

Instinct, Intellect and Leadership (Or, I've Been a Lot Clearer Since Sunny Bit Me)



By Janet L. Crawford

INTRODUCTION

I arrived at SkyHorse Ranch on a chilly May morning, nervous and excited, looking forward to my participation in a five-day Equine Guided Education (EGE) intensive on Leadership and Horses™. As I turned off the country highway and drove down the long drive to the barn where our training would take place, my first impression was the expansive and breathtaking view. While we waited to start, friendly staff and fellow participants huddled over mugs of steaming tea in an outdoor kitchen, complete with wood burning stove. The ranch had a natural quiet, rare in today's world: no noise from background traffic, cell phones or faint electric hum.

I'd heard about Ariana Strozzi and her pioneering work with Leadership and Horses™ for years before I had the pleasure of meeting her following a talk I'd given on The Human Brain and Leadership in Times of Crisis. I'm an executive coach and pioneer in the application of neuroscience to leadership development. As such, I couldn't have been happier at Ariana's invitation a few weeks later to come out to the ranch and experience her work first hand.

For anyone who has worked with horses as a vehicle for self-exploration, the efficacy is indisputable. Few people I know have come away unaffected. Yet, for many, there remains a kind of suspicious wariness. Did I just cross over into the realm of crystals and rainbows? Did the horses really do what they did or was I reading meaning into something that in fact was random? For the average person living in our rationality-steeped culture, the experience can have an uncomfortable and unfamiliar quality.

As magical as the work can seem, it sits squarely on a scientific foundation. This article explores the biological and neuroscientific basis for the effectiveness of using horses in the development of leadership skills. We'll first consider the history of our societal evolution away from awareness of our animal nature, highlighting how the marginalization of instinct has made us less intelligent, not more. We will then examine the neural programming that produces behavior within human social groups and individuals, looking at how interactions with horses can illuminate those forgotten aspects of our being which most influence our daily interactions with others.

THE EVOLUTION AWAY FROM OUR NATURAL INSTINCTS

In order to intellectually understand the transformational power of EGE, it's useful to take a brief foray into human history.

Our basic biological design hasn't changed much in the last 10,000 years. Our bodies and brains are built to excel at life on the African

Savannah. For the average middle class American, it's hard to conceive of what that might have been like. As I write this, I've just finished a light dinner: organic soup from a can with ice cream pulled from my freezer for dessert. No sooner than I start to feel the barest evening chill, I hear the whir of my furnace kicking on. A little later, I'll watch a National Geographic special on my high definition flat screen television, where, ironically, I'll be able to watch humans living in natural environments half a globe away.

We take all of these things for granted. Our ancestors on the African plains had no such luxuries, but they also lacked our worries. No thoughts of global warming or famines in far off places. No concerns about whether the ingredients of that ice cream were natural enough, or whether the Diet Coke® I drank might lead to cancer years hence.

We lived in small, ethnically homogeneous tribes with largely stable membership. Our existence was essentially the same as our ancestors' had been for generations back. Food was foraged and hunted, and was, by default, nutritious and organic. Likewise, procuring that food ensured ample exercise. Most humans lived in equatorial areas where both day and night lasted 12 hours year round. We went to sleep as the last daylight faded and woke up as the first faint light appeared, approximately nine hours a night. No one lived in isolation. To do so meant certain death. From birth to our last days, we lived in close and stable social and physical connection with the same clansmen and extended family members. We worked hard to find food and make shelter, but along with that work came extensive down time with no modern appliances and few chemical substances to distract us from presence to the moment. We had time to recharge, renew and connect.

Danger was constant, but the threats we faced were immediate and largely predictable. You didn't know when a tiger would strike or you might suffer a fatal injury on the hunt, but the circumstances that were likely to end your life were the same as those your ancestors had faced since the beginning of time. Our modern propensity to worry about the future stems from our inability to accurately predict which of all the new and ever changing elements of daily existence might cause us harm down the road. For our ancestors, what served survival was intimate familiarity with the surroundings and a keen alertness in the present moment. Worrying about the tiger won't keep you alive. Sensing his presence might.

All animals survive through awareness of their environment. Mankind is no exception. Due to the enormous cortical mass of our brains, however, we also have an extraordinary ability to imagine things that don't exist now. Then, through the power of language,

we can coordinate action with other humans to create a new and different future. To what use do we put this superpower? Instead of responding to the environment, we find ways to alter it in an attempt to ease our biological needs and imperatives.

The first changes we brought about were survival-based in overtly obvious ways. Agriculture allowed us to produce food independent from what naturally occurred. We could settle large numbers of people in one place and not have to migrate to follow our food sources. The production of more food than the producers could eat in turn enabled specialization of trades.

The religions that emerged with agriculture differed greatly from those of our “primitive” ancestors. Ten thousand years ago, religions were animist. Humans were part of a magical spirit world, where all beings, animate and inanimate, played a part. We worshipped the natural world and gave thanks to animal spirits for protecting us, bringing us luck and most of all, sustenance. Agriculture-based religions begin to focus on a creator in human form, with people placed outside and above the natural order.

Millennia after the advent of agriculture, the scientific revolution precipitated massive “improvements” in the human condition, resulting in my canned food, frozen ice cream, television and thermostatically regulated heat. Each step has taken us further out of touch with the natural world in which we were designed to flourish. I had no part in the production of the gas that fueled the heater that was designed, built and installed by someone else. Nor, more importantly, do I have any direct connection to the production of the food that nourished me this evening. Having food and shelter and heat no longer requires any real-time sensitivity to my environment.

Concurrent with the scientific revolution was the philosophy that the individual was the fundamental unit of human society. We saw our lives as self-determined, with cause attributed to individual choice. Terms like “self-made man” and “captains of our destiny” underscore this cultural ethos. If we err, it’s personal moral failing. If we succeed, it is through individual merit. Our lives are the result of personal choice and rational consideration. To think otherwise would be morally and intellectually weak.

For centuries, Western belief, conscious or unconscious, has been that technological “advances” disentangle us from having to pay attention to the “baser” things of life and leave us free for more “noble” rational pursuits. This belief belies a key reality: irrespective of our modern comforts, our biology still responds to the world as though it were the Savannah. The preponderance of human behavior results from unconscious neural hardwiring designed for survival and happiness under very different conditions.

As modern leaders in cube jungles, we trip through minefields filled with the expectation that people will respond rationally, when in fact, they answer mostly to ancient imperative. Lacking fluency in the language of nature, we are left powerless to understand and

influence our experience. We stand at the whim of an invisible and puzzling master, bereft of choice.

THE HUMAN BRAIN AND SOCIAL DESIGN

In stark contrast to our cultural beliefs, conscious volition represents a very small sliver of the brain’s capacity. In order to preserve this precious cognitive resource, the vast majority of our behaviors result from a mix of instinct, learned habit and unconscious emotional patterning acquired early in life. Because we tend to believe that we are in conscious control of our choices and we live in a society that demands rational explanations, we are experts at constructing justifications for actions that were, in fact, generated on autopilot.

Instinct is easy to spot in animals. Dangle string in front of a cat or throw a tennis ball in the presence of a dog. It’s easy to predict what they will do regardless of whether you know the individual animal. But instinct is equally present in humans, and nowhere is unconscious neural programming more evident than in our communal interactions.

Contrary to the idea of individualism, humans are social animals. Our brains have developed over millions of years in response to the fact that we don’t survive well in isolation. Brain scans conducted by Matthew Lieberman at the University of California, Los Angeles show a rapid redirection of neural activity away from the higher cognitive areas of the brain and into its fear centers in the presence of indicators of social exclusion. So powerful is this neural predisposition that subjects exhibited this redirection even though the specter of abandonment existed only from hypothetical strangers in a contrived laboratory study. To emphasize how important social awareness is, neuroscientists have found that the neural systems which process social interaction are the brain’s default position. As Dr. Dan Siegel, of UCLA puts it, “The brain’s evolutionary bet is that in the absence of any stronger input, social awareness has the highest survival value.”

As much as we like to think we live in an egalitarian society, our brains are wired to be exquisitely sensitive to our rank in the status hierarchy of the communities in which we live. Where we fall in the social pecking order predicts the length and quality of our lifespan, but more importantly, the very survival of our genes. Especially in primitive societies, but more so in our own than we might be aware, status determines such fundamental needs as what we eat, how much shelter we are afforded, the desirability of our sexual partners, and whether we are beaten or protected. Humans non-verbally convey and respond to status in every interaction in which we engage.

An entire new field, social neuroscience, studies the neural processes that support the complicated social systems necessary for human survival. From this body of research has emerged a resounding rebuttal to the pre-eminence of the individual. UCLA professor, Dr. Naomi Eisenberg, has shown that our brains feel the pain of social exclusion in the same centers that process physical pain. Decisions

about people outside our social group are made with different neural algorithms than are used for those inside it. When we interact with people of different races, the fear centers of the brain are more active, even when we consciously believe ourselves to be free of bias.

We possess mirror neuron systems which track minute details about the physiology of those around us. Our brains compare their physiological state with what it would mean for us, were we to exhibit that behavior. A whole host of variables including breath rate and depth, skin flushing, muscle tension, micro facial movements, and pupil dilation are monitored continually outside our consciousness. Our body uses what it detects to assess the emotional state and congruence of those with whom we interact, allowing us to expertly maneuver through social situations by predicting the other persons' upcoming behaviors, needs and likes.

Primal codes related to such things as dominance, submission, generosity, reciprocity, etc. also govern how we interpret those signals. Our brain gives far more credence to these assessments than it does to the linguistic content of the message. Our decision to focus all our attention on someone, to turn away and ignore them, or to become argumentative comes only in very small part from a reasoned thought process. We assess other people before they open their mouths to speak. We think we communicate in words, but the bigger story lies elsewhere.

INFORMATION PROCESSING AND BEHAVIOR GENERATION IN THE HUMAN BRAIN

Humans process information and experience through multiple brain systems. Unlike most other animals, instead of relying primarily on preprogrammed instincts and habits acquired through stimulus-response learning, we also process information through complex emotional programming acquired early in life and rational/logical filters which have the capacity to override the other processing systems. The vast majority of our information and decision making machinery operates at an implicit level: outside our consciousness, but still calling the shots.

Our response to every situation is the result of a complex combination of all the systems, although for many of us, the conscious rational level is the only one we know to acknowledge. This leads to befuddling situations such as making New Year's resolutions we know are to our benefit, but which we immediately abandon for no apparent reason. Our instinctual programming and emotional patterning is the key to what has happened: it had logic all its own for blocking our success.

Rational processing takes place in the neocortex, the seat of language and original thought. The neocortex is comprised of the large grey lobes you see in depictions of the human brain, and has two hemispheres, popularly referred to as the left and right brains. In the foremost area of the neocortex, located directly behind our forehead, lies the prefrontal cortex (PFC), which mediates an

impressive list of functions, including attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility (i.e. the ability to override instinct and unconscious programming), empathy, fear moderation, intuition, future-based thinking and morality.

It is precisely these functions that differentiate humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. We can consciously resist our impulses. We act by moral codes. As mentioned earlier, we can think into the future and create things that don't exist today, allowing us tremendous power over our natural environments. We are the only animal for whom a great deal of our neural processing is devoted to imagining various future possibilities and creating advance strategies for dealing with them.

Amy Arnsten, head of the Arnsten Lab at Yale University, calls the PFC "the Goldilocks of the brain....it likes everything just right." The PFC is exquisitely sensitive and limited in its capacity. Were we to really use rationality and volition to determine our every action, we would completely overload our neural circuitry instantaneously. We rely on a combination of instinct and acquired habits to determine the lion's share of our responses.

Instinct exists to automate the patterns that keep us alive, so that the precious resources of the neocortex can be used for more valuable purposes. We've now engineered our way into a society where many of our instincts are no longer necessary to keep us alive. The critical point is that they have not been erased out of our brain's programming, and they still dictate our behavior! We can override them, but to do so uses precious and limited brain resources. It's akin to leaving the faucet running while you brush your teeth during a drought. If there's only so much water to go around, you shouldn't waste it. In addition to requiring the use of precious brain resources, overriding instinctual impulses can only occur when we are conscious of the impulse and are motivated to counteract it. As a leader, pitting intellect against instinct is a recipe for ineffectiveness.

A second level of processing occurs in the limbic system, which is the seat of emotions and memory. We live in an emotionally illiterate society in which we marginalize emotion as immature compared to our logic circuits. One of the most common requests I hear from the executives I work with is, "Will you help me get emotion out of my organization?" If they knew how emotions function, they'd know how impossible that request is to fulfill.

People with damage to the emotional centers of the brain cannot, among many other things, make decisions. They may stand in the cereal aisle for hours deciding between generic and brand name. Emotions provide us lightning fast short cuts in processing data. Our brain encodes the outcomes of our life experiences with emotional markers. When similar situations arise, we use those markers to guide the rapid production of a "good" decision. This partially explains why we are predisposed to agree with people we like, even when their logical arguments make less sense than those of someone we don't like.

Each of us has fundamental emotional patterns that were acquired very early in life, typically before the age of two. The very large mass of the human brain would prove fatal to our mothers were it fully developed at birth. To compensate for this anatomical discrepancy, the human brain grows and matures for many years post-partum. In fact, the PFC isn't fully matured until we reach our early twenties, explaining in part the often rash behavior of adolescents. Compared with other animals, we spend an inordinate amount of time dependent upon our parents and community while the brain completes its maturation.

Humans are born with what is referred to as "open neurology." At birth, we cannot self-regulate even such fundamental bodily functions as respiration and heartbeat. Rather, we are dependent on physical contact with the nervous systems of those who care for us to regulate ourselves. In the face of danger or pain, we do not innately know how to interpret the seriousness of those signals. Our bodies mimic the reaction of those most closely bonded to us in order to learn how to respond to the world. After all, our parents' response patterns enabled them to stay alive long enough to pass their genes along to us. It is at this early stage of development that our most sensitive emotional patterns are encoded. As we mature, our neurology becomes increasingly closed, or self-regulating, but it never closes completely. Those around us continue to have an influence over our bodies and moods.

The downside of these acquired emotional patterns is that they are just one way of filtering the universe, and are not necessarily the best or most functional. They are simply the result of the best conglomeration of the patterns we have been exposed to through our parents and culture. They allow for fast judgment in the moment by creating a top down set of constraints on how we see the world. The older we get, the more constrained we tend to become. The insidious nature of our implicit patterns is that they produce judgments that feel like "truth." We tend to see perception as neutral, and assume that, given the same set of inputs, people will "see" the same things. The reality is that our sensory apparatuses are not at all impartial. The same light patterns may strike the retinas of two individuals, but the neural pathways that the brain uses to interpret those light patterns will be very different, based on the prior history of those two people.

A critical actor in the limbic brain is the amygdalae, two almond-shaped structures that, among other functions, detect danger and trigger threat responses. What the brain recognizes as dangerous comprises a complicated mix of preprogrammed "hard-wiring" and references to past experiences. As humans, we instinctively know to be afraid of certain things. We see a stick in the trail and freeze, at least until such time as the brain sorts out that it's just a stick and not a snake. Standing on the edge of a cliff makes us queasy even if our balance is good and we've got a rope to steady us. Fire a gun and the sound makes you flinch. As social animals, we are also preprogrammed to assess status, inclusion, fairness, uncertainty and difference as vectors of our safety.

Another category of threat comes from our internal library of past negative experiences. Our survival depends on avoiding situations that were unpleasant in the past, so we record very sensitive profiles in our memory banks. Whenever we sense something in the present with enough similarity to a past negative situation, that profile is triggered at lightning speed outside of conscious awareness. In order to legitimize our response, we are likely to generate logical interpretations of the current situation that may or may not have any real relation to the actual trigger.

When the amygdalae sense sufficient danger, they redirect control of our actions to the most instinctual level of the brain, the reptilian system, which governs autonomic body functions and default reactions, such as fight, flight and freeze. This redirection phenomenon is called an "amygdala hijack." When we are triggered by social cues or negative emotional memories, we easily go into fight or flight. This behavioral mode is obvious on the Savannah: in the face of danger, you sprint away as fast as you are able or you strike back physically. In our modern jungles, it shows up in a whole host of less overt ways: withdrawal, avoidance, sarcasm, forgetting one's train of thought at embarrassing moments, making socially inappropriate attacks, etc. Again, since we generally believe our actions should be logical and volitional, we usually experience hijacks in one of two ways: we find logical justifications for why we did what we did and/or we feel inwardly shameful and perplexed, unable to understand why we "went there."

In summary, we can see that what determines our behavior is a complicated mix of neural inputs. One contributor to the equation is the instincts shared by all humans. Another comes from individual emotional patterns that exist largely outside of awareness, combined with the learned responses of a lifetime of experience. The last contributor is rational conscious consideration of the situation, with this last level representing a fraction of the brain's processing ability.

Now that we've considered our historical relationship to instinct and gained some insight about basic neural design, we're ready to explore the connection between science and the extraordinary usefulness of EGE in becoming a skilled leader.

THE POWER OF PRESENCE

One benefit of time spent on the ranch has nothing to do with the horses themselves. Modern life keeps us distracted. Focused on email, Blackberries®, traffic, work deadlines, television and other demands, we spend little to no time in natural environments where we can notice ourselves and the subtle patterns around us.

Our ancestors survived by being keenly aware of their environment. To this day, our biology thrives on presence. Brain scans of long-term meditators show substantially more PFC activation and lowered propensity toward amygdala activation.

Without slowing down, we also don't give ourselves the chance to reflect on and enjoy what is right about our lives. It's more valuable to your survival to predict harmful things successfully than it is to rely on sunny outcomes. That's exactly what the brain, left alone, will do. Because of this negative bias, we tend to project worrisome scenarios onto the future instead of noticing that the present is usually pretty darned good. Mark Twain once famously said, "I have suffered through a great many tragedies, most of which never happened." Five days spent on the ranch reminded me deeply of the goodness and blessing that surrounds me. From that space, with low levels of cortisol in our bloodstreams and boosted levels of serotonin (the "happiness" neurotransmitter), our PFC functions well, focus is possible, and we tend to attribute fewer insidious motives to those around us.

AWARENESS OF THE SYSTEM AND OUR SOCIAL NATURE

A second area of learning involves reawakening the ability to observe ourselves as part of a social and natural system. Our cultural legacy of individualism, dismissal of emotion and instinct, and belief that man exists separate from nature blinds us to the intricate patterns of interaction at play around us. Without fluency in these patterns, we repeatedly misattribute the causes of both our successes and our deepest frustrations, leaving us with limited power to influence different outcomes.

Our introduction to the horses came slowly. First, we stood on the outside of the arena, simply observing for quite some time, being present with the horses and looking for patterns in their behavior. Once inside the ring, we quietly mingled with the horses, paying attention to our impulses and feelings, letting them guide where we went and what we did.

The horses clearly had roles of dominance, submission, sentinel, guardian, etc. Each had a position and when one horse moved, it influenced the constellation of the entire herd. The horses responded in an entirely different fashion to each individual in our human group. There were some from whom they shied away and others they eagerly approached. The mere presence of some seemed to agitate the herd, while others elicited the rare horse behavior of lying down. Each of us had influenced the system uniquely, even without intention.

What was it that the horses sensed and to what did they respond? And, knowing now that people also possess strong unconscious social instincts, might we be similarly influencing our every human interaction without our knowledge? People leave, become playful, aggressive, disruptive, and inattentive. In short, they do all the things that horses do when interacting with each other. Due to the very limited capacity of the PFC, there's only so much of that reaction we can control, even when we're aware of what's at play and want to regulate our response. Bottom line: using logic and positional power alone is extremely limited in its potential to influence others.

I was immediately struck by how little attention we pay in our daily lives to the patterns of the humans closest to us, even those most vital to our well-being, in work and at home. We're in far too much hurry to get the task done or be entertained. Such observation doesn't seem necessary in a culture that believes in reliance on logic and will power.

Being with the horses reintroduces us to our membership in the animal world, our fundamental social nature, and the interconnectedness of our natural environment. It asks us to behave in a fashion atypical for modern Westerners, allowing us to witness the influence of our being and putting us in touch with the power of our instinctual, emotional and unconscious biology. From that place, we can start to learn how to leverage instinct and the power of emotion to affect the behaviors we desire in those around us.

GOING BEYOND RATIONAL EXPLANATIONS AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION

Perhaps the most profound level at which I believe EGE works in the domain of leadership is fostering ownership of the influence of one's "being-ness." At a simplistic level, leaders tend to think the world should react to intentions, requests, positional authority and logic. When this doesn't work, blame is placed squarely on the recipient of the communication:

"I do everything right and they don't follow."

"I mentor. I give kudos. Still they aren't performing to par."

"I came up with great strategy for the team and I communicated it clearly. My meetings are organized, and my tactical plan is tightly designed. Despite it all, the team lets petty arguments and resentments impede our progress. What's wrong with them?"

What's missing is the possibility that something about the leader him- or herself could possibly be the impediment. Instead, their followers should "get over" their emotions or sensitivity. What we now understand is that the brain is designed to respond to social cues and that only a very small portion of our behavior is generated through conscious volition. The leader's every move activates instinctual responses in those around him. Pitting logic against instinct is a losing strategy.

What muddies the water for humans is that we are not solely creatures of instinct. We all possess the ability to construct logical arguments, to override instinct and to make up stories to explain the world around us. In all our interactions, a combination of conscious and unconscious, volition and instinct is at play. When we respond instinctually, we seldom recognize it as such. Because of that, it is often hard for even aware leaders to discern how much is "me" vs. how much is "them."

The horse brain is much smaller as a percentage of body mass than the human brain. More importantly, the equine Neocortex is

relatively undeveloped. Horses don't rationalize things, nor do they possess much capacity to think into the future. In the book, "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers," Stanford Professor and MacArthur Fellow, Robert Sapolsky explores the effects and origins of stress in humans. It is exactly the inability to ruminate that makes ulcers a nearly unheard of malady in equine populations.

When relating to a horse, there is no neocortical filter between action and response. They cannot sense one thing and then reinterpret it through thought. Information is only processed instinctually and emotionally. Likewise, the horse is impervious to your verbally expressed intent and stories. The information that determines its response comes entirely from your way of being: how you hold your body and move, the tonality of your voice, the smell of your sweat. Horses are simultaneously more instinctually perceptive and have less to cloud that perception. Prey animals are usually more sensitive to threat stimuli; therefore they have heightened awareness to their surroundings. Their eyes and ears are capable of swiveling, allowing them to take in a very large perceptual field.

In human interaction, we make up stories to explain the situations in which we find ourselves. Individuals rarely accurately assess why they can't find a mate that treats them well, their employees leave for other managers, or people fail to share vital information with them. As an executive coach, I conduct assessment interviews with several coworkers of my client at the outset of the contract. Invariably, my client is surprised by multiple aspects of how others perceive their interactions. Bottom line: what we think is influencing others is often not what is actually at play.

Nature isn't random. When a horse allows one person to lead it and not the next, it's because of how that person is being or failing to be. Horses don't play intellectual games or hold grudges, nor do they second guess themselves or make up elaborate stories to justify the behavior of the beings in their lives. Horses directly perceive who we are in the present moment and respond accordingly. We may be able to rationalize away our ineffectiveness in interaction with other humans, but horses force us to own the affect we are having. In this context, individuals who act from intellect and dismiss the power of presence come face to face with their limitations.

One of the most important "energies" social animals assess is congruence. Our biological design ensures that non-verbal behaviors and internal emotional states match. It's impossible to convincingly deliver the line "I'm happy" with sad eyes, a morose tone and hunched shoulders. In fact, recent neuroscience research on the congruence of emotions suggests that people easily assess the emotional state of an object in an animated video, simply by observing its movement, shape and color. What we think and how our body moves has a natural alignment, and incongruence has physical markers. If we are in touch with our instinct, we allow the dis-ease the incongruence produces to surface as information. But even if we ignore it, it still influences how we respond.

Again, because horses lack the cortical filter that would allow them to dismiss incongruence or listen to stories that compete with it, they can't buy into our intellectual justifications. They also don't hold grudges based on their history with us or cultivate worries about where things might head in the future. The response we get from a horse is pure unadulterated reaction to our congruence and presence in the moment.

As the week wore on and I became more and more present with my thoughts, feelings, and impulses, I started to notice a repeating pattern. I would have a bodily sense of the situation followed quickly by an internal explanation or dismissal. This showed up in my initial experience of one participant: I noticed myself thinking that I should want to talk to her on break (based on common interests), but I couldn't muster the interest to have a conversation. From there, I quickly went into stories of judgment and self-esteem. "She's a nice person" "I should pay attention to her. She's doing some really cool things." "I'm a bad person for not wanting to talk to her." Still, the feeling of disinterest persisted. At some point, the story even shifted to "We haven't talked because she's not interested in me and probably doesn't like me!"

All that shifted for me when she wanted to hang with the horses and they turned and walked away. Just a moment before, they'd been frolicking with someone else. They didn't have any of my stories or content-based reasons telling them to pay attention or not. All they had to work with was her energetic presence. "Do I need to pay attention?" "Does she have presence?" "Can I trust her as part of the herd?" If not, better to leave her to her own devices. Humans can have a felt sense and override it, horses can't.

I marveled at how much information I had lost by ignoring my initial sense of the situation and covering it with unnecessary stories. Had I stopped with, "I don't feel like talking with her," and then remained curious and open about where that was coming from, it would have served both of us. As it was, I had spent time shaming myself for not including her, chiding myself for not being an effective networker, and feeling anxious about whether I was liked. The exchanges I did have had a forced quality. After all, with those stories going through my head, her instinctual body had to be detecting incongruence as well. Those early conversations lacked an authenticity that might have emerged, had I allowed my instinctual reaction into consciousness with compassion and curiosity.

Over the week, as she became more open and I became more settled and authentic, my felt desire to interact and my ease at approaching her increased. Based on their willingness to play, the horses felt the same way.

I'VE BEEN A LOT CLEARER SINCE SUNNY BIT ME

Each student in the program, it seemed, experienced at least one breakthrough moment in which old patterns or new awareness became suddenly illuminated. My magic moment happened on the third day. We were gathered in the center of the arena debriefing the

morning, with the horses milling about on the periphery of our circle. Suddenly I felt the strong sensation that a horse was approaching me from outside my visual field. I turned around to see Sunny, a gelding with powerful energy, walking directly toward me with a purposeful gait.

My immediate gut reaction said, “I don’t like his attitude and I’m going to let him know it’s not OK.” Then my cortical stories kicked into high gear: “For heaven sakes, he’s just walking in my general direction. Why do you make everything about yourself?” “If you aren’t nice to him, everyone else will be shocked and think that you’re an animal hater.” “I’ll take my cue about what to do from the guy next to me. After all, he knows what he’s doing.”

By that time, Sunny had made it across the arena and had stopped directly between me and my classmate (who I’d secretly fancied into Mr. Horse Whisperer). He put his hand on Sunny’s shoulder and I dutifully copied. The moment my hand made contact, Sunny spun around and bit my forearm with surgical precision. It was a cold morning and I had three heavy layers on. Despite that, he pulled a ¼ inch diameter bit of flesh off my arm. Months later, I still have a faint scar to remind me.

The moment he bit me, though, my neocortex went quiet and I spun into instinctual action. I stomped toward him with the energy of a grizzly bear, my open palm hand shoved toward his face. He reared, spun around and galloped off. One of the assistants approvingly said, “Well done!” Well done, I thought, would be if I’d listened to my first impression and acted accordingly.

Upon returning to my friend’s farm where I was staying for the duration of the program, I pondered the connection between the day’s events and the patterns in my life. The feeling of the interaction with Sunny, along with the stories that accompanied it, was intimately familiar. I had “Sunnies” all over in my life, people whose motives I didn’t trust, but with whom I had told myself I needed to play nice or risk looking inappropriate. That night, I quickly dispatched with several emails asking for information, support and business that simply didn’t feel clean. I’d procrastinated for many days and invested considerable psychic energy worrying about how to politely decline without closing any doors or offending anyone. Something big had shifted.

CONCLUSION

In order to act with power and intentionality in the world, it is imperative to master one’s own biological presence such that the human animals we interact with respond from the best possible instinctual place. It is crucial that we learn how to avoid triggering negative instinctual reactions, and come to terms with the “unfair” and unvarnished truth: our intention and thoughts account for a very small portion of the message we send to others. Having good ideas and surface level intentions will not make others follow you. Signaling engaged relaxation, assurance, focus, congruence and presence will.

I am not advocating that we become pure creatures of instinct, or that “listening to your gut” will always give you the best answer. Intellect is a powerful, yet limited force. Instinct is not always right. Rather than relying on intellect as a one-size-fits-all answer to leadership, we can reconnect with the enduring instinctual logic of our biology, leveraging its wisdom when it leads us in the right direction and skillfully overriding it when it doesn’t.

A week spent in relationship with horses puts us back in touch with the degree to which we are part of a natural system, participating in a social “herd” and responding more through instinct than rationality. It’s been a while since that day, and I’m still a lot clearer since Sunny bit me.