

AEDP-Informed Equine Assisted Psychotherapy

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Abstract. Part One of this article is a historical contextual introduction to lend appreciation to the centrality of the horse-human relationship. We begin with a moment, 7,000 years ago, when a human first mounted a horse and there upon altered the course of human evolution. As advances in civilization progressed at an exponential pace, the developing human mind created increasingly left-brain-leaning cultural developments. The contention is that left-brain-leaning influences had over the centuries laid dormant the capacities that enabled that ancient horse-human collaboration. This leads us to confronting the effects of a left-brain-leaning world orientation upon social isolation, loneliness and disenchantment. Our continuing bond with the horse remains one of the few links to our finely hewn right-brain ancestral history and provides an experiential vantage point from which to understand the depth and breadth of our right-brain-leaning capacities laid dormant over the course of time. AEDP meta-psychology is uniquely positioned to help us understand what we have lost as our evolution carried us further from the Eurasian Steppe, and has a methodology to reclaim and vitalize these capacities. Part Two introduces the incorporation of AEDP into Equine Assisted Therapy (EAP), and illuminates the perfect mapping of each onto the other. Part Three is a review of the horse/herd mentality, which supplies the therapeutic tools for AEDP-Informed EAP. Part Three gives special attention to the transformational affect, awe, ubiquitous to the horse-human experience. Part Four is a transcription of a client's account of her healing experience in equine therapy.

Part One: Contextual Introduction to the Ancestral Mind and the 7,000-year Horse-Human Journey

Those ancient neural territories below the neocortex constitute our ancestral mind—the affective mind, which is evolutionarily specialized and that we share with many other animals. It is an “archaeological treasure,” for it contains the sources of some of our most powerful feelings. Those ancient subcortical brain systems are precious, multihued “jewels” for anyone wishing to understand the roots of all the basic values we have ever known and will experience in our lives (Pankseep & Biven, *Kindle location 54*, 2012).”

Barns are typically oriented east to west, so that the state of entry is subliminally apprehended by the sensation of its shadowed portal. This is rightly so because a chasm of 7,000 years of left-tilting brain evolution and neo-cortical expansion separates us from the horse-human neuro-affective resonance that mastered that singular epic collaboration.¹

Seven thousand years ago, a brave man on a brave horse collaborated² to gallop across the Eurasian Steppe for the first time (Anthony, 2010). That single day, on the vast pastoral, temperate Eurasian Steppe (modern day Kazakhstan), both human and horse became a creative force in their own evolution. The brave horse, by allowing the man-predator atop its back, an act defiant of its most basic survival instincts, saved

¹ I use the word collaboration because the horse, when approached respectfully, mindfully and with self-possession, is an intelligent and willing partner. It is impossible to imagine that our ancestors could have coerced the horse to deliver on actions that are antithetical to his most basic instincts such as allowing a creature onto the top of its back. To put this into perspective, is it imaginable to coerce a horse to perform highly skilled athletic feats during battle with clashes of swords and trumpets and the scent of blood and death?

² “With choice comes the emergence of a new evolutionary agency—the capacity of individual field of aesthetic evolution. He critiques the over-emphasis of a minor aspect of Darwin’s theory of evolution, “survival of the fittest,” and attempts to revive Darwin’s original thesis, natural selection, using his study of bird mating as a source of validation. “Darwin discovered that evolution is not merely about the survival of the fittest but also about charm and sensory delight in individual subjective experience (Prum, 2017 p.56).”

itself from certain extinction³ and then made itself indispensable to most aspects of human survival, mastery, and inspiration. The man, ignited with exalted emotions and ingenious inspiration that could not be muted by the obvious danger (he had surely witnessed the horse/herd skillfully evade, or mercilessly eject, and for good measure, stomp, the predator that dare jump on its back), re-routed the path of the previous 200,000+ years of human history. Civilization, as we know it, was thus launched in a thunderous gallop toward modernity.

Partnership with the horse enabled exponential progress in most aspects of civilization: territory discovery and acquisition, agriculture, trade, transport, technology, and creative inspiration in every era and culture (Forrest, 2017). It was the horse that was the subject of the first motion picture photography (see Wikipedia: Motion Picture Photography). In our most intimate cultural moments, humans looked to the horse for courage, solace and hope. The rider-less horse honors our fallen presidents and soldiers. Seabiscuit, an underdog race horse, rallied an entire country, and inspired broken spirits during the Great Depression (Hillenbrand, 2001). Horses fought with valor along with their soldiers in war, carried the dead home, and were themselves buried with military honors. The magnificence of the Lipizzaner horses persuaded WWII General Patton, much to his own bewilderment, to risk essential military resources to the rescue of these 250+ horses from the claws of the Soviet Army (Letts, 2016).

³ By 5,000 BC, horses had been hunted to near extinction (Anthony, 2010)

Today, the horse heals the injured spirits of our war heroes⁴, mobilizes the hips of disabled children in the exact mechanical ways that mimic walking, and heals psychic wounds through their highly refined means of social bonding. The horse ignites exalted emotions, and, as will be featured at the close of this article, these emotions have the power to restore vitality and hope to a grieving widow.

Part Two: Ancestral Longings: Human Suffering and Hope to be Found in the Shared Mammalian Mind

Seven thousand years ago, human mastery was defined by the mutually beneficial engagement with nature. Today, human mastery has far surpassed its reliance upon nature, and is steeped in our technological/mechanistic left-leaning mind/brain orientation. It is therefore difficult to put into perspective what our ancestors of the Eurasia Steppe achieved given the thousands of years of horse domestication⁵ and our cognitive revolutions. Yet, it is not beyond our imagining, because this mind-set remains within us to re-discover.

Badenoch (2018) brings to the study of trauma the work of McGilchrist (2009) on the deleterious effects of our progressively dominating left-leaning

⁴ The VA has endorsed equine therapy as a treatment for PTSD. "Colonel Brown described the joy and freedom of two men who lost both legs above the knee. Once lifted and secured in saddles over time were able to trot and canter and perform tricks. One day they exploded into full gallop whooping in triumph at their accomplishment (Forrest, 2017)."

⁵ The feral horse of 7,000 years ago cannot be compared to today's horse, or today's horse-human relationship. Today's horses have not been taken down by their backs by cougars, or hunted with arrows to near extinction by humans. The initial prospect holds no precedent. Let us not underestimate this achievement.

brain on society and culture. She gives considerable weight to his argument that the consequences of this left-leaning shift have weakened social structures, those necessary to support our social-emotional needs. Our society is less supportive of environments that enrich our access to the right brain capacities: social-emotion intelligence, emotional attunement, mutual regulation, holistic and intuitive thinking and non-verbal reasoning. We are cut off from the somatic experience of emotion and from the body's informative signals. Badenoch proposes that the isolation from others, and alienation from a felt-sense of self that is inherent in such a society, is, in and of itself, a form of trauma.

Modern-day humans are so deeply afflicted by social alienation that, as I write this, England has announced the creation of a "ministry of loneliness," in acknowledgement of a "crisis of loneliness" of epidemic proportions. Loneliness is and now determined to be a leading cause of death (NPR, 1/27/2018). In a CNN advertisement for its AI series, a young scientist is asked if she thinks people will fall in love with robots. The woman answers, "Oh, I think it's inevitable." An MIT robotics researcher reported on subjects who are compelled to share their deepest feelings to a robotic box, equipped with a recorded voice and painted smile (NPR, 2/24/18, *All Things Considered*). Badenoch is correct in alarming us to the traumatic and alienating consequences of our left-leaning culture.

The following vignette illustrates the chasm between the right brain mind-set and the left brain mind-set:

I'm walking by a little girl and her mom at the edge of the river. The water is exceptionally clear and from where I am I can see that the little girl is excitedly pointing at a school of minnows. They are synchronized swimming in glitter flesh. "Mommy" Mommy!" The girl joyously mimics the fish swirling in somatic resonance. "The fishes are dancing!" Mommy leans in and carefully studies the fish. She clarifies, "No honey, the fishes are not dancing, they are escaping from a bigger fish that is trying to eat them.

The child is participating in an act of mindfulness to her environment and somatic resonance with nature. Her joy and enchantment is heightened but not dysregulated, because she is grounded in her somatic resonance with the minnows' homeostatic biology. This child, in this moment, has access to the fully integrated self we work hard to recover in our clients.

As AEDP psychotherapists, we understand the psychic harm when emotions are stifled. We recognize the frozen wonderment of this child in our dysthymic adult patient. However, this injury is not simply interpersonal, although it would be if dampening emotion in general is this mother's agenda. It could well have been a bonding moment, as mother and daughter walked hand in hand, with mother solemnly introducing daughter to the dangers in the world. But, more likely, we witness the effects of the long reach of modern world's left-leaning tendrils into this mother-child moment. We witness the tendrils strangle the experience of enchantment, inherent in communication with nature⁶.

⁶ "In the long evolution from primal to modern consciousness, there has taken place a complexly intertwined and interpenetrating two-sided process: one the one hand, a gradual *differentiation* of the self from the world, of the human being from nature...on the other hand, a gradual *disenchantment* of the world... (Tarnas, R. 2006, p.22)."

The vignette illustrates the natural functioning of the right-brain capacities AEDP therapists work to access and cultivate in our clients: (a) mindfulness (noticing the fish as opposed to thinking about, anything); (b) accommodation of the positive (beauty, positive affects in general), integrated into a creative narrative (the fishes are dancing); (c) somatic resonance (she spontaneously moves in rhythm with the minnows), and (d) inherent in that, seeing oneself in the delight and beauty of nature, a recognition that affirms the self (Fosha, 2009).

So as to not *understate* the difficulty in reclaiming these gems, consider the weight of both societal evolution and personal development that render these capacities dormant. Furthermore, a great deal of cognitive-social-emotional development must proceed smoothly for this minnow girl to evolve her somatic-affective resonance into, perhaps, dance choreography, or the study of microscopic fractals. These developmental processes proceed within nuclear caregiving environments, but are nested in layers of proximal social environments – with effects that seem far too subtle and too deeply embedded in society to notice or challenge. To add to our developmental complexity, humans are not only wired to thrive and survive within secure social bonds, as the horse in the herd, but, unlike the horse in the herd, we also are wired to individuate⁷. How well the inevitable early parent-child conflicts are navigated along these two lines of development, that of connection (attachment) and individuation (Mahler, 1963), impacts the individual's cognitive-affective-social

⁷ The zoological term for this form of sociality is “fission-fusion.” This type of society is found among coyotes and a rare few other species. Fission-fusion is the ability to function in social bonds or autonomously as conditions warrant (Flores, 2016).

competency (Sroufe et al., 2005). The internal pressure of competing needs, for connection and autonomy; that is, to stay with, or to head off and away, gives greater weight to the achievement of our Eurasian mounted explorer.

At the same time, we cannot overstate the elemental resilience of these capacities (Russell 2015). The vignette in Part Three, “Lori enters the lair,” demonstrates our physiological responsiveness to the horse’s “right-facilitating environment.” The vignette also illustrates that biology retains the capacities of our Eurasian horse whisperer and gives credence to the unwavering optimism AEDP holds for human healing capacities (Fosha, 2001).

Part Three: The AEDP-EAP Interface Herd-Brain to Right-Brain Healing

AEDP metapsychology offers EAP a theoretical foundation, and EAP offers AEDP ecological validation. AEDP metapsychology applies to EAP accordingly: (a) capacities for social bonding, exalted affects and creative aspiration are innate; (b) pathology is the result of obstacles to access innate capacities; (c) resilience and self-righting are inherent and oriented to reclaiming our biological nature; and the reclamation resides in the very natures that have been blighted; (d) we are wired to seek out, know when we find it, and respond to the “right facilitating environment” to restore our inherent capacities to thrive; and (e) positive change experience can be transformative beyond healing. This last point is especially important for explaining the

powerful effects of equine therapy. The horse inspires exalted transformational affects, and particularly, awe (this will be thoroughly discussed in Part Four).

The interface of horse therapy and AEDP is that both environments—one by natural design, the other by research-based methodology—aims to access, enhance and nurture these capacities by providing an interpersonal/interspecies environment awash in them, recognizing and seizing them, and fostering the integration of these capacities into an continuously integrating self.

The horse will teach us a form of human collection⁸, and in return the horse responds with their version of emotional agility. This highly aware, inquisitive, centered form of human collection is simultaneously instructive, contagious, and comforting to the horse... We should always remember: our horses always mirror our inner and outer behaviour precisely. Understood in the right way, this is an incredible opportunity (Hempfling, 2010).

The horse⁹ is an especially valiant healing resource when we consider the fact that what is instinctive for the horse is for the human exactly what is most vulnerable to social and interpersonal and developmental challenges. The human, when entering the herd dynamic, will find that internal conflicts and self-other challenges come glaringly in to light. Where the horse and human mis-attune is where the horse alerts us to that which needs healing. This is the entry point for an equine therapist to intervene. The areas of difficulty encountered are predominantly: (a) resonant presence, (b) emotion clarity, and (c) clear yet flexible boundaries. When the difficulty is made clear by the horse's' unmistakably negative response, the horse will just as unmistakably respond in

⁸ "Collection" in the horse refers to the highest level of athletic training.

⁹ A therapy horse is selected for their ability to understand their role and the context in which they assist. The well selected horse enjoys and is proud of their role as co-therapist. These horses are also provided with protection and support by the equine therapist and horse handler to whom they are bonded.

a positive manner when the human self- rights. An opportunity to grow in this environment is rich with positive affect, play, and social bonding; these are the very ingredients known to comprise a therapeutic healing environment (Schoore, 2012).

These three particular horse/herd behaviors will be discussed as they operate within the herd and as they correspond to AEDP state therapeutic work.

Resonant Presence and AEDP State One

AEDP methodology follows human development needs. The first order is to establish dyadic regulation, awareness and responsiveness, and only then to access and process core affect with a calm nervous system. Therefore, just as an AEDP therapist creates a right-brain to right-environment to engage and nurture the receptivity to co-regulation and affectively-toned communication, the horse can similarly offer a herd-like version of this healing environment. Somatic attunement to self and horse is the continuous undercurrent and foundation in equine therapy. Clients are given tasks such as monitoring synchronized breathing, listening to horse sounds of eating grass, or hand grazing to heighten somatic awareness and to encourage co-regulation.

For the horse, survival of the herd is dependent upon each member's absolute resonant presence¹⁰. Ethologist Lucy Ree (1985) in her study of stampede behavior, noted that even in the panicked flight of a stampede, there is cohesion and synchrony.

¹⁰ This phenomenon is often called morphic resonance and/or swarm theory; the beings are part of a shared field of energy with its own identity, yet the individuals are autonomous within the field (Sheldrake, 2009).

You never see a stampeding herd trampling one-another, the energy field of boundary is always intact. Their survival is dependent upon the quick-fire responsivity to another horse's alert, and just as quick return to pastoral para-sympathetic calm. Life in the herd is saturated with vibrational breath sounds that communicate persistent reassurances of presence, safety and homeostasis. All this is soothing the brainstem's "natural rhythmic engagement" (Perry, Hambrick, 2008) for horse and human alike.

Horses spend the vast majority of their time maintaining and monitoring the homeostatic well-being of the herd, and will provide regulation and comfort to a herd member in distress. When a disorganized, over-stimulated horse senses that they are dysregulated, they will seek out comfort from a calming pasture-mate (Kohanov, 2013).

Horses will impart their instinctive affect regulating behaviors onto their humans, through licking, mouthing, sighing. When we are in attuned contact with them, our heart-rates synchronize with theirs. When there is stress in the environment, they willingly lean their bodies into the human members of the herd to calm our nervous systems. Australian study of equestrian athletes during the Sydney Olympics found that the most successful horse-human pairs had synchronized heart-rates (Bridgeman, 2009).

Yet horses do not simply attune to our nervous system and emotions, they actually process and understand the context. In a study to determine if horses responded to heart-rate or emotion, researchers put blindfolded subjects in a corral with horses. Some of the human subjects were experienced, and some were frightened. Those who were experienced were told to run to raise their heart rate. The horses lowered their heads (an affect regulating behavior) and did not move around the

frightened subjects. The heart rates of the frightened subjects were lowered following the trial. The study demonstrates that horses naturally extend sympathetic herd behavior to humans, and can discern emotion and intention underlying a physiological state (Keeling, et al., 2009).

The human side of the equation is that to connect with the horse we are challenged to match their degree of resonant presence. Simple actions require constant attention, connection, refinement (though for a person already belonging to this level of attentiveness, presence can be split alongside attention to other activities). If one takes one's mind off even a daily task such as cleaning hooves, one risks losing the attention of the horse, which can be dangerous, and the human learns the same quick-fire shift of state and attention. Hempfling (2010) writes, *"Training a horse for work, or interacting with the horse, whether, leading, cleaning hooves or high-level schooling is a process of obtaining a level of attunement such that the horse is only tuned in and exclusively tuned in to his owner – this is why a bond can be so deep and satisfying."*

Lori, 9, was running through the aisle of the barn while her older sister received a riding lesson, violating two barn rules: Children must be supervised by an adult at all times, and no running in the barn. However, before me was an opportunity to witness in vivo, the regulatory powers of the horse. Because horses are annoyed by chaotic and impulsive activity, eleven of the horses in the 12-stall barn stayed in the back of their stalls, eating their hay, and ignoring her as best they could. Bonfire, a massive but gentle stallion, hung his head over his stall gate and calmly observed her mindless and noisy activity. Lori allowed me to introduce her to Bonfire. I led her some distance from his stall and stepped aside. Lori was immediately stilled, as she was likely intimidated by his size. However, something about his attention to her compelled her to engage in a reciprocal interchange guided by Bonfire. This looked to me much like the way people instinctively speak to babies, providing the pauses to be filled

in by babbles (Brunner, 1985), except this was not a communication with words, but with energy and boundaries. Bonfire reached his head toward her, and sent out a long, slow, bass-like breath. Lore very briefly looked to me to reference safety, in wide-eyed amazement and apprehension, with a shade of reverence. With my nod of approval and encouragement she leaned her upper body forward a bit, instinctively gauging what would be just right so as not to drive him to the back of the stall as she had learned to expect from the horses in reaction to her impulsivity. Bonfire sent out another softer, more relaxed breath and tilted his head sideways a bit. Lori closed her eyes and leaned in a little closer, and she also sent out a breath. This appeared spontaneous. It appeared she was engaging in a give-and-take exchange of cautiously venturing into one another's boundaries. This is similar to how stallions and mares approach one another. However, Bonfire was acting to calm Lori as he would a youngster in the herd in need of regulation. Lori worked her way close to him, over the course of several reciprocal exchanges until she had her cheek resting against the side of his muzzle. He was breathing slowly and deeply. The effect on her was extremely calming. Lori experienced the power of a regulating other, without the usual corrections and shaming reprimands. Lori remained relaxed and enjoyed visiting each of the horses while she waited for her sister. The experience was not only a healing corrective emotional experience; it was felt as an achievement. She felt cared for, not judged, and also felt important.

What stands out to me about this event is Lori's somatic responsiveness to the regulating environment Bonfire created for her. The lack of context to a human regulating environment, ordinarily fraught with the triggers of judgment and shame, allowed her to have an experience of mutually pleasurable connection that could be integrated into her developing self, a new experience of "I am calm, delighted and delightful, connected, liked and competent."

*Emotion, the Language of the Horse, and AEDP State Two:
Integrating Core Emotion and Somatic Experience within Social Bonds*

Emotion is a biological, self-organizing and motivational life force, for horse as

well as human. It is the primary source of information about the environment to the self, and about the self to the self, and is also the primary source of communication about the self to others. Clarity of expression and a capacity for attunement to another's emotions are necessary to effectively interact with the human environment, and to develop a cohesive sense of self. Because its central organization is biological, emotion gives continuity to our experience of self in spite of the many ways we change throughout development. However, as we explored in the case of the minnow girl, left-leaning social forces hinder natural access to our emotions. And, sometimes, as is often the case with our patients suffering trauma, emotion is suppressed for more pernicious reasons.

The horse-herd environment is entirely emotional, and therefore, emotions become heightened and undeniable (fortunately, the emotional atmosphere is mostly positive, playful and peaceful). The horse-herd environment is the one place where dropping into core affect, regardless of what it is, is consistently required and instantly rewarded. Horses are accepting of all emotions, and it is natural for them to impart soothing or to share pleasure. What they do not tolerate is emotional incongruity. When the somatic expression does not match the emotion expression, the horse is confused. For a horse, confusion is unnatural and dangerous. A confused horse responds with avoidance and evasion. As the confusion mounts or is mixed with threat, the horse will progress to dissociation and, on rare occasion, aggression¹¹.

For the horse, emotion is its language, communicated through vibrational breath with sounds of unmistakable meaning. For the human, language is removed from the

¹¹ Horse is 20x more aggressive in domestic than in wild (Ree, 2017).

equation and our minds are stripped of the set schemas we rely upon to understand our environment. We are transported into the realm of pure affective expression of the primary motivational affects all mammals share (Pankseep, 2010). And thus, a rawness of our own emotions may be awakened. But within the herd, this rawness is at once welcomed, comforted or celebrated, and always smoothed back into homeostasis.

Expressiveness and fully embodied energetically felt presence of the feeling states associated with primal motivational systems are in constant flow. Felt through the lexicon of breath, emotional states are highly organized around the cohesiveness of the herd: the low whinny of a welcome, the high-pitched screech of separation, the cheerful singsong announcing a happy event (hay!), the unmistakable screech of “get out of my space.” This language of emotion viscerally rises from the belly and vibrates throughout the horse’s body. The sounds viscerally penetrate. And when there is silence, there is the slowed rate of breathing. I have just described, the feeling of immersion in the primal affective resonance within the herd. Devoid of human context and language, we are forced to recalibrate our preferred reliance upon higher level cognition and language-- and we may feel momentarily untethered. However, an untethering within a herd environment is awash in somatically felt positive affect and the encouragement of the magnificent beasts so fond of human attention.

While humans may be skilled at blocking access to their emotions, for most of us, it is *physically* impossible not to experience emotion from the horse. This is especially impactful when a horse is traumatized or unprotected in some manner. The screams of terror or separation in this horse is penetrating and felt on a most primal level, where we

do not have defenses against these states. Or, the horse may dissociate so profoundly that the connection with a horse whose spirit is broken will feel devastating and haunting. Nietzsche's admission to the mental asylum was famously triggered by observing a horse beaten by a cruel master; it is storied that he threw his arms around the horse's neck to protect him and then fell to the ground (Smithfield, 2017).

Without language, and the concepts embedded within language, we are stripped of thought patterns relied upon to understand our environment. Automatic habitual patterns of interpreting are un-useable. We are transported into the experience of clarity of emotion experience. Therapeutic moments frequently occur as assumptions and projections are glaringly disconfirmed. Positive affects compete with emotion scripts that are easily disconfirmed in the herd environment. For example, Karen, below, was forced by her own observation to acknowledge that she could not hurt her horse's feelings by asking him to walk with her.

Hilda's Thumb: The Shadow World between the Aid and the Response

"Give an aid and get a response." This is the horse trainer's impatient refrain echoing throughout riding arenas around the world. When there is not an instantaneous response, overlapping the aid, there is a problem. All too often, the rider assumes the problem lies within the horse's head or body. He is either stubborn or hurting. The question of can't vs. won't is a common discussion within horse training facilities.

Hilda is an accomplished equestrian, a successful competitor and sought after trainer. Her competition horse, Priority, died two years earlier. She is now training a young horse with hopes to achieve the success she enjoyed with Priority. Goldmine had great promise but had more than his name to live up to. Hilda was troubled that she did not feel the familiar passion for her new horse that she had with Priority. She secretly disliked him. And they struggled to create a harmonious partnership, evident in the invisible response to aid communication. After chiropractors ruled out structural problems with his neck vertebrae that became very stiff when she rode him, she assumed he was simply oppositional. Hilda finally sought help from a colleague. After a few moments of watching Hilda warm up her horse she

noticed Hilda's right thumb and forefinger held the reins so tightly that the tension could be seen up to her forearm. She asked Hilda to stop riding and to notice this tension. It was now clear that the problem was Hilda. She was sending tremendous amount of tension to her horse through the tension in her thumb. When she asked Hilda to let go of the rein and release her thumb, tears welled up in her eyes. Attending to her thumb, Hilda's anger at the horse erupted, and then her grief. Goldmine was not Priority, and she had been angry with this horse for failing to replace her beloved. Hilda was unaware that she had been suppressing such powerful rage and grief. She relaxed with Goldmine and felt remorse and sympathy for the chronic mis-attunement she generated. She appreciated that Goldmine was doing his best to cope with this disheartening predicament. From there the pair went on to achieve the expected success.

Goldmine's tension and stiffness was in reaction to Hilda's suppressed anger, felt energetically through her tense thumb pressed against the rein and vibrating to his mouth. He was responding to the incongruity of her pleasant voice, affectionate pats, cheerful disposition, but raging body tension in her body.

Boundaries and Fluid Hierarchy

AEDP State Two: Discovering and Recovering the Untethered Self

The simple act of leading a horse will expose conflicts concerning authority and autonomy, or will expose a fragile core self with which to reference for leadership or self-guidance. Developmentally, issues concerning boundaries, roles of dominance and submission are compromised when we cannot rely upon self-regulation and clear accessible emotion. Without self as point of reference we are at the mercy of external forces. Because emotion's central organization is biological, emotion gives continuity to our experience of self in spite of the many ways we change throughout development.

For the horse, harmonious boundaries are of critical importance for herd survival. Contrary to common belief, leadership in the herd is fluid and *not fixed* (Forrest, 2017;

Ree, 2017; Kohvonv 2013). The play and negotiation of boundaries is a continuous activity in horse interaction. While there are temperamental preferences for dominance, any competent horse can dominate or submit when necessary for the benefit of herd functioning. Most horses are happy to hand over the responsibility of being in an alpha role, as it is more stressful to be on alert for predators than to mindfully graze. However, dominance has its perks, and the alpha horse assumes postures expressing pride, power, and nobility; they are obviously expressing pleasure in the role (Hempfling, 2010). In fact, ancient “war moves” taught to horses for the battle field, now demonstrated as an art in dressage performance, were adapted from the horse’s natural expression in play, prance, and aggression (Podhajsky, 1967).

The horse is highly attuned to the stability of a human’s energetic grounding and strength of an operating core self. This is evident to the horse through the clarity of our assertions, the congruity of our emotions, and the degree of precision in moment-to-moment mindfulness. If there is a void in our energy, the horse will physically fill the space, either to assume a role, or simply fill a void as we are compelled to complete a circle. If we are unclear in our request, within the void between the request and the response, we encounter our confusion and conflicts concerning self-assertion, if mindfully present. The horse will not attend to a distracted person, and that is when accidents happen.

The following vignette illustrates the precision with which a horse exposes what is hidden within us, and the rapid self-righting a human can accomplish through the horse’s reflection and rewarding responsivity. Mister let Karen know she was not

mindfully present. Her emotions were not clear and her expression confused. Her conflicts about assertion and aggression led Mister to ignore and then escape her presence. We also witness how Mister positively responded to Karen's self-righting following our 'talk' intervention.

Karen was 28 when she entered therapy and she soon revealed a history of witnessing her father physically abuse her mother. Over time, Karen confronted her anger with her mother for "not fighting back" and "being weak." Though she understood the dynamics of domestic abuse, and in her rational mind did not blame her mother, Karen did attribute her own passivity to her mother's example. Phrases regurgitated in her mind, "don't make waves," "don't draw attention to yourself," "be quiet and do as you are told." Karen was making progress, eventually recognizing these 'voices' as coming from a part of her childhood mind that, though tormenting, were there to keep her "in line," safe from the kind of abuse she witnessed. She was learning to take distance from these thoughts and to have compassion toward them as well. Karen is a few weeks into a promotion at work. Having never experienced the challenges of being in a position of authority, she now is charged with supervising a small staff. She is emotionally unprepared to "take charge," "tell someone what to do," and to be "convincing about it." It is time for Karen to have a horse-therapy session. Karen chooses Mister, a small and meek horse, "because he looks easy and not scary." After having spent time with Mister and establishing a co-regulating relationship, it was time for Karen to directly confront her issues by asking Mister to take her lead in walking inside the arena. With the horse handler, Anna, on one side of the horse and me walking next to her, Anna instructs Karen to walk Mister across the arena. She moves forward, but Mister does not budge. Anna encourages Karen to hold the lead lightly, not pull, but to "just picture walking with him and us to the other side." I remind Karen to breathe, and take some time to pet and talk to Mister. When she feels ready, she tries again. She walks forward and Mister walks along, but veers in another direction (toward the door leading out of the arena). Mister is letting Karen know that he doesn't want to interact with her because she is sending conflicting messages and is not present and grounded, not connected to him. Another horse may express his discomfort and instinct to escape or evade in a different way, but this is Mister's way. At this point Karen is discouraged. Worse, she sees 7-year-old Sonja casually lead a "difficult" horse back to his stall. Anna returns Mister to his stall while Karen and I begin to process her experience. Karen felt unsettled by her feeling resentment and dislike of Sonja, whom she did not know and only had a glance of her walking

by with the horse. With some help to not “think” about her feelings, her go-to strategy to avoid actually “feeling” her feelings, but to attend to what is happening in her body, Karen accessed a clearer experience of her emotions. Karen was simply feeling anger, bitter anger. She was angry with Mister, angry with herself, angry with her parents. As the wave of these powerful emotions eased, Karen reflected. She was taken by surprise by her anger, and realized that in fact, “if I were to be absolutely honest,” she wanted to yell at Mister. Karen had just accomplished an honest and courageous piece of therapeutic work. She felt proud and amazed by her realization that after all this time her passivity had been in defense of a fear that she may be in possession of her father’s violence. Karen is able to settle her mind and connect to where she feels somatically centered. We envision leading the horse from that felt sense of a calm, centered self. We can now bring Mister back to the arena. Karen takes a great deal of time to talk to him. She wonders about him and asks questions. Mister responds by gently nudging her, which awakens a bright smile in Karen. She feels she “really loves this horse,” and “feels calm” and “light on my feet.” On their own accord Karen and Mister walk casually forward. She talks to him as they walk, and they make it in tandem, walking in synchronized rhythm, to the other side of the arena. She turns to us and jumps joyfully, laughing, “So *this* is what you wanted me to do.”

Karen felt this casual walk with Mister as a natural non-verbal communication that she felt coming from her core, as opposed to her mind. In fact, she wasn’t thinking, she was aiming for the other end of the arena along with a willing Mister, who was likely very proud of his role in helping Karen get grounded and present. I asked Karen to memorize this feeling of connection with her own desires and the feeling of her grounded core-self so that she could recapture the feeling in other settings

Had our session ended with Karen memorizing this connection with her desires, this could be a satisfying session. However, in an AEDP therapy we are not satisfied with reconciling inner conflict and processing emotion to completion. We now move on to a truly unique AEDP innovation. We now raise up the glimmer of pleasure following a completed emotional process, and cultivate these

transformational emotions. Transformational emotions are often of the exalted order of emotions, such as awe, enchantment, joy. AEDP therapy reserves ample time within a session to explore and embed these emotions. In the words of SueAnne Piliero, we “glue the glimmer (AEDP presentation).”

Part Four

AEDP State Three. Awe: A Horse-Human Phenomena in Abundance

*A free horse that has been effectively and authentically trained by the human hand is always stronger, braver, more confident, more flexible, of higher status and simply more beautiful than a comparable one in the wild. Work with horses would not be interesting to me if it were not mutually beneficial. Riding a horse would not be interesting if it were not desired by the horse. Because a **horse desires to express the magnificence that the human sees in him**. And, in doing so, the horse informs the human how to perfect his authentic self (Hempfling, 2010).*

It is unique to AEDP therapy that what we've accomplished is merely half the work, there is yet the, “and then some!¹²” waiting to unfold. Processing emotion hovers on the edge of a magnificent crescendo: There is yet a third and a fourth course to offer our intrepid patient. We now attend to the third state transformation, replete with transformational affects (which include the exalted affects, such as, joy, amazement, gratitude, awe), allowing them to simmer until they settle into core state, a state that “feels relaxed, accepting of oneself, compassionate toward self and other, open, grounded, in a ‘flow,’ at ease, solid but light” (Russell, 2015, p. 43). Fosha states that

¹² This phrase is part of the title of one of Fosha's (2009) articles: Healing attachment trauma with attachment (and then some!).

“more begets more”, and this must be a wired-in truth. After all, our spirited rider of the Eurasian Steppe was not satisfied with plentiful harvest, temperate climate and tribal comforts. In the words of Robert Browning, “Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a heaven for?”

Prum (2017), a contemporary evolutionary biologist contends that not every biological nuance must serve a survival purpose. The quintessential example is the peacock’s fan. Exalted affects, while we can survive without them, (and sadly, in our left-leaning society, many people do), we cannot thrive without them (Steller, 2012). Keltner states these affects are aspirational and serve to inspire creativity, and unify, with fellow humans, or with nature, or an object of beauty. “To be moved by that which unites us into collectives, was to be wired into our minds and bodies”

(Keltner, 2013, p. 260). Piff et al. (2015) invoked their subjects to experience awe then asked them to write about their experiences. They found that awe seemed to “dissolve the self” and promote “self-distancing.” Shiota et al. (2011) find awe states stimulate vagal parasympathetic “tend-and-befriend” responses and pro-social behaviors. Steller (2012) speculates that some of the pernicious effects of poverty may be the deprivation of awe-inducing experiences. And of course, in our left-brain-leaning society we do have the problem of forgetting to look up and outward from our smartphones.

Keltner shares Greek philosopher Protagoras’s mythological story on the origins of awe:

The gods ran out of abilities and talents, alas, before figuring out what to do with that thin-skinned, slow-footed species— humans— who were

scattered about in semi-functioning, soon to be extinct bands. Reacting to this state of affairs, Prometheus gave the first humans technology— fire. Zeus, however, quickly realized the limitations of technology. Fire could provide warmth, a means of burning germs out of meat, and forms of defense, but humans would need more to survive; they would need to be bound together in cooperative, strong communities. So Zeus gave humans two qualities. The first is a sense of justice, to ensure that the needs of all would be met. The second was reverence, or the capacity for awe (Keltner, 2013, p. 257).

Keltner defines awe as the experience of both “vastness and accommodation.” It is the experience of an encounter with something vast that is beyond our ability to understand, or beyond any cognitive schema we can apply.

Consider Keltner’s definition of awe and Fosha’s definition of recognition: *“If emotion is the disruption that forces us accommodate to new aspects of reality, recognition is the process by which we assimilate the new and fold it back into ourselves” (2009, p.190).*

We can be led to wonder if awe can be considered, in addition to a transformational affect a recognition process, except that the “True Other” is not a fellow human, but a force of nature or beauty. Fosha (2009, p.179) states, “Recognition is always ‘dyadic’ in that it involves two things fitting together, but it is not necessarily relational or interpersonal: the fit can be between self and other, but it can also be between self and self, or self and process, or self and experience. The ‘click’ occurs between what is felt as ‘me’ and ‘not me,’ in a way that feels right and allows what was felt as ‘not me’ to eventually become integrated into ‘me’”. Considering our biological interconnectedness with nature (one can presume that recognition processes can also occur between self and nature. We can “fold” the awe-inspiring “back into ourselves,”

thereby discovering the parts of ourselves that belong to what we find beautiful in nature and reminding ourselves that we too are a part of the natural world.

Archeology, mythology, art, history and psychology attest to the common experience that awe is ubiquitous in the horse-human relationship. The experience, as will be shown in the case of Cindy and Casper, it underlies the entire healing experience. Awe can change lives, as it did mine, when my heart soared so high and so far, watching this horse Casper dance, that I changed my life to buy him, and then went on to organize my life around him, then began this 20-year journey to understand how to integrate the horse experience into my psychotherapeutic work. If you have not felt the ground rumbling beneath your feet as a herd thunders past you, or felt your heart soar watching a magnificent athletic performance, or had the mighty creature respond to your distress signals by breathing their hot opium breath into yours, or felt the comforting of their spontaneous affect-regulating offerings (licks, leaning in, sighs), that you didn't even know you needed, or felt something strangely ethereal when captured by their large liquid eyes... then, you *must* go, now, and meet a horse.

I believe this state helped Cindy, the grieving widow, who we are about to meet soon. Perhaps awe can be an antidote to loneliness. When in awe with nature, we may feel the interconnectedness we rely upon with humans, and thereby offset loneliness in the absence of human connection. Nature can also gratify our need for inter-connectivity, flushing our brains with pleasing and rewarding neuro-chemicals (Arvay, 2018).

Part Four

The Healing Power of AWE

Casper, I loved the way you looked at me with your soulful, understanding eyes. I loved it in the arena with your fancy moves and thunderous galloping. I think you liked showing off to Carrie and me. I loved it when you looked at yourself in the mirrors, because I knew you were looking at someone so special! I loved just standing there, and you just standing there, hanging out with you. We were just being and that's what we'll do, we'll be, always.

I marveled at your strength and the consideration you showed in the stall as you slowly gently turned your massive body while Carrie, you and I were together in there... I thank you for appreciating my singing to you, I enjoyed it too.

Thank you for accepting me for who I am. I didn't have to worry how I appeared to others, and it felt good! I was just being because of you." Cindy (2014), portions of her eulogy to Casper (1984-2014).

The following is an interview with Cindy in January 2018, which I call "Grappling with The Sublime." Cindy's husband died in her arms from a sudden heart attack, at a young age of 60. They were childhood sweethearts and in over 30 years had not spent a day apart. Cindy's resiliency was already stressed by previous traumatic losses, and the loss of her husband was an unthinkable possibility; she did not want to live this life without him, she did not know how she could manage. After several months, as Cindy was slowly emerging from a highly dissociative state, but into an unbearable reality, I suggested Cindy come to the barn to meet my horse, Casper, and to see if horse therapy might somehow help her feel grounded and experience her playfulness in spite of her despair. We would see what could come of it, and at the very least I was happy to introduce her to my horse Casper. Cindy and

Casper flourished in their relationship for two years before he died at the old age of 30 (a very loving passing after a healthy summer).

For this article, I asked Cindy if she would explain how Casper helped her heal from her traumatic grief. From my perspective, I believe that, in addition to what Cindy shares, that her relationship with Casper was healing because Casper connected to a part of her that she felt had died with her husband.

Cindy: “The understanding he had for me, and the compassion for me, and he made me feel somewhere else on a different level than a human can be, a raw level, a very basic level. People have it too. When I said John’s name, he immediately responded to me, knowing what I was feeling, maybe knowing my sorrow.

“I felt like I belonged. I felt like I was just being, with no judgment on his part, just loving me. I think he loved me. I really think he did love me because I heard he could be frisky and he could be aloof.

“He needed to do it and he wanted to and he felt it. He needed to fix me. Broken, I was broken. He just accepted me as - just raw, raw and primal.

“My first Valentine’s day without my husband! Casper was sparkling, both his coat and his eyes. And remember when I said, ‘I’m never going to be kissed again, he started kissing me as though on cue. I even asked Nancy, because I knew she’d tell me the truth. I asked, “Does Casper kiss?” She said, “Ohhh Nooooo! Casper is *not* a kisser.”

“I think you have to be open. But I think, too, grieving so deeply makes you more open. I think it’s that you are very.....when you’re grieving so much, you’re broken. You feel like everything is confusing. Your life has just changed. Your life isn’t what it was anymore. You’re not...(sobbing)... I had a husband, Carrie, and all of a sudden I don’t have a husband. All of a sudden is somebody going to tell me I’m not a wife anymore. But you know something, I still consider myself a wife and married forever. You know what it is? It’s a state of confusion. It’s a state of, as you said, dissociation. Everything has changed, your life as you know it has changed. My brain shut down to help me cope, you explained that. I thought I was going crazy, but you explained my brain was helping me. But Casper, he picked something up. He picked up something.

“It comes down to being instinctive being very instinctive with the person. I don’t know, if I want to say primitive? Soul? I don’t think anyone could reach someone who was like me on that level. I had trouble talking in the beginning. My words were like chopped up, I was like somewhere else. And he brought me back. How could he bring me back? I was never around horses before and he was so big and tall, and he paid attention to me. And he knew I was different too. Not only on the primitive level, the soul level, the soul. Spontaneity. Yes. But he knew I was different because all people (in the barn) are skinny, he could bounce off my belly (*laughing*). It made me laugh. It made me laugh, it made me laugh, Carrie. Oh, and his eyes. He knew that I knew, and this is something that a human can’t do, maybe some humans think they can do it, but a very - what is the word I want to use? Very.....the word I want to use is the *essence*, of like primal. Primitive, but not primitive as far as we are not talking about intelligence,

because Casper was above, *waayy* above, intelligent. Yes, he was off the charts. Just to know that I was different, that I was with him Carrie. Just to keep looking at you with me, his head was out (*reaching out from stall gait into aisle*) all that time (referring to the first time she came to the barn, and was deciding which horse to work with).

What people might call soulful primitive is actually a higher level. A higher level, yeah (eyes up, long pause). I got the chills. Carrie, I got the chills right through me, cause when I get the chills right through me that's affirmation¹³. The primal level is the higher level, and I was able to experience that. I got the chills right through me and I'm thinking that it's (the chills) kind of a recognition of what I wanted to say. People might think raw, some might think primal, some might think primitive. Soul. A higher level.

I got the chills still, a little bit right through me. But to think that I experienced that. The specialness, the specialness and being at a higher level. People may not understand this, but after Casper passed away I still felt him with me.

Casper the horse, and Cindy the widow. Too bad you're not in a room with psychologists and psychiatrists, they can see that I'm with it. They wouldn't believe it. They would be awe-struck. Maybe there would be some that could understand the higher level. The higher level that comes from the primal. Carrie, that's what I want to say, the higher level that comes from the primal. It was a very big blessing. A very big blessing. Kind of showing us, this is not it. This is *not* it. "

¹³ "Let's start with where William James started: The autonomic nervous system. In one study we asked people to describe physical sensations that accompanied different positive emotions, including awe. We found that goose bumps are fairly unique to awe (Keltner, p. 262)."



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