

Working with Horses on the Ground: Case Studies

Eva J Usadi* and Rev Sean A Levine

Trauma and Resiliency Resources Inc., New York, USA

*Corresponding author: Eva J Usadi, Founder and Executive Director of Trauma and Resiliency Resources, New York, USA, Tel: +(855)8774968; E-mail: eva@trrhelp.org

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Opinion

During our 7th Warrior Camp® program, we were in the arena with 3 horses and 7 military veterans. This was day 4 and they had each been in the arena for 3 hours every day already, in different groups, and in private sessions. They had not fully come together as a whole and were struggling to complete tasks, working individually or in units of two or three. We decided to give them a task with the direction to work as a whole group. We asked them to move the horses from one end of the arena to the other, first in any way they wanted, and then with increasing difficulty: moving all horses without touching them or talking to them, then, in the final attempt, without talking to each other. As the horses were at liberty-un-haltered and free to move about as they wanted, this took some time, as one can imagine. It also required nonverbal communication, and teamwork.

By working more collaboratively and without speaking, they were able to do this. Upon completing the activity the warriors were quite pleased with themselves and began to playfully kick a large Pilates ball back and forth. The horses were, at first, curious, but, as the game got more animated and finally very loud the horses startled and all of them ran to one end of the arena. One of the warriors said he didn't like this, that, "we're scaring them, we're bullying them, this is what happens to us all the time and it's not right, and I'm not doing it." Two others agreed with him and we gathered the group for discussion. What a perfect moment to talk about Moral Injury-in real time. We suggested that while it is very true that we, as humans, are capable of inflicting great and sometimes fatal injuries on one another, and on other living beings, we rarely have the opportunity to repair what we have done. This is what causes the lasting damage to our psyches that for many results in suicidal despair. In the arena, having just demonstrated cruelty to innocent animals, albeit unintentionally, the warriors were invited, as a group, to find a way to heal the horses that had been healing them all week. They were encouraged to do this in silence. What they did will be discussed later.

A horse we worked with during one Warrior Camp® program was a loner. He could be in the arena with 3 or 4 other horses and a group of people yet would wander off by himself. During one session this little white pony walked up to a spiritually/morally wounded warrior who was standing apart from others, alone, in an arena full of people and horses. The pony engaged in what the warrior described as "a two minute stare down." He said that when he looked into that horse's eyes he felt the horse looked into his soul, saw the evil there, and accepted him in all of his despair. He felt the horse's message to be, "You do not have to carry this alone. I am with you." We saw what happened, so we offered this warrior a private session the next day with just us and that pony. When we asked him if there was anything he would like to do he said, "Just be with him." So off they went, walking around the entire perimeter of the arena. The warrior came back to within about 4 feet of us to check in. The pony continued walking about 15 feet away,

stopped, turned it's head, looked directly at the warrior, and walked back to him. They walked off again and did a perimeter walk. This happened 4 times. Later, the warrior told us that it was in that session that he decided he had a reason to live. He was curious again. A live being had approached him, stayed with him, came back for him repeatedly and seemingly on purpose. He and the pony worked together every day that week. After the program's conclusion the warrior told us he had come to us having left a loaded gun and a bottle of Jack Daniels on his coffee table and with every intention to take his life when yet another program failed him. He is still with us.

In the words of another Warrior Camp® participant:

I worked exclusively, in my individual sessions, with Gruffy, an immense Clydesdale. I did not know his name during our sessions, so I referred to him as 'The Big Guy.' One day, I arrived at the arena before him, while the horses were being switched out. I thought to myself, "Well, the Big Guy is always here to greet me when I enter the arena; it would be rude not to do the same." So I decided to wait near the entrance. As I stood there, another thought crossed my mind: what would happen if I were to walk all the way across the arena to the opposite side? As I finished that thought, a sense of sheer terror and dread washed over me and my heart sank. "What if he totally ignores me? I'm not sure I could handle that sort of rejection right now. And I would look so stupid if I was just standing there and nothing happened." My ego jumped and shuddered at the thought of standing there waiting without effect. Then I made a decision, and it was a very conscious decision: I decided to follow the program. Try something new. I put my trust in the Big Guy, and I decided that if he did not cross the arena to be with me, he would have a good reason, and I would humble myself and go find him. The arena is not about me, I decided; it is not about my ego being stroked and affirmed, but rather the arena is for work. I suddenly wanted Gruffy to approach me in his own time and in his own way.

I walked the two hundred feet to the other side of the arena and faced away from the entrance door, wondering what all of this would be like. A few minutes later I heard the arena door open and Gruffy entering. He is a quiet horse, so I only knew he was there because of the sound of his hooves on the dirt. Gruffy lingered near the entrance of the arena with the team for a while, and I had to practice letting go, waiting, and being patient. I held in my conscious mind my desire for Gruffy to come to me, but I released any fear or compulsion. He had to do it because he wanted to, not because I "needed" it. After about five minutes I heard the slow, heavy sound of Gruffy's hooves on the ground as he walked the length of the arena, and I did not turn around. He stood behind me, not pushing or making any sounds. I turned to him, and realized he was right upon me, very much in my space but not invasively so. When I made eye contact with him, rather than fear and dread, I was afloat in a sea of unconditional positive regard. To know that "The Big Guy" would walk all that way just to be with me

and that he would do so willingly brought me to tears. I serve others all the time, and constantly. When deployed, my life belongs to everyone at any hour, but Gruffy was there for me and only me. He let me know that I am worthy of dedicated therapeutic attention. The power of that moment and its impact on me emotionally continues to resonate to this day.

Getting back to the group session we discussed at the beginning of this section, we had given the group the task of healing some horses who had become frightened by a large bouncing Pilates ball. The horses had run to one end of the arena and were standing near the exit gate. The warriors approached them quietly and slowly, several with each horse, speaking to them softly, and gently petting them. This went on for a few minutes with warriors and horses readjusting to being in each others' space. We then suggested that the warriors build or designate a safe place in the arena, and invite the horses to join them in it. Without speaking they moved into a semi-circle around the horses, who were still at the fence, and joined hands. They stood in silence for a few moments some with their eyes closed. We approached and offered to teach a loving kindness meditation, which they accepted. "May you be safe, may you be healthy, may you be happy, may you live with ease." We repeated this a few times to the horses and to each other, finally saying the meditation to ourselves, "May I be safe, may I be healthy, may I be happy, may I live with ease." We then said that, since life often requires movement from safety to un-safety (life happens), they, as a group, should create a place of un-safety in the arena using any of the objects they had available (orange cones, balls, styrofoam noodles, a few metal trash bins, a plastic mounting block, jump poles, and some other items) and let us know what those objects signify for them. They all walked to where the props were, to explore their options. The horses went with them. The warriors turned two metal trash bins on their sides. They then all sat on them squished pretty closely together. And smiled at us. This had been done in silence. When we asked, what was going on and how this represented un-safety one warrior explained that they don't feel comfortable so close to each other-or to anyone for that matter-and that touching shoulders and legs was way out of most of their comfort zones. They sat there for a while sharing what this was like. We then invited them to move back into their place of safety and the horses again followed them.

The question in all of this work is always who or what do the horses represent? For example, in the early part of the session described above the warriors identified with the horses when they had scared them as, "us, when we are being bullied and abused." They also identified them as, "the part of us that is able to be healed." When the horses followed them into the place of un-safety, and stayed apart and a few feet away, the horses were, "our outliers, our guys on point, our safety net, and our perimeter watch." When the horses again followed them into their place of safety-they were identified as "the part of us that knows how to trust, knows it's okay to trust."

Although programs using horses for war veterans proliferate, few programs have carefully thought through the impact of placing warriors on horseback. While riding might be appropriate for warriors with PTSD, for those who also suffer with Moral Injury we believe

riding to be contraindicated. At Trauma and Resiliency Resources, Inc.'s Warrior Camp® program our warriors do not ride our horses. Instead, warriors work with an equine psychotherapy team in accordance with the EAGALA-model of Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. This model best suits returning warriors who suffer from war trauma because it allows for a more robust use of the horse's capacity for nonjudgmental intuitive mirroring. In particular, a horse's ability to intuitively target post-war attachment disruptions caused by morally injurious combat experiences is best employed when the veterans keep their feet on the ground and in eye contact with the horse.

When warriors return from deployment, they return in a heightened state of the "fight" side of the "fight/flight" sympathetic nervous system response. Long deployments in dangerous areas overstimulate this part of the warrior's nervous system, and leaving the battlefield does not automatically reduce the activation of this part of the neuropsychological functioning of the war veteran. Specific psychotherapeutic work is necessary to move the warrior from "fight" mode to a calmer internal state. Before this work is done, the internal nervous system disruption often continues, even if no overt symptoms show. A veteran can appear relatively calm while they are actually in a dissociated state, with a simultaneously highly activated nervous system. This can be misunderstood as adequate coping. Often, warriors pursue treatment in this condition.

In our work with war veterans we see that many have been touched to their core by Moral Injury. Not only do they experience the neuropsychological dysregulation so characteristic of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, they also struggle with an existential and/or spiritual crisis stemming from the ethically and morally questionable things they have done or seen in combat. Wounded at the deep level of moral conscience, these veterans are that much more sensitive to the dynamics of living in a predatory state of being. The nervous system stands ready to fight to the death in order to survive while the soul, the moral center, wishes never to be in a predatory state again. The inner dissonance of this experience drives many war veterans to suicide.

This represents, in our estimation, precisely the wrong state of being for horseback riding, and we contend that warriors riding in this condition is profoundly harmful. Rather than allowing them to interact with another sentient being on their own terms, we have placed a morally wounded war veteran, struggling with memories of predatory actions in war, in the position of predatory dominance of a prey animal. We have re-evoked the experience of being a predator in control of a victim. Which is precisely the wrong relationship to create for a warrior who needs to re-establish the capacity to embrace community, and live in harmony with the civilian population at home.

At TRR's Warrior Camp® program we do not place warriors on our horses. Instead, we enlist the horses' efforts in collaboration with a psychotherapeutic process that allows them to respond to the deepest emotions and intentions of the warriors, expressed through the horses' own behavior. The human members of the EAP team are then able to help the warrior reflect on the horse as metaphor.