

PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL REFLECTIONS ON THE HORSE/HUMAN RELATIONSHIP

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This essay offers a psycho-spiritual and psychoanalytic meditation on the horse–human relationship as a nonverbal site of attunement, regulation, and meaning-making. Drawing on autobiographical clinical narrative, it explores how horseback riding became a medium for experiencing and reflecting upon embodied connection, mutual responsiveness, and contemplative presence. Encounters with horses illuminate forms of reciprocity that preceded and exceed speech, while also opening reflection on maternal attachment, separation, loss, and the emergence of selfhood. In dialogue with Freud, Winnicott, Piaget, and Buber, the essay argues that the horse–rider dyad may be understood as a lived analogue to central psychoanalytic concerns, including attunement, play, symbolization, and the I–Thou relation. The horse emerges not merely as metaphor, but as a sentient other whose responsiveness invites humility, emotional integration, and spiritual deepening. The essay ultimately suggests that sustained attention to the nonverbal—whether in relation to children with disabilities or to sentient beings—may enlarge psychoanalytic understandings of embodiment, intersubjectivity, and transcendence.

Keywords: attunement, embodiment, intersubjectivity, symbolization, transcendent

The first time I ever put my foot into stirrups was when I was 7 years old when visiting my second cousin's farm along the Rapahannock River in Virginia. A stillness came over my body that felt like a prayer. This palomino horse had a long, flowing blonde mane and swishy tail, an equally twitching ear. The smell of a horse is earthy, and scratching his neck revealed many layers of his hair: the outer was coarse, but the inner felt soft. Hoisted up onto the back of the horse by my cousin Danny I felt like I was on top of the world. Sitting straight up, I sensed an invisible thread holding me to the heavens. With my feet planted in stirrups, I picked up my reins and began walking to the other side of the barn to the trail that opened to the mountainside. With a rocking motion the

horse's breathing steadied mine, as if we shared the same nervous system. Only later in life did I begin to understand this feeling, that what I had begun to understand at age 7 was the experience of being attuned to another in a mutual way.

Forty-one years passed before putting my feet into stirrups for the second time in my life. Choosing marriage, creating a professional life, and raising children took priority over horseback riding for myself. My life was facilitating play for others; now it was my turn to pursue a long-held dream of riding. Reaching back to my childhood love, I found a barn close to my home that had a paint quarter horse named Whiskey. Taking my first lessons resulted in doing trail riding on the Manassas Battlefield close to my home.

Riding horses is not a passive adventure, I learned that summer. Trotting up a hill, I lost my connection to Whiskey, who decided to jump over a fallen tree. Next thing I knew I was on the ground, surrounded by Whiskey checking me out and the other seven women on horses towering above me. The first voice I heard was, "Mom, are you all right?" This was music to my ears. Hearing that voice was reassuring. However, what I had lost was the vital connection to my horse to stay balanced. Moments prior to the fall I had lost not only the connection to Whiskey, but to myself.

There was more to learn from horses with this fall. My capacity to empower my language-impaired daughter to have confidence to speak up loud and clear when she witnessed my falling off Whiskey was a testament to her hard work to acquire language despite her medical condition. She rode from a very young age, and the horse's movement aided her own nervous system, which facilitated her capacity for speech.

Speaking of equestrian skills, trail riding is enhanced by adding dressage training. The root word of dressage is "to train." Over time this training evolved into the competitive sport, which focuses on the horse's obedience, suppleness, and balance through precise movements. This purely nonverbal relationship with a sentient being has been woven now into the fabric of my understanding of myself even further. First, George, an Irish Sport Horse. Immediately I felt a better connection with him than I ever had with Whiskey. Just like with people, finding the right fit for friendship matters. George matched my energy levels. Over the course of several years, I learned how to better use the reins, riding on the bit, using my seat, calves, and feet. Being balanced on

the horse is central to riding safely on a horse. After three years of riding George, an Irish Sport Horse, I was given the opportunity for my traditional lessons to ride Donatos, a retired Grand Prix warmblood dressage horse. Horses trained to this elite level possess exceptional athletic ability and are typically ridden by highly accomplished competitors in international equestrian sport. At the barn, Donatos was affectionately known as “Donuts.” I also volunteered at this equestrian center with the Faith and Family Foundation, which serves children with disabilities. Under the direction of Muriel Forest, Wheatland Farm has been a pioneer in providing para-dressage, therapeutic riding opportunities for children with disabilities, and traditional riding instruction for adults. Greeting Donuts felt like meeting a dignitary at an embassy. He stood tall, 17.2 hands, he was very quiet and gazed at me with huge dark bright eyes. While waiting for his permission to scratch his neck, he turned his head toward me as if to say, okay, you can scratch my neck.

Being patient with horses is essential to build trust. After all, I didn’t know this horse, and he didn’t know me. Putting my feet into the stirrups and quietly sitting down I noticed the saddle was different, with knee pads and a higher back. This was a custom-made saddle, and much to our surprise I fit perfectly into it. We stood there for a moment, as I visualized where his tail was, his back legs and front feet. These are parts of his body I cannot see when riding but wanted to make sure I include in my feeling of being seated, where I look at his ears, see his eyes, and feel those back legs crossing under me once we get moving. Once this was in my mind, I asked him to start walking with one small squeeze of my calves onto his side. He responded immediately. Being higher up in the air at first was disorganizing but breathing deeply in and out softly I quickly felt assured when Anthony, my trainer, said, “Paula, ride him like you did George.” My mindset shifted and off I went.

Donuts had a huge stride, and his neck was so supple, bending to create the circle. I could see his right eye as we circled and with each half halt to tell him we are changing the gait, or direction.

Donuts quickly taught me humility with a newfound experience of being attuned with harmony and connection in this horse/rider partnership. He had a stable mind, he was calm, I was light in the seat, he responded to my approach and our serious, quiet demeanor matched even better than George. Danish Warmbloods,

as Donuts was, are bred for dressage, not trail riding. Riding is not about physical strength but more about a positive mental attitude, visualization, and using self-awareness to be aware of how the horse is responding, all the while remembering which way to go in multiple circles.

The opportunity was presented to me to show him at the farm to see how I would do in competition. With lots of deep breaths I took up the challenge and entered a dressage show. Much to my surprise I won first place several times in my category. What mattered most to me was having the confidence to experience riding that ultimately felt like poetry in motion. A well-trained horse and my hard work in learning about horses and the art of dressage gave me a gift of joy, a deepening faith in the mystery of nature and the generosity of friendships within the equine world.

My desires are limited in showing and competition. I've often wondered and feel that my creativity, trust, and risk-taking in learning new skills has been enhanced since I took up riding. Riding these past 20 years has become like a meditative moment each time I put my foot into the stirrups. This first love for horses was overpowered by my passion and love for people, but now they seem to live side by side.

Horses have captivated my imagination from the time I was 7 years old, now they inspire me as an adult. The very definition of inspiration implies there is mental stimulation that provides creative ideas or a feeling of motivation. The word itself is derived from the Latin word *inspirare*, meaning to breathe into. This can be understood as a feeling of excitement and awe that encourages a person to create and solve problems. When I first start my warmup in riding, I focus on my own breath, then listen to the breath of the horse, to find a connection through breathing. With a relaxed mind, new ideas or feelings often rise up, and I bring my mind back to the present moment. Learning to breathe into riding became my new mantra.

Inspiration is a feeling that drives action and can drive passion. Growing up I was surrounded by creativity in how my parents were providing for my brother and me. My dad built the home we lived in, my mother taught herself, then me to make our own clothes, she taught me to bake and garden, and they loved being outside for picnics with family or traveling to cabins in the mountains to explore. My family was practical with values of family and

education. My first mentors who inspired my curiosity of the world were my parents; then there was Freud.

Sigmund Freud was a man who challenged the traditional way of thinking about the human mind and relationships. He understood the need for a consuming passionate outlet that brings joy. In his 1895 “Introduction to Psychoanalysis” he reflected on what makes life worth living: “A man like me cannot live without a hobby-horse—a consuming passion—in Schiller’s words a tyrant. I have found a tyrant, and in his service, I know no limits. My tyrant is psychology” (Freud, 1933, p. 267).

A review of psychoanalytic literature on the human–horse relationship ranges from Freud, to Heiman and Searles, with theories that are often filled with contradictions and ambivalences. Psychoanalysis remains a talking cure between two people. Even so there are silent, nonverbal moments between patients and analysts. Silence does not always mean resistance to know as in repression of trauma, but silence can also provide space to think, feel, observe, process, and organize and be a reflective space to bring greater understanding and meaning to life experiences. Silence between horse and rider is a space where connection is created by feelings and nervous system between two alive beings.

As a child I was verbal, healthy physically, and loved animals and being outside playing. My mother had two children before the age of 20; I was number two. She sent me to first grade at age 5 because “She didn’t know what to do with me.”

At 7 my parents took my brother and me to Washington, D.C., where my mother’s aunt lived. When she was a child, my aunt would send money to her brother (my grandfather) to send my mother to stay with them in Washington, D.C. My mother’s relationship with her aunt was central to whatever emotional health she possessed. This was a gift to my mother to be in the presence of her Aunt Mary, a lovely, elegant woman who was licensed as a nurse, and her husband, a dental surgeon at Georgetown. This trip to D.C. is a good memory of my mother–daughter relationship.

We all know the mother–child relationship, the first experience with what Martin Buber (1958), the inspiring Austrian-Israeli philosopher, religious thinker, and educator known for his philosophy of dialogue, described as the “I-Thou” relationship. “I-Thou” starts with child coming into the world from the mother’s womb. When we are born, we begin our truly reciprocal relationship with her

and the world around us. We are born to relate, which gives rise to social relationships, all thinking, all speech, everything builds on the initial scaffolding of give and take between mother and child. If everything goes well, mother and child are immersed over and over in a pure, “I-Thou” relationship.

Freud’s theory rests on some desire to “return to the womb”; regression in the service of the ego. My subjective experience through the unfolding of the stages of my life has been the yearning and searching to make meaning out of my relationship with my mother, who did not always feel like a good enough fit. Our temperaments were different, energy levels were different; I wanted to learn and was curious about everything, resulting in a great deal of impatience from my mother. She worked outside of the home once I went to school. As a “latchkey” child in the 1960s loneliness fueled my longings for adventure.

This special vacation with family to Washington, D.C., to visit a great aunt gave me the opportunity to know at a young age there are differences between people. My great aunt Mary lived between two very different worlds: one home in the Virginia countryside along the Rappahannock River, where the horses were, and another in Washington, D.C. She had a maid and a cook, a way of life far removed from the country world in which I was raised. In noticing those differences, I came to see more clearly something about my own life, for it is often through contrast with others that we begin to understand ourselves.

As a little girl I fell in love with my cousin Danny’s palomino horse. From the experience of riding when I was 7, I was drawn to the powerful emotional connection that for even a moment felt like empowering and a sense of freedom. This self-awareness was a nonjudgmental moment that came through a nonverbal encounter with a horse.

The household I grew up in was not a fairy tale of love and bliss, but more of my being overexposed to the steady strain of my parents’ conflicts over their monetary fears or unfulfilled desires. As a child I ran away to the top of the hill to get out of their line of fire, but the feelings became all knotted up in me like a perfect ball of wool yarn waiting to be woven into a beautiful sweater. Their story was not my story, but their story imprinted my story with restlessness, confusion, and my own longings for loving connections.

Another place I ran away to in my youth was to the horse show grounds. Living in the country, the horse show grounds for the county I lived in happened to be a short walk down the road from where my house was. There I dreamed that one day I could do this too as I watched riders and horses jump and make circles.

Studying Freud as an adult, I was opened up to another world of animals that felt foreign and jarring and ideas unrelatable to my subjective experience. As a married woman I found loving connections through my spouse, my children, and my professional community. The household my husband and I created was playful, interactive, and filled with caring for one another. Over the course of many years my level of emotional and spiritual consciousness was raised by being a wife and mother, and an equestrian.

Searles (1960) expanded the focus of development to include the entire expanse of the nonhuman, referencing Piaget's (1932/1962) model of development, "Consciousness arises through contact with things."

Psychoanalysis does not acknowledge that there is a sublime intimacy of being co-emergent with all beings in our surroundings. Analysis does recognize that by becoming a mother a great deal of unknown intergenerational feelings can be unleashed. Raising a language-impaired child from birth on, I sought to work separately on my own history while providing meaningful experiences with my daughter. We shared the love of riding together; with my mom I learned many practical skills.

Horseback riding in the 21st century is not for practical reasons; it is for pleasure, athleticism, community, and playing outside in nature. Riding through the Manassas Battlefield, which sat behind our home, was the beginning of my equestrian journey that deepened my self-awareness of being more present to my body, mind, and spirit.

Donald Winnicott (1971), an English pediatrician and psychoanalyst, explains that play starts with physical actions, like a child sucking their thumb. Children learn to differentiate between themselves and others. This is the foundation for activities such as painting or writing. Play merges internal and external realities, promoting growth and health. Play involves both excitement and risk, navigating emotions and tension.

Freud (1933) used the metaphor of the rider and horse to describe the relationship between the ego and the id. In his book

New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis Freud says the horse represents the id, the instinctive part of the brain that controls our desires, urges. The rider represents the ego, the part of the brain that has been modified by the external world; the rider's role is to control the horse's movements and choose the goal. Freud goes on to say the ego, as a rider, must balance the demands of these three masters, the id, the super ego, and the external world. The ego must restrain the id's energy while also allowing it to be satisfied to keep it alive and healthy. Flexibility of the mind requires the capacity to hold a great deal of opposing thoughts, multiple realities and understanding. Sometimes when the mind is preoccupied when riding a horse accidents happen.

Falling off a horse, as described in my second phase of riding, as an adult, raised my level of consciousness. In this phase I was the mother of an adult daughter. Riding weekly for me became a way to gain energy. Each time I rode I felt the strain of caring for others dissipate. In addition to all the therapies through the years, I introduced Rachel to horses; they were like a nonverbal co-therapist, in addition to everything else, to help her pick up her own reins in life and be empowered.

Typically, our time together is marked by a lot of space for silence. Her silence does not mean she doesn't care or is not listening. She needs a lot of time to process what is being said, and what to say to others. When she was younger, I did a lot of intuitive work to help her find the words to what she wanted to say. In this experience with the horse when I fell off her voice was the first I heard.

In the space between falling off a horse and hitting the ground I heard, "Mom, are you all right?" Taken by surprise both by her voice and losing my balance off the horse so quickly when Whiskey jumped over the fallen tree, I lay on the ground to gather my wits. What just happened never happened before, either my falling off a horse or Rachel speaking up so clearly.

My feet came out of the stirrups as I ducked to avoid the overhead branches from hitting my face, but I lost my balance and knew I was in trouble; I grabbed onto the neck of Whiskey, shouting, "I am falling!"

My heel hit the flank of Whiskey, and I started to tumble sideways over the English saddle with Whiskey taking off in a canter. Toppling down the side of Whiskey's body still holding the reins my body bumped along the ground until I dropped the reins to let

go. As soon as I let the reins go Whiskey stopped. Horses get upset when the rider falls off, and the reins are a way of communicating. Looking up, Whiskey came over to me and stood still. To the right of me were the other riders, all seven women hushed waiting for me to speak. Lying on the ground bewildered, confused, and downright mad at myself for falling, it was Rachel's voice that brought me back to the moment. Her words were clear, articulate, and no evidence of her neurological speech difficulties.

This was a moment where I learned about the joy and grief of separation. Separated literally by falling off Whiskey but the realization of a new level of separateness from my daughter.

What kind of example am I now lying on the ground? I knew I had to get off the ground and get back on that horse and be a role model for perseverance. "I am okay, it all happened so fast. I am not sure what I did wrong." Putting one foot back into the stirrup I hoisted myself back up into the saddle. Now back in line with the other riders, posting and trotting continued before darkness fell; back to the barn, a 15-minute ride away after what had been a long-anticipated two-day ride. Reflecting on this different kind of mother/daughter experience, I could not have ever imagined it possible when she was first born and I was told "she may be mute." I felt joy.

In an external world and at times internal world that often feels uncertain, I thought I had found my balance on the back of a horse. Each quiet ride holds my feelings of trust, my very body and mind, a kind of meditation in motion. Nurturing my daughter has been a devotion to understanding the neurology of speech and language; I stayed in my lane and focused on emotional development.

Horseback riding was a happy place for me. The hard work Rachel spent on countless hours of speech appointments, traditional therapies, neurological testing, speech and language schools was an attempt at early intervention to, as the doctors would say, "rewire her brain for speech."

In some ways riding to me was my attempt to keep my energy from total maternal depletion. Now Rachel asking me if I'm all right was a role reversal. Instead of me advocating for her she was asking me to speak up and get up. Separate but together we pushed and pulled on each other to be our best selves.

Horses show me that communication is far more than words—their energy, and unspoken language is one of trust and respect. Through their patience, horses invite us to slow down, breathe,

and truly see each other not for what we can accomplish, but for who we are.

In a world that so often values speed, efficiency, and results, each trail ride reminds me of the daily beauty in simply being. Horses help me reconnect with my own senses and remind me that wisdom isn't always loud or obvious, sometimes it's a quiet nudge or a soft exhale or a peaceful silence shared between two beings. Walking the path with horses is an endless education in wonder and humility. I believe that when we honor them as sentient beings, we open ourselves to an entirely new way of living—one grounded in respect, empathy, and a deeper understanding of the interconnected world we are all a part of.

Over the years I have had experts in the field tell me the medical diagnosis of childhood apraxia is the result of fetal stroke, or a birth trauma; others say it is genetic, and one psychoanalyst said it came through intergenerational trauma. This life-changing birthing event for me challenged everything I knew about the neurology of speech and language development, which was nothing. What I did know about, however, was identifying experts who did know about language impairments, nurturing resilience and persistence. No one is spared pain/suffering. What seemed to always matter to me was that what happens in life is not as important as how to empower my daughter to be the best advocate for herself she could be in a speaking world where speech to her did not come naturally. When I was told at Rachel's birth that she would be mute I felt disorganized, sad, and angry. My mom gave birth to a perfectly healthy child and complained about my high energy, my curiosity and desire to be out and about with friends. Now I had to rise to the occasion to process whatever lay dormant within me developmentally while at the same time raise a healthy child.

Clearly, falling off Whiskey and hearing Rachel's voice told me she was not mute. At that moment I had a lot more to learn about the horse/rider partnership and even still more to learn about mother/daughter relationships.

Horses carry in their quiet ancient wisdom a sense of presence that is both calming and awe inspiring. Horses see and feel the world in ways we as humans cannot fathom. They listen not just with their ears, but with their whole being; every twitch of the ear, every shift in their breath, every softening of the eye is part of their profound way of connecting with life.

One time while riding in the arena on Donuts I started to pay attention to my breathing in and out. I use breath as centering, but then I realized I was breathing together with Donuts. He let out a huge breath, and we trotted on breathing at the same rhythm. When I breathed calmly, Donuts slowed down his breath. This is biology. The horse's nervous system is a mirror to our own language without words. This is exactly what I experienced with Donuts when we were breathing together. His head would lower; he moved better. We became a team. Through mutual body language and presence, we reached a nonverbal harmony that bordered on spiritual for me.

This kind of attunement amazed me, and at that split second, I didn't know who was regulating whom, but we trotted on in unison. I've come to acknowledge that horses are not simply animals alongside us, but unique sentient beings with their own thoughts, feelings, and perspectives. More than once while riding, Donuts would sense if I was tired and would stop, put his head toward my boot in the stirrups to check in on me. That is true attunement coupled with the rhythmic breathing pattern. When I slow down and truly observe them, horses have much to teach us about awareness, authenticity, and humility. Their sensitivity is a guiding light—a reminder of how much subtlety and richness exists within every moment.

Horses can sense a mood before I even realize it. I'm anxious; my horse won't stand still. If I approach them with calm and openness, they mimic it back and become a safe space for me. Before riding Donuts each week over a period of 18 months I would arrive at the barn one hour early to stretch my legs and hip flexors and raise my arms above my head before touching my toes. This felt like a responsibility on my part to be my best relaxed, flexible self before approaching him. Over time we trusted one another, and I felt safe. One time I said to my trainer, "Anyone would do well riding this well-trained horse" Anthony responded, "No, you must know and think differently when riding this level of horse. You are doing great, and he is responding well to you." His remarks deeply touched me and encouraged me to keep learning, for myself and for the benefits riding has at different levels for everyone.

This unique bond is not only cultural but neurological and biological. Horses are deeply attuned to emotional riders. When a rider feels fear, a horse responds with nervousness. Research shows

that horses read human facial expressions, distinguish between anger and joy. They sense human heart rates and respiration and often mirror them in what is called physiological synchrony. When a rider feels fear, a horse responds with nervousness.

Time with horses slows the clock. Horses demand presence, attentiveness, and respect. Horses force us into our bodies, into the now. In a world that often feels disconnected and synthetic the touch of a warm muzzle or the sway of a canter reconnects riders to something very elemental.

The effects of such connection have measurable impact on well-being: lower blood pressure, decreased depression, increased mindfulness. For me, I've struggled with anxiety and worry often in relation to my children, or at times working with difficult patients. Being around and on the horse, my anxiety dissipates as I focus on thinking in the moment of what I am doing and where I am going. The bond between humans and horses defies easy explanation because it resides in the space between language and feeling. It is born of biology, nurtured by culture, and elevated by spirit.

The opportunity to ride Donuts was a gift from above, and words failed me when I learned he was ill. Profound grief came upon me when I walked out to the pasture to say goodbye. He ran over to the fence when I called his name. In the eyes of the horse, I am a partner, a mirror, a teacher. In this gaze there is a deep unspoken connection. He lowered his head as I gave him carrots and scratched his neck. Thanking him for all he has taught me and for all the safe rides both in the arena and in the field, I was overcome with emotion. Tears flowed down my cheeks like a river. Alone at the fence I sat down and cried. Grieving losses of parents, friends, and colleagues, a new realization of my own aging process became heightened. Flooded with concerns and worries about my now-grown children and on top of all that never being able to ride him again washed over my soul. Acknowledging and allowing my sorrow to be present, an enormous wave of gratitude swept over me. This was the moment that I decided I would carry all that I learned forward. Sitting there on the ground by the fence, Donuts lingered, watching me. Standing up with tears in my eyes I said goodbye. He nodded his head the way he always did when we were together, turned, and slowly walked back to the middle of the pasture. He had incurable stomach cancer.

Martin Buber (1958) says there are three worlds in which we experience the I-Thou. One is with plants and animals. When Buber was 11, he was at his grandfather's farm immersed in grooming and petting his favorite horse. As he did this, he felt the reciprocity between them—until one day he reflected on it and felt the horse become an it. After that the horse lost interest in him.

Buber adds the second world we encounter is with each other, engaging with one another through speech. The essential healing in psychotherapy has nothing to do with suggestions but occurs through right brain to right brain communication that requires presence but not always speech. These moments reveal to one another two dialogical natures (1958, p. 6). Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis is built into a talking therapy, and speech is powerful.

The third area he addresses is spirituality that occurs right here, in the mind/body/spirit, but always between two beings. His inspiration for his thinking and his writing as a philosopher came from his 11-year-old self and his grandfather's horse. My inspiration to write this comes from being a wife and mother, parenting three children who are all professional artists, my patients who trust me with their emotional lives, the opportunity to experience the horse/human bond, and having the health to continue to trot on.

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