

A View from the Hoof

Life within the Circle...

By

Kerry Mark Thomas

Equine Ethologist and founder of Thomas Herding Technique

To understand what life is like within the *circle* for the horse, one must first comprehend what the circle is. It is the entire reality of the here and now for an animal that lives within singular moments of time. If this concept is not understood first, your attempt to understand the horse will be fraught with frustration. This comes directly from thinking of the horse in human terms, a mistake no matter how sincere we tend to be. From eating habits to fear of the cold, human are we, but not our horses. Often times I have heard it said to me that *oh it feels cold and damp today, aren't the horses cold, shouldn't they have on their blankets?* Ask the horses on the wild ranges in Wyoming and Montana in the dead of winter what cold is. Cold in human terms is not cold in horse terms in quite the same degree, a clipped horse notwithstanding. This is of course just one example of a common mistake, pouring the human perspective all over another species and not understanding why things don't always work out. What we are doing to, (not for) the horse, is throwing *our* circle of reality around him. Our reason based, forward thinking reality that is as wide ranging as our imaginations will take us. Projecting the future events of our lives and having the ability to understand what can happen because of the things we've done in the past, good and bad, affords us a very large circle. We can dream of the future, and work toward a goal, therefore our circle of reality is limited only by the choices we make. The equine circle is much different, there is no life outside the circle, there are no long term goals and aspirations there is just life within the moment of time that it is passing through. He doesn't sit in his stall and make his plans for the time he or she will spend out in the field, or on the track, though he very well may know he wants out and make a lot of noise so that you know as well. Everything the horse is, and will become, the past, the now, and the future, are all enveloped within the circle of singular moments of time that is the equine reality. The reality of the moment is all there can be, for this is what allows a herd animal to survive. The here and now are all that matters, the horse needs to stay alive within each moment, and be ready to react at all times. Survival is what we might call it.

Associated memories and associated learning that make up the acquired instinct are forced to operate within the circle, woven and blended with the ever present basic instinct. A horse's brand of associated learning is concise and often rapid, without being forgotten very easily. It is a necessity again, of survival, for in nature there may be no second chance, for the second chance might be the horses' demise. The equine is equipped with incredible senses, but

they do not operate outside his circle, because his survival never depended upon it. However the senses do dictate just how far reaching the circle expands. In a field the circle will be as far reaching as the ears can hear, or the eyes can see, or the nose can smell, or as close as the fly on his back. This fluctuates of course, depending on the survival requirements of the moment. The lead mare of the herd will always be more attentive to a broader circle than the playful yearling. Anything entering the circle goes through a barrage of instant scrutiny, assessing any possible threat is the first order of business; this means posturing, expressions and attitude. Your horse has no survival requirement to enter your circle, though he or she may wish to be close to you. Make no mistake, when your horse approaches you, you are the guest, it is you who has entered the circle, and when within it, the human rules of life are circumvented by the horse's set of laws physically and emotionally the horse will seek out signs of danger first, and react accordingly. You have the ability, once you have entered successfully, to expand or constrict the circle, but you had better know that how you enter the circle, no matter from what distance it may be, has a profound effect. Being accepted is all about approach; the positive and negative stimulus, whichever the case may be, that is used to enter. These can form into the ever powerful *triggers* and it is here that they are often unknowingly distributed directly affecting later results that we often say are *unexplainable*. Associated memories are the connected links birthed from segmented links of associated learning, when this marriage is being melted together the stimulus that is present within that moment becomes the trigger. This marriage often happens instantly, making immediate responses from you to the actions or reactions of the horse, so very important. How one enters the circle can have just as much impact on your training of the horse, or handling and is every bit as important as anything you ask him to do later. Once a successful breach of the circle has been made, a true connection is possible. The dynamics of *Light Touch Therapy* lay within this very moment, for *channeling* is enabled by the connection of emotional and physical sensations, making the circle small enough where just you and the horse are within it. The smaller you make the circle, the more effective you can be. An equine at rest is within the most constricted of circles; safety and comfort allows for this. If you have entered the circle in a negative way or with a negative frame of mind, break away from the circle and reenter at a later time, even just a few minutes later can make a difference. The very best way to enter is to take nothing with you that will confuse or make the horse anxious. Remember you are being scrutinized for any signs of danger, this means stress and anxiety which are affecting your communication. Everything you do communicates something to your horse. It is important to understand that just because you are within the circle does not mean that you are the main focus. Trying to teach or socialize when you are not the main concern can cause mixed stimulus to the picture with fogged results in the form of skewed triggers. It is like getting only half the book to read but having to write an essay on all of it.

There are man-made implements to censor the sensory horse. The use of blinders on a horse is a direct and physical way to inhibit one of the senses, serving to limit the breadth of the circle. The concept is simple an affective, and centers the focus of the horse a little more to your liking for a selected period of time. Over use of any sensory inhibition however, can have the

opposite outcome, causing undue stress. Hobbling would be another example. Socializing the horse to his environment, be it foal or mature stallion, can lend itself to the same philosophy. Trying to beat a lesson into your horse through forced repetition does little more than stress out and frighten the horse, and make us grow impatient and exasperated. Physically we can assure a better concentration for a longer period of time because we have inhibited a sensory dynamic, forcing the horse to use another one a little more which is the underlying reason for more stress if over used. To properly socialize and train the horse you have little choice but to do it within his circle of reality, flooding the animal is not as affective for him as is fragmenting your teaching. If you want your horse to *learn*, you must be fully aware of the ways in which he learns, for it will not ever change. The horse learns within *their* circle of reality, and time for him is not as connected as it is for us, it is a pulsating reality much like a heartbeat. Singular moments strung together dictate that his experiences will be better absorbed when presented to him in a similar manner. Do not *assume* your horse doesn't get it the first time, proper communication will let you know if he has or has not. Be wary that too much consecutive repetition can frustrate and confuse your horse. Don't you just hate when someone thinks you don't *get it* and repeats themselves over and over and over again, drives you crazy. Less is often more inside the circle, and you can give little tests to check to see if he has actually *gotten it*. Do not combine steps before a strong foundation is created, if you move too fast, or too slow, the outcome can be equally uncertain. Unlike humans, the horse cares nothing about what you or anyone else is doing outside the circle, he does not plan for the future, have false realities and is not thinking about how things are going for you before you enter his circle. None of these things carries any weight inside the equine reality. The basic purity of mind and reaction, the willingness to accept things as they are presented to them, is an honesty we too often do not recognize. The way in which you communicate yourself to the horse is of monumental importance. Communication within the circle controls movement, stress, anxiety, comfort, it controls life. These things are going on for the horse long before you might think, and it is much easier to correct your body language than it is to check your emotional self. Yet it is the emotions you bring inside that dictate your actions. The many layers of the equine circle of reality swim in the same waters at all times with the underlying sink hole, the basic instinct, ever ready to kick into action. The way in which you communicate your desires to the horse should never be threatening, he or she isn't out to get you, and they do not plot, as we do, to *get even*.

The equine circle can be developed, expanded, or constricted to suite our needs of the moment, but you must check yourself from becoming complacent. The circle allows for concentration and learning, but as we have seen, it does not operate within the same rules of time that we do. There is no watch on the fetlock, your horse may well see 15 minutes the same as he sees 1 minute, or 45 minutes. Teaching your horse does not require a set standard of time, it might well require patience. Fifteen minutes of learning one thing may be great and 1 time through just might be all he needs for another. You need to understand that within his world, within the circle, because each moment is a separate segment of time, it is also a separate segment of understanding, and these pulsing links of associated learning that will be blended into

associated memories, do not necessarily require constant repetitions, though consistency on your part is of great importance. Knowing when one time is enough and when two times will confuse, is a matter of proper communication and concentration. Being a herd animal there is a built in natural desire to make friends, not enemies. Herding within the circle is pure and honest, and whereas they will tangle to maintain and reaffirm the hierarchy, there is no thought out plan of subterfuge in the ways we might think of it. Having a friendly, peaceful relationship within the herd perpetuates safety. Safety is comfort and the horse isn't comfortable when someone or something isn't within his circle in a comforting manner. If two horses are stalled together, they are reliant on one another to maintain the circle, one for the other. If you bring them in from the pasture separate it is likely that before long, if you do not bring in the other or you yourself do not enter the circle, she or he will fuss, whinny and whine until the circle is completed by that comfort of the other. The incomplete puzzle often has a clear signature. Life within the circle was not meant to be a lonely endeavor. Loneliness can be very stressful and cause much anxiety, leading the way to many bad vices and issues, even a lashing out in frustration when a companion is offered. If your horse must be alone, blocks of time should be filled in various ways; grooming, exercising, and presenting challenging obstacles are all helpful. Yet nothing makes the horse feel better or more comforted, than a trusting best friend to hang out with. You need to enter the circle in this manner, become that trusted best friend, using proper communication parameters, if you truly wish to connect and teach your horse, or perhaps, if you wish to discover what the triggers are that cause certain reactions, and how deeply they run.

The concept of the *circle* of reality should be quite easy to accept, for in our desire to train our horses or *break them*, a term I despise, the round-pen has been used with great success. The idea is a basic and simple one, changing the physical environment into a smaller circle, to assist with our goal attainment and help center the concentration of the horse onto us so we can *connect*. Can it not be so then, that with proper communication while within the equine circle, we can also change the inward environment to a more suitable, stress free reality? Of course it can be, and should be. There is no true prerequisite for a physical round pen other than the obvious needs, for the horse himself lives within his own circle of life. It can be entered, and when entered properly, with non-threatening devices, the human can swim within the equine circle of life, and be seen, accepted, and sought, as a being of comfort and safety, worthy of being followed. As a view from the hoof, life within the circle is not magic, but the experiences within, can be magical.