


Horse sense

Barney Bardsley examines why more of us are heading towards the stables to find answers to life's challenges



WHEN I was a girl, I was horse mad. We never had much money, so I was only rarely allowed riding lessons. The horse I was given – an old one called Jeremy, with a mouth like a bar of rusted iron, and a penchant for biting chunks out of the horse in front – was a total nightmare. But I persevered. I loved it. Then adolescence loomed, with its gloomy indoor moods and obsessions, and I left the equine world behind. By the time I became an adult I had become shy, even a bit nervous, around horses of any kind.

Given the profound nature of the horse-human connection, there is no-one better to >>>



>>> work with than the founder of the International Foundation of Equine Assisted Learning (IFEAL): the energetic and highly experienced Sun Tui. Smiling and optimistic, Sun Tui has spent a lifetime working with horses. Born into a military family, she had a rather fractured childhood, being sent to boarding school in England while her father served abroad. She also experienced tragedies in her younger adult life. But through it all, her love of horses has been a constant source of stability and joy.

Trained as a counselling therapist – and then, in America, in the horse-centred approach to trauma treatment – Sun Tui now works with troubled adults of all kinds. Among her most damaged clients – with a nod here to her own military background – are soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Like the original ‘horse whisperer’, Monty Roberts, she does not shrink from taking on these difficult war-ravaged cases, helping them to turn their lives around in a remarkably short period of time, with the help of a little equine magic and understanding. Sun Tui believes it is not the incident

itself that causes trauma, but the inability to express the emotions of the experience. ‘Stuck emotions leave us blocked and unable to move forward with our lives in a fulfilled and integrated way,’ she explains.

Whoever she works with, the approach is always the same: non-verbal, direct, grounded, and extremely sensitive. ‘Horses,’ Sun Tui says, ‘respond not to what we are thinking or saying, but to what we are feeling.’ By being with horses, people learn to line up their cognitive abilities with their much more ancient and trustworthy bodily intuition.

At Great Cansiron Farm in East Sussex, where IFEAL is based, the horses live in a natural state – the herd of six are free to wander the extensive grounds, unhemmed by gates, halters, or restrictions of any kind, except

for the perimeter fences.

It is their highly tuned sensitivity that makes horses so rewarding to work with. They pick up any inconsistency, in body language or behaviour, so if you are feeling or thinking one thing, but saying or doing another, horses will sense it and >>>

“Horses respond not to what we are thinking or saying, but to what we are feeling”

>>> not engage with you. There is no pretence. You might be able to fool another human with false words and platitudes, but you can't fool a horse.

The IFEAL approach is not about leading or riding the horses, or dominating them in any way. It is all about the relationship, about being alongside. Sun Tui had a pony of her own as a child, but was never keen on riding it. 'I just wanted to be with the horse, in its company,' she says. She found its quiet power deeply healing.

This makes her a natural at the work she does. I watched her with one horse, who was initially far more keen on eating grass than responding to her cues. But quietly, confidently, with subtle movements, eye contact, and the occasional, understated hand-to-horse contact, she got him to raise his head, soften his gaze, and walk calmly beside her, without a halter, saddle or bridle in sight.

Making a connection

Then it was my turn. I admit to a racing heart: there's no denying that these were big beasts, and I was walking wounded, with a broken arm. Nonetheless, I did feel a real desire to get close to the horses, and sensed a tangible physical excitement.

Out of the herd of six, I chose a gorgeous grey stallion called Ko Li (which means 'Fire in the Mist'). Or rather, he chose me, as he came straight out of the herd and offered his head towards me in greeting. I felt ridiculously flattered. Next, he was separated into an enclosure, where he immediately retreated, head down, to a far corner.

'Walk towards the horse,' instructed Sun Tui. 'And every time he moves, stop, take a step back, and breathe out.' It felt like it took an eternity, but with each quiet step, I could feel the roots in my feet grow stronger, and a tentative relationship beginning to grow, horse to human.

Then Ko Li turned his head to look at me. Such huge, dark, unflinching eyes. Such a steady and penetrating gaze. Finally, I reached his side. A stroke of his shoulder; a snickering from his nostrils. Then, as a final gift, the horse began to walk in step with me, with a measured grace – like a slow dance.

It was all over far too quickly. Ko Li was returned to the herd and kicked up his heels to gallop to the far trees, with a swish of his long white tail. But the effect he had was long-lasting



The lowdown on horse therapy

1 What is it? Horse therapy, or Equine Assisted Learning, works to develop high sensory awareness in individuals, in order to bring about positive change in their lives.

2 Why is it effective? Working with horses encourages a direct, physical and instinctive approach in the client – rather than hiding behind a camouflage of words.

3 Who is it for? Anyone struggling with work or personal difficulties can benefit. Among the visitors to the centre in Sussex have been troubled adolescents, businesswomen looking to be more successful at managing their workforce, soldiers suffering from combat stress

disorders, adults who have experienced trauma, depression or addiction.

4 What does it entail? Standing and observing horses living naturally and freely as a herd. Working one-to-one with a horse to build sensitivity, stability and trust. Using that awareness to release a healthy self-esteem within oneself.

5 Where does it happen? The only centre for Equine Assisted Learning in the UK is currently based at Great Cansiron Farm, East Sussex. Horse specialist and therapist Sun Tui is its founder and director.

For further information on the therapies that IFEAL provides, go to ifeal.me

and profound. Much of what we did that day was just to stand still and observe each other. There was no showmanship, just the acquiring of a deep sensitivity, one to the other.

And I do feel changed, in some mysterious way. I was left, as the day ended, with a desire to stand very still, for a very long time, just watching the horses – and the spaces between us. The whole experience inspired both peace and longing, as if for something lost long ago. I will never forget the look in that horse's eyes as he first turned his head to look at me, and the feeling I had as he did so; of being somehow understood, somehow undone. ■

'Old Dog' by Barney Bardsley will be published by Simon & Schuster this year