

CAN HORSES SPEAK?

This is a controversial and difficult subject to approach as you will find yourself in one of two opposing sides, either you believe that horses can and do speak to each other and humans or you believe that they simply communicate with pre-programmed responses to visual cues developed and enhanced through evolution.

To tackle the second of the two points of view, that horses have evolved an efficient visual communication system honed to a subtleness that is almost invisible to us then I must definitely agree that this is the case. Being large animals they are very spatially aware and communicate very effectively with visual signals through body posture, positioning of the ears, eyes, nose, tail and mouth. The whole array of signals is astounding and their varying combinations can allow the horse to express a full range of feelings and emotions to their companions with astonishing subtleness. However, this communication is strictly visual (there may also be other senses included such as smell and hearing) and in no way supports the possibilities of telepathy etc. The renowned author Michael Schafer has gone into great details and study of this language and his ground breaking book "The Language of the Horse" shows just how effective this postural and visual language is with its complex rules of etiquette and ritual. To give you some idea of just how subtle this posturing is look at the picture below

Horse A on the left is more dominant than horse B on the right to underline this fact horse A has deliberately moved into horse B's personal space. A has inclined his head slightly towards B and is pushing with his body and eye contact against B (indicated by red arrow). This has caused B to move away from him with a submissive lowering of the head, licking and chewing and neutral ears. This has avoided any unpleasantness and the social order has been confirmed. To many people watching they simply would have seen two horses walking around a field and completely missed the quick and rapid exchange of visual cues. This complex language is not totally inherent and many of the subtleties involved do have to be learned over a period of time (as can be seen by the lack of understanding of equine language demonstrated by some orphaned or hand reared foals). This does not mean that horses are holding conversations with each other and discussing the merits of the latest fashion in turnout rugs! This simply shows that horses can and do respond very effectively to visual cues and respond accordingly in order to maintain harmony in the herd and thus an easy life.

This ability to respond to visual cues can also be used when dealing with other animals such as humans. We too have a very subtle body language of which we are for the most part totally unaware but which the horse can pick up on with ease. The most prominent case of this was the renowned horse "Clever Hans" who appeared to be able to count and carry out a range of mathematical equations by tapping out the correct numeric answer with his front leg. They even hid the handler from view in an attempt to avoid any unconscious cues given by him and Hans still appeared to get it right. What Hans was doing however was watching the body language of his handler or those around him and as he neared the correct answer the slight tension and excitement of the crowd told him when to stop. This was only discovered when Hans was separated completely from the audience and could not "read" any body language then he simply continued to tap until he was told to stop. Does this not prove then that horses can only communicate through body language and can only respond to pre-programmed cues which relate to their instincts. I would have to agree that for the most part most horses are not required to have an understanding of mathematics as it has no relation whatsoever to their survival, however, with regards to the fact that horses cannot speak, well there is another side to this story.

During the late sixties and early seventies a gentleman called Henry Blake set out to prove, as scientifically as possible his belief that horses were capable of empathy or simple telepathy and could communicate with their fellows a range of concepts and abstract ideas. His earth shattering book "Talking with Horses" sent scientists into a frenzy as they replicated his experiments with very surprising outcomes. Henry Blake discovered that horses tended to form what he called "empathic bonds" this could be with one or more horses but they always seemed to be very close to one or at the most two others.

We have all experienced this bond with our own horses who seem to team up and buddy around with specific individuals (sometimes not the sort of individual we approve of!). What made Henry's

experiments so exciting was that he found that horses in an empathic pair could “talk” to each other and express abstract concepts to their partners. One of his experiments was to separate one of the pair bond and remove the horse to a distance of about ½ – 1 mile away from his partner. There was absolutely no way that the horses could see or hear each other. At a specified time the stabled partner was “excited” usually by the expectation of feed and the resulting response of the removed partner was noted. Almost 90% of the time the horse removed from the experiment would become excited as though they too were expecting to be fed, this excitement continued until the stabled partner had been fed and his excitement subsided, at this point the removed partner returned to grazing. It became obvious to Henry that there was some form of communication other than the obvious visual cues going on and subsequent experiments carried out both by himself and other scientists have confirmed that in many cases there is a form of empathy (the communication of feelings) between very close partners.

Yes, it could be argued that perhaps the horses could “hear” the excitement caused by the other horse although not all of the horses being fed were vocal. Perhaps the removed horse was reading the body language of the observer or handler present, but the handler was not told when the stabled horse was being fed, they were simply asked to record the time and duration of any unusual behaviour shown by the horse.

Again, this does not imply that horses are capable of abstract ideas or concepts, but what it does prove is that we cannot ignore the possibilities that just maybe our horses are able to communicate on a much higher level than we have previously thought. Remember, the equine species has been around far longer than we humans and so on an evolutionary scale they have had a several million year head start on developing their senses. What many of you will already feel is that your horse can and does show levels of intelligence that often make you take a step back and look at them incredulously and there is that fleeting moment when you truly feel that they are quietly laughing at you and your stupidity.

What are my thoughts on the matter? Well to be honest I am a scientist at heart and always crave evidence or proof that things exist. I have learned however that in nature not all things are clearly explained or can be categorised and labelled and not all things are straightforward. You cannot work with or own horses for any length of time without knowing that special bond, that feeling of mutual respect and trust that cannot be explained by simple body language or pre-programmed responses. I have personally experienced emotions and feelings that go beyond explanation, have witnessed things that cannot be scientifically proven, have met horses who are spiritually far more developed than most humans and this is the way it should be. There must be mystery in this world for us to discover as individuals as and when we are ready, not all things should be explained by science and those of us who have chosen to be with horses have the opportunity to begin a journey of revelation.