

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

OF

**Psychotherapy &
Critical Thought**

VOLUME VI NUMBER 1

SPRING/SUMMER 2000

In this Issue

**WHAT ARE THE ACTIVE INGREDIENTS
OF PSYCHOTHERAPY THAT
BRING ABOUT
BASIC PERSONALITY CHANGE?**

Robert Redford, Freud, Human Misery and the Panic of Horses

REUVEN BAR-LEVAV, MD

On rare occasions when we are fortunate, a flash of insight and new understanding unexpectedly comes our way from the most unlikely direction. Shamans, magicians and gurus, as well as healers of God and of Satan, have always promised to drive insanity out of the afflicted humans who had lost their senses and their mind. But even now, with the real advances of modern psychiatry, we still are groping in semi-darkness.

What didn't these wretched and suffering human beings have to endure at the hands of those who would stop at almost nothing to free them from their "madness"? They were shunned and ridiculed, hidden in attics and burned at the stake, mercilessly beaten to drive the evil spirits out, their blood was sucked by leeches, they were subjected to insulin and to electroshock therapy, endlessly psychoanalyzed and psychotherapized, given antidepressants, anxiolytic and antipsychotic medications and promised that Thorazine, Prozac and a host of other "miracle" drugs would cure them—all with very questionable results. At times such people felt better for awhile, but hardly ever did they really get well.

And then comes Robert Redford who in his movie "The Horse Whisperer" effortlessly settles this ages-old, wide-ranging search for a cure of this, the most common of all maladies that afflict our species. The beautifully photographed movie, while an hour too long and too schmaltzy in its romantic parts, is nonetheless wise,

This article is being published essentially without editorial changes. Responses, questions or clarifications should be addressed to the editors.

touching and sensitive, even as it is thought-provoking and very instructive.

"The Horse Whisperer" shows with great clarity how panic and lesser anxiety are successfully eliminated, at least in this case. In doing so it lifts much of the thick fog of confusion that has clouded our understanding for so long. It is so much easier to see what must happen to bring about a successful result when the subject is a horse. Better than the book, the film tells an internally consistent tale and we can easily identify with the powerful and graceful animal in its terrible turmoil.

The story is simple and easy to follow: two young girls mount their well-groomed horses on a gray winter day for a ride when a web of circumstances suddenly and unexpectedly turns an ordinary morning into a horrible tragedy. One of the horses and its rider are killed when the slippery landscape brings horses, riders and a semi-trailer truck together in an unavoidable crash.

The second horse and the other girl are very seriously injured. But the real damage to them both is deeper yet: the girl is stricken with hopelessness and guilt, the animal with lasting panic which is easily recognized in its wide-open, terror-stricken eyes, in its explosive body, in the ever-present tense alertness, and in the total distrust of everyone, including those eager to help and to solace. Indeed, as I previously wrote, "The push away from fear and dread supersedes everything" (1988, p.59).

And the torturously slow course of treatment which ends in a cure is also simple and easy to follow: a patient, knowledgeable and self-confident horse "whisperer" who stands his ground firmly even when the powerful animal appears dangerously violent, demonstrates to the terrorized animal that he is not afraid. This is the first and a most important reassuring message. It helps to settle the frightened horse somewhat, though it remains in the grip of hurricane-like internal forces which shake it to its core. And then, patiently and deliberately, one tiny step at a time, he slowly gains the horse's trust by his manner, actions and steadiness. Since he is

sensitive, he always is respectful of the animal's need for enough space, and for time, to test the limits of safety. And since he is firm he pushes the animal repeatedly beyond its comfort zone. His loving reliability is conveyed by a look, by his stance, and eventually also by physical touch. All this time the horse is confined in a round corral which serves as a protective and holding environment, as it also prevents any possibility of escape.

The powerful irrational physiologic reactions of the animal to what it wrongly perceives as still being life-threatening are challenged again and again, day after day. Unlike the brain, the body is a slow learner, and it remains "convinced" that the present is as dangerous as the past used to be.

And when at one later point the horse suddenly bolts in a burst of defiance, rage and fear and escapes into the wild, he neither chases nor reprimands it. Instead, the whisperer follows the animal but keeps his distance and waits patiently and quietly, without moving for hours, knowing that storms of powerful feelings pass only at their own pace. Paradoxically, the least activity on his part is the fastest way to speed the return of calm. We see the horse's inner struggle as it ever so gingerly and very, very slowly dares to get closer to the human whom it alternately perceives as an enemy and as a protector, finally allowing a tender pat. A long chain of such hard-won victories is needed to reverse the horse's physiologic certainty that contact with humans must be avoided since it had been so dangerous in the past.

And when it finally appears that the horse is ready to allow the girl of the accident to mount, panic unexpectedly grips the horse once again. The tenacious hold of terror had not yet been released, and more heart-rending and agonizing battles must be won before the steel-like vise lets go. The huffing and puffing horse finally yields when it can take the physical pressure of the whisperer no longer, in spite of the lingering remnants of fear. Slowly, with much trepidation, out of breath and unable to find the energy to fight anymore, the animal eventually tolerates the loving touch of the girl associated with the traumatic accident. Even the body and its autonomous

physiologic patterns eventually change in a "crucible of no choice," and basic behaviors can slowly be learned and unlearned with such persistent pressure.

Every creature in the animal kingdom reacts in a similar fashion when panicked. Both a baby bird that falls out of its nest and the powerful horse that was so terribly traumatized fight with equal ferocity, though with greatly different force, when anyone tries to approach them, even if it is with the best of intentions, trying to save their lives. The subjective "certainty" is that they face extreme danger. And we humans are not exempt. In spite of the wonderful capabilities of our cortex, this thinking brain of ours is no match for the raw power of emotions. We too cannot reason with panic.

In the process of healing ourselves and of overcoming anxiety we too must keep ourselves from bolting when we most want to escape what we (wrongly) perceive as dangerous and life threatening. By repeatedly resisting the powerful, impulsive urges and inner commands to run to greater "safety," we eventually develop the capacity to act thoughtfully and rationally. Even we humans can have no short cuts in replacing distrust with trust. We may deeply resent the deflating fact that in spite of our greater intelligence we are still a part of the animal kingdom but, try as we might, we cannot change it.

Freud was fortunate. The nose counters and the statistic compilers were not yet around to dismiss his important contributions about the inner life of humans as mere anecdotal findings, although even then he met with opposition since all his theories were based on observations of himself and of a few others, without independent validation. It did not help that his conclusions were strongly colored by Greek mythology in which he was steeped, but which often was wrong or irrelevant. Even so, his place as a centrally important pillar of Western thought is assured. In spite of so many wrong conclusions, he was right in emphasizing the power of the unconscious and the limitations of the will.

But Freud's good fortune was not to last. Psychoanalysis reigned supreme for awhile but his theories began to be questioned in

earnest soon after World War II. All the "talking therapies" were increasingly devalued since they failed to meet the high expectations that they themselves gave rise to by claiming to have found the answer to all of human misery.

A rich variety of psychoactive medications were soon developed, promising that unlike the Freudians they would cure depression, eliminate anxiety and return everyone to normal, happy functioning. And indeed, with these drugs the human warehouses known as state hospitals were quickly emptied, and the eager do-gooders of the Community Mental Health movement soon had their occupants park themselves on the doorposts of our cities, all in the name of human compassion. Good will can blind, especially when it is patronizing. It prevented them from seeing that these unfortunate humans required a supervised living environment, and that they would become homeless street people without it. In spite of all the claims and magazine cover stories, even the newer drugs were only able to lessen the hopelessness and the pain. They also did not cure.

"The Horse Whisperer," by contrast, shows with convincing clarity what causes panic and how it can be successfully treated, and thus its point of view has direct and practical usefulness. Panic, like all the other storms of powerful feelings that come upon us (and upon other living things) from time to time, originates from experiences earlier in one's life, and it is therefore often irrational when it occurs later on. Such physiologic storms are under the control of lower brain centers, not the cortex. This is why we cannot reason panic away any more than we can lower our blood pressure by reasoning alone. But we can affect both by patiently retraining our body's physiologic responses to various external and internal stimuli, far beyond what we associate with biofeedback.

The implications of "The Horse Whisperer" for the treatment of emotional illnesses such as anxiety states and depression are simple, though not usually so obvious:

1. Interpretations, reconstructions and reasoning, the usual modes of most "talking therapies," are of no real value. They all address the cortex, our thinking and understanding brain, and it is not in

charge of our reactions when irrational fear and hurt take hold of us. This is why psychoanalysis and most of psychotherapy have had only palliative and temporary results. They use the wrong address.

2. Most importantly, here is a piece of good news: anxiety and panic are curable medical conditions, not an inseparable part of human existence, as the existential philosophers have claimed. Anomie is universal, but reversible. It is nothing more than a summation of individual anxieties and dread. These reside in each of us since every human alive had to endure months in the almost total darkness of normal autism, before we knew anyone or anything, and before we had any capacity for memory.

3. To reduce and to eliminate unrealistic anxiety, to replace chronic hurt and anger with tolerance and reason, and to develop the capacity to trust, it is necessary to repeatedly pull and push humans, too, beyond their comfort zone. As in the movie, this can only be achieved within a committed, decent, steady and respectful relationship. The absence of pressure explains the rather limited success of traditional psychotherapy and psychoanalysis.

4. Psychoactive drugs, the old and the newer ones which are better, have been most helpful in lessening the terrible pain and suffering, just as morphine does for postoperative and terminal patients. But they only treat the symptoms and none of them change the underlying illness. These medications do not cure and their effects are short-lived. This is why they must be taken continuously.

Redford's horse had but one single traumatic episode whose dread-filled effects needed to be reversed, but every human baby has hundreds, perhaps thousands, of episodes which are subjectively experienced as life-threatening, though in fact they are usually safe. The sharp and sudden bite of hunger pangs, for example, like a knife stabbing us in our middle, is what each of us had experienced many, many times before we could understand what it was. Such totally unexpected "attacks," subjectively harsh and dangerous, have conditioned all humans to have at least traces of a vague expectation of dread built into their bones and tissues.

Without having had any concept of time, each "attack" is totally unexpected and new, and without a capacity to understand, each "assault" comes "for no reason at all." Less than adequate early mothering, added to this universal expectation of dread, is the source of all manifestations of pathologic anxiety. Panic reactions and lesser clinical syndromes of this type are peak experiences, volcano-like eruptions that arise from this often seemingly placid landscape.

Thanks to Robert Redford and "The Horse Whisperer" we can now see much more clearly than before that anxiety and even panic can really be eliminated. His sensitive presentation of the tortured horse is also a clear illustration of what must be done to successfully lessen the inner turmoil of human beings.

Reference

Bar-Levav, R. (1988). *Thinking in the shadow of feelings*.
New York: Simon & Schuster.