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Opening the Gate: Cultivating Self Awareness and Self Acceptance through  
Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy

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### Abstract

Equine-facilitated psychotherapy is a powerful, illustrative therapy modality that cultivates relationship between clients and horse(s) and helps people gain self-awareness and bring self-acceptance to parts of themselves that have been denied or repressed. Furthermore, equine-facilitated psychotherapy encourages clients to quit struggling against themselves, as opposed to identifying or labeling something that needs to be “fixed” or eliminated such as depression or anxiety. When people are able to genuinely experience whatever they think and feel, and act in a way that is congruent with this, horses respond by wanting to engage in relationship, which can lead to clients having a corrective emotional experience. This is an unexpected gift for many who believe that being genuine with what they think and feel and having their actions reflect this is a sure way to drive away relationship rather than to invite it. Clients then are able to experience what it is like to be authentic in relationship with another living being, rather than being tied to the conditioned ideas of who they “should” and “should not” be. When people experience this, they can be their own authority, and make choices about life from their genuine self. This ability cultivates happiness, intimacy, and mental health as the true self is being honored.

There are several different models of equine-facilitated therapy and psychotherapy practiced with different client populations ranging from at risk youth to the terminally ill. To fully explore each of them would require several different papers. The focus of this paper is how to work with horses to facilitate psychological and spiritual growth for clients within the context of relationship. There are several therapeutic factors that arise from equine-facilitated psychotherapy. The ability to be present is the foundation from which the other therapeutic factors originate. These include: self-awareness, self-acceptance, congruency between inner experience and outward expression, ego strength, the ability to access information from intuition, body sensations and energetic realms as well as the intellect, the ability to tolerate one's own emotions, and the cultivation of healthy relationships (Eldredge, personal communication, Feb. 4, 2003). Utilizing a humanistic and transpersonal framework, equine-facilitated psychotherapy assists and supports individuals in letting go of struggling against who they are.

Using horses in psychotherapy is a relatively new development. The field of equine-facilitated psychotherapy gained official recognition in the mid-1990's when the Equine-Facilitated Mental Health Association (EFMHA) formed as an off-shoot of the North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) (Kohanov, 2001). Although the use of horses in psychotherapy is in its infancy, there has been significant scientific research aimed at understanding the therapeutic relationship between people and animals over the last 40 years,

which is useful for putting equine-facilitated psychotherapy into a broader context.

H. S. Bossard and Boris Levinson are credited with publishing the first papers on animal-assisted psychotherapy in the journal *Mental Hygiene*. Bossard's article, entitled, "The Mental Hygiene of Owning a Dog," discussed several roles a dog can play in family life, including being a source of unconditional love, an outlet for people's desire to express love, and a teacher for children on many topics such as sex education and responsibility (1944). Levinson's article, entitled "The Dog as a 'Co-Therapist,'" introduced the idea of using his dog while doing psychotherapy with children (1962). This idea challenged the paradigm of what was considered therapeutic and was met with cynicism from his colleagues (Fine, 2000). Today it is not uncommon to find dogs at mental health facilities, including the Mental Health Center and the Counseling Center in Boulder, Colorado. Both Bossard and Levinson recognized the healing potential of the human-animal bond.

Although much of the animal-human based research first focused on health related issues, later research has gone on to follow up on Bossard's and Levinson's original work, focusing on the positive psychological effects animals have on people. It makes sense that much of the initial research was done on the animals closest to man, pets.

One of the most significant studies to date was conducted in 1992 by a group of Australian cardiologists. Data on more than 5,000 clients who had signed up for a "healthy heart" project were analyzed over a three-year period, and distinct

differences were found between pet owners and non-owners. Women pet owners older than 40 and male pet owners of all ages had lower blood pressures and 20% lower plasma triglyceride levels than did non-owners. Male pet owners between the ages of 30 and 60 had lower cholesterol levels than did non-owners. “The research found no difference in exercise levels, body mass, or eating habits between the two groups” (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992). Another study conducted in 1990, showed that Medicare enrollees with pets had fewer doctor contacts over a one year period than did non-owners (Siegel, 1990).

Research also has shown that having a pet increases one’s level of psychological well being. In his book, Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy (2000), Fine summarized the most recent research by dividing the findings into two groups that have stood the test of time and multiple studies. According to the first grouping, animals are able to induce an immediate, physiologically de-arousing state of relaxation simply by attracting and holding our attention. This is the same concept that I refer to as awareness when discussing equine-facilitated psychotherapy. According to the second, pets are capable of providing people with a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support (Fine, 2000). According to Serpell (1996), the absence of social companionship is a primary cause of depression, stress, suppression of the immune system, and other various disease states. Animals are consistently available companions that can help fill a lonely void. “It is generally recognized that companion animals provide a readily available source of warm support that can be compensatory for human companionship,” (Fine, 2000, p. 61).

Furthermore, taking a dog for a walk can have a powerful socializing effect as people are more likely to start a conversation when a dog is present than when a person is alone (Messent, 1984). Given the positive effects of simply living with an animal, it makes sense that animal therapies, guided by the skill of a knowledgeable therapist, would yield therapeutic results. The current realm of research extends beyond household pets to other animals, including dolphins and horses.

Dolphin-assisted therapy, although limited to serving certain populations due to the specific dolphin habitat, has produced some interesting results. Dolphins are seen as useful in therapy because of their intelligence. They seem to be closer to humans in their multi-modal learning style and cognitive abilities than most other animals, and the stress-reducing capabilities of water also yields therapeutic results. (Nathanson, 1998). Nathanson studied the long-term effectiveness of dolphin-assisted therapy for children with severe disabilities in Florida. The children chosen for participation had more than 20 different diagnoses and were from different countries such as the United States, Germany, England, Ireland, Switzerland, Korea, Wales, and Scotland. The two-week program of Dolphin Human Therapy showed significant improvements in language, speech, gross and fine motor function, as compared to a second group of children with disabilities which received a minimum of six months of conventional speech or physical therapy. Nathanson (1998) concluded that The Dolphin Human Therapy was cost effective, when compared to conventional long-term therapy, and increased attention, motivation, and specific desired skills, in both the short and long term.

Horses also have been used to help individuals with disabilities. Bertoti (1988) conducted a study in Pennsylvania using horseback riding as a way to improve posture in children with Cerebral Palsy. Children between the ages of two and ten with spastic Cerebral Palsy were selected for this study. Bertoti states, “The rationale for therapeutic riding is that the horse’s movement imparts a precise, smooth, rhythmical pattern of movement to the rider” (1988, p. 1507). A posture assessment scale was used to visually assess the alignment and symmetry of five body areas: 1) head and neck 2) shoulder and scapula 3) trunk 4) spine and 5) pelvis. The results showed that children with spastic Cerebral Palsy demonstrated significant improvement in posture after 10 weeks of therapeutic horseback riding (1988).

There are currently many programs utilizing the therapeutic alliance between horses and humans. According to the NARHA website, there are more than 650 NARHA centers in the United States providing equine facilitated activities for people with various disabilities and ages. “For individuals with disabilities, equine assisted activities have been shown to improve muscle tone, balance, posture, coordination, and motor development as well as emotional well-being. And it’s fun!” (Retrieved Jan. 4, 2003, from [www.NARHA.org](http://www.NARHA.org)). The Equine Facilitated Mental Health Association’s (EFMHA) mission statement includes: 1) to promote professionally facilitated equine experiences designed to enhance psychosocial development, growth and education 2) to educate others to work with the horse in the treatment of people with emotional, behavioral, social, mental, physical, and/or spiritual needs. In addition, the EFMHA lists mood

disorders, anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders, personality disorders, and post traumatic stress disorder as treatable with equine-facilitated psychotherapy (Retrieved Jan. 4, 2003 from [http://narha.org/sec\\_efmha/fact\\_sheet.asp](http://narha.org/sec_efmha/fact_sheet.asp)).

The Four Harmony Foundation, established at Pine Knoll Farm just outside of Lexington, Kentucky, is an example of a program serving a variety of populations. The head trauma program's goal is to help individuals regain independence after injury. Their vocational program provides job training and opportunities in the equine field. The terminal illness program provides openings for self-love and a relationship with a horse outside of the sterile environment of a hospital. The physical therapy program provides rehabilitation, using the 3-D movement of a horse as a therapeutic tool, to improve posture, balance, and mobility in the physically disabled (retrieved Feb. 11, 2003, from <http://www.4harmonyfoundation.com/TherapeuticRiding.htm>).

The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association, (EAGLA), is a non-profit organization developed to, "address the need for resources, education, and professionalism in the field of equine-assisted psychotherapy" (retrieved Feb. 12, 2003, from <http://www.eagala.org>). They offer a certification program to assist practitioners who want to learn their particular style of equine-assisted therapy. An example of an EAGALA activity is asking a group of individuals to get a horse to jump over a board placed across two buckets in the center of the arena while following these five rules: 1) No touching the horse. 2) No bribing the horse. 3) No using anything outside the arena. 4) No using ropes or halters. 5) No talking to other team members. This activity promotes teamwork, direct

communication (team members had three minutes to discuss a plan prior to starting the activity), learning from mistakes, trying new ideas, and thinking “outside the box” (or arena in this case).

Although each of these programs has its place in the equine-therapy world, the focus of this paper is on a psychological and spiritual growth model developed by Jill Eldredge, an equine-facilitated psychotherapy practitioner and founder of Spirit Horse Ranch in Westcliffe, CO. I interviewed Eldredge about her model of equine-facilitated psychotherapy (personal communication Feb. 4, 2003), and the following is a synopsis of Eldredge’s work.

Eldredge started practicing her model of equine-facilitated psychotherapy in 1997. She realized that interacting with her horse Roxanne had led her to a deeper understanding of herself, and she believed that her clients could learn about themselves through this unique process as well. While working with clients in her office doing traditional talk therapy, she would get an image of the client working with a horse around his/her issue. One day she got up the courage to invite a client to try the work, and her model developed from there. The therapeutic factors listed earlier emerge and develop throughout the stages.

Eldredge named three distinct stages of equine-facilitated psychotherapy. In the first stage, the client meets him/herself, which happens through meeting the horses. They reflect back to the client what’s going on, and the client comes face to face with where he/she is; nervous, excited, sad, angry, intellectual, confident, etc. Being with a horse(s) helps a client sharpen his/her present awareness while the reaction of the horse to what he/she presents helps the client to cultivate self-

awareness. The therapist can then begin to bridge that information for the client, helping him/her apply it to his/her life. The work deepens from there, as the client is able to recognize his/her way of being in the world. In addition, the client learns more awareness of his/her emotional, physical and energetic being and has access to the broader range of who he/she is. Many people come with a strong sense of their intellectual selves, but need help learning how to become informed from intuition, body, and energetic realms. This is how horses live, processing information from many sources, demonstrating a balanced way of taking in information.

In the second stage, the client becomes comfortable with being uncomfortable when experiencing strong emotions, and self-acceptance is fostered. The client then has the opportunity to take the risk of expressing who he/she is. This congruent self-expression allows for more and more engagement with the horses, and a relationship develops. Many are surprised that their genuine expression is an invitation to the horses to interact- not a pushing away, like many have been taught. This usually touches people quite deeply as they discover that they can have strong emotions and still engage authentically in relationship. This realization helps build ego strength as the client is rewarded again and again by the horses for his/her authenticity.

From there, the third stage is moving into a place of choice and action. Once a client becomes comfortable with who he/she is, new choices and options become available that didn't exist before. Furthermore, the client experiences what it is like to be a vital part of a relationship- it's not just about what the "other wants."

A healthy, honest relationship can grow as both participants engage genuinely. Eventually, the client can take this skill and apply it to his/her relationships with other people.

This final therapeutic factor of learning how to engage in healthy relationships is pivotal as relationships span the spectrum of most people's lives from family to work, romantic relationships to friendships. Eldredge reports that some people tell her that they feel like the relationship they have established with the horse is their first healthy relationship.

Healthy relationships are supported by healthy boundaries, which the horses model. In human relationships, there is usually a tendency towards enmeshment or separation. The horses model a different perspective on boundaries that can be observed by how they interact with each other. The herd is very connected as they are continually communicating their needs and wants. It is rare to see a group of horses standing still for very long. They are constantly shifting and moving, while at the same time asking other horses to adjust as well. According to Eldredge, without boundaries there aren't healthy relationships, there are invasions, and one is either being invaded or invading another. Usually one's orientation towards enmeshment or separation is established at a young age through interaction with primary care givers.

Relationships and experiences from an individual's childhood can bring issues to the forefront when working with the horses. The therapist can frame the experience the client is having with the horse in a way that makes sense from the client's past. For example, if as a child the client learned fear was for the weak,

and he/she didn't want to appear weak, it would make sense that a client feeling afraid in the corral would attempt to suppress his/her fear. What the client will eventually experience with the horses is that fear itself is fine, (horses understand fear) but acting like one is not afraid (when one really is afraid) is not fine, is incongruent. Childhood wounds can provide a compassionate framework around the more challenging places for the client to go, but it's from the client's present experience that past experience is put into context.

Eldredge believes that when one overrides his/her internal wisdom and listens to the false self or the "I should" self, (using the example from above, "I shouldn't feel afraid"), it is usually about what somebody else wants and nothing to do with the individual. In his book, A Brief History of Everything, Ken Wilber explains it in this way, "There are now aspects of the self's being that it doesn't own or admit or acknowledge. It starts to hide from itself. In other words, the self begins lying to itself. A false self system begins to grow over the actual self, the self that is really there at any given moment, but is now denied or distorted or repressed" (1996, p. 161). What many learned at a young age is that in order to be loved, certain parts of the self that primary care givers were not comfortable with needed to be suppressed. This leads to non-acceptance of the self, and the fear that being one's self will ultimately lead to being alone or in some cases not surviving. That's where the horses come in. Interacting with them, one is able to find out what a healthy relationship is: that it's cultivated from genuineness, and that genuineness sustains relationship rather than causing its end. The horses validate the true self, which is essential for a fulfilled life. Masterson, author of, The

Search for the Real Self, explains, “Under the guidance of the real self, we can identify our individual wishes as they change over the years and discover realistic ways to achieve them in our lives. The real self allows us to take the steps to carve out our individual places in the real world by finding the appropriate job, lifestyle, or mate” (1988, p. 26).

According to Eldredge, equine-facilitated psychotherapy is not better suited to work with certain neurosis over others because in the horse world all feeling states are equal. Kohanov, founder of Epona Equestrian Services in Tucson, and author of The Tao of Equus, concurs with this belief:

As animals that are preyed upon in nature, it behooves them to know when another herd member is feeling afraid or playful, angry or in pain, depressed or content. Though they ultimately strive for well-being in their relationships, horses don’t consider so-called positive emotions any more important than the negative ones humans routinely try to suppress. To these animals, the ability to intuit fear in a distant herd member and act on this feeling without hesitation is a lifesaving skill. Their innate aptitude for resonating with another being’s trust, joy, or confidence is a *life-enhancing skill*. [Italic added]. These mindful creatures have developed a magnificent capacity for responding to subtle changes in the arousal of other horses as well as predators, a species-wide talent they easily transfer to interactions with people (2001, p. 105).

Their ability to experience emotions simply as information and without judgement is the gift horses bring to many clients who routinely judge their feelings.

According to Eldredge, the pain associated with many emotions may actually be

caused by the struggle against the emotion and not the emotion itself. Unlike humans, horses demonstrate comfort with all genuinely expressed emotions.

Given Eldredge's model, it is important to address what makes someone appropriate for this particular style of equine-facilitated psychotherapy, and to note that there are specialized models to meet the needs of various populations interested in working with horses. Eldredge believes that people who dissociate, have a violent history, live with post-traumatic stress disorder, or that have had negative experiences with horses in the past should be considered carefully before embarking on equine-facilitated psychotherapy. Individuals that dissociate are at risk due to the fact that awareness is crucial for physical safety as well as the psychological process. A client that dissociates runs the risk of being stepped on or bitten and then he/she is faced with not really knowing what happened. This could be more traumatic than therapeutic. Also, people with a history of animal abuse and/or violence and people living with PTSD should be considered carefully for their own safety as well as the safety of the horses. Horses are wild animals, and they make sudden movements that can trigger reactive responses and old traumas, especially when a client is not feeling safe. In addition, people who have had negative experiences with horses, especially injuries related to horses, may need to proceed with extra caution. None of these circumstances is one hundred percent prohibitive necessarily, but the therapist really needs to be aware and to recognize his/her own limitations.

The last thing I asked Eldredge to comment on was what she would say to skeptics who don't believe in what she is doing. She responded, "How do we

know anything? By trusting our own experience, not just believing something because someone said it. I empower people to become their own authority. That's what changes lives" (personal communication Feb. 4, 2003). Joko Beck concurs, "Usually we're either an authority to others (telling them what to do) or we're seeking someone to be an authority for us (telling us what to do). And yet we would never be looking for an authority if we had any confidence in ourselves and our understanding... There is no authority outside of my experience" (1989, p. 15).

Eldredge's model of equine-facilitated psychotherapy is best understood through a humanistic and transpersonal framework. It's humanistic in the sense that it is client-centered. The therapist is not trying to change the client, but rather is following the client and helping him/her observe him/herself. Instead of the therapist mirroring the client, the horse takes this powerful role, and instead of the client hearing him/herself reflected through the therapist, the client sees and experiences him/herself through the reactions of a thousand pound being. The size of this mirror makes it a powerful reflection. The therapist's role is to witness the interaction between the horse(s) and client, and to help the client illuminate the meaning of what transpires in a compassionate, accepting, and caring way. It can be scary for a client to have the parts of him/herself exposed that he/she has spent a lifetime covering up and defending against. The work needs to progress at the speed the client is comfortable with. Wiping out defenses that a person has spent a lifetime developing in a few sessions is sure to be counterproductive. It is the therapist's responsibility to support the client at his/her pace.

Eldredge's work is transpersonal in that it encourages clients to expand their definition of self, or to transcend the ego, which impacts the client on a spiritual level. Transpersonal psychology can be understood as the marriage between the wisdom of the world's spiritual traditions and modern psychology. "It takes the age-old question of, "who am I?" and combines the answers of spiritual traditions: a spiritual being, a soul, with the answers of modern psychology: an ego, a self, a psychological existence" (Cortright, 1997, p.8 ). Transpersonal psychology is concerned with, "developing a self while also honoring the urge to go beyond the self" (Cortright, 1997, p. 9).

Ego structure is how one defines his/her self, including what is embraced and what is denied. For example the ego's voice might say, "I am always a nice person. I never get angry." Ego structure provides a sense of safety, much like a surrounding wall. The same wall, however, also serves as a kind of prison, keeping one from exploring parts of the self that are beyond the ego's limited definition. Furthermore, the ego does not have a tangible existence; it will not show up on an X-ray or EEG. Ego structure is a function of the mind; a set of limitations imposed by one's self, one's upbringing, society, culture, religion, or experience. However, in any given moment, the possibility exists to step outside of the ego's walls, letting go of the defined self. For this to happen, a present state of mind is necessary, or an awareness of self and one's surroundings. When an individual is aware of him/herself but not attached to maintaining self, one has access to a limitless number of actions, feelings, and thoughts. It's as if for a moment, the ego walls become transparent.

This is therapeutic as the struggle against who one is ceases, and the realm of choice opens up (personal communication, Eldredge, Feb. 4, 2003). From the stand point of believing that one “should” be a certain way, there are no options. “I should be nice so I will,” eliminates all other possibilities outside of being nice. However, when one is able to recognize the thought, “I should be nice,” and weigh it with other information, “I am aware that I actually don’t feel like being nice. My breath is shallow, my chest tight, and I feel like crying,” the ability to access the right action in the moment becomes available for that individual. Perhaps the individual doesn’t feel safe crying, perhaps he/she does, maybe the person needs to leave the situation, or perhaps the decision to be nice is the best choice for who that person is in the moment. Regardless, having choices outside the realm of the ego supports self-acceptance and facilitates change, as the opportunity exists to try new ways of being. According to Cortright, “...consciousness = growth = freedom = movement = health,” (1997, p. 56).

While self-awareness and acceptance may sound simple, awareness without “shoulds” is actually an acquired skill that needs to be practiced. Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-renowned Zen master, says in his book, Peace is every Step:

We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive (1991 p.5).

The state of mind necessary for connecting with a horse is similar to that of a meditative state. It requires taking meditation instruction from the cushion out into the active world, and then takes it one step further. Rather than just being aware of what one thinks and feels, the next step is having choices about what one can do (personal communication, Eldredge, Feb. 4, 2003).

Meditation is about a shift in focus from the external to the internal. Instead of focusing one's attention outward (the phone, the TV, the pile of dishes in the sink), one focuses his/her attention on him/herself. Joko Beck, a Zen meditation instructor and author of Everyday Zen, writes:

Our interest in just being with reality is extremely low. No, we want to think...When we're lost in thought, when we're dreaming, what have we lost? We've lost reality. Our lives have escaped us (1989, p.26).

The client works with the horses to come back to the present moment of his/her life over and over again. Doing this gives clients information about themselves that they can use to enrich their lives as well as simply live. Working with horses helps to cultivate and fine-tune one's ability to be present and self-aware.

In addition, equine-facilitated psychotherapy provides the opportunity for what Alexander (1946) and later Yalom (1995) referred to as a "corrective emotional experience." Alexander, quoted in Yalom explained the corrective emotional experience in this way, "the patient, under more favorable circumstances is exposed to emotional situations that he [or she] could not handle in the past. The patient, in order to be helped, must undergo a corrective emotional experience suitable to repair the traumatic influence of previous experience" (1995, p. 24).

Alexander went on to add that intellectual insight is not enough. There must be an emotional component as well as a way for the client to “test” his/her newfound intellectual and emotional insight. To further illustrate how corrective emotional experiences are created and what an actual session might look like during equine-facilitated psychotherapy it is helpful to look at the experience of one of my clients, whom I’ll call “Jan.”

Jan, age 45, came into the Counseling Center, where I did my internship, after the breakup of a 7-year relationship with her partner, “Sandra.” Sandra had unexpectedly asked Jan to move out of the house they had shared, and almost immediately started a new relationship. Jan felt devastated at her loss, and replaced. She also reported feeling like she had when at ten years old her dad had abandoned her and her mother and sister. Sandra leaving her had triggered the painful emotions and view of the world that she had experienced as a child, leaving her feeling unworthy of relationship, and depressed.

I was impressed by Jan’s level of self-awareness, and how she had been able to connect her current feelings of abandonment to her childhood experience of losing her father. Her awareness, although insightful, didn’t seem to be easing the pain she was feeling. I wanted to help her know that she was desirable and worthy of relationship, and no amount of telling her so would convince her of this; she needed to experience it. I immediately thought of the horses. They could help provide this kind of experience.

I brought it up at the end of our sixth session. “There’s another type of therapy I’d like to make available to you if you’re interested,” I started. “It involves

horses.” I could tell immediately that Jan was interested. She leaned forward in her chair and inquired, “Horses?” “Yes,” I continued, “Horses. It’s called equine-facilitated psychotherapy, and in a nut-shell, it takes what we’ve been talking about here and provides an opportunity for you to see it, in action. What I mean is instead of talking about your relationships and how they’ve effected you, you get to experience yourself in relationship and see the results.” “I’d like to try it,” Jan replied, “I like horses. And besides, right now I feel like I could talk about this forever and never feel any better.” I gave her directions to the ranch, and we picked a time to meet the following week.

I watched Jan drive up the dirt road and get out of her car to open the gate, as I had done only 10 minutes earlier. Opening and closing the gate had become a ritual for me: a symbol that I was leaving behind my hurried world and narrow view of self and entering the world of the horse, an open, sacred place where I could simply be me. I greeted her as she parked and stepped out of the car. “It’s beautiful out here.” Jan said. “I saw a bald eagle when I was driving in.” I smiled, enjoying the change of pace from sitting in a small room on somewhat uncomfortable chairs to being outside with a full view of the Rocky Mountains. “Come on,” I said, “I’ll introduce you to the horses. Keep in mind that they are very aware of us, even from this distance. Their survival in the wild depends on their ability to sense predators from afar. As we approach them, focus your attention on your body, and just notice what you feel, without trying to change anything.” Jan nodded. The session had begun.

All 6 horses were inside the corral. As we approached the fence, Bacardi, the lead gelding of the herd, came over to greet us. He immediately put his face up to hers, rubbing up against her and dominating her field of vision. “Pay attention to me,” Jan said, revealing what she thought Bacardi was communicating. “You’re special” she told him. I made a mental note of this, wondering if Jan was projecting her desire to feel special on Bacardi. “This is Bacardi,” I said. “That’s Hope, Arwin, Wolf, Zoey, and Roxanne.” I pointed to each as I said their names. We took a minute to simply observe them. “How are you feeling?” I asked. “Happy to be here,” Jan replied. “What’s your comfort level around horses?” I inquired next; knowing her answer would set the tone for what we decided to do next. “I feel comfortable around them,” Jan said easily. “Sandra had a horse.” “Would you like to enter the corral?” I proposed. “Oh yes,” Jan said agreeably, and started to climb through the wire fence. I followed her.

“Just stay present. Notice what’s going on around you and notice your body. If you ever feel unsafe, let me know immediately,” were the only instructions I gave, “and we’ll just see what happens.” Bacardi continued to focus on Jan, his face right next to hers. “Notice how it feels to have him there.” I said. She responded that she felt he was too close. “Notice how that feels in your body.” I said. “It feels uncomfortable.” Jan retorted. “Where?” I asked. “In my chest and in my face,” she responded. “Would you like him to move?” I asked, and Jan nodded yes. “Experiment with asking him to move back.” I said, purposefully not giving any suggestions how to do this. Jan put her hand up and gently pushed Bacardi’s neck. He walked away.

At that point a shift happened in the herd, and they all started walking towards the open gate to the pasture. We watched them walk off. After a few moments I looked at Jan, and saw tears in her eyes. “They all left. I wanted them to stay close.” She squatted down close to the ground, hunched over and crying.

As I noticed how upset Jan was, I felt amazed at the impact of this work. It had been less than 5 minutes into it and here was one of Jan’s core issues, abandonment, being played out right before my eyes. For a moment I thought that maybe I “should” have closed the gate to contain the horses so Jan wouldn’t be so upset, but quickly realized that this was just what needed to happen.

“Notice your body,” I said, squatting down beside her to mirror her posture. “I just want to sit down in the dirt and draw,” Jan replied, very child-like. “Then do that.” I said. She picked up a stick and began to draw a design in the earth. “Everybody left,” she said again. We talked for a few moments. She reported feeling the pain of her dad and Sandra leaving all over again. When she had stopped crying, I asked her what she would like to do. “What do you mean?” She responded, puzzled. “Well, we can continue to sit here, or we could approach the horses.” I suggested gently. “I’d just be afraid they’d walk away again,” Jan replied sadly. Then she had a moment of insight. “I always wait for relationships to come to me. That’s how it was with Sandra. She was really interested in me, so I thought, why not? I never pick out someone I’m interested in and approach them.” Here it was, the opportunity for a corrective emotional experience handed to me on a golden platter. “Would you like to try something different?” I asked.

Jan thought about it for a moment, and said, “I feel afraid.” “That’s ok,” I encouraged, “Stay with your feelings. You don’t need to do anything about them, just feel them. We can go very slowly, at whatever pace you feel is right. When you want to stop, stop. When you want to walk, walk. We could even just walk as far as the gate.” I pointed to the gate about 10 feet away that led out into the pasture. Most of the horses were at least 100 feet from us by now, some even farther. “Ok,” Jan said, dusting herself off as she stood up. “I’ll try it.”

We walked together through the gate that separated the corral from the pasture, and I couldn’t help but think that we were, once again, leaving something behind. In Jan’s case, the small, wounded girl who was powerless to do anything about her dad’s disappearance. As for myself, I was leaving behind the therapist that doubted that what needed to happen would spontaneously arise in the present moment. We walked side by side out into the pasture, and then Jan stopped. “I feel better over here,” she said taking a deep breath, “because now I can at least see the horses.” “Good,” I replied, again impressed by her ability to notice emotional shifts within herself. “Let’s just hang out here for a minute and see how it is.” We stood there, watching the horses graze. “What are you aware of?” I asked. “I’m aware of the sun on my face, and the breeze, and the horses,” she said, “and of feeling calmer.” I noted how her awareness had moved beyond herself and the horses to include the sun and wind. In that moment, she had broadened her perception of the world, an often difficult task when involved in relationship struggles that tend to operate from a very narrow, self-centered

perspective. “I feel ready to move closer,” she said, taking a step forward. I followed.

We continued to walk until again Jan stopped. Hope and Wolf were only about 25 feet away, munching lazily on the prairie grass. “I’m feeling afraid again,” Jan said. “Stay with your fear,” I instructed. “Take a deep breath and notice where you feel it in your body.” Jan took a deep breath. “Look,” I said, “here comes Hope.” Jan smiled at the obvious play on words as Hope approached us. “Here comes Hope!” She repeated happily. Hope stopped about 5 feet from us to munch on some grass. “She’s beautiful,” Jan said. I agreed with her, admiring Hope’s soft black coat and gentle manner. “Everything these animals do is communication,” I said. She wouldn’t have come over here if she didn’t want to be close to you. She responded to you being able to be with your fear.” Jan smiled again, taking that in. Hope continued to graze, and then walked off back toward Wolf. She laid down to roll in the dirt and scratch her back. I looked at Jan. “How are you feeling?” I inquired. “Ok,” she said. “I didn’t feel bad when she walked off. I didn’t take it personally.” We stood there a few minutes more in silence, watching the rest of the herd graze a few hundred feet away from us.

At some point I noticed a shift, a subtle difference in the look on Jan’s face and the way I was feeling. Later I would discover from Jan that she had started to dissociate at that time. Perhaps the interaction with Hope had satisfied her, and she had felt relaxed enough to drift off. Or perhaps the thought of continuing to seek out relationship had been on some level overwhelming, and she had chosen to “check out.” Whatever had happened, I felt the urge to keep Jan moving, rather

than to let her stand idle hundreds of feet away from the rest of the herd. “How would you feel about choosing a horse to approach?” I asked. “Is there a certain horse you feel more compelled to interact with?” “Yes,” she said. “Roxanne. But I still feel afraid that she’ll walk away.” “How about if we just move closer to her?” I suggested, trying to minimize the gap between the horses and us. “Ok,” Jan agreed, and we started walking towards the herd.

After walking about 100 feet closer to the horses, Jan stopped. I was about to say something, when Wolf stepped in as therapist. He walked up to us and literally nudged Jan in the back, very gently. “What did you experience from him?” I asked. “Friendliness,” Jan replied. “Like he was telling me it was ok.” I nodded in agreement. “He nudged you.” I said. “I think he was encouraging you.” Jan smiled and started walking again, and this time she didn’t stop until we were within 20 feet from the horses.

“How are you feeling?” I asked her again. “Good,” she said. “It feels good to be close to them.” “Just experience that for a moment,” I said, and we stood together watching the horses graze and interact with each other. “They are all very aware that we’re here,” I said, pointing out Zoey’s fixed lowered gaze upon us and Roxanne’s pinned ears in our direction. “They feel safe with me here,” Jan said. “They aren’t running away.” “How does that feel?” I asked. “Wonderful,” Jan said, and I noticed tears in her eyes. “Sandra always told me she didn’t feel safe around me.” “Take a deep breath,” I said, “and notice your body. Notice how it feels to know you’re experienced as safe in relationship.” Jan cried some joyful tears.

The horses were all very relaxed, most standing in resting posture with their weight on three legs. They were comfortable with Jan's openness, her ability to be with her feelings rather than suppress them. She wasn't trying to pretend she felt differently than she did: she was emotionally congruent and the horses were responding to that. "One last thing I'd invite you to do," I said. "I'm going to stay here, and if you'd like, you could move in a few steps more, on your own. Trust your instincts, and stop when you want to stop, just like you've been doing today." Jan took about eight steps forward. The horses didn't even flinch. I let her stand there, on her own, to take in what she had accomplished. The same woman who had sat drawing in the dirt only an hour earlier was now standing proudly with a smile on her face. I walked up next to her. "Great job," I said. "You showed a lot of courage today." She looked over at me. "I feel complete." "If you like you can thank them, and say goodbye," I said. She closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she said, "I'm ready to go."

Jan demonstrated beautifully how this work progresses throughout a session. Initially, Jan fell into old behavior patterns (Eldredge's first stage, meeting one's self) that were no longer serving her as an adult. When the horses left, Jan felt like a child, and felt fearful of going towards them. She reported that this was how she felt in life, and that she usually let the other person in the relationship choose her. During our session, Jan got the opportunity to honor how she was feeling *and* to do something different, (stages two and three) which eventually led to a corrective emotional experience, as Jan experienced herself in relationship with the horses. Even though she never directly approached Roxanne, (this might

be follow up for a future session) by the end of the session she was standing about 10 feet from her. For a horse, this is close proximity. Furthermore, she felt safe and more importantly for Jan, the horses felt safe. Because of what Sandra had said to her about not feeling safe with her, Jan had doubted whether or not she was deserving of relationship. Horses don't hang around to be "nice" or to make someone feel better. They simply feel what they feel and react to it, without judging it or overanalyzing it (Kohanov, 2001). This realness and presence is felt and accepted. Jan was moved to tears by it.

Was this one experience enough to help Jan overcome her fear of people leaving her in relationship, or to erase her doubts that she is, indeed, safe for someone to love? Of course not, but it's a strong beginning. With more equine-facilitated psychotherapy, this corrective emotional experience can be built on over and over again.

Regardless of what issues the client brings, the work is the same: cultivating authenticity in a supportive environment. I have noticed as I work with clients doing equine-facilitated psychotherapy that I have applied the same principles to working with clients I see in the office; I want to empower them to be authentic and discover their own authority. I try and focus the session on the present, encourage clients to be aware of their bodies and to feel their feelings without needing to judge them or do anything about them, and I try to help them cultivate a sense of self-acceptance for who they are. As our relationship strengthens and clients develop ego strength, I can help them look at options and choices they

have that they may not of been aware of before, and they can begin to trust and rest in who they are.

In addition, working with clients with the horses has provided me with an opportunity to become clearer on the concepts of transference and counter-transference as I have been able to clearly see them played out with the horses. For example, Jan's belief that the horses all wanted to leave because of her was her transference, and my initial thought that I "should have" closed the gate so that my client wouldn't have been so upset is an example of my own counter-transference. Having concrete experiences like this one has helped me to recognize transference and counter-transference as they happen in the office as well. I've become well aware of my need at times to try and make things comfortable, when really I know that most of the therapeutic work gets done by exploring the uncomfortable.

Carl Rogers once said, "The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change" (2001, p. 91). Equine-facilitated psychotherapy assists individuals in doing just that. Often people seek counseling to find an authority on themselves- someone to tell them how to feel less depressed or how to deal with a challenging relationship. In reality, a counselor can serve as a compassionate guide, but the ultimate authority is the client. Equine-facilitated psychotherapy helps cultivate the client's ability to be his/her own authority on him/herself. Working with the horses teaches clients how to trust their own experience and then to act congruently from that experience. When this happens, the client realizes that he/she has dropped the struggle against who he/she is, and

the reward is the invitation for relationship with a beautiful, free, and wild being. This relationship is powerful because the horse is genuinely acting of his/her own free will, because he/she wants to. This is healing to many people who attach conditions to relationships, like, “My therapist only listens because I pay her,” or “My spouse only stays because of the kids.” Validation of the client’s authentic self builds ego strength and genuineness, as well as skill around how to deal with challenging aspects of him/herself. The client’s genuineness can then be validated through corrective emotional experiences. The abilities learned through relationship with the horse(s) can then be transferred to relationships with people, and intimacy becomes possible as we open the gate, or expand our definition of who we are.

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