Wildness Regained? The Challenge of Authentic Connection

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SYNOPSIS

I have been deeply stirred by moments of encounter with horses. Many people have similar experiences with diverse creatures, but this often remains on the periphery of consciousness. When it becomes more conscious, emotions of sadness and longing can also arise. This sometimes has a biographical explanation, but some writers link it historically to the process of domestication. Other interpretations see domestication as an *expression* of animals' nature rather than a betrayal of it. This exemplifies the range of stances we can take towards other creatures, and a growing openness towards them which warrants inclusion in the process of therapy.

For many years I have kept horses. The current horse lives with others, in a meadow on the Cotswold hills. A particular kind of moment recurs frequently, yet feels extraordinary. When I approach the field area in darkness, I hear, from behind bushes 40 yards away, a nickering in response to my approach, signifying a recognition. Every time it happens my heart is stirred. This is partly due to the quality of the sound; coming from deep within the horse's body it seems, literally, heartfelt. It carries tenderness and appreciation – in the moment, this feels beyond doubt. Yet it is the voice of another species. Our languages are different, our appearances vastly so, we spend much of the time in utterly different worlds. But for that moment there is, in my perception, a bond. For much of the last decade I have been thrilled and haunted by the meaning of such signals that pass across space between different animals when there are no mechanical devices – reins, leads, shafts, ropes – connecting them. How do we understand what they mean? How fluent can this language become? What difference does fuller fluency in this language make to us?

About twelve years ago, after learning from accomplished practitioners like Steve Halfpenny, the Australian horsemanship teacher, this language became the main currency of my transactions with horses. But the history of my horsemanship career was already marked with unforgettable moments when it had suddenly arisen. For instance, the time when a friend returned to her horse after a fortnight's holiday, and as soon as she entered the field he tore round her in a circle at full gallop, leaving us with the firm conclusion that this was an enthusiastic welcome. The time when I walked down to the field and my new horse, immediately on my appearance, stamped and whinnied. Another time when, the evening before departing on a trip abroad, the same horse laid her head against my chest, remaining still in that position for ten minutes.

It has become clear to me during a seven-year cycle of research enquiry – interviews,

conversations, listening to audience members at talks and participants at workshops – that many of my contemporaries know a heart-felt closeness to the other-

than-human life around them. This closeness is felt as reciprocal, as soulful as human relationship, and crucially important. But it is often kept private, and sometimes only hovers on the limits of consciousness. It is sometimes only cautiously admitted. When it is allowed, recognised and validated, there is often a wave of relief and resolution, as though something long cooped-up has been granted freedom. And with this a long journey ensues, towards confidence and clarity in the language of such encounter.

There are types of affinity which emerge from people's narratives; with individual creatures or plant life; with whole species (like Lawrence Anthony or G.A. Bradshaw with elephants); with specific locations such as a beloved riverbank; with the Earth or Nature as a whole. Any of these can be ardent, earnest and marked by mutuality; a sense that the other, in some way, returns the feeling.

It seems to me that a clearer awareness of this is growing, although I accept that I might be finding more of what was already there since I am now looking for it. When the stories are received with positive regard, many people begin to let this kind of experience move from the periphery of awareness towards the centre; others come to allow it into their awareness for the first time. Therapists can be crucial in aiding or impeding this process. Indeed, a whole realm of repression and potential fulfillment for humans is implied here, which has social, cultural and ecological implications.

The inter-species dialogue often arises with a fierce intimacy and intensity, fragmenting the politeness and safety of human conventions. One young man had left his work transporting chemicals by sea on huge tankers. He had come to the Gloucestershire countryside to be with his new partner and find a new direction. One day he was walking towards some beekeepers clad in their protective gear, and a bee flew out of the hive and hovered around the beekeeper. The beekeeper brusquely swatted it away. The bee then flew straight at the young man and then burrowed into his hair. He was alarmed as he knew the agitated bee could summon the rest of the nearby hive to attack him, and his only alternative was to kill the bee to avoid that happening. Of course he was stung. Then his head swelled up hugely and in his sleep he was overwhelmed by bee dreams. It seemed that bee-nature had entered him viscerally and psychically. He concluded that he felt called by the bees, and that the next part of his life would be dedicated to them. The outcome of all this was his founding of a wild bee conservation charity and devoting his next years entirely to its work.

Likewise, my own entanglement with horses has come about through those moments when they shattered my delusion of safety – and therefore of separateness. When I was thrown and landed on my head (fortunately cracking my headgear and not my skull); when a horse I was riding in open country suddenly rejected all control by hurtling rapidly backwards in a wide arc through a wheatfield, until I leapt off his back (at which moment, having made his point, he stopped). In such moments these creatures etched their nature indelibly on my mind. It was more than just an increase in my respect. Their being penetrated mine, so that now we overlap – my life path is inextricably enmeshed with theirs.

Others have achieved mutuality with species that might seem even more alien to many of us than horses, or even bees. In her remarkable book on the human–insect connection, Joanne Lauck recounts the cases of Geoff Alison (Lauck, 1998: 92), 'Gail' (ibid.: 229) and Warren Estes (ibid.: 248), who achieved co-operative relationships and reciprocal communication with scorpions, tarantulas and cockroaches, respectively. Alison's blindness rendered him particularly sensitive to cockroach mood and signal in a way less likely for a sighted person. 'Gail' allowed the spiders to maintain the ecology of the house and both human and arachnid were relaxed in each other's presence.

Estes would stroke the scorpion's poison sac admiringly. Such cases indicate just how far the human capacity to make connection can reach, how far the limitations of our consciousness can be pushed back.

When this kind of affinity first emerges into consciousness, it is frequently accompanied by feelings of sadness and longing, and it is often possible to find a biographical explanation for this. Many individuals recount the severance from connection which they remember at some stage in their early life. For one of my interviewees, 'everything was connected' until, at age nine, she was sent to boarding school and the connectedness was replaced by 'emptiness', which persisted for years until a rediscovery of the land around her in adulthood. However, various commentators have also sought to find a collective and historical explanation for the loss and yearning which many of us seem to carry.

Several eco-psychology writers contend that the historical domestication of animals marked some kind of fall, a diminution of other creatures in our regard and perception, a narrowing of vision. Both Glendinning (1994) and Shepard (1997) offer versions of this thesis. Beforehand, humans revered and respected other creatures, but afterwards increasingly saw them as objects or chattels or extensions of themselves. 'One thing about these societies is certain', writes Glendinning of early herding cultures, 'pastoral men took control of food production by breaking the animals, and in so doing they traumatized themselves'(Glendinning, 1994: 80).

In making some sense of the feeling of impoverishment many of us know when we compare the attitudes of factory farmers or medical experimenters to those of some indigenous peoples, this is an appealing and helpful narrative. However, it can, while seeking to restore the stature of wild creatures, simultaneously maintain their diminishment by portraying them as passive or unwitting victims of human manipulation. There are some alternative readings of that historical moment which suggest an even richer picture of our mysterious relationship with other living creatures. These differing accounts of the advent of domestication extend the range of our gestures towards other life. I suggest we gain by embracing this diversity. Science writer Stefan Budiansky (1998) carefully surveys the latest archaeological findings concerning the domestication process and writes:

> To ride a horse before the wheel or ox-cart existed, and before humans conceived of riding on the back of any other beast, was a total leap of imagination. It was surely more *an act of daring, bravado, curiosity and yearning* than of necessity.... *To have ridden on the back of this powerful and dangerous animal at the dawn of its domestication must be ranked more as a sacrament than an invention.* (Budiansky 1998: 46; my italics)

This sounds very different from Glendinning's account, referred to earlier. Several versions of the domestication process offered by academic researchers (Budiansky, 1997) portray the animals as actively engaging in the process. Initiating, encouraging, even manipulating the humans towards interdependence. In this, ironically, they actually credit the animals with more agency than some eco-psychology writers do, even though the latter commentators may be protesting at our denial of the animals' beinghood. Whether factually accurate or not, the former version restores to the animals the active and knowing role which they play in many traditional oral tales about how domestication occurred.

This also resonates with the narrative contemporary horsewoman Carolyn Resnick has given us (Resnick, 2005) of her sojourn among wild mustangs in California (in the interests of intellectual precision it should be granted that these were, actually, feral horses descended from domesticated stock first brought over in the 16th century).

In her experience, the free-roaming horses, who had already come to accept her presence in their herd, initiated not only requests for grooming (wanting to have itchy spots rubbed), but *actually offered* invitations to

be mounted. Of course her interpretation of the horses' signals is open to challenge from ethologists, and is subjective. But at the very least, her key moments of mounting and riding a mustang who was loose and close to the rest of the herd arose out of a moment-by-moment build-up of mutually exchanged signals and an increasing trust.

If Resnick has tapped into a seam of spiritual truth in this – that at some level the species was a prime mover in its domestication, that it was not just some ingenious move on the part of man, the 'superior' species – then we might be offered a relief from the burden of regarding ourselves as by far the most intelligent and resourceful of the species. We would be less alone. This is not to deny in the slightest that men have abandoned the respect and awe which they once felt for animals, if the cave paintings at Lascaux are any indication. Nor is it to deny that much human behaviour has been a betrayal of the animals and ourselves. But the different narratives of domestication both describe and imply various stances towards other life, and some of these are not obvious at first sight.

This is well illustrated in the equestrian world, where the rediscovery of empathy,

respect and liberty has been so noticeable in some training methods becoming increasingly popular since the start of this century (e.g. some 'Natural Horsemanship' approaches). Practitioners of these methods aspire to a flowing partnership in which freedom, splendour and the power of the other is honoured, but in which they co-operate with the intentions of the human; in which they are not subdued but enhanced, brought to full fruition.

However, most advocates of these approaches nevertheless hold that to do this the human must be able to display *leadership* and *authority*. While some observers might therefore dismiss this as yet another version of arrogant human domination of other life, its advocates would claim that doing so in a way which the horse understands and is comfortable with, and in which the horse also feels respected, is quite different. Even Carolyn Resnick, the exemplar of 'naked liberty', describes herself as working *up the hierarchy* of a herd in order to develop inter-actions with them. Klaus Hempfling achieves miraculous levels of co-operation and complex dressage movements from loose horses, with grace and exuberance. They seem to exude freedom and well-being, but he states, '...togetherness with horses is always a question of trust and dominance' (Hempfling, 2010: 19). Craig Stevens, a master at eliciting calm and graceful response from horses, describes his position thus:

> The willing submission of the horse is the same form of submission we feel when we let go to the music and dance, we submit to the pleasure of cadenced movement, *it is not a diminishing of the animal but an exploration of his brilliance in tandem with another.* (Stevens and Campbell, 2011: 31, my italics)

There are admittedly dissensions even from this benevolent stance. On the outermost fringes of the equestrian world there *are* a few voices which renounce any notion of leadership at all. Michael Bevilacqua, for example, while reputedly winning extraordinary levels of co-operation from horses, states:

> One has to reach out and be open to the other... there can be no agenda. It cannot be made to happen, it just happens....You cannot demand, force, bribe or manipulate someone into real friendship. Believe that they can accomplish anything and they will.
> (Bio section on http://www.beyondthedreamhorse.ca/)

Personally, I question whether there is much difference between what each of these three individuals is actually doing. I suspect their vocabularies reflect individual history and context. But this does exemplify the sometimes emotive complexities which can be stirred up when we try to find a verbal language for such transactions.

Theodore Roszak (1993) saw the Deep Ecologists like Arne Naess as rejecting the notion of humans as in any way 'above' or apart from the eco-system, 'whether as master or steward'(ibid.: 234). Any residue of the story that we were appointed by God over other life was seen as human self-aggrandisement. With a capacity for folly as great as our ingenuity and intelligence, we had lost any claim to superiority over other life forms. But others, ardently seeking an honest position, have arrived at concepts like 'Guardianship'. Jessie Jowers, one of the founders of the Bee Guardian Foundation, describes this as quite different from rulership. It recognises that we do have immense power, our decisions affecting the well-being of innumerable other species. It calls on us to express that power in attuned and reciprocal dialogue with those species. The underlying paradox of the concept is this: if we achieve true Guardianship, it is because we are *appointed* to it, *elected* even, by the others, having earned it. This occurs when are able and willing to also play the other roles of child, pupil or partner of life. The lesson of horsemanship is that the horse gives his most gracious moments to the one who knows exactly how to ask, who understands most fully what he is asking, and who most appreciates the response; who asks in

a way which flows into the horse's own inclinations and potential. In this scenario we have the power to complete the picture, to consummate the process. Hempfling states: 'The person at the horse's side has the possibility to "finalize" this act of creation, to perfect it....The human being awakens the spiritual in the horse, and by doing this, he confirms and releases the spiritual being within himself.' (Hempfling, 2010: 132, 133) Here, he hints at a special possibility for human beings which may challenge the renunciation of human 'specialness' which is inherent in Deep Ecology. Or it may offer a transcendence of the polarity between anthropocentrism, on the one hand, and a disingenuous denial of our power, on the other.

The ways in which many contemporary humans feel a bond with other life seems very close to those which appear in ancient and indigenous cultures like the Choktaw or Lakota; we might exchange intimate messages with an animal or a plant, we might identify with a species – or a place, or a landscape. The difference is that because our culture does not affirm this, we may be hesitant in recognising it, or else shy about revealing it. Our yearning to renounce any claim to superiority or domination may also dilute the authenticity of our transactions.

Realising the likelihood that consciousness of this sphere may be a growing part of the experience of both clients and therapists, my colleagues at Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling have encouraged my development of a new training unit on *Therapy and the Human Bond with Nature*. The response of students so far seems to confirm the relevance of this approach. Such considerations have also led me to include animal-assisted sessions in my practice and changed the way I attend to more conventional therapy sessions. (Indeed this would easily provide the material for a whole separate article.)

Last year's Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness marked a very significant step on the part of the scientific community. On 7 July 2012, 'a prominent group of cognitive neuroscientists, neuropharmacologists, neurophysiologists, neuroanatomists and computational neuroscientists gathered at the University of Cambridge' and made public a series of observations which 'can be stated unequivocally'. They include the statement that 'humans are not unique in possessing the neurological substrates that generate consciousness. Non-human animals, including all mammals and birds, and many other creatures, including octopuses, also possess these neurological substrates'. Elsewhere in the document, a slightly more succinct statement runs, 'Evidence of near human-like levels of consciousness has been most dramatically observed in African grey parrots'. There is much more in similar vein, all amounting, as the signatories avow, to a rejection of long-held assumptions about the 'exceptionalism' (their word) of the human race.

I take this as a sign of a much wider opening which is occurring, even as we reap the disastrous consequences of our ecological blunders. Moving beyond human 'exceptionalism' while maintaining a *humanistic* posture seems to require a diversity and fluidity of roles, on the way to an ever-deeper meeting with other-than-human life.

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