

# A View from the Hoof

## The Enigma of the Equine Puzzle

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Picture all the different parts of life as if you were looking at a puzzle. Along the way some pieces may change or be taken away only to have the space re-fitted by another better fitting piece that expands the puzzle as you grow and learn. Imagine forming this puzzle through a natural sequence, a pre-programmed instinctive expectation based life that allows for you to adapt quickly, re-fitting the pieces that shape the lifestyle you need to have in order for you and your band to survive. Imagine then, what it might be like, to have these instinctive pieces forced to fit and form from out of an environment that is far from your *natural* understanding. Your adaptability works well for you here, however some of the new puzzle pieces you are presented with do not snugly fit into a natural program. So you remove them for something else that fits a little better, a little closer to what feels natural, or instead, because they make you feel so uneasy when in place, you remove them completely and replace them with other skewed pieces that keep changing. Stress and behavior management of the self can only be born from out of the environment from which they are drawn. You grow uneasy about your life and the routines expected of you, you hold and manage your stress as best you can. You are now the horse in a domesticated, or rather, an artificial, human based environment.

Everything that exists is a part of an intricate, often unrecognized part of another, a networking of causes and effects that is the essence of life. The myriad pieces blending together to form a puzzle, *the puzzle of life*; we are both a part of a larger puzzle, and living within our own puzzle, the pieces of which we choose to fit, or form to fit, into what makes our individual puzzles complete. All the while, each living thing, operating within their puzzle, is a link in the chain of the bigger puzzle of life. The things we do within our personal sized puzzle, or *circle*, can have an effect on how we ultimately fit into and influence the other links we are a part of. Opening the door for a stranger, a friendly hello, a positive attitude, and of course, the opposite of these, are all projected from within, and effect without. We humans, as the highest cognizant beings on the planet that we know of, have free will of mind and our puzzles are not so much chosen for us as they are molded by us. The puzzle of life is capricious and always a mystery and how it fits into a larger society of blended individuals is often times fascinating. If society has a problem, the individual parts operating within, that make up that society, has to be looked at. So it is, with the horse.

Horses too, being a herd animal, live within a kind of society, with rules and hierarchies serving to keep order and ultimately survival of the species. The make-up of that society is of course the individual horse, which has his or her own little puzzle (circle of life), within the bigger picture. The pieces of the puzzle for the horse come from two areas only, the *basic instinct dynamic*, and the *acquired instinct dynamic*. These two parts of the equine are blended together in such a way that has allowed the horse to live and evolve for many, many years. In nature the laws of evolution dictate that a basic instinct animal without a developed or developing acquired instinct is a food source that is apt to being replaced over time, whereas a species with a developing acquired instinct is indeed moving within the game of survival, evolving forward. As this happens the puzzle is becoming more and more complex. The two fundamental parts of the equine puzzle of life are then broken down into individual subsets. The basic instinct has two governing bodies; the sensory and voice parameters. The basics are obvious; survival, procreation, drinking and eating, sleeping and all of the automatic life giving dynamics that makes a horse a horse. The sensory horse then being in control of the influx of information and the translation of it; breeding behaviors, the fly on the back, the taste of good food or bad food and so on and so forth. Voice is also a basic key; the importance of communication in a society is paramount to its success. The transfer of information allows for a society to function in an ever changing world. Just ask the march of the ants on a jungle floor, or the swarming of bees how important communication is to any society of life. It can be smell, touch, posture, or sound. The equine body language is accentuated often by sound and this resonance is the voice, working in conjunction with the body language. To belittle the importance of this voice is to ignore the accent by which much information is imparted. Think about your own world, the tone of a voice can often say more than the words spoken, just as a certain look or stance can do the same. Tone of environmental stimuli affects the equine *tendencies* which are evident within the characteristics of the IHP, and these tendencies are present within the expressions of the horse. Just like children learning the different tones of mom or dad's voice and what they are *actually* saying with the words that are chosen. Pretending that the voice does not exist, and working with only the body language of the horse, means you are missing the corner of that piece of the puzzle that allows it to fit in its place. If we tried to live in a world with no accents on the things we say, the literal would indeed, literally drive us mad. It would be like art without imagination, unthinkable. The magical key that successfully blends the basic and the acquired instincts together lay directly within the accentuated voice. It is the first sign of your horses' IHP, and who will deny that the horse has what is analogous to personality? This is what has allowed the horse to move away from being solely a prey species subject to extinction. Nature requires there to be prey species with enough ability to maintain itself like the planting of a food source in the garden of life. Smart enough to create a *herd*, or *society* that will ensure continued survival and who will not become so easy a food source the predators become fat and they disease themselves into extinction. The prey animal is the driving force behind the forward motion of evolution. A higher functioning prey animal requires the push forward for higher functioning predators. This evolutionary push from below is like a volcano, developing

ever more sophisticated species and is the true and natural essence of life working together to sustain itself. All of this is a part of a very large puzzle of life, and for any puzzle to maintain itself there has to be room for movement within. That movement within a horse herd is the IHP.

The acquired instinct dynamic has itself subsets of the whole that also break down into pieces. The more pieces there are, the more complex the puzzle. The more complex the puzzle the more brilliant are the pieces, the more brilliant the pieces, the more capricious they are. The *acquired instinct, AI*, is governed by only one dynamic and that is the environment. The environment itself is manifested from several components. The environment is the world in which the horse lives in, its experiences within that world become the many triggers that allow for associated learning and control the associated memories. No greater example of the working relationship between the two parts is the learned control of the most basic defense mechanism, the flight response. If the horse could not *learn* it would not have survived. But learning has to come in two parts so that a distinction between life threatening circumstances and harmless events can be made. Out of this necessity comes the associated learning and memory balance that is controlled by the difference maker, the *trigger*. The triggers allow the horse to recognize the difference between what it should fear and what it should not waste the energy on. Within this parameter of the equine enigma do most of the pieces of the puzzle go off-center. The associated memories of the horse have much to do with his take on the world, and have everything to do with how he or she approaches new things within that world.

When a horse is *learning* something from his environment the animal goes through a series of processes that happen almost immediately, an association of events unfolds. The trigger is the mechanism from which a new experience is introduced, and it can be anything great or small. Once this new piece of information is introduced it becomes associated with the trigger as something basically learned, once that is completed it has become an associated memory. The association being within the connection to the trigger that preceded the stimulus; there is a very small window of opportunity here where the true essence of being *taught* something lay. As the information is translated from something learned to something memorized by its association with the trigger, positive and or negative stimulus connected with it acts in essence like an amendment to a bill; the horse can be taught *good* or *bad* behavior. Herein lay the reason for any handler or trainer to act immediately. Even people or happenings that seem to have nothing to do with the horse, have an effect on the horse. Anything within the circle has its effect, large or small. For the horse, moments of time are the smallest of the puzzle pieces, and these then fit together and form bigger pieces. It is often these underlying and governing small pieces where stress and behavior find their start. Understanding a problem requires an understanding of how associated memories are formed. To understand their formation requires an understanding of the mechanisms that create the format for learning and memory. The issues we so often try to treat are little more than the expression of the underlying problem. These *expressions* we see may or may not have much to do with the actual issue. This is because forms of expression are often dictated by the IHP of the horse, and what we see as expressed can be nothing more serious than

an IHP tendency, or *trait*. The key to unlocking all of this lay within recognizing the triggers that dictate certain behaviors or stress levels. The *trigger* is the smoking gun, for it has control over the individual pieces and how they fit into the puzzle.

In a natural venue, the equine puzzle of life is left to form by way of normal environmental settings. The herd animal finds his place, and there is no need to supplement any portion of the puzzle for the horse quickly recognizes life as he was born to live it. It is when we as people change this environment, that pieces of the puzzle can get exaggerated into parts that are too distorted for the horse to comprehend. When this happens, and the puzzle doesn't exactly fit like the individual, society seeking horse likes, he will himself *supplement* that which he or she feels is missing. (A troublesome prospect for a non-reasoning species) This is an area that we as people too often fail to deem as important. We may spend freely on physical health care and nutrition, hoof care and grooming and all the pretty things that say we love them. Much of the time the adaptable horse has enough and doesn't show any expressions that would indicate a missing part. Though when he does express himself, and the physical horse is not the cause, that stress or behavior we see but do not like, are the effects caused by the equines own attempt at supplementing that which he is missing. These often inhibit the true potential of the horse, so we try in vain to *fix it* by supplementing gadgets and gimmicks and even force of will; when indeed it is a reverse look through the equation that offers the clearest picture. Not all issues of stress are obviously stated by the horse; it is the hidden stress the horse tries to handle that is the most dangerous. For we often do not know it even exists unless a true understanding of the IHP is assessed. Expression of stress is as subject to the equine tendency as is everything else.

Because of the fascinating ability of the horse to adapt to his environment, there is always time to override the associated memory so long as the trigger stimulus has not been too disturbing. If the basic building blocks of the IHP and AI lay within the environment, it is within the environment where keys of change can be discovered; all hope of finding and fixing the skewed puzzle pieces live within this dynamic. Knowing and understanding how a horse actually learns demands the recognition that all associated memories are built upon a foundation. The ability of this foundation to be changed in its underlying format is what we see as *adaptability*. If the horse is adaptable, he must have the ability to override associated memories by new ones overlapping the old via the introduction of new triggers and stimulus. Being able to adapt and therefore survive as a species shows us that even as the horse grows, he or she can be socialized to new environs. Socialization is being adapted to new environments, a task at which the horse is master. How this is done is through the equine's ability to assimilate. If we continue backward through the mysteries of the equine puzzle, we find the foundation of environmental growth to be *assimilated imprinting*.

Imprinting is, without any doubt, the purest and most acceptable form of learning. Immediate imprinting of the foal is different only because as a foal he or she has yet to be influenced by a barrage of associated memories and trigger stimuli. As these memories gain in number and influence with age and experience, the untainted form of imprinting can no longer

operate alone, but it can work in the form of assimilated imprinting. Assimilated imprinting is the integration of new triggers to old associated memories. It is the foundation for adaptability which translates into survival. A prey animal will retain a very strong basic instinct dynamic as well as keep a close hold on the associated memories that have contributed, from his point of view, to his survival. Overriding these is possible because of the generally friendly, gregarious and curious nature of the horse. This is the parameter of the basic instinct that allows for the working of the acquired instinct. Projecting forward by a reversal of the equation is like sifting through the layers of a cake. Associated learning, (a dynamic that is not a function of the trigger to the associated memory link), is the key to imprinting the older horse to become assimilated to a new environment; making assimilated imprinting the means to problem solving. You must build a new foundation for the horse, or as much of one as you can, through small steps. It is within the basics of the environment that can be found the building blocks of all the pieces of the equine puzzle. In nature the horse assimilates to the environment created by the other horses within the herd, (if you are the *herd leader* of your horse, your approach and attitude can also be mimicked) therefore assimilated imprinting is influenced by the other horses and their take on the environment. Of equal importance is the horse's individualism, the principle dynamic that allows for a hierarchy to develop. The understanding of these two cohesive parts of the equine puzzle allows for the imprinting of the older horse through assimilation. The *emotional* well being of the horse has a great influence over the ability and willingness of that horse to be in essence, re-socialized to an environment that is different to one in which they have heretofore survived in.

Within the IHP lay the emotions of the horse, and within that can be found the traits of the sire and dam blended with the tendencies of their offspring. It is the supplementation of the emotional triggers, (triggers that evoke certain feelings, like fear), that have a great deal of control over the seasoned equines ability or desire to assimilate. Emotion feeds off of emotion in many ways, making the emotions you are feeling when you come within the circle of the horse so very powerful. The range of emotions differ little in the basic form from horse to human; fear and elation, comfort and happiness, discomfort and anxiety, stress. These are all parts of the equine puzzle, and they have great influence over the assimilation process of the horse and their physical, as well as emotional health.

The very best way to, and time to introduce new stimuli is in small amounts that are followed by times of rest. If you think of the *restless eye movement*, or, REM sleep of your horse, it is obvious he is dreaming. A resting horse's brain works like the resting human brain; no body stress or movement, no real stimulus from the environment, the hearing portion of the brain being the only major sense that isn't turned off for rest because of survival. Dream training is highly effectual. A dreaming horse collates and filters new information, learning and saving experiences into memories. Therefore, one would have much greater impact by working with the horse in short consistent periods followed by periods of rest and relaxation. If you are working a horse hard and he is in an environment that doesn't allow him time to be a horse, to rest, you will

do double work for half results. The equine schedule and your training schedule are far removed from one another. The horse learns in the herd environment in this, his natural way, and he has survived a very long time because of it. Spending all day going in and out of the circle at intervals and introducing old and new training stimuli is the most natural herding technique there is. Too many simply *want* a horse, without trying to understand what makes a horse a companion, not a pet. When you accept the responsibility of taking an animal out of his natural environment, you are accepting the responsibility of creating a suitable fabrication of that environment. The horse being in large part a friendly and adaptable creature, desiring comfort over stress, paves the way for misunderstanding of the view from the hoof. These equine traits are easy to take advantage of and when *stress* or *behavior* issues arise, we too often fail to see life from the other side. The horse is an animal deserving of so much more on our part. The equine is a complex and fascinating animal overflowing with intricate and interlocking parts that are the pieces of the enigmatic equine puzzle. If you care to look deep enough, you may find your own, missing pieces.