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# Dancing with Horses: Communication, Dominance and Trust

by

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(Reflections on rereading Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling's *Dancing with Horses*. All references are to the Trafalgar Square Publishing edition of 2001.)

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In Chapter 2 of *Dancing with Horses* Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling (KFH) defines the essence of riding a horse as “communication and balance”. The corollary to this is that any form of interaction with a horse other than riding will at the very least necessitate communication, if not balance as well. He then goes on to stipulate two prerequisites for such communication. To many who seek a humane form of interaction with a horse, one of these is self-evident: trust. If you are to communicate with your horse, it needs to trust you implicitly. The other prerequisite which KFH postulates is almost guaranteed to raise the hackles on the necks of the same category of humans: dominance. This is partly because the concept of dominance is often accorded the negative connotations of its linguistic cousin, “domination”, and partly because the latter is so typical of modern conventional approaches to horsemanship, including those relying on refined forms of pressure and release.

Let us briefly examine these three concepts in the order in which they are mentioned in the book (communication, dominance and trust) and determine whether there is anything we can do to facilitate communication with our horse.

## COMMUNICATION

KFH suggests that in the course of growing up humans lose the “original body language”, the “basic form of communication” and the “basic feel for movement and balance” that they once had as children. To learn to ride a horse – and hence, as a corollary to this, to learn to interact with one at various levels – you, the human, need to “find your way back to what you once possessed”. What you once possessed was a “basic form of archetypal communication”. You also had a “natural self-assurance, self-determination and sense of self-preservation” which you need to rediscover and develop (p. 22).

The suggestion that KFH makes here is profound. Ask yourself what type of communication this could be, if there is no need for a child to learn it, because he possesses it instinctively and indeed, if it is necessary for an adult human to experience a process of “unlearning many things”, so that he can find his way back to what he once possessed (p. 22). Further on in this chapter KFH contends that (and the following quotation is printed in bold type in the book to underline its importance) “**above all, in order to gently but truly dominate a horse, it is absolutely necessary to communicate with him**”, and that horses have their own language, namely “body language” (p. 33). Is this what children have, according to KFH? Is this what adult humans need to rediscover? And if so, is this all?

The answer is not straightforward. While it is clear that children have not acquired the body language that is set out in detail in the book, they do possess its essence. The quotes mentioned

above reveal that adults need to acquire both. So what is this essence? To find the answer to this question it helps to read the poem found on p. 45 of KFH's book, *The Horse Seeks Me*, which KFH follows with this conclusion:

That is how the invisible shapes the visible, moves, renews and changes it. The body becomes the authentic and diverse instrument of the self-aware person; a sensitive way of expressing their individual personality. That is my understanding of body language.

The poem itself is about being in the moment without an agenda, a goal or any concerns. In other words, the essence of body language is being: consciously and authentically being yourself. Put another way, there is congruence between one's inner and outer self. You are not sending out conflicting signals as adults normally do. In her book, *Empowered Horses*<sup>1</sup>, Imke Spilker sets this out so clearly, that it is worth repeating here:

A person's inner "posture" and his external one create one unified image. Like the two sides of a coin they are inseparably connected to one another. Emotion reveals itself in movement. That is the problem with learned-by-rote body language manoeuvres as they are taught in clinics. If the gesture is not connected with genuine perception and feeling, it will generate incongruity and that will be perceived by an aware counterpart. "Beware of him whose belly does not move when he laughs," warns a Chinese adage. (p. 138)

Spilker then goes on to state the following:

To be congruent, one with self, is a condition with which not many people are familiar anymore. Often we are not even aware of our disharmony, but its effect – particularly on horses – is very negative. At the same time we thoughtlessly demand this same sort of disharmony from our horses and try to force them into a similarly divided life. But a horse draws the majority of his power from the unbroken unity between expression and perception. In the language of a horse a particular gesture makes a particular statement. Moving in a certain manner is the direct expression of the experience of the moment. Every movement is a feeling! (p. 139)

Although KFH is not as prosaic in articulating his understanding of body language, it is clear that he and Spilker are at one on the need for congruence between the human's inner being and its outer expression.

## **DOMINANCE AND TRUST**

Before exploring each of these concepts on their own, it is necessary to ask why KFH insists that both are required. He provides an answer in *Dancing with Horses* by noting that some of the vital characteristics of a dog and a cat can be found in every horse.

On the one hand, the horse is a herd animal in a way that is similar to the dog having his origins in a pack. A herd is a social group of horses within which there is a hierarchical order (which may be dynamic and changeable as opposed to static and constant). As such, every horse within a herd is either a follower or a leader in relation to every other member of that herd. Put another way, one is dominant, while the other is subordinate to it. Although horses may play with each and the stronger may allow the weaker to get away with conduct which would not be tolerated outside the bounds of play, when push comes to shove a dominant horse will always take the lead, while a subordinate one will follow it.

On the other hand, horses also exhibit the characteristics of a cat in their reliance on trust for benign social contact. Horses are also capable of deep friendships, even across species. Trust is an essential aspect of such a friendship but also of the relationship between a horse and the herd's

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<sup>1</sup> Spilker, M., *Empowered Horses*, Trafalgar Square, North Pomfret, Vermont, 2009.

lead stallion or mare. Yet you cannot win the trust of a cat by dominating it. Instead you need to be patient, gentle and tolerant.

This approach begs a seemingly irreconcilable question: how do you dominate a horse and simultaneously obtain its trust? KFH looks to the origins of European classical horsemanship for the answer as purportedly portrayed by the Christian knights. Their secret, he claims, is this:

High-ranking horses have a quality which gives them the power to maintain their position without constantly having to fight for it. Once a person discovered this secret he would be able to dominate a horse without resorting to any form of physical force. He could caress and dote upon his horse a little in order to win his trust, as he would with a cat and, at the same time, he could dominate him with the same methods that the non-fighting lead stallion uses. This quite simply was and is the secret of the caballero, the knight (p. 31).

## **DOMINANCE**

KFH insists that dominance is imperative, if a human is to set out on the path to the achievement of collected riding on a loose rein. He argues that it is essential for the psychic wellbeing of the horse that we dominate it completely, because it is only then that it will be able to achieve a peaceful state of mind and find its stability and equilibrium. This is even more important where a horse is engaged in fine, sensitive work, because “a horse who resists, even if only occasionally, can never be ridden with the finest, most subtle aids” (p. 29).

### **Definition of “dominance”**

The terms, “dominance” and “domination”, are frequently subject to emotive interpretations, which also seemingly vary from one person to the next. For this reason it is helpful to define these terms first. The free Oxford online dictionary ([www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com)) defines “dominance” as “power and influence over others”. In this context we may therefore define it as the power and influence which a human *has* over a horse. Used in this sense “dominance” therefore does not necessarily imply that the human actually dominates the horse – although this is not ruled out – and leaves room for an interpretation which sees the horse act of its own volition albeit under the power or influence of that human.

### **Definition of “domination”**

The same dictionary defines “domination” as “the exercise of power or influence over someone or something, or the state of being so controlled”.

Publicly opposed to any form of domination of horses while simultaneously successful in nurturing happy, self-collecting horses, Imke Spilker is perhaps the most appropriate person to define “domination” for us, even if she does not mention the term specifically when she does so. She defines it as “negative motivation”:

If we examine the current training of horses by people we find a classic example of negative motivation. The horse does something because he wants to avoid a negative consequence that the human being will inflict on him. The horse avoids something of which he is afraid or has learned to fear, and this ‘something’ hangs in connection with an action of the human being. He runs so that he will not be attacked, so that the whip will not strike him, so that the spurs won’t prick him. He stops so that his jaw will not be crushed, so that he will not be hit on the nose, or so that he will not again be chased round and round until he is totally exhausted. Horses try to avoid things that are unpleasant. Flinging out his forelegs so that no one whacks his sacrum, jumping high so that the pole does not hit those sensitive legs, running because someone is sitting on his neck, faster, faster.... (p. 89)

She also defines it as “negative reinforcement”:

Traditionally, the stick reigns in the relationship between man and horse because a horse acts to avoid unpleasant consequences, not in order to get something for which it is worth striving.

He reacts to the negative reinforcement. He is worked until he gives in, yields or moves forward. The horse learns about negative motivation and wants to avoid something worse. The reward is that the unpleasantness stops as the person lessens his actions (p. 90).

She also defines it as the use of commands, threats or punishment:

We speak of an “aid” but we could just as well use the words, “command”, “threat” or “punishment”. Because logically structured systems are easier for human beings to deal with, riders learn this “aid-giving” as a set of rules, preferably with sketches that show them around the “dashboard” of this living sport machine. But to get a living being to function in such a predictable manner, a great deal of effort has to be invested to mechanise this creature and adapt him to the system. On this road to the goal of “animal automaton” occasional expressions of natural aliveness cannot be ruled out. When that occurs, disciplinary measures are used – sometimes harshly, sometimes more gently (p. 149).

She also defines it as the use of fear in the absence of force:

Just because a horse is not physically touched by a person’s movements does not mean that force is not being used. This is particularly the case in a confined space where the horse has no opportunity to retreat, as in a round pen, for example. After all, a situation does not become threatening only with the onset of physical contact. Threat arises long in advance of that, in the fear of the one being threatened “with the finger on the trigger”. The person who pressures a horse against a wall or a fence or who drives him into a confined space is playing with the claustrophobia that is so much a part of the nature of these animals of the wide open spaces. Fear is, and will always be, the foundation of such work (p. 152).

Finally, she also defines it as having a horse do or refrain from doing something in the absence of its consent: “No matter what the particulars of the work, one thing always remains the same: horses are not asked for their consent” (p. 89). Indeed, whether a horse is asked for its consent or not marks the dividing line for Spilker between what type of training is acceptable and what type involves domination and is therefore not.

Interestingly, Spilker makes no mention of training by rote which is based on rewards only as opposed to the “carrot” and the ‘stick” approach. Should one consider reward-based conditioned response training (such as clicker training) as something for which horses are asked to give their consent? Surely they have a choice where only rewards are involved? Obviously they do but the question that then needs to be considered is whether the conditioned responses that are elicited on demand do not constitute a form of domination by a human in that the horse ultimately does not consent to those responses (but only to the training preceding them) and that they are therefore not authentic movements on the part of the horse. Alternatively, one may conclude that no genuine communication is involved, as the conditioned responses only occur in response to a trigger.

## **KFH’S DOMINANCE**

KFH bases his dominance on a horse on what he refers to in *Dancing with Horses* (p. 32) as “two pillars”, namely:

1. the qualities of a high-ranking horse, being magnetism, presence, dignity, superiority, thoughtfulness, experience and intelligence;
2. a system of signals with which a high-ranking horse is able to demonstrate and consolidate its power by the most peaceful means, and which are transmitted through body language.

Whether true or not, the knights embodied these qualities according to KFH. As he puts it:

They knew exactly that they could only live and go to war with horses who gave them both absolute obedience and absolute trust. They dominated their horses with the power of their personalities, their individual magnetism and with the help of those signals and gestures used exclusively by high-ranking horses in the wild. They cultivated the most humane interaction

with their horses that you can imagine, because they took the place of everything, the entire herd, in their horses' lives. They gave their horses a solid dominance structure together with the opportunity for friendship.

All that is the foundation for collected riding on a loose rein. So we have to begin our work at the very beginning, at the time when the rift first developed between our body and our personality. (p. 32)

In the course of the seventeen years that separate the publication of the German version of *Dancing with Horses* and that of *The Horse Seeks Me*<sup>2</sup> KFH has remained committed to what he calls the "way of the knight" but he has changed his description of the two pillars and the change is profound. Dominance and trust have been replaced by "being and trust" (p. 61 – see also *Trust* below). Although there are occasional references to "dominance and trust" in the rest of the book (e.g. on p. 86, p. 118 and p. 315), the emphasis has shifted to the human becoming a caring, healing leader who is committed not only to not hurting the horse but to helping him grow and develop.

In *The Horse Seeks Me* KFH draws a distinction between the type of human who seeks to draw the horse down to the level of the unconscious human and the type of human who seeks authenticity and awareness in his interaction with horses. The first seeks the horse while the other allows the horse to find him, because he "is credible, sets an example, radiates inner confidence, is trustworthy, clear, unambiguous, relaxed, quiet, peaceful, positive, hopeful, balanced and controlled, and because he keeps on testing himself and, although he finds much that he does not like, he still remains cheerful and confident" (p. 39). This is the type of human we need to become, if we are to be capable of being with horses.

### **KFH'S DOMINATION**

Within KFH's approach the dominance of the human is so emphatic in the form of his presence that there is little or no need for him to actually dominate the horse. The questions of dominance and trust are resolved in the first few minutes and as of that time the horse, assured that the human will not in any way hurt him and is a trustworthy leader, does what is asked of it of its own volition not because it feels it does not have any choice but because it wants to do what the human whom it has acknowledged as its leader asks. Put another way, the absence of choice is irrelevant, because the horse does not want to consider any other option.

Punishment does not play a role in KFH's approach. As he puts it, "punishment as such has been purely and simply eliminated. This must always be the case...." (p. 198).

Nevertheless, KFH does insist on the human's need to protect his personal space. So what does KFH do if a horse ignores his signal to stop and intrudes into his personal space? "I hit him and very soundly!" (p. 199). What is important in this respect though, is that this is done reflexively and without anger, as a horse would do. What KFH also does is "immediately stroke the horse in the spot where I have just hit him" (p. 199). Can such self-defence be interpreted as domination? I personally feel that it can only be interpreted as self-preservation. Yet even if it could be interpreted as domination, the alternative – the injury or death of the human – is simply unacceptable. KFH also deals with this concept, which he now refers to as our "vital circle" on p. 213 of *The Horse Seeks Me* (p. 213).

*Dancing with Horses* contains numerous descriptions of what KFH refers to as dominance tools or aids. He cites backing-up as the most important dominance tool and suggests that it may be used in cases where your horse mouths you, rubs himself against you to scratch an itch or rub off a fly, or leaves his position when being led:

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<sup>2</sup> Hempfling, K.F., *It is Not I Who Seek the Horse, The Horse Seeks Me*, Cadmos Publishing, London, 2010.

In all these cases and many others a few steps of backing up will send the horse back to his subordinate position. You always do this with a friendly demeanour and affection while emphasising your position. After three or four steps halt him and praise generously your now-obedient horse. (p. 199)

In *The Horse Seeks Me* KFH introduces another specific dominance tool, the “magic circle” (pp. 264-297). A description of the “magic circle” is provided on p. 271. Its stated purpose is not to dominate the horse but to improve the “dominance relationship” (p. 266).

The ostensible purpose of dominance tools is not to dominate the horse but to establish the human’s dominance in the relationship between them thereby obviating the need for any dominating behaviour (i.e. domination). Although a dominance relationship does not necessarily imply the occurrence of domination as such, the existence of dominance tools presupposes the breakdown of such a relationship and the need to re-establish it. As such tools are not initially required to establish it and these tools do deprive the horse of any choice which it may have to refuse to cooperate, we may conclude that the re-establishment of a dominant relationship does involve domination, if we accept Spilker’s broad definition of it as the denial of consent.

Going up a grade on Spilker’s ladder of definitions, we may ask whether fear constitutes the foundation for the use of such dominance tools to re-establish a dominance relationship. It is clear that if these dominance tools are used as explained in *Dancing with Horses* and *The Horse Seeks Me*, no threat of violence is explicit or implied and, as such, there can be no room for fear to play a role.

## TRUST

Although KFH insists that trust is as important in a human’s relationship with a horse as dominance, he devotes little attention to it in *Dancing with Horses*. Implicitly communication and dominance nurture it in that the former is intended to be clear but calm, while the latter provides clarity and security. For the rest, KFH offers no help in relation to establishing trust let alone maintaining it.

It is to *The Horse Seeks Me* that we must turn for some direction as to how a human can establish and maintain trust with a horse. It is to be found in his comparison of the three ways of being with horses in the first part of Chapter 3. The human who follows the way of the knight (now based on “being and trust”) is one who “works on his own unique qualities as a helper, mentor and healer, and on his exemplary leadership qualities, his body language and his coming to awareness, until the horse really wants to come to him, not because everything else has been spoiled for him and he simply gives up and gives in” (pp. 61-63). The implications are profound. The dominant position of the human is now defined by his capacity to give: to give help, guidance and healing to the horse. Such a person, KFH tells us, a horse wants to follow “because he believes and genuinely trusts in him”. Such a person:

“becomes the central support for the free development of the horse. That is the fundamental principle. Everything revolves around the inner qualities of the person. In days gone by that was the (ideal and idealised) path of the knight. (p. 63)

Again though, KFH does not provide any guidance on how obtain the horse’s trust in as much detail as he goes into when explaining how to achieve dominance over the horse. Add to this the fact that the horse appears to start trusting the human from the very moment that the human establishes his dominant position in relation to the horse, and we may have to conclude that it is not a question of the horse trusting the human but of it placing its trust in the latter. It is a fine point but an important one. We humans tend to trust someone based on experience. It is an active trust which develops and deepens over time. It is very seldom that we are prepared to place our

trust in a stranger. If we do, it is usually based on the recommendation of someone whom we consider to be reliable, someone whom we trust: trust by proxy, as it were.

Horses, on the other hand, seem to place their trust in other horses almost immediately, albeit to varying degrees. A horse joining a new herd will almost immediately place its trust in the other horses comprising it and its lead horse (unless of course it becomes the lead horse itself), submitting itself to the lead horse's dominant position. The horses comprising the herd graze and move together trusting each other that it is best for them to do so, and that it is safest for them to follow the lead horse. It is this act of placing trust which appears to occur when the horse submits to KFH's dominance, because it is a form of dominance that is accompanied by a commitment not only to refrain from hurting the horse but also to help it develop and grow. More importantly, we may conclude that the horse submits to the human subject to the latter's commitment to be trustworthy in this respect. This commitment and how it may be communicated to the horse is set out in detail on p. 121 of *The Horse Seeks Me*.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that we will need to experience considerable self-development if we are to become the credible human whom KFH insists we need to become in order to interact with horses, one who is capable of setting an example, who radiates inner confidence, is trustworthy, clear, unambiguous, relaxed, quiet, peaceful, positive, hopeful, balanced and controlled, and who keeps on testing himself and still remains cheerful and confident even though he finds much that he does not like. Fortunately, much of this self-development can occur through interaction with the horse.

Although such self-development will take a considerable period of time, there are some practical things we can start doing immediately. In *Dancing with Horses* KFH also provides the following exceedingly practical tips for improving communication with the horse (pp. 40-45):

1. everything is information – all that we do conveys information to our horse, which means that, unless we learn to use our body consciously, we may end up asking our horse to do something without being aware that we have done so, hence the need to learn to use your body properly;
2. less is more – the more aware we are of our body language, the calmer we will become and the less we will need to do in order to communicate with our horse, leading to an almost meditative type of interaction with it;
3. always use the same “vocabulary” – we need to be consistent in the body language that we use;
4. from flow to stimulus – if we ensure that our movements are controlled and flowing, only the smallest movement will be required to be detected by our horse as a stimulus to do or stop doing something;
5. softer, softer until you only think it – each signal needs to be increasingly refined, until the barest perceptible move will be enough to serve as an aid;
6. knock before entering – before asking our horse to do something, we need to alert him to the fact that we are about to ask.

Finally, we need to be aware that the horse communicates with us constantly and to learn to understand that communication. As KFH puts it:

There are a number of very subtle signs and signals by which our equine partner lets us know if we are asking too much or too little. We must focus not just our eyes but our whole attention on these very subtle signals from our horses. If we do this, we will always have horses who approach their work joyfully, like children who play and, in playing, challenge and discover themselves”. (p. 45)

Of these signs and signals there are two types which KFH cites in *The Horse Seeks Me* as indications that we are on the right path with our horse (p. 124). The first of these is what is

translated in the book as the “first parallelism” (an unfortunate bit of gibberish) but should be more accurately referred to as the “first parallel”, which occurs when the horse parallels what its human does (the horse moves forward, backward, to the left or to the right, or stops when his human does, doing so with “a natural consistency and at a slight distance” – see p. 79). “Another sign is complete peace, security, relaxation and contentment – they yawn with abandon” (p. 124). If either of these occurs, you know that you are on the right path. In short, be guided by your horse.

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