

Magic and Mystery in Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy

By Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC

According to the web dictionary Wikipedia, "*Manifesting* is a term often used in metaphysics to refer to the belief that one can by force of will, desire, and focused energy, make something come true on the physical level."¹ Today many people recognize that we can influence our reality by what we pay attention to; this is the magic of manifestation. Our attention seems to activate The Law of Attraction, which Wikipedia defines as "... the metaphysical "principle of life"...you get what you think about; your thoughts determine your destiny."² This is the mystery of manifestation.

Horses are able to teach people a lot about the mechanics of manifestation and attraction. In Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP), the focus is not on perfect horsemanship, but on helping a client to discover and develop congruence of body, mind and spirit, a state that is greatly helpful in creating positive manifestation cycles in all kinds of situations. I think of a small client I'll call "Missy", a diminutive 7-year-old red head, who just last week had her first session in a therapeutic riding program where she has been referred for emotional problems. Missy's partner in this lesson was Leah, a very kind (and strong) Norwegian Fjord mare, and Missy was leading her on a lead line, her first time ever leading a horse.

In her first attempt to halt Leah, Missy stopped and said faintly "Whoa...?" – but Leah just kept walking! Missy's feet started moving again as she got pulled off balance. "Breathe out, bend your knees – and pull! Yes, that's it, she'll stop!" I said to Missy. The furrows made in the arena dirt as Missy dug her heels in were only about 8 inches long by the time Leah stopped and looked at Missy as if to say, "Oh, did you want something?"

The next halt went a little better, no furrows at all and better timing (therefore less pressure) with the pull on the rope. Here is the magic: soon, a proud straight little girl with a confident voice will bend her knees first, glancing at Leah to make sure she noticed, and both will stop together, with no voice command and no pull on the rope. And here is the mystery: as she learns this, she will also start talking about her feelings, and she will begin to heal. Those who know her will be able to see The Law of Attraction in action. The fearful and angry child that Missy has been is attracting more wounding experiences (like being labeled emotionally disturbed, for instance); now the healing child who begins to voice her feelings will begin to attract the sympathy and support of others who can help.

With some clients in EFP, we use a "horse whispering" model that encourages free play (within a safely controlled environment) between a loose horse and a person. Anyone who has watched a talented "horse-whisperer" in action recognizes that the magic they demonstrate is not supernatural at all, but the careful application of specific principles designed to work with, and never against, what the horse is offering. Horse whisperers tame frightened or unruly horses, and effect change in long-standing behaviors such as aggression or refusal to do a particular thing, like loading in a trailer.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifesting>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Law_of_Attraction

These results are evident in a very short period of time, with a minimum of effort on the human's part and a maximum of respect toward the horse. The secret of horse whispering lies not in outer method, but in the horseperson's inner awareness of the energetic cycles of manifestation and attraction.

Horse whispering *works* like magic, the *effects* are magical, yet the process itself is almost scientific – a carefully applied set of energetic principles, combined with the discernment to understand which principle wants to take priority in a given moment. In EFP we help clients discover and explore these principles, and practice the moment by moment discernment to effectively apply them. Even horse beginners experience "horse whispering" success when they are privy to the energetic principles affecting the horse-human interaction. The ultimate goal of horse whispering is to activate the "join up" response in the horse, an especially concrete example of The Law of Attraction.

Inevitably, clients generalize the principles very quickly to their human environments. Recently, a young college student I'll call "Susie" began EFP. Susie, now 22, has experienced anxiety and depression since the age of 13. Traditional office therapy and medication have not been very helpful, and currently the emotional patterns were threatening to undermine her relationship with her fiancé. Having some horse experience as a youth, Susie felt that the equine context for treatment held some promise for her.

In Susie's first session we focused on the principle of emotional awareness, and Susie met all five horses in the HEAL herd. With her new awareness, she noticed that each horse she interacted with aroused different feelings in her, and that in some meetings she picked up emotional affect that actually belonged to the horse. She spent the most time with the Arabian gelding Ameer in an unstructured "reflective session". Ameer was clearly attracted to Susie, even though she didn't feel attractive – she felt vulnerable and very weighed down by her long struggle with her "symptoms".

Ameer didn't try to interact; he simply chose to graze in the grassy paddock right by Susie's feet, following her wherever she moved while also doing his own thing (consuming as much grass as possible). Susie's own comfort level told her that this was what she really wanted from other people, and especially from her fiancé. She articulated this as the ability for each person to stay in their own psychic space, being responsive without trying to deny or fix the feelings of the other person. In her second session, we explored in more depth the concept of invisible boundaries. When she arrived for her third session, Susie excitedly told me of the success she was experiencing in her relationship, and of her fiancé's very positive response to her as she practiced the principles of boundary clarification in their relationship.

Harnessing our capacity to manifest positive outcomes for ourselves is (for each of us) simple in some situations, and very challenging in others. Thus, most of us have a rather uneven experience with manifestation, to say the least. We may feel effective at manifesting good (or at least influencing for the better) our life circumstances in some domains, but find in others that we get stuck in repetitive, largely unconscious manifestation "cycles" that are less than optimum, or even downright frustrating!

In EFP, people can examine in detail how energetic patterns either help or hinder manifestation potential, and the horses are reliable guides in helping people discern the

difference. As one client participating in EFP said, "The horses taught me to become more conscious. I'm able to focus my intentions congruently now, although that's not always easy. But then it seems like my goals begin to manifest with relative ease." She paused for a minute, and then giggled. "In fact, that's when it seems that others are 'joining up' to help me get just what I want!"

About the Author:

Leigh Shambo, MSW, LMHC, a licensed therapist and educator, began her career as a horse trainer. Leigh is widely recognized for her articulation of the horse-human bond and its application in therapeutic and learning programs for a variety of ages and diagnostic groups. She is the founder and lead therapist for Human-Equine Alliances for Learning (HEAL), a non-profit charitable organization that supports equine assisted services and programs. Leigh is regularly invited to teach and to speak throughout the US, Canada and Europe.

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