



Reiki, Horses and Autistic Children

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, based on the information that I had read in Dr. Temple Grandin's books *Thinking in Pictures* and *Animals in Translation*¹ about the ability people on the autism spectrum have to better understand how animals think, I came to understand that because a horse's brain and an autistic person's brain are very similar, horses can "reach" people who are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) better than humans can. Based on this newly emerging concept, I decided to offer riding lessons to people with autism. As a result, we have experienced tremendous success over the last four and a half years, as our autism students seem to teach us and bring joy, understanding and learning to us all—volunteers, instructors, horses and other students.

I am an animal scientist so Dr. Grandin's work gave me the scientific viewpoint from which I can understand the potential of putting people on the autism spectrum together with horses. Reiki and my intuition told me that Reiki-attuned horses would be even more effective in helping people manage their conditions. To this end, we have noted several repeating patterns in the changes that our students experience. Usually the first change that we see involves connection. Our autism students often have difficulty connecting with and feeling empathy for other humans but seem to learn this skill within the first few sessions with the horse. We then watch them turn around and

connect with humans. It's truly beautiful. Over time, many of the students seem to develop more empathy. The second is in the area of confidence. They all grow in confidence as their anxiety and stress levels go down, and they seem better able to cope with the task of living everyday life, which for a person with autism can be daunting. The third change that we often see involves sleep patterns. As their confidence grows, lessening their levels of stress, some of our students notice improvements in their sleep patterns, which is an issue for many with this condition.

Why is this so effective?

There are several reasons why the connection we have established between our horses and our autistic students has been so beneficial. The first reason is that unlike even the most well-meaning humans, horses don't judge. And so by not judging our students, they create a safe space for them. Next comes the ability of Reiki to provide a calm, relaxing environment for the students and the horses to work together in. We have seen that the horses put up with much more from an autistic student rider than they will from other students.

Another important reason for the partnership's effectiveness is that because, as Dr. Grandin's writings describe, horses' brains are wired so much like human ones, the horses appear able to develop lines of communication with our autistic students on a level that the rest of us find difficult to understand; yet it is palpable and visible.

Also, since both horses in general and individuals on the autism spectrum are

hypersensitive and often unable to ignore the "noise" of everyday life that assaults our senses, our quiet lessons give our Reiki horses, through their usual outpouring of Reiki, the chance to help our students and themselves find a place to release the stress and excess energy they pick up each week. It's a beautiful thing to behold.

Once we determine that our potential students who are diagnosed as autistic can safely ride, we enroll them in our program. In addition to this, we teach the parents to lead the horses, creating a bonding experience between parent, horse and child.

We want you to meet some of the intelligent, sensitive, talented and remarkable students from our autism program.

Amanda

Twelve-year-old Amanda was our first student. Her mom, Lisa, is a Level II Reiki practitioner who has worked with other therapeutic riding programs and helped us get set up with a year-round program that would be specifically designed for young people diagnosed with autism who would use our "Reiki horses." Amanda was diagnosed with Mosaic Down's Syndrome before birth and later, with ADHD (inattentive type) and Asperger's, which often accompany this. Lisa hoped our program would help Amanda manage stress and

¹ Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures, Expanded Edition: My Life with Autism*, rev. ed., (New York, NY: Vintage, 2010).; Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*, (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2006).

The dynamic duo, Taryn and Breaker Dawn share so much through their connection.

hypertonia (overall muscle weakness), which is also part of her condition.

We generally allow our horses to pick their students. Star picked Amanda and a beautiful relationship ensued. Amanda tells me they have similar personality traits, that Star is the most like her. Lessons started in September at the beginning of the school year. The transition from summer to “school” for children on the autism spectrum is often difficult. Amanda’s parents were amazed at the easy transition Amanda experienced that fall; our jaws all dropped the third week of lessons when this shy, sensitive young woman announced that she planned to attend her first middle school dance. This increased interest and capability with her school experiences and academic work continued to expand and grow as the year progressed.

Our riders learn to groom their horses and work with them to establish a relationship. Amanda and her dad, Larry, call it their “date night” each Friday when they work together in lessons. Initially, Amanda’s weak muscles and lack of balance made it difficult for her to pick out hooves, get on the horse and maintain her seat, so we provided volunteers to walk with Amanda and hold each leg as we trained her father to lead Star. Each week we noticed Amanda’s core strength improve. Now, although we still walk with her in case she needs us, she and Star have things figured out; we are just there for show. Amanda can give all of the cues to Star and can even trot bareback on her own—sometimes with her arms out straight relying only on her balance. And she enjoys doing that to show us all what a great rider she has become.

When asked what she has gained from the lessons, Amanda, who is now a Level I Reiki practitioner herself, says that she enjoys the sense of energy and connection she gets from the horses. She says she feels a sense of spiritual belonging with animals

and that her time with Star has also helped improve her focus.

She finds that in addition to being physically stronger from her riding, Star has shown her how to be stronger mentally. “I don’t have as much Asperger’s as I used to in elementary [school]. I guess I don’t have as many traits”: she thinks that she learned to adapt from watching the horses. One trait of her Asperger’s condition is that she is extremely observant, and Amanda believes that this is why she can watch how the horses handle different situations and then adapt them to her own life. She surprised me when she said that she uses the skills from her riding lessons at school and at home. As an example, Amanda says that she can lower her extrasensory levels on cue now, and her parents agree. Noticing that when horses become stressed, they yawn and snort, she translated that to deep breathing for herself, and she employs this technique several times a day. She also says that she sleeps much better than she used to—especially after riding lessons; Larry says she is often asleep on the way home! And through the week, any time that she struggles to sleep, she uses her own Reiki to help. She plans to stick with riding into her adult life as she loves the peace and sense of belonging that she feels with the animals.

In Fall 2014, Amanda was able to share all of this with Dr. Grandin, herself, as she and I, along with my daughter and some other students, were blessed to travel to my undergrad university in Truro, Nova Scotia, to meet Dr. Grandin. There, we had the opportunity to inform her that her work had inspired our riding program.

Taryn

Taryn started lessons with Amanda when she was 11 years old. She said that she had always enjoyed the calm she noticed around her neighbor’s Percherons and wanted to learn to ride because of this. Taryn was originally diagnosed with

extreme deafness in her left ear and profound deafness in her right ear as an infant and with Asperger’s when she was 10. Taryn’s mother, Dawn, was familiar with Dr. Grandin’s work and wondered if our program might provide an outlet both for sport and socializing for her daughter, especially as deafness and autism are both communication disorders. She finds the program has given Taryn a way to communicate with another being without having to talk, allowing her to be herself without the pressure of verbal communication. We all watched Taryn blossom like a flower through her relationship with the horse that chose her—ironically named Breaker Dawn.

Taryn likes Breaker Dawn because she is easygoing and feels they clicked immediately.

I could see Taryn making a connection with Breaker Dawn and realized this was a difficult skill for her. I could almost see the wheels turning as she quickly determined how to apply this to connecting with people. She then proceeded to charm all of the volunteers and staff who helped with lessons! Taryn had a smooth transition into school that year and ALSO announced to us that she planned to attend her school dance which was held a week after Amanda’s!

Then one day, Breaker Dawn decided that Taryn did not need our help, and began gently pushing us out of the way during lessons, wanting Taryn to herself. Turns out that she was right—Taryn was able to begin riding independently well before WE were ready to drop the lead line. Then Taryn’s confidence soared. This growing sense of confidence is something that her mom recognizes, noticing that Taryn has learned to make small talk and is more in touch with what’s going on around her.

This awareness holds true for Taryn herself. She says that when she feels stressed, Breaker Dawn “drains the stress



Amanda with Star—a beautiful relationship.

away” and that when she sometimes has those typical teenage disagreements with her family, Breaker Dawn seems to help her see her way smoothly through those as well. Dawn (the mom) finds that Taryn is always really relaxed after her lessons and that Taryn looks forward to them all week. She loves that Taryn enjoys the opportunity to share with other people and finds she is in her element when she’s here. Lessons tend to bring down Taryn’s anxiety level and she is more relaxed physically, mentally and emotionally.

Like Amanda, Taryn is also attuned to Levels I and II Reiki, as is her mom. Taryn uses her own Reiki at night when her stomach feels funny and it helps that and also helps her sleep.

When I asked Taryn what advice she would give to kids on the autism spectrum who were thinking of working with Reiki horses, she said that “some people just feel drawn to a certain horse and if that horse is drawn to you too, it just clicks. Then it makes your life easier—maybe not your whole life but at least some of it.”

Christopher

Christopher is a 27-year-old man with classic or profound autism and a communication disorder. Christopher is non verbal and lost his vision completely due to

retinal detachment a few years prior to starting lessons. This loss of vision caused Christopher to be frustrated, loud and violent much of the time. He suffered from anxiety and migraines and used to self injure with head hitting so that he always had to wear a soft helmet, even to bed. He struggled with appointments and with just about everything. Karen, his mother, is a school intervention worker who works with children with disabilities just like Christopher’s, but recognized that traditional therapies and medications simply were not working for her son. She was grasping at straws when she remembered that he used to enjoy riding horses in his

youth. And while his visual impairment and size do not allow him to ride, she wondered if she could set something up for him to “be around” horses to see if that would help.

At first, she found it difficult to believe that horses could do Reiki for a human—but she was willing to try it, simply to get him some horse-time in the hopes that would help.

It did not take long for Karen’s skepticism to turn to wonder, as her frustrated, unhappy son turned a corner that everyone noticed! The first week, after about 15 minutes with Rain, Christopher lifted his hands and smacked them down hard on Rain’s back. Thank goodness I can communicate with the animals, as I was ready to tell his mother he was not able to handle the sessions and cancel his lesson. His mortified mother grabbed Christopher’s hands and told him the behavior was unacceptable. Meanwhile Rain did not move except to turn her head around to me and say “It’s okay. You don’t understand what is going on with him, but I do. We



Rain brought wonderful changes for Christopher when they started working together.

understand each other. He needed to do that. Don't cancel his lessons! I need to keep working with this boy." I relayed this to his mother and while Karen was still skeptical about horses, Reiki and animal communication, she was relieved that there would be a second lesson.

At the end of the second lesson, Christopher indicated that he was "finished" with a slightly less violent smack to Rain. After Rain looked at me with another "okay," I had to assume that it was progress. And by the third session, this agitated and somewhat violent young man was smiling and gentle with the horse. After a few more sessions, Christopher stopped self injuring and was able to remove his helmet, which after more lessons led to its removal in bed at night and during the day. Having had big behavior problems at his dental appointments for years, after his regular Reiki time with the horses, his dental appointments were so much easier that his dentist thought that perhaps he had been prescribed medication. Karen explained that the only change she had made was to bring him to horse sessions with Reiki horses. The dentist was surprised and skeptical but grudgingly admitted that "something" was working so keep it up.

And the changes in his behaviors and personality are not relegated to his dental appointments. Karen finds Christopher less anxious and frustrated. He talks, giggles and hums and where he used to yell high-pitched, negative sounds, now he sounds happy and content. Now Christopher tries using language and while he can generally only initiate the first sound for each word, there are several words we can all understand. He is beginning to communicate in a very different way.

Because of his vision impairment, Christopher generally simply sits with Rain though sometimes he even walks her around the arena. At first, it was with one of us holding his hand, but eventually he

and Rain walked on their own, each using the energy of the other to guide them.

One day, Bev, another animal communicator, visited, and Rain communicated full sentences for Christopher to her. This was a miracle as it allowed Christopher to express himself more completely than ever before. Bev described the things Christopher loves about his mother in detail, explaining things she does for him that neither Bev nor I had any way of knowing, but Karen was in tears as she said that she had always hoped he had felt this way, but never knew for sure. For the first time in her life, she received words of appreciation from her son. There were not many dry eyes in the arena that day, and Karen lost her skepticism about both Reiki and animal communication.

Sometimes the horses work together to bring about change. Christopher, who is very sensitive to changes in the weather and suffers migraines from air pressure changes, came to ride on a low pressure day after not having been there for awhile. He was not the happy, relaxed man that we had come to know. Star decided to come in and help Rain that day and the rest of the horses stopped grazing and joined them, lining up outside, facing the arena. They just stood there for most of the time Christopher was there. I noticed their odd formation and attention as I glanced out the door and asked Buddy what they were doing. Bud explained that Christopher had "a great head pain," and that he needed all of their help that day. So all of the horses worked on Christopher that day and within 45 minutes, our happy and relaxed Christopher was back. We were all just a little amazed at the change the horses brought about.

Christopher is trying new things again like music therapy, massage, swimming and art therapy. He is happy, humming much of the time. Occasionally, he gets quiet and starts making similar humming sounds to those he makes when he is here

with Rain. When Karen notices this she asks him who he is talking to and he replies, "Rai," so she knows that the two of them connect even when he is not here.

Eventually, Karen studied Reiki Level I and recently studied Usui/Holy Fire II Reiki II. We created a modified Reiki I class for Christopher, too, who understands everything we say to him despite his difficulty expressing language. He uses Reiki in between his riding classes, and we can see its effects coming out in his artwork too!

Karen feels that Christopher has regained a sense of value and worth through the time he spends with Rain. He now seems motivated to live his life fully. I certainly look forward to my "Christopher" time every week. His workers delight in him as do his teachers, therapists and pretty much everyone he meets. Karen, whose dedication to her son never ceases to amaze and inspire us, believes that Christopher's time with the horses profoundly changed everything for him and for them and that those changes continue to grow as he continues to spend time with the horses. She feels she too receives much needed therapy from the horses when she is here and is so grateful for all of this.

And gratitude is what we all feel for our Reiki horses and the people who join us here to experience the uplifting healing that they share with us. 🌸



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