

EQUINE ASSISTED PSYCHOTHERAPY

FROM AN IMAGINAL PERSPECTIVE

By Lisa S. Baugh

In the past three decades, the positive health affects of the relationship between pets and their owners have been the center of much research (Beck, 1996). Most of the work has focused on how people and their companion animals interact and the benefits gained through the relationship. More recently, in the field of mental health, working with animals in psychotherapy has revealed the potential for helping humans connect to the unknown, troubled, or misunderstood parts of their psyche. From this work, a therapeutic technique that involves the use of horses has evolved. Equine Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) or Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) is “a new and emerging field in which horses are used as a tool for emotional growth and learning” (Equine Services Inc., n.d.). Though cognitive and behavioral theories apply, there is a deeper underlying process at work that closely resembles what Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung explored.

In his 1916 essay, “The Transcendent Function” Jung asks how is it possible to clarify the workings of the unconscious so that its regulating influences can be brought to light in relation to the conscious mind. In answer to this question, Jung brilliantly lays out the foundation for what today is known as “expressive art therapy” by describing practical techniques that allow for clarification of the situation of the unconscious. These fall under the general rubric of active imagination. Jung, however, does not limit this practice to written, dialogical engagement, but extends the terrain to include painting, drawing, body movement, and sculpting. Following Jung, Imaginal psychologists highly value the practice of giving form to unconscious material as part of the therapeutic process. (Murdock, 2002, p.6)

From the perspective of Imaginal psychology, EAP can be seen as a type of expressive therapy that actualizes the experiences of the unconscious through a relationship with horses. Based on the use of

metaphor, the process is analogous to that used in traditional art therapy and dream interpretation. A clinical vignette will illustrate the process.

Sherri was one of the first EAP clients therapist Linda Myers worked with (Irwin, 1998). She was part of a group of kids working on substance abuse. In addition to chemical dependency, Sherri had a history of sexual abuse and was used to being victimized. Even within the therapy group, Sherri was the brunt of teasing, sexual jokes, and physical harassment, particularly from the boys. In the EAP session, Linda's goals were extremely simple; to have the group move the horse from one end of the arena to the other without touching, bribing, or use of verbal communication. Linda showed them how to make a horse go forward and how to make it stop by either moving behind it or in front of it. All the boys were able to make the horse go forward but none could make it stop. When they tried standing in front of the horse, it sensed their lack of confidence and kept approaching. The boys would eventually give in and back up. No one could stand up to the horse and make him stop. Then, Sherri tried it.

She planted her feet in the sand, held out her arms and chest, and that was it. The horse couldn't move her. Instead, she moved the horse. She got so good that she pushed it all over the ring, all by herself. Nothing could have been more empowering, and that session was a turning point for her.... Sherri became a group leader. She learned to say "no" to the horse and "no" to her peers. She learned how to be assertive without being confrontational. She learned what a mutually consensual relationship felt like, and she transferred that to her everyday life. She learned she didn't have to be a victim. (Irwin, 1998, p. 158).

Until this EAP session, Sherri was living in a state of conflict between her conscious and unconscious mind. She longed to be assertive but constantly found herself in the position of victim. Inside, there was a more

forceful part of her personality she had not yet tapped into. She experienced a lack of equilibrium, causing her strife and demonstrating that when the conscious and unconscious minds “are out of balance with one another, neurosis or other disturbances result (Johnson, 1986, p. 6).

James Hollis says that essential to making the connection between the conscious and the unconscious is the use of “*metaphor* (something that will ‘carry over’ from one thing to another)...With metaphor...we are provisionally able to approximate, to apprehend, to appreciate that which lies beyond our powers to understand or to control (2000, p. 4). He proposes that the unconscious psyche “has an irresistible urge – to assimilate all outer sense experiences to inner psychic events” (2000, p. 23) and that it “scavenges the known and the unknown worlds [looking] for images to become hosts for meaning. Such image-husks are filled with energy and present themselves dynamically for the possibility of conscious discernment” (2000, p.18). He says, “it is not enough to have the received image; it must retain the power to move one personally” (2000, p. 23). For Sherri, the size and presence of a 1,200-pound moving horse was just such an image.

Jung writes, “when an inner situation is not made conscious, it happens outside as fate” (as cited in Hollis, 2000, p. 57). Another way of looking at this would be to say that when an inner situation *is* made conscious, it does so through an outer experience. EAP can provide the experience necessary to allow this to happen but both the inner and the outer must be addressed. “It is fruitless to waste your time trying to understand an external situation unless you also identify the psychological

patterns within you that affect it” (Johnson, 1986, p. 68). When interacting with images, such as that of a 1,200-pound horse, “a magical principle is at work: When we experience the images, *we also directly experience the inner parts of ourselves that are clothed in the images*” (Johnson, 1986, p. 25).

With the help of a therapist, Sherri was able to process her EAP experience and make a connection between her outer actions and her internal psychic and emotional state. James Hollis calls this resonance.

The principle of resonance is critical here, for resonance tells us what is true for us, or what moves us. Resonance is not created by an act of will; it is experienced autonomously, the stirring of “like to like”, the thrum of the tuning fork inside of us. (Hollis, 2000, p. 62)

In traditional art therapy, images are drawn and interpreted. James Hillman suggests that “interpretation acts as a bridge between worlds, teaching the practicality of metaphor for helping the descent from images to experiences” (as cited in Allan, 1989, p. xviii). He acknowledges that inferences are drawn through interpretation but emphasizes that “the image itself...remains intact as the actual healing factor because it gives the [client] a way of picturing in metaphorical terms his drama” (as cited in Allan, 1989, p. xviii). The horse in EAP is analogous to the paper or canvas in traditional art therapy which “becomes the ‘safe place’ onto which projections are placed, while the symbols and images [and the horse itself] become the ‘containers’ for various emotions, thus allowing feelings to be expressed” (Allan, 1989, p. 22). Alan Beck and Aaron Katcher note that, “by giving behavior or feeling a form, animals permit us to visualize actions as...images and to store those images in the wordless, unconscious level of the mind that generates both dreams and poetry” (Beck, 1996, p. 66).

A successful art therapy technique used in processing work involves talking about a drawing in the third person. An example would be to comment about a picture asking, “do you know what the cat in your drawing is thinking?” or “how does the dog you’ve drawn feel about the situation?” The same technique may be applied in an EAP session. In Sherri’s case the therapist could have asked, “what do you suppose the horse is thinking right now?” This question might be used several times over the course of the session. In the beginning, Sherri’s response might have been that the horse was angry and thought it could bully her and the others. By the end of the session, when Sherri learned how to assert herself, she might interpret the horse as being friendly and thinking more respectfully towards her.

In art therapy and in EAP, “at certain moments the counselor makes ‘linkages...from the drawings to the therapeutic relationship or to outer world situations’” (Allan, 1989, p. xvii). In Sherri’s case, when all the others failed at making the horse stop, the therapist might ask, “when have you experienced something like this in your life?” Mary Watkins writes that, “the path, as I see it, proceeds from image to insight and interpretation, from image to actual event, not the other way around” (Watkins, 2000, p. 197). Applying this concept to the vignette suggests that Sherri already possessed the seeds of assertiveness and strength deep within her *before* she demonstrated it in the EAP session. The exercise actualized and brought into consciousness what had previously remained unconscious.

Like art therapy, interpretation of dreams can also help clients tap into the unconscious through the world of the imagination. Robert Johnson (1986) has outlined a four-step approach to dream analysis that can also be applied to EAP. Step one involves making associations. In dream interpretation this would involve exploring the associations one has with specific elements of the dream. In Sherri's EAP session, it would be identifying patterns like the horse moving away when someone got behind it and stopping or not stopping when someone stood in front of it. These are the basic associations of the session.

Step two involves connecting images to inner dynamics. In both dream interpretation and EAP the client asks,

What part of me is that? Where have I seen it functioning in my life lately? Where do I see that same trait in my personality? Who is it inside me, who feels like that or behaves like that?...What goes on inside me that this dream [or experience] speaks of? (Johnson, 1986, pp. 65-66).

In her EAP session, Sherri instantly made a connection realizing that like the boys who failed to stop the horse and were bluffed into backing up, she had been unable to stand her ground in relationships.

Step three involves interpretation. Johnson advises honing in on "the single most important insight that the dream [or EAP session] is trying to get across" (Johnson, 1986, p. 87). He states that, "an adequate...interpretation should sum up the meaning...in a nutshell. It should also provide a specific application...to your personal life, to what you are doing, to how you are going to live" (Johnson, 1986, p. 90). Through interpretation, Sherri realized

she needed to apply the assertiveness she learned in her EAP session to other relationships in her life.

Ironically, Johnson's final step in dream interpretation, ritualizing, is exactly what an EAP session does.

Doing a physical act has a magical effect...It takes your understanding ...off the purely abstract level and gives it immediate, concrete reality. It is a way of putting...[it] into the here-and-now of your physical life.... Rituals provide us a way of taking principles from the unconscious and impressing them vividly on the conscious mind. But rituals also have an effect on the unconscious. A highly conscious ritual sends a powerful message back to the unconscious causing changes to take place at the deep levels where our attitudes and values originate. (Johnson, 1986, pp. 99-100).

The impact of ritual and the EAP session for Sherri is that not only did it allow her to tap into an unconscious part of herself, but the physical act of working with a horse concretely imprinted its meaning in her psyche, causing deep changes to take place.

As a non-traditional method of psychotherapy, EAP is as efficacious as the painting, sculpting, and body movement of traditional expressive arts therapy. Hillman reminds us:

Therapy has everything possible going on in it, and it needs every sort of tool. Look at the instruments dentists have, drawers of little tools and nozzles, and that's just for your teeth. Imagine what's needed for the psyche! (Hillman, 1983, p. 60).

Just as Imaginal psychologists emphasize the autonomy of the image, EAP practitioners acknowledge that neither the therapist nor the horse are "the cause of healing but rather the midwife of the organism's own intention" (Hollis, 2000, p. 8). Anyone who participates soon realizes that you are not just working with the horses, but rather, the horses are working you.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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