

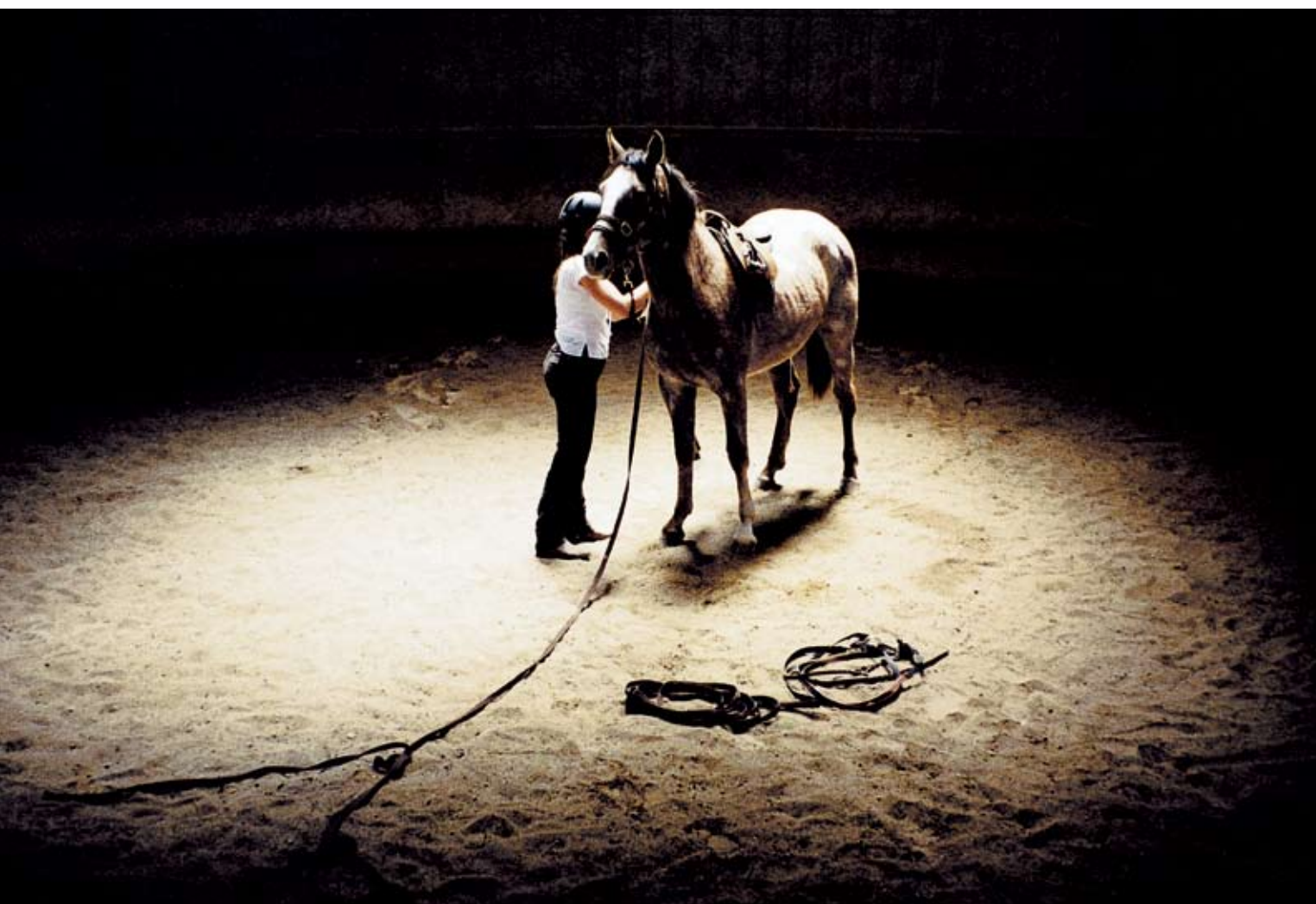
LEARNING CURVES

SURE, ELIZABETH RAPOPORT MAKES HER LIVING AS AN EDITOR AND WRITER, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN SHE CAN'T LEARN A LITTLE HORSE SENSE ABOUT COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE.

You *never* face your own issues more squarely than when you can't tell a lie. Allie **NEVER** lies.



And I'm not trying to lie to Allie. I'm just a lousy communicator. Which is *alarming*, because I'm a professional communicator. Did I mention that Allie's a HORSE?



I'M INSIDE THIS CIRCULAR PEN, with this very large horse, for a sampling of the Leadership Workshop led by Koelle Simpson, creator of The Gift of Equus, which offers programs to help people grow personally and professionally. For five years, Simpson was the head instructor at the International Learning Center run by Monty Roberts—the original “horse whisperer.” Under Roberts’ tutelage, Simpson taught horse owners how to improve their skills by “speaking horse”—how to read and translate horses’ nonverbal signals, and train even the most skittish or damaged ones nonviolently and compassionately. (She also worked with damaged horses herself.) She discovered that people who become fluent in “horse” inevitably become more effective communicators with two-legged travelers as well.

In Gift of Equus sessions, Simpson offers a fascinating fusion of horse whispering, biofeedback and life-coaching techniques to teach participants, whether they own horses or not, how to develop leadership skills and become more effective communicators.

“Ninety-three percent of communication is nonverbal,” Simpson tells our group. She maintains that our body language conveys more than half of what we mean. Our tone of voice expresses about 40 percent of our message. And our words? A measly 7 percent. “Animals only respond to the truth—your physical body language,” Simpson explains. “They get confused when our body says one thing but we say something else. The capacity for language equals the capacity to lie.” Working with horses helps us become better leaders, Simpson promises, by helping us synch up our verbal and nonverbal communication.

For the centerpiece of the Leadership Workshop, we’ve driven out into the Sonoran desert, perfumed with juniper and mesquite, to a gorgeous ranch in Scottsdale, Arizona. Simpson leads us into a light, airy barn more lavishly appointed than most SoHo lofts. Each horse that we work with is damaged in some way; they’re here to learn to trust humans, and we’re here to help them. One horse radiates unrest and fury; we all avoid him. Blondie seems a little skittish, but John, a massage therapist, bonds with her. Annette, an interior designer, chooses Monty, who seems good-natured if a little stubborn. I settle on Allie, who seems cautious but unlikely to flatten me into a tortilla.

I lead Allie into the middle of the circular pen and step into the “blind spot” directly in front of her head, giving her a firm nose rub. I’m safe, I’m telling her. You can trust me. I then unhook the longline from Allie’s halter, slapping it vigorously against my thigh, “sending” her from my herd of one. Allie leaps into action, galloping around the ring, glad to be getting away from the crazy lady making the loud noise. My job is to stand in her “driving zone,” about 45 degrees behind the line of her shoulder, and keep her circling around me.

Here comes trouble. As Allie approaches the side of the ring flanked by a flapping white tent, she rears like her



hooves are on fire. She’s scared witless by that tent. I’m scared witless by her. “Come on, Allie!” I shout, even as I shrink away from her.

Allie bucks and shies. My yappy primate frontal lobes, with their havoc-wreaking capacity for language, don’t fool her. “Don’t let her back away,” Simpson urges me. “Show her you’re in charge. Be the matriarchal mare.”

The matriarchal mare rules the herd. Horses are prey animals; it’s essential to their survival to know who’s in charge at any given moment. Put 20 horses that are strangers together, and in mere minutes they’ll know exactly where every one fits in the horse hierarchy. The matriarchal mare guides everyone to food and drink, and dispenses discipline by isolating, or “sending,” a naughty horse from the herd. As the matriarchal mare, I’ve got to be firm, directive, yet serene. “True leadership comes from a place of being truly tranquil, so others want your leadership,” Simpson explains.

I go into full Matriarchal Mare Mode now, squaring my shoulders, slapping my longline, and eventually I get Allie circling regularly, although she keeps glancing back nervously at the tent like a starlet pursued by paparazzi. “Now

make her go in the other direction,” Simpson orders. “Step in front of her.” I take a single step forward, so that I’m lined up ahead of her shoulder. Astonishingly, Allie rears in place, spraying dirt everywhere, and immediately begins galloping in the opposite direction. Cool!

Translation: “I’d like to get closer to you.” The third sign: My horse makes licking and chewing motions. “I’m not afraid of you anymore. Hey, we could have lunch together.” Finally, Allie begins to bow her head as she gallops. “If we could have a meeting to renegotiate this deal, I’d let you be the chairman.”

Allie’s clearly telling me to give join-up a shot. I make brief eye contact, then drop my gaze so she doesn’t feel attacked. I approach her firmly but calmly, angling my body to hers, then moving in J-shaped arcs from one of her shoulders to the other. As I draw near, I dip my own shoulder and flick my eyes coquettishly behind me. Advance, retreat. Advance, retreat. After a minute or two of this dance, I walk away, head down, eyes straining to glance behind me. Soon I can feel the soft puffs of sweet breath from Allie’s nostrils. Allie follows me all around the ring like a very massive, very magnificent pull toy with an invisible string. When I turn to stroke her neck, the hair stands up on my own and I have to fight back tears. This is love. Is it just my imagination, or is Allie as grateful as I am

that I can speak a few words of her mother tongue?

Annette’s horse, Monty, plays hooky like an unruly schoolboy. “Do you by any chance have boundary issues?” Simpson probes. Annette laughs, busted. “Take charge,” Simpson insists, and when Annette does, Monty falls into line. In minutes they’re nose to nose, in deep join-up. John is

too laid-back with his horse, Blondie. “Your horse doesn’t feel safe if there’s no leader,” Simpson reminds him. John assumes more confident body language, and soon he and Blondie are as one. As each of us completes join-up and sits back down under the tent, we’re wiping away tears of joy.

We spend the afternoon with Simpson and life coach Martha Beck decanting our experiences. It’s astonishing how closely our new equine soul mates have held up mirrors to our personal issues—and how astutely Simpson draws the connections and advises us. John’s been less than assertive with some clients. “This is all about stepping into your own leadership,” Simpson tells him. “See what happened when you took charge of your horse? He was relieved!”

She then tells me, “You need to be more assertive, less worried about how you’ll look. Your desire to be perfect gets in the way of your connecting.” She reminds Annette that she needs to stand her ground with humans as well as horses. “Placating or being aggressive just creates more aggression. Can you disengage from that, be calm yet assertive?”

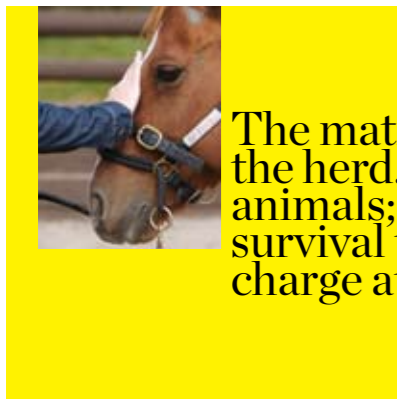
Simpson then asks us, “What are the qualities we need for human join-up?” Lack of honesty and inability to be vulnerable are deal-breakers, we decide. “People are afraid to tell the truth because we’re afraid to be vulnerable,” Simpson says. “Who’s going to dominate whom becomes what we think leadership is. But it doesn’t come close to what true leadership is. We’re looking for good, calm, assertive leadership.”

She reminds us, “You’re not going to be able to save all

people or facilitate them through things, but be aware that you have tools: your energy, your body, your physical sensations. Listen to those and be willing to give them weight.”

Back home, I replay over and over the deliciousness of Allie’s soft breath on my shoulder during join-up. I scheme about opportunities to “speak horse” again. But I also start seeing leadership—mine within my family, on the job, on various committees—in a new way. Every relationship has to pass Koelle Simpson’s Criteria for Human Join-Up. If I don’t get honesty and vulnerability, I can “send” the miscreants from my herd. And through it all, I listen, really listen, to my breath, my body, and will myself to be the calm, serene Matriarchal Mare. And that’s the real Gift of Equus.

Freelance writer and Sky contributor Elizabeth Rapoport eagerly awaits her next invitation for Join-Up with Koelle Simpson from her home in White Plains, New York. In the meantime, she’s developed a passion for oats.



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Now that Allie sees me as a leader, will she want to rejoin my herd? I watch for the four signs of “join-up” in the “language of equus.” Here comes the first sign: As she’s galloping like fury around me in the pen, Allie’s inside ear locks on me. Translation: “I’m giving you attention and respect.” And now the second sign: Allie begins a tighter orbit around me.



Neigh-Sayers

The Gift of Equus (www.giftofequus.com) will conduct Leadership Workshops at the following locations:
THE CROSSINGS Austin, Texas; August 17-19
THE BISHOP’S LODGE RANCH RESORT & SPA Santa Fe, New Mexico; September 8-10
THE RESORT AT PAWS UP Missoula, Montana; October 19-21