



Clanking Chains: Illustration of Severity & Benevolence: Monty Roberts's Discovery of the Equine Language of Equus: "The Call of the Wild Horses"

- 14) I have been led to a couple of books that I believe provide excellent illustrations of the critical balance that exists between benevolence and severity. I recommend these books to all parents and even grandparents. I will quote liberally from each. The two are:

Roberts, Monty. *The Man Who Listens to Horses: The Story of a Real-Life Horse Whisperer*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

_____ . *Horse Sense for People*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2000).

Both books in addition to other titles and videos may be purchased from his Web site: www.montyroberts.com.

First of all we must learn a little about Monty Roberts. The man and his career are summed up nicely by Dr. Michael Schwartz in his Foreword to:

Roberts, *Horse Sense for People*, ix-xii:

I wonder why I am standing in sawdust while people with big shiny belt buckles, jeans and pointy boots mill around me. The loudspeakers are playing full orchestral renditions of "Don't Fence Me In" and "Tumbling Tumble Weeds." With my nondescript beige pants and T-shirt I must look out of place. I am too fat to ride horses. I'm surrounded by opposites, hundreds of gangly men and tiny women.

Oddly enough we are all here to see the only other person in the place who doesn't look he ever rides a horse, Monty Roberts. I'm here to see a man who deciphered the horse's natural language, Equus.

This is a man who listens to horses. For his first act, he takes a horse that has never been ridden. He communicates with it by using a fascinating body language. Monty's communication with this animal creates a trust that is astonishing. His new friend accepts a saddle and a rider, all because Monty said "trust me" in the horse's language. Monty transformed himself from the predator to the horse's ally. Now that horse will go to extremes to comply with him.

All this is opposite of the age-old practice of breaking a horse, which usually involves inflicting pain and terror on the animal. The traditional method of breaking literally mortifies a horse until it seems to accept its own spiritual death, and in doing so survives.

The real reason I am here is to see a man who is taking a giant leap of faith, past the world of horses. It is simply stated: cooperation is better than domination. Monty has used his knowledge of horses as a vehicle for the message.

Monty takes obvious pride in breaking a long chain of violent human domination. His message is clear and simple: all violence is bad; cooperation is good.

With this background of our subject, our first excerpt will center on Monty's discovery of Equus and his development of vocabulary words and definitions to describe the language.

Roberts, Monty. "The Call of the Wild Horses." Chapter 1 in *The Man Who Listens to Horses: The Story of a Real-Life Horse Whisperer*. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997), 1-20 passim:



It all dates from those summers alone in the high desert, me lying on my belly and watching wild horses with my binoculars for hours at a time. Straining to see in the moonlight, striving to fathom mustang ways, I knew instinctively I had chanced upon something important but could not know that it would shape my life.

I remember, especially, the dun mare with a dark stripe along her back and zebra stripes above her knees. Clearly the matriarch of the herd, she was disciplining an unruly young colt who had been roughing up foals and mares. I vividly recall how she squared up to him, her eyes on his eyes, her spine rigid, her head pointed arrow-like at the adolescent. No longer full of himself, he knew exactly what she meant. Three hundred yards from the heard, the outcast would know by her body position when he could return to the fold. (p. 1)

If she faced him, he could not. If she showed him part of her body's long axis, he could begin to consider it. Before her act of forgiveness had to come signs of his penitence. The signals he gave back to her—the seeking of forgiveness—would later be fundamental to a technique I would develop to introduce young horses gently to saddle and rider. It was the mustangs who taught me their silent body grammar, and the dun mare was my first teacher. (pp. 1-2)

From that experience I would begin to learn a language, a silent language which I have subsequently termed "Equus." With that as a springboard, I would assemble a framework of ideas and principles that would guide my life's work with horses. (p. 4)

There was something compelling about seeing them as a family, the male or breeding stallion circling and lifting his tail, stepping out with a high, proud action, and acknowledging our presence. It made me want to melt into the background and see what could be seen, without subjecting them to our interference.

As we passed the mustangs ahead of us, we saw the signals that would be obvious to anyone with experience of horses. A pair of forward ears shows interest in something in front. Forward ears with head high denotes interest in something in front but far off. Forward ears with head held low indicates interest in something up close, near the ground. (p. 8)

The mustangs we pursued held their heads in normal position but with a "split ear," one forward and one back, signifying interest in something in front, but also concern for anything to the rear—us. The ears were like beacons that told us the direction of their focus. If their ears were hanging relaxed and the horses stood with one hind leg bent and resting, we could assume we were unobserved. At that moment, the signals said, these horses had no concern for their safety. (pp. 8-9)

If a horse pens his ears back on his neck, he is angry. We watched one mustang, ears pinned, maneuvering to position his rear legs and take action against another animal. He was angry, aggressive, and dangerous. Once or twice I saw the stallion pin his ears back and stick his nose straight out as far as he could reach; he had his head lowered to just below wither height, so that from his shoulder forward the neck and head looked like an arrow; his eyes steely, and he was moving forward in a stalking mode.

I learned that a horse's field of vision is nearly 360 degrees, with only a slim cut of land right behind him, which he cannot see, and an even slimmer cut directly in front. (p. 9)

Perhaps the most important piece of knowledge that my first foray into the high desert of Nevada indelibly engraved on my mind was this tenet: there are two types of animal, the *fight* animal and the *flight* animal. It bears repeating that the horse is a flight animal. If I knew it before, I understood it now in a more profound way. (pp. 9-10)

It sounds obvious, but it is critical to remember that given the slightest excuse a horse will say, "I don't want to be near you. I feel there is danger if I stay!" The flight animal wants only to reproduce and survive; fear is the tool that allows him to survive.



Humankind, however, is a fight animal. Our preoccupation is with the chase, and having dominion over other creatures in order to eat them or use them for our own ends. The horse, then, sits at the far end of the flight animal spectrum, while humankind, the supreme fight animal, at the clear opposite.

In order to gain a horse's trust and willing cooperation, both parties must meet in the middle. However, it is totally the responsibility of the human to achieve this. The only way is to earn the trust of the horse and never abuse his status as a flight animal. (p. 10)

... when I looked through binoculars at that herd of wild horses (t)hey seemed close enough to touch. I could see subtle shifts of the eyes, ears, tongue. These were pure movements, untainted by human intervention. That day I would watch for eight continuous hours.

I noticed, in particular, the dun mare. Older than most of the others, with a heavier belly that hinted at many pregnancies, she seemed to issue a lot of commands. She ordered her group to move off. She started, the others followed. She stopped, they all did likewise. It seemed she was the wisest, and they knew it.

What I was observing, in fact, was the dominant mare. Many people likely still think that the stallion runs the show. The breeding or dominant stallion, sometimes called the alpha male or lead male, will skirt the herd and defend it from marauders. His motivation is to prevent anyone or anything from stealing his harem. But it was the dun mare who was in charge of the day-to-day running of the group. There was no mistaking it.

And then I saw an extraordinary sequence of events. A light bay colt was behaving badly. He was about twenty months old with a vast amount of feathering around his fetlocks and down the backs of his legs, and a mane running down well below his neckline. He took a run at a filly and gave her a kick. The filly cowered and hobbled off, and the colt looked pleased with himself. (p. 19)

Then he committed another crime. A little foal approached him, moving his mouth in a sucking action to indicate he was no threat but subservient. Just a foal. That cut no ice with this colt; he launched himself at his younger cousin and took a bite out of the foal's backside. The bay colt was a terrorist. Immediately after the attack, he pretended nothing had happened; he went neutral, as though trying to avoid blame. (pp. 19-20)

Each time he behaved badly, the dun mare—the matriarch—weaved a little closer to him. I became certain that she was watching for any more of this behavior. She showed no apparent sign of interest, but she had left her station and was edging closer to him all the time.

The mare witnessed about four such episodes before she finally made her move. Now she stood within twenty yards. Still, the cream-colored colt could not help himself; he launched at a grown mare, grabbed the nape of her neck, and bit down hard.

The dun mare did not hesitate. In an instant she went from neutral to full-blown anger; she pinned her ears back and ran at him, knocking him down. As he struggled to his feet, she whirled and knocked him down again. While this chastisement unfolded, the other members apparently took no notice.

The dun mare ended by driving the colt 300 yards from the herd and left him there, alone. Amazed, I tried to fathom what I was seeing. The mare took up a position on the edge of the herd to keep him in exile. She kept her eyes on his and faced up to him. She was freezing him out.

It terrified the colt to be left alone. For a flight animal, this was tantamount to a death sentence; the predators will get any horse long separated from the group. He walked back and forth, his head close to the ground, several times executing this strange, uncomfortable gait. It looked like a sign of obedience, similar to a human's bow. (p. 20)



Then the colt made his way around to the other side of the herd and attempted to sneak back in that way, but the dun mare had followed his circle. Again she drove him out, running at him until he had fled another 300 yards. Returning to her post on the edge of the herd, she kept her body square on his, and never once took her eye off him. (pp. 20-21)

He stood there, and I noticed a lot of licking and chewing going on, although with all this drama he had eaten nothing. I remembered the foal and how he had snapped his mouth in an obvious signal of humility, as though he were saying, "I'm not a threat to you." Was this colt now saying the same thing to his matriarch? (p. 21)

When the dun mare squared up and faced the colt, she was holding up a Keep Out sign. If she showed him part of her long axis, he could begin to consider returning to the herd. But before she would say, "I forgive you," he had to say, "I'm sorry." If the colt paced with his nose close to the ground, then he was asking for a chance to end his isolation and to renegotiate his position with her. He was saying, "I am obedient, and I'm willing to listen." If he showed her the long axis of his body, then he was offering vulnerable areas to her and asking to be forgiven. (pp. 25-26)

Their eye contact also spoke volumes. When she was holding him out there, she always kept one eye directly on his, sometimes for uncomfortably long periods of time. When her eye slid a short distance off his, he knew he might be allowed back in. I came to realize how subtle was this reading of eye contact. Even when I was unfamiliar to this herd, I could cause a horse to alter his direction and pace of movement by changing which part of his body I looked at—even from a distance. (p.26)

For the next two summers, I would round up mustangs for the Salinas rodeo, and nothing I saw ever matched the exchange between the dun mare and that light bay colt. It was educational to watch the matriarch disciplining young, adolescent horses because so much happened. The youthful energy and inexperience of the gang of adolescents drove them to make mistakes, much like the young of any species. (p. 23)

Often like a child, the colt would reoffend immediately after being let back in, to test the disciplinary system and to gain back lost ground. He might fight another colt or bother the fillies. The dun mare came right back and disciplined him again. Each time he sinned she drove him out and kept him out before letting him back in and welcoming him into the group with extensive grooming. The third time he sinned, he practically owned up and exited by himself, grumbling about it but accepting his fate. (pp. 23-24)

Then, finally, his teenage rebellion ceased. Now cloyingly sweet, he had become a positive nuisance, wandering about and asking every horse, "Do you need any grooming?" when all they wanted was to be left alone to eat. For four days the dun mare had made the education of this awful brat her number-one priority, and it had paid off.

As I watched the mare's training procedures with this adolescent and others, I began to understand the language she used, and it was exciting to recognize the exact sequence of signals that would pass between her and the younger horses. It really was a language—predictable, discernable, and effective. (p. 24)