

In the Company of Horses: Rhythm and Suffering in Equine-Assisted Psychotherapy

Jen Van Tiem

Abstract: *Equine-assisted psychotherapy is considered a form of talk therapy that depends upon differences between species as venues for therapeutic work. These differences in kind reveal the presence of an order that allows us to re-think what counts as talking and how we recognize it. At stake in these interactions is not the production of signs, intelligible as marking disease, but rather the assembly of rhythms, capable of producing a sense of accord.*

Keywords: psychotherapy, radical participation, witnessing, performance



It took approximately seven hours of driving west over the Rocky Mountains to reach the Colorado Plateau and the town of Craig. I stayed overnight before heading out to Sand Wash Basin, which was another hour past Craig, and a half hour past Maybell (population 72). My first glimpse of a wild horse came as I reached the top a low-slung hill, where I saw two dark colored souls standing next to the dirt road, along the crest of the next ridge. The dirt was soft, sometimes clumped up like paper pulp. I made an audio recording that later proved useless; the sound didn't make sense without the horizon that bordered the open range. As the heat poured up from the ground and made the horse's forms shimmer, I stood and watched them. They walked slowly over the ridge and out of my sight. The wind whirred and brushed through my ears, washing out older sounds that then exploded and disintegrated into the space around me. I listened, and knew I was alone; but a horse's ears are in its feet, and when I saw the wild horses again, walking together in a line, nose to tail, I realized that part of what held them together must have been the sound of each other's hooves on the ground. In a place where all the sights and sounds were constantly receding to the horizon like an ocean without tides, I wondered if the horses held their world together by staying close enough to hear each other.

Jen Van Tiem is a Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Medicine at the Roy J. and Lucille A. Carver College of Medicine at the University of Iowa, as well as a Co-Investigator at the Center for Access and Delivery Research & Evaluation at the Iowa City Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Iowa City, Iowa. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author, and the material presented here is the result of work done prior to employment with the University of Iowa and the VA.

Introduction

In both talking and walking, repetition renders the sounds as musical. In the company of horses, in the context of equine-assisted psychotherapy, a person's talk is part of a harmony of associations among movements, sounds, touches, and things. Spoken beats are vocalized accompaniments to repetitions of bodied habits, such as brushing, feeding, and saddling. These harmonies bridge the distances between human hands and horse mouths, human fingers and horse lips, or human eyes and horse ears. Refrains of habits thickened the relationships between the humans and horses, reframing their differences as generous moments of productive compatibility. Among horses, the utility of words was mutable; the place that the sound of a word occupied as a beat within a conversational rhythm might matter as much as the place that word occupied in a sentence or in a lexicon.

Background

This essay draws on data from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2012 with horses and humans at Equine Healers, a non-profit organization located in the western United States, whose mission was to “enhance the mental health and life skills of youth, adults, families, and groups through therapeutic interaction with horses.”¹ Annually, Equine Healers served approximately 400 clients. The clients who came to Equine Healers were best understood through the specific types of therapy programs offered, as these programs emerged in response to categories of distress. There were several different programs for youth facing self-esteem and self-efficacy issues, including young people situated in alternative education schools and/or the juvenile justice system, coping with the death of a loved one, living with autism, or facing depression. Programs for adults included an open-ended discussion group for women, a program for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse, horsemanship activities for adults with developmental delays, and a program for veterans suffering from PTSD.

Methods

Research efforts included systematic observation and video recording of the daily activities and schedules of the humans and horses, followed by interviews with therapists and horse-handlers. In total, I have approximately 554 minutes of video-recorded data of horse training sessions, horse riding lessons, and practice therapy sessions. I conducted forty-three unstructured, audio-recorded

¹ “Equine Healers” is a pseudonym of a registered 501(c)(3) non-profit organization located at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in the western United States. The quote relating their mission is their own description from their website.

interviews with therapists, therapist interns, volunteers in therapy programs. These systematic observations, interviews, and archived curricula provided the emic context for the specific data that grounds this paper: the “Dancing with Horses” practice group therapy session on October 7, 2012. “Dancing with Horses” was a group organized by Carmel,² a dance/movement therapist. The group was based on a specific therapeutic modality, called a “group sculpture,” rather than a particular diagnosis or constellation of troubles. Therapists used the group sculpture modality with different client populations, most often in a penultimate session. In a group sculpture, one human positions one or many other humans into particular places and shapes, moving parts of others’ bodies in reflection of some personal internal feeling or impulse. During this “sculpting,” horses are “at liberty,” meaning their movements are not restricted within the arena. This modality provides a valuable source of data for analysis, as it required a great deal of familiarity and trust among clients, therapists, and horses.

The particular session on October 7 was oriented around the need for two therapists to practice how they would facilitate a group sculpture in the context of an upcoming conference presentation in New York. While the sculptures lasted for approximately 10 minutes, the entire session lasted for two hours on October 7. I videotaped the entire session and asked Carmel to carry an audio-recorder in her pocket, with the intention to capture the sounds and utterances made by the human participants. Because I was videotaping, I did not participate in the sculptures. To analyze these data, I used modified grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) and an analysis of rhythm in conversation first employed by Paul Byers (1986, 1992). I chose to focus on these particular sculptures, within the larger session, because of what transpired during the sculptures. The engagement between the horses and humans, and the way the humans framed their responses, constituted an opportunity to think critically about how doing therapy in the company of horses prompted re-imagining speaking, or using words to sound out how we feel.

Theoretical Orientation

Therapy, specifically “the talking cure,” provides a context in which people may use metaphor and metonymy to test the truthfulness of their claims about their experiences. Linguists and psychoanalysts have already made this connection (Freud 1955; Jakobson 1956; Lacan, 1957). Jakobson (1956) linked Freud’s concepts of “displacement” and “condensation” to metonymy, and Freud’s “identification” and “symbolism” to metaphor (132). Lacan (1957) carried these associations forward, with some revisions, and claimed that the “topography” of the unconscious mirrors the polarity of metaphor and metonymy, and in so mirroring, becomes implicated in the “emergence” of the “subject,” the “I am” (516). Derrida

² All names are pseudonyms.

(2002[1997]) famously picked up this declaration, “I am,” when he wondered about “who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example the eyes of a cat” (372). These ruptures, that Derrida attributed to the arrival of animals, expose opportunities, among other possibilities, for us to notice when we tell the truth about ourselves, and when we lie (Derrida and Wills 2002: 390). Jakobson (1960) seemed to suggest that the truth of a statement could be “challenged” through attention to the structure of language (355). Thus, the specific contribution of this paper will be to pay attention to how therapists at Equine Healers structured their talk in order to make space for the horses to challenge the truthfulness of their clients’ claims, consequently fulfilling the therapeutic promise of the context.

Labov and Fanshel, writing about psychotherapy as conversation, suggest that pieces of conversation characterized by “lack of clarity or discreetness,” are crucial to thinking about talking as therapeutic (Labov and Fanshel 1977: 43). They frame the lack of discreetness as a kind of opportunity, writing how individuals in therapy “need a form of communication which is deniable” (Labov & Fanshel 1977: 46). Labov and Fanshel were interested in paralinguistic elements of talk; when they wrote about deniability, they were interested in the slippage between, for example, the word “maybe” and a shrug. Bateson (2000[1972]) started this work through his discussions of digital and analog forms of communication among mammals.³ Bateson argued that descriptions of conversations that integrated digital and analog forms, may “not look like [the representation of] a ‘thing’ language,” but rather, “might, more probably resemble music.”

Three elements become key when paying attention to conversations that rely on the slippage between digital and analog forms: how participants know when to talk, how participants build the opportunity to convey an idea, and how to tell whether the message is believed. Charles Goodwin offers an example of the possibilities created by this kind of language game, in his exploration of communication with an aphasic man. Goodwin suggested we measure the ability to participate in the production of meaning, not as the “[ability] to speak novel sentences,” but the ability “to produce a competent reply at precisely the place where such a reply is relevant” (25). Bateson (2000[1972]) analyzed how, rather than say “milk,” a cat “acts out (or is) her end of an interchange” (275); as much as humans have the word “milk,” cats also, in fact, have what might count as a “word” for “I want to drink milk,” as well as, “I want to engage with you in that thing we do when I want to drink milk.” When interchanges, and not words, are the vehicles for abstraction, this confounds the project of talk therapy, which has historically relied upon the production of words, intelligible as semantic units and translatable

³ Digitally, as Bateson (1972) explained, the word ‘big’ is not bigger than the word ‘little.’ By contrast, in analogic forms of language, including paralinguistics and kinesics, “the magnitude of the gesture...commonly [corresponds]...to magnitudes in the relationship” (374).

as marking disease. Among horses, the language produced could not usefully be measured by a grammar that relies upon semantics, as the physicality of words (e.g., the sound and the distribution of that sound over time) was more significant than how the words could be interpreted.

The act of speaking in the context of equine-assisted psychotherapy, whether in words or through habits, was, for humans, like turning one's inner world into an acoustic space external to, but anchored in, the body. One moment of slipping a horse's ear under the strap of a halter folded onto a person's memory of the same action on a different day, maybe with a different horse, for a different reason. This "musicalisation' shift[ed] [one's] attention from the meaning of the words to the contour of the passage...and its rhythms" (Margulis 2014). In describing how these therapists privileged rhythm as an ordering mechanism, this essay analyzes two related concepts: "groundedness" and "congruency." Groundedness entailed awareness and led to congruency. Congruency entailed an emerging synchronicity between humans and horses. When "talking" with horses, embodied harmonies balanced patterns of voiced sounds and silences. In surrendering to this assembly of rhythms, humans cultivated the opportunity for groundedness and the capacity for congruency. This communicative work was considered therapeutic.

The Group Sculpture on October 7

Three humans and two horses were standing in an arena, which was an oblong shape. Three therapists were standing in a circle within the arena, near the south end; the longest side ran north to south. Two horses, Frankie and Starlight were at liberty, within the arena. Carmel began each of these group sculptures with a meditation; she guided Clara and Julia as follows:

The Meditation

what I want you to do right now is just trust that your body has the answers you don't have to think about it too much, just go with it. And what you are is a sculpture so, just from this moment and how you're feeling, take a minute to just check in with yourself maybe just starting at the top of your head and letting your attention just go down from the top of your head into your neck, down your shoulders, almost like water's pouring over you and it's going as fast, or as slow, as you need, maybe just checking in with yourself, just noticing, what's coming up, what's there, letting all of that sink down into your belly, into your pelvis, out your hands, down your thighs, the bottoms of your feet, out your toes, into the ground, so that it's stretching through you and just take a big deep breath in that place feeling your whole body at once, if you can, and just trust that what needs to be there is there, and when you feel ready, you can open your eyes and get to look at your clay.

In the descriptions that follow, I break up the sculpture into “Sculpture 1,” “In Between,” and “Sculpture 2.” The three descriptions are staccato snapshots of three moments, which happened in time one after the other. In real time, the movements of the horses and humans were fluid and continuous; I have broken up and shortened my description of what happened in an attempt to make the descriptions more digestible and less complicated.

Sculpture 1

The initial sculpture involved Julia sculpting Clara into a shape around the mounting block. It lasted about four minutes. All three humans started from near the north end of the back arena and from there, Julia took Clara by her right wrist and walked her up the center of the arena, to the green mounting block, or step stool. There, Julia motioned for Clara to sit down on the stool and Clara sat, feet planted a hip’s width apart, legs bent at the knee, back straight, facing the north end of the arena. Julia then took Clara’s left arm and raised it up, palm spread wide, also facing north. Julia took Clara’s right arm and set it in the same position, so that Clara looked as though she were making the letter “V” shape with her arms raised above her head. Julia then moved to stand behind Clara, where she took her own two hands and held them under Clara’s chin in order to move Clara’s head and turn Clara’s face towards the sky. Julia re-adjusted Clara’s arms, which had sagged, and made them straighter, re-enforcing the extension of the arms up, with palms facing forward. At this point, Julia stood back, surveyed her sculpture, looked to Carmel, who was standing nearby, and nodded.

Carmel walked over to Julia and they both walked backward, to stand about seven feet from Clara, who continued to maintain her position. Carmel started asking Julia questions like, “*do you feel like you need to move her?*” Based on this prompting from Carmel, Julia returned to her sculpture and, with her palm to Clara’s back, extended the arch in Clara’s back, readjusted Clara’s right arm and face, and opened Clara’s mouth. Carmel offered to Clara, “*so Clara, you're just feeling into this position that you're being put in.*” At the same time, Frankie walked over to Clara, from the west side of the arena, and touched his nose to Clara’s left forearm. As Frankie lightly pushed at Clara’s left hand, Julia moved toward Frankie, stood in front of his face, albeit about 3 feet away, and bent her upper body toward him. From here, Julia and Carmel walk backward again, to continue to survey Julia’s sculpture.

In Between

Carmel made statements like, “*there's sort of several different places that you could go with this...one is, in witnessing Frankie, [as he] followed you in the circle, as he followed both of us in the circle,*” adding “*so there's a shape of a circle sort of happening as well*” and

“there's also this, he wants to stop between you and doing your sculpture...and then noticing too what you're doing in relationship to that.”

Clara again dropped and picked up the sculpture. Carmel offered several options to Julia, including *“do you want to see or ask your sculpture to put herself in relationship to a horse, do you want to put her in relationship to a horse, or are you ready to drop the sculpture?”* As Julia and Carmel continued to deliberate, Frankie walked to the west side of the arena and snaked his neck through the fence. Julia decided *“to have Clara move the sculpture to a horse.”* At this point, approximately four minutes had passed; this is the beginning of the second major piece of the sculpture.

To begin, Carmel walked closer to Clara and began to direct her, while Clara dropped the sculpture to listen. After Carmel finished directing Clara, Carmel turned to Julia and said, *“and you get to just witness.”* Carmel and Julia stood together, and turned to face Clara, as Clara went back into the sculpture. Carmel continued to narrate to Julia. Clara opened her mouth and re-adjusted her arms before bracing her hands on her knees, bending at the waist, and standing up. Clara turned to face the south, fixed the hem of her sweater, and started to walk to the south end of the arena. As she walked, she bent her arms at the elbow and held her palms face up towards the sky. Carmel and Julia remained standing together, about seven feet from the mounting block, at about 6 o'clock. Clara walked to the south edge of the back arena and, upon reaching the fence line, turned and faced north. Clara re-created Julia's original “V” posture, though this time, Clara remained standing. Frankie, who had been at about 3 o'clock in relation to the mounting block, began to walk counterclockwise, along the fence line, towards Clara. He stopped about seven feet from her and snaked his head through the fence. Clara, having been standing still, turned, or swiveled on her torso, to her left, arms up, to glance at Frankie. She then swiveled, to a lesser degree, to her right, to see Starlight.

Sculpture 2

Clara closed the distance between her and Starlight, and Starlight touched Clara's hand with her nose. After this brief contact, Starlight put her head down and pushed her nose under the bottom rung of the fence. Clara started petting Starlight's barrel with her left hand. After a few strokes, Clara turned and backed up into Starlight's barrel, lining up her two feet perpendicular to Starlight's body. Starlight moved slightly, the result of which pushed the round of her barrel into the arch of Clara's back. Clara slightly bent her knees and leaned the arch of her back into Starlight's barrel. She then held up her arms, re-taking up the shape of Julia's sculpture and the “V” shape.

Clara opened her mouth, as Starlight continued to shift, clockwise, toward Frankie. Both Starlight and Clara had shuffled closer to Frankie by this point, and Frankie lifted his head up through the fence, acknowledging their proximity.

Having been moving horizontally, Starlight turned her body and took a more direct couple of steps toward Frankie. Clara maintained her position, leaning on Starlight's barrel. Frankie and Starlight continued to each take a couple of steps, inching closer to each other. Starlight pinned her ears back, as Clara briefly dropped her posture and started to walk a little forward, away from Starlight.

At this moment, Starlight lunged out at Frankie. Clara leaped away, arms up; it almost looked like either Starlight's lunge interrupted Clara as she tried to take up the posture again, or that Clara attempted to hold the posture, while also leaping away from Starlight. Starlight swung around so that her rump faced Frankie. Frankie took several steps back and turned away, into the fence, toward the north end of the arena. Starlight moved around in the opposite direction, along the fence. Clara stood by at first, then shook her whole body, starting at her hips, up her torso, into her shoulders, and then moving down her arms into her hands. She walked back to Starlight and started petting her barrel with both of her hands, then with just her right hand. Starlight shifted away from Clara, at which point Clara turned and walked back to Carmel and Julia. This second sculpture did not last much longer than the first, taking up approximately five minutes.

Pulse and timing: Frankie knows when to "talk"

What follows are three narratives of "groundedness" and "congruency," one from Julia, as the sculptor, and two from Clara, the "clay." These narratives were spoken at the close of the sculpture; Carmel, Julia, and Clara again stood together in a circle in the arena. Frankie and Starlight were at liberty.

[Julia]

well it was pretty immediate, the visual I had of sitting down on [the bench], but yet, wanting to be just really open and expansive, that sense of wanting to be grounded but really open, that was my image, and it was just so clear, and the thing with the mouth, I just wanted you to relax your jaw...but then it was interesting with the mouth open, it added a whole another element to it, of like, taking in, there's a practice like, feeding your demon, where you visualize a demon and you're just feeding it, the demons in your life, you just feed it till it's satiated, so I got this visual, too, of feeding, my demon

[Clara]

I feel like, while the hecticness of the summer has slowed a bit, there's still a way that I haven't quite got my schedule in...place, over stimulated a lot of the time, I'm late for things, so I had to like, kind of like work out of that contraction into a more open, expansive place, and then to drop the jaw, was the next level, of just letting in the energy of the moment...I really had a sense of joy that's rooted in life experience, not like surface happiness, but that ability to be really joyful, despite what's happening in life, and a real connection to earth, that I was feeling through my tailbone, as well through my feet

Groundedness started with an accord achieved in the body. In inviting Clara to recount her experiences in the group sculpture, Carmel and Julia swung their feet counterclockwise with opposite feet (Carmel, left and Julia, right). Once both Carmel and Julia completed the same action, together, with their feet, they turned and opened their bodies to Clara. Carmel did not start voicing words until Julia finished the movement and when she did, she said, “hear from Clara,” to which Julia replied, “yes you bet.” Because synchronized body movements prefaced these words, I argue that the sounds and silences produced by voicing these words constituted a digital representation of a sense of accord. As they continue to speak, Carmel and Julia repeat this pattern of sounds and silences, though the pattern breaks down over time. The digital pattern that carried the accord generated by Carmel and Julia was thus like a wave breaking on a shore. Bodies anchored the accord; and synchronized, swinging feet pulled a wave of patterned sounds and silences back and set it loose across the text, originating a back and forth movement between analog and digital forms that potentially reshaped, or differently enabled, the textual register. While the movement of feet held the accord, the connection between the mouth and jaw, for Julia, also linked “*wanting to be grounded, but really open*” to the idea of “*feeding your demon*.” For Clara, the connection between the tailbone and feet also linked “*that ability to be really joyful, despite what's happening in life*” to “*the hecticness of the summer*.”

This kind of heterogeneous repetition, with parts of bodies and components of dialogues, fostered non-linear, oscillating associations. These associations were accordion folds that held the capacity to connect the present moment to a memory or feeling from the past. Rather than temporal agreement within the confines of a sentence (i.e. subject-object-verb agreement), conversations built upon these oscillating associations were designed to square aged internal conflicts by folding time. As these folds peeled apart and pushed together, the back and forthness produced the possibility of what I call “embodied iconicity,”⁴ when whatever experience brought a person to Equine Healers was realized as a fold among folds, referenced and referenced by whole constellations of memories, thoughts, and

⁴ The term “perfect iconicity” originated in poetics. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* suggests that “the voice and sound – aural ‘images’ such as rhyme, rhythm, onomatopoeia, and tone – are the first place to look for perfect iconicity” (Greene, Cushman, Cavanagh, Ramazani, & Rouzer, 2012, 661). This work with horses suggests that there is an embodied component and earlier anthropological work supports this suggestion. Csordas’ also references “perfect iconicity,” in quoting work by Valentine Daniel (Daniel 1984; Csordas 2002). Daniel described a physician’s pulse beginning to match a patient’s pulse through the act of the physician touching the patient’s skin over a vein, in order to feel the beat of the blood pulsing through the patient’s veins. So in the context of equine-assisted psychotherapy, iconic could mean the gradual alignment of layers of rhythms, describable not as synchrony, but as moments of accord.

feelings. Just as the bit⁵ referenced and was referenced by the mouth, the tongue, the ears, the poll,⁶ different body parts became iconic for particular experiences or memories. Like a metronome ticking back and forth and briefly hitting its center, a moment of embodied iconicity might open for the smallest of seconds, but that fleeting accord might offer someone the chance to choose differently and perhaps, for example, to live out the call to: “*if you feel you are scared, then say you are scared.*” In this way, a person cultivated the capacity for “congruency” by demonstrating awareness of timing, which, among horses, was measured through rhythm.

Backing up in time, and returning to the sculpture, Julia asked Clara to take the shape, which she had been holding with her body, and “put it in relation to a horse.”

[Clara]

I went to Starlight...and as I leaned into her back, and went into that posture, it was even easier, actually, to support it, it felt really safe, it felt supported instead of kind of being on my own doing that...all of a sudden, I was in relationship doing that, and I could feel the warmth through my back, and then her breath through my back as well, and even as we were shuffling, as she was chewing, I really felt this sense that it was okay for me to be there

At this point in the sculpture, Starlight lunged at Frankie. At this point in the dialogue, Frankie stepped on Clara’s foot.⁷ After Frankie stepped on Clara’s foot, Clara offered the following:

[Clara]

I was definitely pissed today, Frankie, I had a really rough time at movement class and I was pissed afterward, just, like the room itself was really intense, and I was working with a lot of anger that was coming up [during the sculpture] I feel like what I was starting to get in touch with, with [the] posture, and then really melting into it in the support, with Starlight, is where I want to be, and so the opposite from where I was this morning

In reference to Frankie stepping on her foot, just as she was describing her sense of what had happened when Starlight lunged, Clara said:

[Clara]

⁵ The “bit” is a piece of tack, usually metal, that sits across the horse’s tongue, inside the horse’s mouth. It connects the rider’s hands to the horse’s mouth. Putting pressure on the bit impacts the carriage of the horse’s head, in part by acting through the poll.

⁶ The word “poll” refers to the top of a horse’s head between the two ears.

⁷ Frankie did not step on Clara’s foot with enough force to cause damage, however nor was he particularly gentle. His step caused Clara some discomfort, certainly.

I've worked with Frankie a lot, he and I actually have a pretty close bond. I haven't been with him for a few months, but I feel like there's a recognition there, and when I felt him circling around, I thought it was in relationship to what [Julia was] doing, and also some sense of maybe being familiar with my energy, and so it's totally not an accident

Moving with Frankie and Starlight, in the context of a group sculpture, allowed Clara to become known as having had “a really rough time at movement mass,” as much as it also allowed her to live through what she knew, or had been knowing, about her morning and about her summer, in the presence of Carmel and Julia. Clara said that “melting into [the posture],” which gave her “a sense of joy that's rooted in life experience,” was “where [she wanted] to be.” To Clara, this was “the opposite from where [she was] this morning,” and perhaps the opposite of where she had been since “the hecticness of the summer.” Over the summer, Clara had been “over stimulated a lot of the time,” and “late for things;” at movement mass, she was “pissed.” Carmel came to know Clara in her anger by witnessing and voicing how Starlight “burst from [Clara].” Carmel also came to ask Clara to acknowledge her anger by noticing Frankie step on Clara's foot, and by offering that movement, in words, as, “come on, Clara, you're smarter than that, you've gotta get down in there.”

The iconic connections between the moments when Clara “could feel the warmth [of Starlight] through [her] back” and “a real connection to earth...through [her] tailbone [and her] feet,” with “a really rough time at movement mass” and “the hecticness of the summer” were marked, in one instance, by breath, shuffling, chewing, and lunging, and in the second instance, by vocalized speech, and stepping. Each of these particular markers had a rhythm, and because they had a rhythm, these moments became accessible to the horses, Frankie and Starlight. It made sense for Clara to say that Frankie's step was “totally not an accident;” his step was responsible to the rhythm of speech, and was therefore “a competent reply at precisely the place where such a reply is relevant” (Byers 1986; Byers 1992; Goodwin 1995). Moreover, it also made sense for Carmel to then frame Frankie's step as a kind of admonishment for Clara to “get down in there,” insofar as the dissonance between the rhythm of Clara's speech, and the rhythm of the conversation, might have indexed Clara's degree of responsibility to, or alignment with, a source of her distress. The hope that “if you feel you are [angry], you [will] say you are [angry],” becomes something like a hope that, if you are comfortably angry, then speak in time, breathe in time, shuffle in time, and chew in time, with us.

Discussion

This paper conceptualizes therapy as the process of talking against a shared reference (e.g. “depression”) using a shared form of communication. Among horses and humans, sharing a reference means sharing a rhythm. In a moment of accord marked by synchronized body movements, Carmel and Julia initiated a rhythm

with their spoken words, “hear from Clara/yes you bet;” the pattern of those voiced sounds and silences constituted a reference. Upon speaking, Clara’s voiced sounds and silences did not match the pattern of “hear from Clara/yes you bet” and thus constituted a disruption of the reference, an incongruence. When Frankie stepped on Clara’s foot, it alerted Carmel, Julia, and Clara to this incongruence, and emboldened Carmel to say, “*come on, Clara, you’re smarter than that, you’ve gotta get down in there.*” The purpose of this admonishment was to pull Clara into the accord that initiated the rhythm and to thus invite her to speak in time with Carmel and Julia. In initiating a rhythm, Carmel and Julia created an opportunity for Clara to experience groundedness and demonstrate congruency; in talking against the rhythm, Clara uncovered a source of distress (i.e. “*the hecticness of the summer*”) and was able to fold that distress into other experiences that she had noticed, including being “*over stimulated,*” “*late for things,*” “*definitely pissed today,*” and having “*a really rough time at movement class.*”

In attempting to attend to the rhythm within conversations with horses, humans became immersed in an origami world where the whole body was something like a horizon, an artifact of the breath. The body was made and remade by the waves of patterned sounds and silences, as the stories people told were reconsidered, balanced, and harmonized by rhythms that were anchored in dissolving moments of accord. The breath, as a kind of prosthetic,⁸ was analogous to the hinge in Latour’s (1995) hole-wall dilemma, neither the opening, nor the closing, nor the threshold itself, but that thing that made the conversation possible. In folding and enfolding the phenomenological experience of the body, the breath generated opportunities to temper and manipulate that experience, thus re-making parts of the body as capable of “triggering acts of self reflection” (Basso, 1996: 107).

If not metaphor and lexical choice, as weights that call for an anchor in the universe of a “thing language,” what do we look for, as we find ourselves, among horses, in a universe in which something like, for example, “I’m afraid,” might murmur forth in a way that is managed musically? The patterns that Carmel and Julia initiated did not last long past Frankie’s step. Discipline among the humans and horses was thus generous in ways different from the opportunities offered by a grammar in language, providing a venue for anticipation different from the kind offered by a pre-existing subject that was identified and connected to an object and an action. What this suggests is that, rather than living in a “sentence-shaped universe,” perhaps we can come to appreciate how our world might be, for example, a couplet-shaped universe, in which our words are folded, referential, and significant not because they point us to a distant prospect, but because they call us back to ourselves (Birdwhistell, 1970: 84).

⁸ Here, I am using this word to reference Lury’s (1998) work on prostheses. In her work, the camera was a prosthetic of memory and the photograph was an artifact of the work of the camera. Among horses, I would like to suggest that the breath was a prosthetic of experience and the body was an artifact of the work of the breath.

Conclusion

Equine-assisted psychotherapy is a form of talk therapy that depends upon the differences between humans and horses as meaningful venues for the practice of therapeutic work. At stake in these interactions with horses was not the production of signs, intelligible as marking disease, but rather the assembly of rhythms, capable of producing a sense of accord. These rhythms were the material fragments of embodied harmonies that were made up of the analogous connections between human eyes and horse ears, human ears and horse feet, or human hands and horse mouths. The congruity in how humans and horses made use of their bodies generated openings for meaning-making through sound that could only be usefully described by paying attention to the digital hues of language, a descriptive form that Bateson suggested might “resemble music.” In disabling the textual register of talk, equine-assisted psychotherapy is an unusual form of talk therapy. In linking allied forms of “talking,” the rhythms shared between humans and horses transform the act of speaking into an “act of self-reflection.”

Acknowledgments

This paper is for the secrets we keep, the knots we weave to protect their fragile lives, and the horses we trust to hear our lies.

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