

The Horse as Auxiliary for Life

NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP, PSYCHODRAMA AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

KATE TAPLEY

ABSTRACT

Natural horsewoman and psychodrama trainee Kate Tapley draws our attention to the horse as an auxiliary for life. Through her work training riders in natural horsemanship from a psychodramatic perspective, she has noticed that horses, unerring sentients that they are, act as auxiliaries for human beings, mirroring their inner often unconscious experience with immediacy and authenticity, and following only those riders who prove themselves willing to enter their here and now world of being-ness and presence, as 'true leaders'. This article presents the application of this approach during a natural horsemanship workshop and the positive outcomes in terms of leadership development, healing and wholeness.

KEY WORDS

auxiliary, healing, horse, human development, leadership, Moreno, natural horsemanship, psychodrama

Introduction

I am Kate Tapley, a natural horsewoman with a lifetime of dedication to the healing arts, especially psychodrama. Working with the partnerships between people and horses from a psychodramatic perspective in my natural horsemanship business, I have long pondered the therapeutic qualities of the horse. These qualities become more apparent the more we enter the horse's world and communicate with it using its own visceral language. In particular, I have observed at close range the horse's effectiveness for leadership development, indeed for healing and holistic human development. This is because the horse, fully embodied and living in the moment, mirrors our inner emotions, our truth, with immediacy and authenticity, even when we are unaware of that truth ourselves. Its language is thus threatening to humans in a similar way that unconditional love is, or trusting in the unknown. Using Morenian language, we could say that horses act as extraordinary auxiliaries for human beings, assisting them to connect to their unconscious experience, their 'true selves'. In many years of

teaching natural horsemanship using psychodramatic principles and practices, I have noticed that, as riders are immersed in the immediacy of their 'horse auxiliary' and become proficient in its language, they develop roles such as the courageous leader, the intrepid adventurer and the open learner. This development permeates lives, leading the person towards leadership, healing and wholeness.

In 2016, I accepted an invitation to lead a natural horsemanship workshop, known as a clinic in the horse world, for a small riding group in Hanmer Springs, Aotearoa New Zealand. Five women riders attended and we worked together one day each week for three weeks. In this article, I describe the ways in which I combined the philosophy of natural horsemanship and a psychodramatic perspective to assist the riders to embrace the horses' auxiliary functioning. The aim of the workshop was to develop a positive relationship between them and their horses, and thus promote progressive role development and leadership capacity. The contents of the article mirror for me the vision and values that are often invisible but which I hold dear when I do this work, specifically the values of cooperation, connection, courage and communication.

The Group Warm Up

I began the workshop with a director-directed warm up. I invited the women, four aged over 50 and the fifth in her mid-20s, to express their hopes for themselves and their horses, and as they did so I quickly noticed the emergence of several themes. The four older riders were concerned to provide themselves with more safety, to develop greater confidence and to rediscover the freedom that they had experienced with their horses in earlier times. However, the younger rider was motivated to increase her expectations of her horse. I was aware of the two subgroups forming, identified by differences in age, developmental stage and purpose, and wondered if this might be particularly significant or disturbing for the younger rider. I was reminded of the notion that the group will adopt the norms of relating that are modelled by the leader. I trusted this to be the case and became mindful of my style, consciously modelling safety and liveliness so that such norms might be adopted by the participants. I also listened respectfully, responded enthusiastically and was mindful to capture and rejoice in the small brave items that the group members brought forward, again with an eye to the emergence of progressive group norms.

I then moved on to deepen the warm up of the group members. I invited them to share their 'horse journeys', how it was that they found themselves at this workshop. Although the participants revealed diverse paths and varied experiences with horses, their motivations were similar. These riders were united by a lifelong love of the horse. This unity of purpose assisted the group members to warm up to one another, a warm up that increased as

I invited each woman to indicate who of the other participants was already known to her and to appreciate that these old links would be refreshed in this new situation. This sociometric way of working assisted the riders to 'arrive', in other words to warm up and bring their presence more fully into the group. I also shared my horse story, which helped me to 'arrive'. I indicated that I would endeavour to be fully present and involved with these riders and their horses, with a view to fulfilling their hopes for the clinic.

The Horses' Warm Up

Having assisted the participants to enter their experience more fully, I invited them to consider the horse's warm up in relationship to the rider. Horses present human beings with a paradox, their frightening strength and unpredictability juxtaposed uneasily alongside their fragility and ability to surrender to us in each moment. The species of horse is thought to be 60 million years old, and the long fight for survival as a prey animal has honed sensitivities, enabling the horse to discern the energy of a predator from far away. Horses are thus unerring sentients, embodied, highly sensitive to energy and presence, living in the moment, impeccably true to themselves and unable to lie. My colleague, Jo Gaul, and I named this language of body and being the visceral language, all immediacy, energy, rhythm, presence, focus, feel, strength and stillness. This horse language, or equus, is counter intuitive to human beings and often experienced by them as 'unnatural'.

The cornerstone of natural horsemanship is that a rider comes to terms with this sense of unnaturalness and learns to communicate with her horse using the horse's language, thus presenting herself to her horse as an effective authentic leader who can be trusted. I normalised the tussle that immediately begins between the rider's brain and body as she learns this new visceral language. The brain, concerned to keep the person safe by tightening up, becoming defensive, holding on and maintaining control, will not at first trust the horse's language. When a rider reverts to these familiar defensive styles of behaviour, the horse becomes worried and responds defensively or ceases to be interested and seeks out a more reliable 'herd leader' elsewhere. In this sense, the horse acts as an authentic auxiliary for its rider. The action phase of the workshop, described next, assisted the riders to experience their horse's visceral language and embrace its auxiliary functioning without defensiveness, and as a result develop their leadership capacities.

The Action

The action was designed to immerse the riders in the immediacy of the horse and become proficient in its visceral language, with the broader goal of progressive leadership development, healing and wholeness. The first

phase of the action involved the psychodramatic technique of role reversal when the threat of a real horse was removed. I invited the group members to pair up, one designated as the 'horse' and the other as the 'rider', with the pairs exchanging roles at halftime. Those playing riders held reins tied to a three foot stick, which the horse auxiliaries held with two fingers to emulate the sensitivity a horse is likely to feel on the face when wearing a natural halter. I directed the riders to use rhythm, focus, feel and smoothness in their instructions to the horses. Meanwhile, I encouraged the horses to be open willing learners and to note the effects of the riders' actions on them, what worked and what did not work. I also instructed them to provide the riders with a role test by becoming somewhat 'stroppy', and coached the riders to hold their rhythm and focus, to resist the invitation to become impatient and to note their tendencies in the face of this challenge. At the close of this role reversal activity, the group members processed their discoveries. In terms of the horses' experience, they identified the offensiveness of being pulled by the reins, the way in which a very small feel of the reins is adequate, and the significant way in which contact with the reins provides confidence while loose reins produces directionless. The group members also reflected on the resistance the horse had to a rider's energy when that energy became uncommunicative, serving the rider's defences rather than communicating with the horse. This happened when a horse did not listen at first or went unexpectedly fast, and the rider's fear and need for control took over rather than the maintenance of rhythm and feel. The riders' reflections focused on the significant intimacy of the relationship between horse and rider, and the way in which the fun of the activity 'assisted with everything'.

The second phase of the action, again aimed at assisting the participants to embrace the horse's auxiliary functioning and become proficient in its visceral language, saw the riders immersed in the immediacy of real horses. We began with some manoeuvres on the ground, or games as they are called in the natural horsemanship world, and immediately the riders' bodily defensiveness manifested itself. Here was the beginning of the deeper work of leadership development. I normalised this habitual defensiveness, explaining that body language is unconscious until it is observed and mirrored: "We can't help it. The brain will automatically want to fight the horse, control the horse, manipulate the horse, force the horse. But horses are forgiving animals, responding or not to the clumsy first steps of their riders". In one manoeuvre, I demonstrated the use of focus, feel and rhythmic movement to move the horse out of its rider's personal space. I explained that this hierarchical claiming of personal space demonstrates leadership in the horse world. When one horse subtly pushed his shoulder into me as I claimed my personal space from him, I described this as a small but shrewd test of my leadership. I demonstrated

ways in which to resist this challenge, to persist at all costs in asking the horse to move off my space and then reward him by standing beside him with my energy at a low level. I framed the work as leadership development, as the riders experienced the challenge of trusting that focus, feel and rhythmic movement alone would achieve this goal. Horses act as auxiliaries, seeking to know the reliability of our leadership by testing it out. We thus become as strong and effective as we need to be without hurting the horse. Indeed, when we work with a horse who is not respecting our leadership, we are putting ourselves at risk.

The action portion of the workshop continued on the theme of leadership development. I taught the group ways in which to read their horses' responses, each horse expressing itself differently. I introduced new games for the riders, aimed once more at asking the horses to give up their defences and become emotionally, mentally and physically more pliable and orientated towards human leadership. The activities included asking the horses to bend their bodies while standing still, to move their hind quarters around, to move their forequarters, to walk in a circle, to walk sideways. These endeavours also constituted 'pre-flight checks' by assessing the horse's mood in terms of the safety of mounting. Thus the riders entered into a parallel process with their horses, trying out new ways of being as they required those new ways of being from their horses. They developed confidence, created new habits and celebrated struggles and achievements. It was important to continually normalise the ways in which the horse acts as an auxiliary by mirroring our fears and showing us up in our leadership difficulties. In this regard the horses were wonderfully expressive, expertly manifesting the riders' inner conflicts and defensive styles, but also their developing confidence, moment by moment. The riders learnt to understand the horse's visceral language, its immediacy, in a way that enabled the horses to join them in these developments. Truly, 'the horse was growing their human' and 'the human was growing their horse'.

I also entered into a parallel process with the group as I encouraged myself to lead, celebrate and learn from the newness of the experience. I observed, doubled and mirrored difficulties and developments as they emerged. Individual questions became teaching moments for everyone, whereby I demonstrated adequate leadership with horses. I modelled and encouraged the group norm that 'the more we get stuck, the more we all learn', 'with nowhere to hide in the group, we are all in this together'. The more we embrace that empty space and drop our ego, the more effective leaders and human beings we become. There were many significant moments in the work of this group. One moment, involving Jess and her horse Jago, was pivotal.

A Pivotal Moment in the Group: Jess and Jego

Jego is a young, willing, open and sensitive horse, bred in the wild, and Jess is his rider. Jess is puzzled by Jego's refusal to allow her to move around to his side for a sideways walking game. It becomes apparent that Jess is not trusting her horse to 'get it'. Instead of using focus, feel and rhythm she is pushing him, much as a parent yells at a child to go to bed when they are not resistant to going to bed at all, but no doubt soon will be. As with many riders, including me, Jess has been taught the mainstream style of horse management, which requires the rider to be the boss, to force the horse to follow instructions and do what it is told. I suspect that Jego is functioning as an 'expert auxiliary' for Jess, and invite her to look into his eye and say what she sees there.

Jess: *He looks worried.*

Kate: (persevering) *Yes. Worried about what, do you think?*

Jess: *Me.*

Kate: *Right. Why would he be worried about you?*

Jess: *I am not sure.*

Kate: *Ok. Let's start over. First we will quell the worry in your horse. Go into his side and rub him with your jaw soft and your abdomen soft. Let it be soothing for you too. Make it a dance.*

Jess follows the direction.

Kate: *What is Jego's eye telling us now?*

Jess: *He is blinking and his head is lower and he is standing with me.*

Kate: (as double) *Yes. You have made yourself more trustworthy and not so worrisome to him now. He can hear you from here. This is a good place to ask him to move sideways.*

Jess's body immediately becomes tight and she uses force towards Jego again.

Kate: *I say stay with the dance. I'll show you.*

I enact the dance of soft focus, feel and rhythmical movement without bodily tension, and Jego moves.

Jess: *Ah! I am too much.*

Kate: *You are screaming at him and he is a horse who can hear a whisper. Try again.*

Jess approaches awkwardly, slows down and consciously uses her hand in a rhythmical fashion. Jego responds with a small movement. This is a pivotal moment. We are witnessing the emergence of a new role.

Kate: *Excellent. See the difference?*

Jess: *I've always been taught to 'make a horse' do something. I am way too much for Jego. He is so willing and gentle and sensitive.*

Tears well up in Jess at this moment of insight. She becomes humble and asks Jego's forgiveness. In a moment of sharing, I reassure Jess that the same was true for me.

Kate: *I have also wronged many a good horse for the same reasons.*

I encourage Jess to put her tears and vulnerability into her hand and ask Jego again to move sideways. The result is even better and we celebrate.

Kate: *There you go. You are with a horse who can heal your heart, the exact right horse for you.*

This drama was a critical moment in the workshop. As a sentient being, Jego mirrored Jess' inner experience of worry, performance anxiety, the need to 'get it right', even before Jess was aware of that experience herself. Through this mirroring, Jego 'taught' Jess to include vulnerability in her leadership, which enabled Jess to 'let go', to enter the present moment with her horse and in life. We can understand this dynamic interplay in terms of a role system. Jess began as a bossy boots in relation to Jego's anxious prey animal self-protector, her fearful avoider of failure to his fearful avoider of harm, a defended child to a worried compassionate lover. Gradually, Jess developed the role of the sensitive guide, the powerful vulnerable leader and in response, Jego became a willing follower, a more confident prey animal, the reassured horse in the light of an enlightened trustworthy human being. All the group members were visibly moved by the drama and I directed sharing and processing at the end of the session. The riders, including Jess, shared their experiences and insights and I employed the psychodramatic techniques of doubling and mirroring to enhance their self-acceptance, self-awareness and leadership capacities.

Closure

As the three days progressed, the group members increasingly embraced the horse as auxiliary and developed their communication using its visceral language. They gradually became independent and self-motivated, managing their messy learning stages, developing their leadership and taking responsibility for their safety and self-corrections. I saw the development of roles such as the courageous leader, the sensitive coach, the intrepid adventurer, the free flyer, the trusting companion, the open learner and many more. There was laughter and rhythm all about me and I experienced a moment of completion, of success. Arrival! I looked around and saw confidence and communication, courageous riders using feel, focus and rhythm to lead their horses and happy willing horses following, their heads down and their bodies easy. With gratitude, I realised that we had exceeded our expectations. I was realising my leadership gifts as the riders were realising theirs, and I was filled up.

Conclusion

What are the implications of this work for psychodrama practice? Psychodrama encompasses the concept of the 'here and now', the present moment. Through the auxiliary function, and techniques such as doubling, mirroring and role reversal, a protagonist is assisted to 'live in the moment', warm up to spontaneity, arrive at a moment of insight or resolution and develop a progressive response. Horses can also be understood as auxiliaries, unerring in their ability to mirror human beings' inner, often unconscious, experience with immediacy and authenticity and follow only those who prove themselves willing to enter their world of the here and now. This viewpoint speaks to what I think of as an ancient visceral energy in all of us and reinforces the visceral intelligence of the psychodrama method.

In teaching natural horsemanship from a psychodramatic perspective, I have noticed that as riders embrace the horse as a natural auxiliary and become proficient in its ancient language, they are confronted with their deeper selves in the here and now moment. When they are mirrored and doubled in these moments, progressive leadership emerges. We saw this when Jego acted as an auxiliary for Jess, teaching her that vulnerability is an essential part of leadership, that she could let anxiety drop away and bring her presence and being-ness into the relationship as a 'true leader'. Many times in my work with riders I have witnessed the extraordinary healing that occurs as a result of such development, for them individually and in their relationships with partners, family members and friends. It is an experience that permeates throughout their lives, with its invitation to 'become whole'.



Kate Tapley is a registered nurse, psychodrama trainee and natural horsemanship. She has journeyed with horses for as long as she can remember, and for 15 years managed Kate Tapley Horse Treks in three venues around Canterbury, Aotearoa New Zealand. Kate has applied the principles of natural horsemanship and of psychodrama to embrace the horse's natural ability as an auxiliary, with the aim of enhancing the connection between horse and rider. Through this work over many years, Kate and the horses have been forever changed by the deepening contact they have had with one another. Kate can be contacted at <kate@katetapley.co.nz>.