche have a Buddha nature? Most definitely."

The horse does not respond to the story – to the particularities or specifics of the narratives passed down, recycled and carried anew, one generation to the next. They do not, according to Knaapen, respond to how the problem is formulated, or to our analytical explorations and definitions of it. Rather, they answer viscerally, instinctively to that which surfaces in the *now*. "When the inner herd of the client is no longer complete or the order has been disrupted," he asserts, "the horse instinctively responds to the system of the client ... Horses see the world as a whole, even if we experience that whole as fragmented."

In the examples above, there is no need for the client to give back, to hand over to others currently in the system or to those who have gone before, for at the precise point of contact between horse and human, in that ecstatic vibrational co-mingling, there is nothing to carry and therefore nothing to lay down. The facilitator in this setting, Knaapen suggests, is the one tasked with resisting the patterning of the client – patterns long in the making and thus likely robust at keeping themselves active and alive. If, however, we follow the direction of the horse, we will invariably be led to the site of most acute disruption or disturbance in the client's system. The horses do not necessarily engage with the reasons behind the disruption or concern themselves with the fates of our forebears: they want to complete the system, repair it and make it whole. And they do this with tremendous love, as Knaapen asserts, in service of life. So how might we follow the herd's lead and open out the space in which this *whole-making* might occur?

Practical Considerations

While each constellator has a method unique to them, it is possible that any facilitator working with Carol in the case above, may have arrived at the same result. The benefit, for me, of working with horses rather than people or with horses and people rather than people alone, is that the horse arrives at the situation without judgement, agenda or bias. They are not inclined to fix us, but rather, as suggested above, to reinstate the whole, to complete the herd, including all its constituent parts; their very survival depends on the whole. Thus, they function with a cut-through immediacy, borne out of natural instinct as prey animals. Put bluntly, horses don't mess around. Sessions tend to be quick, sometimes intense, striking at the heart of the matter without too much discussion, preamble or explanation.

The set-up I use for a horse-guided constellation is similar to that of a regular one, starting with a holding of sacred space, a guided meditation invoking the ancestral line, followed by a brief consultation. Often, it is during this short phase that the horses will make their presence known, approaching the client. Although horses do not hold on to the past in the way we do, it is not uncommon to find horse and human of similar experience drawn to each other: A gelding⁷ who has been passed from pillar to post may seek out and stand right in front of a young man who has endured the same in childhood. A pony that has been abused will often find its way to the very person in the group who has experienced similar conditions. A mare who lost a foal at birth stands beside a woman whose baby has died in childbirth. Sometimes, the constellation starts right there.

If working in a group, once I have gleaned enough from the questions/exploration, I may ask the client to set up others as representatives for aspects of the issue at hand. If working with an individual alone, I may suggest that they view the horse or horses as *standing in for the energy of...* (rather than representing an actual person or place or thing). In either case, I start the constellation as we might ordinarily, all the while my sights trained on the horses (and indeed sometimes the birds, the insects, rabbits, pheasants, wind, trees, etc.),

I prepare for these sessions in much the same way as I might for regular constellation work – that is a kind of emptying or slate wiping, so that I am fully present for whatever surfaces. Always, the night before a session or workshop is scheduled, I will tell the horses – verbally, out loud – that they will be working the next day. As they are loose during sessions, the horses can self-elect to participate, or not.

clocking even the most minimal actions and movements to catch, what Rachael Draaisma describes as calming signals: blinking, yawning, licking, chewing, looking away, neck or body shake etc. These are deployed by the horse as a self-calming agent to appease stimuli in the environment – in this instance stimuli that originate with the client or members of their system. If the tension does not decrease at that point, the horse will likely exhibit more overt displacement behaviours, such as self-biting, rubbing head along leg, pawing the ground, head swinging, rolling etc. Generally, tension escalates in direct response to intensity level from the client. If it reaches a peak with no let up, the horse will begin to display stress signals, indicating they are ready to leave/increase distance or somehow change the situation.

There is a wide repertoire of behaviours to observe from splitting two people by moving between them to decrease tensions, to guard or protect one from the other, or to keep one side exclusive for the horse themselves, to showing the hindquarters and immobility. They may block the client from elements in their own system. They may venture over to the fence and gaze off into a distant future, or indicate a need to leave the situation, turn their backs on specific representatives, lie down beside an issue holder, or move them on in a particular direction. These behaviours offer themselves up for interpretation by the facilitator in the context of the client's system and their initial issue, question or intention.

The horses' responses can be swift and sometimes so infinitesimal as to go unnoticed. And that is one of the challenges of working with the horses – to train the eye and the heart to catch the movement: the sigh, the snort, the swish, the stomp. At the other extreme it's important to resist the urge to instantly make meaning of everything the horse does. In a desire to provide an answer, resolution or slice of magic for the client, there's often the temptation to assign meaning too quickly. It's better for the facilitator to clock actions internally, allowing the full movement to occur and settle before speaking. In a recent session a woman was grappling with issues of Trust/Mistrust. As soon as she mentioned the word trust, our mare positioned herself beside her. I was about to comment on this when I noticed two ponies moving to position themselves directly in front of the representative the client had selected as Mistrust/Fear, such that the woman could not see past them. As she connected in with the mare representing Trust, the representative for Mistrust began to feel herself disappearing, becoming more abstract, a mere fabrication, to the point she reported not being able to feel her body at all. In light of this information from the Field, it became clear that when the client tapped into Trust, Mistrust dissipated. Had I moved too quickly, the message would have remained incomplete; the client may well have embodied the capacity to trust, in isolation, but she would have missed out on the experience of embodying trust while also in the presence of mistrust/fear and might therefore not have fully accessed that capacity in herself.

In general, once the tension in the Field has eased – typically in direct response to a shift in the client: the saying aloud of a healing sentence, an actual physical movement, or some other unseen, yet palpable internal change – the horse returns to calming signals, eventually easing into full relaxation. The door is open then for the client to enter full relaxation mode, alongside the horse. In this shared space, typically that which is most true for the client rises to the fore, entering conscious thought. And somehow, with the horse as vibrational companion, the person's capacity or tolerance broadens to include the fullness of what they are feeling/experiencing in the moment. The horse lets us know when the session is done. There is usually a pronounced energy shift; the horse returns to grazing, in essence leaving the Knowing Field and returning to being a horse. The cord is cut. In some instances, the horse will linger, reluctant to turn away from the connection. There is more to reveal. Again, the guidance is – follow the lead of the herd. For many clients, the 'state of harmony' they enter, so rare yet so longed for, serves as an opening, a gap through which they can slip into a place of stillness. Long after the session has ended, they carry within, both the gap and inherently, the peace to which it leads.

We might be forgiven for assigning to the horse a supernatural power, based on some of the descriptions above. While they are certainly Buddha-like and possess mystical qualities,

There is a wide repertoire of behaviours to observe from splitting two people by moving between them to decrease tensions, to guard or protect one from the other, or to keep one side exclusive for the horse themselves, to showing the hindquarters and immobility. They may block the client from elements in their own system.

the sessions are a product of – in addition to their presence – a willingness/openness in the client and years of training and application on the part of the facilitator. It is not magic, even if the result is often magical.

Who Shows Up

I prepare for these sessions in much the same way as I might for regular Constellation Work – that is a kind of emptying or slate-wiping so that I am fully present for whatever surfaces. Always, the night before a session or workshop is scheduled, I will tell the horses – verbally, out loud – that they will be working the next day. As they are loose during sessions, the horses can self-elect to participate, or not. Sometimes all four will be involved. Sometimes one primarily, with others on the periphery and sometimes, although rarely, none of the horses engage with the client. This tends to happen when a person (or group) is unwilling or unable to drop from a mind/thought to a body/feeling state over a sustained period, when there is a lack of respect or acknowledgement for the horses in their own right, or when individuals are simply not yet ready for work with the horses which can be powerful to the point of overwhelm. In all of these instances, we work with whatever shows, trusting that the Knowing Field is alive. And in all instances, it is entirely up to the horses, whether or not to engage. After sessions, the horses tend to be noticeably quieter, calmer and more at peace. Which is to say, they too benefit.

The horse-guided modality works well for those who have journeyed down the long road of talking therapies and come up short. It's an obvious choice for people who are drawn to animals, nature and the outdoors, but also for those for whom verbal expression and articulation proves challenging. Conversely, it also provides occasion for huge paradigm shifts for those trapped in a mind-loop of constant questioning, second-guessing, doubting and debunking, if and when they are able to dispense with their habitual patterning, even briefly.

In the years I have been offering these sessions, I have noticed that clients tend to arrive in thematic swathes – trauma and PTSD, physical and sexual abuse, addictions, grief and bereavement, in particular. Some sign up for one session and experience a profound life shift. Others will attend several sessions and yet others attend on an ongoing basis, both in person, and now during lockdown, remotely. In each case, a vibrational force-field emerges between the client, the horses and myself, all working together in service of life.

As I have gathered and set down these thoughts over the past weeks, I am reminded that it's almost three years since we first moved here, to our little farm in the East Sussex countryside. Three years of movement and change and shift and heft. But the land, it tells you things, speaks up, catches you unawares and sometimes if I am still enough, I can almost hear the grass growing, stretching out, the leaves falling and the air breathing. It happens often late at night, down at the yard, when the world has gone quiet. The horses, they are the reason we are here, after all. I approach Pineapple's stable, the one he displayed so proudly to the animal communicator we brought in to help us understand his initial distress: "I can't believe this is where I've landed, my own little palace," he told her proudly. And so, I enter his palace and stand close. Close enough to feel his breath brush across my face. My breathing slows in time with his. Our heads lowered, we stand like those two cellos side by side, vibrating one into the other and back again. It's as if time stands still. But no, it's not that at all. There's something else. I have entered time. Arrived there.

Time does its own keeping and breath is its own reward.

Notes:

1. A male horse that has been castrated.

REFERENCES

- Draaisma, R. (2017) *Language Signs and Calming Signals of Horses*. CRC Press, Boca Raton, USA.
- Knaapen, R. (2020) *Coachen Met Paarden: De wijsheid van de kudde*. Boom Publishing, Amsterdam, Netherlands.
- Kohanov, L. (2007) *Riding Between the Worlds: Expanding your Potential through the Way of the Horse*. New World Library, Novato, USA.
- Mason Boring, F. & Sloan, K. E. (2013) *Returning to Membership in Earth Community – Systemic Constellations in Nature*. Stream of Experience Productions, Colorado, USA.
- Peyton, S. (2017) *Your Resonant Self*. W. Norton & Company, New York, USA.
- Reynolds Thompson, M. (2019) *Reclaiming the Wild Soul: How Earth's Landscapes Restore us to Wholeness*. Wild Roots Press, Ashland, USA.
- Sitch, A. (2020) *The Universal Language of Nature – A New Way of Conflict Resolution and Authentic Leadership*. Hybrid Global Publishing, New York, USA.