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Transmission of Safety and Trauma: direct and vicarious

Dr George Halasz

What is the meaning of ‘transmission’ in the new paradigm of relational trauma ?

I personal story: horse Sonny, the neurosurgeon Allan and me.

My curiosity was running high - what could I possibly learn about doctor-patient communication, stress and trauma management and psychological interventions for traumatised patients from a horse called Sonny.

I was enlightened by Sonny who Dr Allan J Hamilton, author, neurosurgeon and with his wife, Jane, jointly run a very special ranch in Tuscon, Arizona.

Dr Hamilton himself is no slouch - ‘He has been the Chief of Neurosurgery and the Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center. He holds professorships in Neurosurgery, Psychology, Radiation Oncology, and Computer and Electrical Engineering at the University of Arizona. He has been chosen by his peers as “One of America’s Best Doctors” for fourteen consecutive years.’ (see full profile below).

Worth mentioning that Allan is also a world authority on horses and author of several acclaimed books, including *Zen Mind Zen Horse. The science and spirituality of Working with Horses*, MA: Storey, 2011.

So as our small van, half a dozen guests at the Canyon Ranch spa, headed to the ranch in the winter (US) of December 2013, I figured I might learn quite a bit - I was certainly not disappointed.

After introductions, Allan’s wife, Jane, mentioned in passing that her husband’s time is mostly spent on the ranch, and oh yes, he also happens to be a Professor of Neurosurgery. We are all impressed. But there were experiences to follow that left our small group awed and speechless, wondering how to explain what we had just witnessed. The demonstration on ‘intention’ was a lesson in life.

But first, some warm-up exercises, as Allan and his team had us grooming the horses, after careful instruction in horse habits so that our interactions

would be safe: rules included - do not approach the horse head-on as they can not see directly in front of them, given their eyes are on the side of their head, unlike us - logical, really, if one stops to think a moment. Similarly do not approach them from directly behind, as that is another blind-spot, obviously. If you do they may kick you, not good.

Then, to grooming, from top - they close their eyes as you groom their face - to the toes, well, actually the feet or hoofs.

How we need to stand to lift their feet ‘rasping the hoof’, following a sequence, while we ourselves needed to breath. I liked this neurosurgeon, he realised that I tend to forget to breathe when I am stressed - inhale and exhale - with a different sequence for the front and the hind legs.

When I’m stressed, as in my clinical practice with traumatised young people, I tend to attune to their stress. Over the years I had learnt that this reaction could be explained - interpreted - as my extreme form of ‘emaphy’ or over-identification with the patient’s stress. I, like them, forget to breathe.

Some years before when I was learning the art of scuba-diving, the first lesson our instructor focused on, for obvious reasons, was the critical importance to focus on breathing - underwater it is literally a matter of life-and-death.

Here, despite being on dry land, trying to get a 1,000 pound horse to trust you by lifting up one of his legs, and leaning against you to maintain his stability, well, to me it had a sort of ‘life-and-death’ quality about it. What if he leaned over too far, 1000 pound was a lot of weight to have on top of you should we both fall. There I go catastrophizing again. But as time went on, we gained confidence, soon the front and hind hoofs were clean. We all stood proud, Sonny on four legs, me on two.

By then I was getting to know Sonny, so I thought. After all, we had build trust, I had cleaned his front and hind hoofs.

Sonny, Allan writes is: ‘one of my Quarter Horses, is a great character. He exhibits a decided preference for one of two apparently identical hitching posts on the north side of my horse barn. One post faces east with a panoramic view of the nearby Rincon Mountains in Saguaro National Monument East....The hitching post on the other side of the breezeway has a nice view of the statelier Santa Catalina mountain range. If he were ever concerned about foodstuffs, Sonny could feel reassured standing by the western

post because from there he could see the hay barn, stacked tall with bales of Bermuda hay. ...Still, tie up Sonny up on the west side and he gets an uneasy, sullen look in his eyes. East side? He's a happy camper. He has always made his choice of hitching spots clear.' (p.48). Clearly Sonny had a mind of his own. As a psychiatrist I figured I had his measure.

So deepening our meeting, Sonny and I realized, so I thought, that the outcome of our relationship, horse and man, would depend in a large measure on my demeanour, curtesy and politeness towards him.

I therefore approached the tasks, as Allan was instructing us, to get Sonny to 'back-up' that is to go backwards, to turn sideways and to 'stop-and-start' with assured deference, almost confidence, that I was pandering to his character. I got nowhere, he seemed to be, how to say this, he actually ignored my most polite instructions.

Allan came over, and showed me his approach. To my eyes it seemed to be identical to mine - what did I know - yet, instantly, Sonny stood alert and obeyed his every whim.

Allan asked: 'do you know what the difference between our approach is?' 'Nope' - actually, it was more like 'no, sir!'

The word he used was 'intention'.

He explained to me that when he 'spoke' to Sonny, both he and Sonny knew that he 'meant business.' I thought this was typical of a professor - they always meant business, ever since my medical school days. And here I was still in student role.

Allan suggested that I take some deep breaths - there we go again, I like his approach - gather my thoughts, focus my energy and in my mind focus on Sonny with 'intention'. Voila, or hey presto, Sonny got the message.

Sonny now listened, responded and even gave me feedback - biofeedback - to my instructions, I could get him to start and stop, turn left or right, and back-up with a minimum of fuss, but with lots of intentionality.

There were many more exercises, and eventually most of us learnt the lesson that Allan was trying to convey - that our own state of mind, breath and energy can shape the relationship with a 1000 pound animal.

How much more so when it came to our clinical non-verbal practice.

We all needed to pay attention to our non-verbal communications, taking place moment-to-moment between ourselves. Of course my lesson also applied beyond my increased sensitivity to the patient - doctor relationship. But that is another story.

Lessons that I learnt from Allan and Sonny soon found their mark in my trauma therapy - where I gradually learnt the difference between my early training - empathic listening (Ginot, 2009) - and the new dimension of therapy with traumatised patients, the wider inclusive dimension of empathy - dissociative attunement (Hoppenwasser, 2016)

Oh, Sonny and I did get on so well, so I thought, that he agreed for a portrait (see below). I'd like to think that in this photo, his eyes are looking more like he was hitched to the East post - a happy camper.





Allan & Jane Hamilton

The Rancho Bosque Team

The therapy programs run by the Hamiltons and the staff at their ranch in Tucson have been featured on Arizona Highways, ABC News, PBS, and CNN and has written about and featured in Western Horseman, Horse and Rider, and Equus magazines. The Hamiltons have facilitated more than a hundred equine clinics in the United States and abroad. In 2011, they were selected as the keynote speakers for the Eighth Annual Gathering on Equine-Assisted Learning and Equine-Assisted Mental Health Best Practices. The spiritual and scientific principles used in all equine-facilitated programs at Rancho Bosque is the focus of a new documentary film by Emmy and Oscar-nominated film director Wayne Ewing, released in 2013. Learn more about the film by clicking [here](#).

Allan J. Hamilton, MD



After beginning his working life as a janitor, Allan J. Hamilton went on to attend Harvard Medical School and become a brain surgeon. He has been the Chief of Neurosurgery and the Chairman of the Department of Surgery at the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center. He holds professorships in Neurosurgery, Psychology, Radiation Oncology, and Computer and Electrical Engineering at the University of Arizona. He has been chosen by his peers as “One of America’s Best Doctors” for fourteen consecutive years.

His first book, *The Scalpel and the Soul: Encounters with Surgery, the Supernatural, and the Healing Power of Hope* (Tarcher/Penguin 2009) was a best-seller and has been translated into several languages.

His second book on the spiritual connection between humans and horses, *Zen Mind, Zen Horse: The Spiritual Lessons Horses Bring to Life*, (Storey Publishing 2011), won the Nautilus Gold Award in 2012 for works of non-fiction "that change the world one book at a time." Past award winners include Eckhart Tolle, Deepak Chopra, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Dr. Hamilton is a renown horse trainer and has carried out clinics throughout the United States and abroad. He has been featured at national venues and has participated numerous times as a featured presenter and trainer at Equine Affaire. Both he and his wife were recruited to help evaluate and train horses from the National Stud of the Re-

public of Ireland and the Racing Academy and Centre of Education in County Kildare, Ireland. Both of them were invited to address a joint session of both houses of the Irish Parliament on the rehabilitation and rescue of Thoroughbred horses from the racing industry which is supported by the government with tax revenues derived from legalized betting. They have also been advocates for the preservation of wild mustangs in the US and safeguarding of their natural habitats throughout the West. Dr. Hamilton is proud of his mentors who include the late Ray Hunt, Monty Roberts, Pat Parelli, and Clinton Anderson.



Jane F. Hamilton, PhD

Jane F. Hamilton is the Director of Rancho Bosque and is a licensed clinical psychologist, instructor, and psychotherapist. She obtained her PhD in Psychology from Boston College and her Master’s Degree from Harvard University. She has been a practicing psychologist since 1981.

She completed a clinical internship in Psychology at Boston Children’s Hospital.