

Reports on Conferences & Intensives

Moving into the Knowing Field with Horses

Ruud Knaapen



Editor's Note:

Ruud facilitated a workshop on constellations and horses at the recent Bernried Intensive and I asked him if he would write something for the journal as a result.

Introduction

This article 'Moving into the Knowing Field with Horses' speaks to us about a form of coaching using horses as part of the team. Working with horses in Equine assisted psychotherapy (EAP) and learning (EAL) is a method that is being used worldwide with individuals, groups, children and adults of all abilities. It has become a highly valued method of consultancy

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for organisations working with trust, leadership and team building issues.

Here we have some explanations of the unique experience of working with and through horses. We find out what we can learn from both the herd and horse behaviour as we work in constellations with horses. It is really

interesting how this can be applied to both our internal and external worlds.

When you observe a herd of horses you will notice that it is constantly forming and reforming constellations, moving and grazing and all in the service of life. Horses become beautiful representatives for both our internal and external world. This article refers to the individual's internal world as 'the inner herd', the container of all our internal parts. The 'herd to which the horse belongs' can reflect our external environment.

The horse is a prey animal that lives in the present moment. Safety is in belonging to the herd. Horses have a level of authenticity that can be observed in their responses and

reactions to their environment. When we are Present, we can experience their deep connections with everything, including us. Their heightened sensitivity and how they express this has the power to transform and heal in the moment. This article and the story included illustrate a 2-system pressure of integration and differentiation that comes through the work with the horses. It explains how the horses, through their interactions with each other and us, can bring to light sequentially what needs to be seen, what the system wants to show, what has been excluded and the horses can open the gate to the next movement in the field.

People often turn to a coach for help when they have problems. You might say that the coach exists by the grace of problems, or symptoms that are showing up in the client's field. Bert Hellinger writes in his book: *'De wijsheid is voortdurend onderweg' (Die Quelle braucht nicht nach dem Weg zu fragen/No Waves without the Ocean):*

'You do not need a problem to be able to work on solutions'.

I mentioned this to a colleague of mine and he looked at me and asked me how did I think I would manage to find clients? I replied sincerely: "If you have to ask me this question – what chance does a potential client have to get rid of his problem and to get rid of the coach?" I unconsciously confronted myself with my own response as well.

I was reflecting on Hellinger's work on the high art of helping. What does helping actually mean? What does helping have to do with my role as a coach? Who is helping whom? These questions have become increasingly intriguing to me. Surprisingly the answers came from the world of horses. Horses are interesting coaches, because they are not vulnerable, as a 'helper' might be, to how the client formulates the problem. They do not respond to analytical problem definitions or requests for help.



Horses and Helping

The art of Helping is, in essence, a loving way of not co-operating with a pattern. Patterns have the tendency to keep themselves alive, to repeat themselves and to recruit helpers who will collude with keeping the root cause of these patterns hidden, often because the root cause is too painful to look at or does not fit within the boundaries of the personal conscience.

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According to the horse's perception, something is 'out of order' or 'excluded'. You could say that the client's 'inner herd' is incomplete. In this exact moment the horses start to react instinctively to the system of the person and you can recognise this by the change in the horse's behaviour as he tries to lower the pressure in the system by: disconnecting, becoming restless or behaving in a neurotic way.

"Wholeness allows itself to be partly seen in our human perception, but cannot be divided by that same perception." (Ruud Knaapen)

It is precisely this ability of horses to experience the world around us as a whole that is valuable for both

client and facilitator. The horse responds to the client's system as a whole, which offers space for a different kind of helping. As coaches working with horses, we tap into that instinctive power and work with that capacity of awareness; looking through the eyes of the horse helps us to be in service of the whole.

The World of the Horse

Horses have existed for 65 million years, that's a fact. Our history as human beings is not even visible on the time-scale of the horse. When I was first told this by an ethologist, I realised immediately why I always feel such a deep relief when I look into the eye of a horse, an eye that has a monocular visual field of about 350 degrees and can detect the smallest movements from huge distances. This eye keeps the horse connected also to where the other members of the herd are. Horses need to belong and forming bonds ensures safety: their defence mechanisms become de-regulated when they cannot be part of a herd and they become hypervigilant. A horse scans its environment 50-100 times a minute to make sure it is still part of the group.

It is also interesting to know something about the structure of the herd: horses tend to organise themselves to avoid conflict. Conflicts would use up too much energy, which is better conserved in the service of safety, for flight not fight. This is the safer and wiser option. There is a vertical relationship and structure within the herd that serves the energy regulation of the group. Every horse knows its position in the herd, which develops over time. Mostly subtle domination expressed through movement regulates this order.

Most of the time the leading stallion initiates or facilitates this movement. There is a second force, which could be called 'leadership', that does not necessarily correlate with dominance. In most cases leadership is given to an older mare who intervenes in

conflicts and most importantly, gives direction to the movement of the herd. Leadership is in service of the whole herd and is given, not taken.

Humans and Horses

Horses perceive human beings as predators and so are naturally wary of us. Everything in our appearance and behaviour reminds them of this. They see how close-set our eyes are, how our ears point backwards, how our hands resemble claws and appear to be grabbing. Most of us smell like meat and we jump on a horse's back, the exact spot where predators attack them. They also recognise us as predators through our behaviour and our way of thinking.

Humans go for their goal in a straight line, think in functions and interpretations and live life in a chronological way whereby 'now' exists because of 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow' because of 'today'. Horses have a more holistic view of the world; they are part of a herd and are always in the 'here' and 'now'. A horse can only survive if the herd survives. Its task in life is to stay as 'we' instead of adjusting into an 'I'.



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relates most to constellation work and I describe it in more detail below:

The work takes place with one or more horses, working in a team consisting of the client, the facilitator/s and the horse. It all happens on the ground, not on horseback. The client brings their question/symptom/problem.

- The more or less *behavioural* approach. The client/s is given an assignment to fulfil a task with the horse. The facilitator observes and reflects on the behaviour of the client and the horse. Then the work is to see, how what shows up in the session, may reflect a dynamic or highlight a movement which is applicable to the client's situation, in their work or private setting.
- The horses seem to reflect on the inner movement of the client, especially the part that is excluded. This is more or less *intrapsychic* work. Through the horse, the client has the opportunity to integrate and face a part of himself that for some reason he has been excluding. On an intrapsychic level the horse seems to react most strongly to the inner part of the client that is excluded.

Horses and Systemic Work

Because horses have this capacity to experience existence as a 'we', they operate with both their individual conscience and a collective conscience. It is important for them to belong to a group, and to occupy the appropriate or 'right' place within that group, each one according to its true nature. Horses seem to recognise and respond to authenticity, i.e. when someone acts in alignment with their own unique sources and destiny. In other words, as a person, when your 'inner herd' is complete and has the capacity to move forward.

Several approaches are used with employing horses in therapeutic work with clients, roughly following the line along which this work has developed. The third approach is the one that



- Acknowledging what is there: A participant of a course appears to be scared of horses, but stands quite close to the horse. In reaction to this, the horse turns its head away, almost to look away. You can see the fear on the participant's face. The facilitator asks the participant to take a few steps back to where it feels comfortable. The participant takes two or three steps away to where it feels more comfortable and her face relaxes. The horse immediately turns back to the participant and keeps its head still, at stomach height on the participant. They are standing stock-still together; they are both at ease, horse and participant.

What the horse is mirroring by turning away, is the ignoring of the participant of her own boundaries and the boundaries of the horse. By doing that she doesn't have to face her fear in reaching out. The horse in the interaction with the client shows how fragile and 'risky' this process of reaching out is for this client. When the participant becomes aware of her own boundaries, a true connection between participant and horse is possible.

- The horse acts as an indicator of where and when in the herd, the system-pressure changes related to the three aspects written below.

This is more of a *phenomenological* approach, which is close to the way we work with constellations.

Horses as an Indication of System Pressure

As I see it, the horse is not so much representing something, but rather functions as an early indicator of where a potential movement is stuck. The horse reacts instinctively when:

1. The inner herd of the client or the whole system is not complete.
2. Both the client and the system are out of order: client and other systemic members are in the wrong place.
3. The client or system is not in resonance with its destiny.

All these aspects influence the predictability and therefore the safety, of the behaviour of a system. The horse simply senses this as stress and will try to resolve it by reducing the stress, leading the facilitator to the point where an intervention in one or more of these three aspects can be helpful.

An interesting aspect of this way of working is that the horse's movements seem to be sequential, following the 'path' of releasing the system pressure downhill. For example, the horse will respond first to the issue of

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the inner herd or system that has the highest need to be resolved (that is, completeness, order or destiny). This instinctive movement is very refined, developed and in service of the whole. The horse seems to respond beyond the borders of what we are able to perceive. Its reactions show a totally different area where an intervention is needed than was first expected.

An example of a systemic session with a horse: "Dear child, when it is my time I will follow you."

Prior to the session, a woman in the group (I will call her Paula) took me aside and indicated that she did not want to step into the arena with the horse. Certainly, she had a theme, but she did not want to face it, right there, that day, not in front of her colleagues. I said that that was fine with me. Halfway through the day, when we had had three people in the arena with the horse, I asked the group who wanted to work next. A client came forward and sat beside me in the usual way we start a session: an introductory interview asking the client what they would like to look at.

In the meantime the horse moved and then stood still at the edge of the arena, right in front of Paula. I saw this happen out of the corner of my eye, but decided to continue with the client who had come to sit next to me, especially as Paula had been adamant that she did not want to work with the horse that day. Against my better judgement, I invited the client next to me to step into the arena. The horse then seemed



to focus even more on Paula. As I looked sideways, I could see that a sort of exchange was already taking place between them to the extent that other group members had moved their chairs and created a kind of workspace for this process. It was now clear to the other client that the horse was not available to her and her question at that moment. I asked her to step out of the arena and suggested that we continue with her question at a later point.

Paula now seemed increasingly open to what was happening between her and the horse. It was an impressive sight: the horse was 1.5 metres behind the rope marking the edge of the arena, standing still, not moving a single hair, completely focused on Paula. She was sitting on her chair, her hands folded in her lap, her head slightly bent. The group was completely silent and still, as if no one was breathing. Looking at this image, the following sentence came to me: "When it is my time, I will follow you, my sweet child." I had hardly heard the sentence in my head when Paula muttered very softly: "I've seen it, I see it now." She looked at me for a moment and nodded as a sign to me that we could continue. Afterwards she told me she was relieved that the session had taken place spontaneously; she was now able to give her deceased son a place in her heart.



Two Types of System Pressure

When we work with horses we work basically with two types of system pressure. The first we call 'integrative pressure', the second 'differentiating

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pressure'. Integrative pressure comes, for example, from something inside the client's consciousness, inner herd or system that has been excluded and wants to be integrated. Exclusion seems to create a potential for an integrative movement, at least for a certain time. The horse instinctively picks up on that potential, especially at the moment just before the movement actually starts. The effect is seen immediately in the horse's behaviour as the system pressure reduces and the horse relaxes, starts grazing again or connects deeply with a client in silence. The inner herd, for this moment is complete.

The movement we call 'differentiating pressure' is associated with the need in herds and other social systems for differentiation. An example is when a client has taken on feelings or a burden for someone else, or where the boundary between two elements is not recognised. When there is a good reason that differentiation is not recognised, the horse immediately shows a rise in tension/pressure. For instance, the horse will withdraw when a client reaches out towards it from an inward position of inappropriately taking on the role of parent, or when he is caught in a triangular relationship; in other words, when the principal

order is disturbed. In contrast, in the same session, the horse will accept this movement when the client is able to reach out from his own position.

From my point of view the two system pressures alternate in a session like a dance. Although they are different, one seems to initiate the movement of the other. At the same time, both are driven to the same extent by an underlying force to move forward: a life force, probably what Hellinger calls 'Geist'. Jan Jacob Stam (2012) refers to Geist in the magazine (Groningen).

This is significant because when symptoms that are caused by the interactions of these two pressures are resolved at one level, they may pop up on another level. This is probably how systems learn on a collective level, exactly as happens in a herd. The result of this learning process is probably to bring the system more into alignment with its own destiny. If this is true, horses could help us learn to be in tune with, consent to and give deep respect to these basic forces of nature.

Life doesn't need to be resolved

Life in general, doesn't need to be resolved. This brings us to a basic question: how much does need to be resolved? Through the eye of the horse there is a limit to working on patterns from the past.

When we continue to work on past patterns it can threaten our forward movement. In this situation the horses will withdraw or their behaviour may highlight the client's acting out or irrelevant behaviour. This same behaviour appears when a client is stuck in secondary emotions. A horse only connects with primary emotions. Horses are not necessarily interested in solutions, which can sometimes be a very powerful mirror for clients or systems.

That brings us to a basic question that has frequently popped up for us since we started working with horses: how much needs to be resolved? Maybe allowing learning is enough; resolving may disturb a natural process of collective learning.

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