



LET THE HORSE BE YOUR TEACHER

Anna Bonnage talks about how learning to observe and listen to your horse can bring a deeper understanding to your horsemanship.

I am sat at the airport as I write this. It's my sixteenth annual trip to Harry Whitney's farm in Arizona, America. With my hat and chaps in my luggage I'm ready to ride young horses, and once again transition from being a full-time teacher/horse trainer at home in the UK to a student at Harry's clinics.

Waiting in an airport gives me time to reflect on feeling passionate about a subject, in this case horses, and the desire we all have to better ourselves and seek information from those who know more than us. We're in an age where some people have chosen to move away from harsher training methods, and are following a path of 'Natural Horsemanship'. The term 'Natural Horsemanship' was actually coined by Pat Parelli but it has come to describe a variety of alternative approaches to horse training, approaches which are seen by their followers as natural and kinder to the horse.

But how do any of us really know if what we are being taught is helping a horse? How do we know if we are helping them to develop clarity in their work with us, a healthy mental emotional state, and a healthy physical body?

I'm running off to another continent for two weeks of training, and I wonder how much more I would learn if I stayed at home and spent a fortnight living with my horses for twenty-four hours a day: observing them in the herd, working with them every day and hearing what they have to say. But every year, for sixteen years, I have returned to work with Harry Whitney.

Every time I see him working with a horse, I see and feel each horse begin to find a deep relaxation. Their worries start

to melt away in front of my eyes. I believe that for a horse to give their best they need to find relaxation no matter what the owner's chosen riding discipline is. Horses feel good in Harry's company, not just because he has great empathy for them, but because he also gives them clarity - which can at times mean being firmer with them while they search for the answers. As Harry says, "Being specific with a horse is far more beneficial to them than being careful". Being firm might not be seen as very gentle or 'natural', but it's clear to me that a little appropriate firmness helps a horse to relax. This doesn't mean having to touch a horse: the sound of the end of the lead rope whacking on your boot can be a great way to re-

focus them, bringing their attention back to you. It's a hard task for trainers to train a horse to enjoy their work with the human, but Harry achieves this and it's the horse that tells us this is true.

When I watch trainers I've learnt not to be fooled by tricks and fancy movements. If the horse is swishing her tail, showing tension in her face,

biting at the bit, stoic in her stance or can't stand still, this tells me all I need to know. Unless a horse shows me that they feel good about what is being asked of them, I'm not impressed.

When traveling out to help people with their horses, I have observed that some people are natural listeners that find it easy, whereas others struggle to stop and hear. Learning can be very uncomfortable for us, mostly because it's about something we don't know. We have to be open to be able to listen so that we can learn. This openness can leave some people feeling vulnerable in a negative way. I wonder if this comes from our experiences of learning as a child; we all start out open-eyed, non-judgemental, and accepting of guidance. As a child we are naturally vulnerable, a state which goes hand-in-hand with being receptive to learn. If we have a negative experience during our developmental years it leaves

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us often subconsciously averse to putting ourselves in that position again. The thing about horses is that they're living, breathing beings. They are constantly expressing themselves through body language and verbal communication in the hope that we listen. Unfortunately when we are closed to listening, too busy in our own agenda, a horse knows that we haven't responded to their questions.

Some clients ask me how their horse became more settled and attentive when I started working with him or her. I explain that it's because every question the horse asks me, I respond to. Otherwise, why would a horse be attentive to us if we have proved to them that we weren't listening?

For example, I see horses fidgeting while the owner is explaining something to me. Whether they are sat in the saddle or holding the lead rope, their horse might start to walk off, nibble the lead rope or reins, nudge the owner's leg with their muzzle, swish their tail, or stomp their foot - many signs that the horse is telling us they feel unsettled. I see people ignore the horse's questions while they step away from the horse, or just hang on to the lead rope or reins which increases the horse's unsettled feeling. As soon as I take the horse from the owner I always attend to the questions that the horse is asking me while I listen to their owner. Soon, the horse starts to calm down and wait. Sometimes the owner didn't see the adjustments which I made in response to the horse's questions, and suddenly they say, "How come he's standing quietly now, what did you do?"

The beauty about animals is that they don't criticise us, which invites us to feel comfortable in taking the time to listen to them and learn from them.

In your observations I also invite you to consider if you are truly hearing what the horse is expressing, or accidentally perceiving it incorrectly. For example, people say to me that their horse is relaxing and processing information because they are yawning. But, it is important that we observe all of the horse's body language, not just one sign. If a horse does short and incomplete repetitive yawns, combined with grinding their teeth, swishing their tail or staring off into the distance, this very often means that the feeling of stress they are experiencing is building not reducing. Some of my clients write down their observations, which is a great way to remember not just what you observed but also what other signs were present at the time and how the observations compare with a previous situation.

I'm not sure that we need to put two weeks aside to live in a tent in the field with our horses to learn from them - even though this is on my list of fun things to do! Tom Dorrance used to say, "Observe, remember and compare". He wrote about how much of his knowledge was taught to him by the horse, due to the time he took to stop and simply observe them. While handling horses on a daily basis my whole body is listening; my senses give me information which I respond to and reflect on.

I have told Harry that my best teacher really has been my horse Apollo, but Harry's ideas and listening ear has been of much help over the years as he has directed my observations

Harry Whitney as seen from a horse's point of view.



and search for understanding. The right human teacher does help to speed up the learning process. But, taking the time to observe a horse and think about our findings brings about a deeper knowing, something which we own because we discovered it - not just because we were told it. I always say to my students that questions are welcome in my lessons because it proves to me that true learning is taking place; it isn't my way or the highway, it's what works for your horse. I call myself a teacher/horse trainer as this clearly describes my work but I believe the rider is the student, the instructor is the interpreter and the true teacher is the horse, if we take the time to really listen.



Anna has spent much of her life looking for ways to help horses to understand and feel good about their work with humans. Based in Devon, she now works full time teaching horses and people and also takes in horses for training.
www.annabonnage.com