

The Horse Does Not Care About Your Story

Equine Coaching Beyond Mirrors and Mysticism

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1. What This Essay Is About

Equine-assisted coaching is one of the fastest-growing modalities in the leadership development space. It is also one of the most poorly understood. At its best, working with horses offers a form of somatic and relational feedback that is immediate, non-verbal, and difficult to fake. At its worst, it becomes a staging ground for projection, magical thinking, and the kind of mystical bubble that substitutes feeling for rigor.

This essay makes the case for equine coaching as a legitimate, neuroscience-grounded developmental tool, while dismantling the interpretive frameworks that have, for two decades, turned it into something closer to a wellness ritual than a serious coaching intervention. It is written for anyone considering equine coaching, for practitioners who want to do it properly, and for skeptics who rightly suspect that much of what passes for equine facilitation is intellectually unsound.

2. What Equine Coaching Is

Equine coaching is, at its simplest, a structured interaction between a human client, a horse, and a trained facilitator – the coach - conducted on the ground in a controlled environment such as a round pen or paddock. The client does not ride the horse. There is no tack, no equipment, and no predetermined script. The session is designed to expose how the client communicates, regulates their nervous system, and manages relational space when the usual tools of language, status, and strategic behavior are removed.

The horse, in this context, is not a prop. It is a co-participant in a live feedback system. Horses are prey animals whose survival has depended, for roughly 55 million years, on detecting inconsistency in their environment.¹ They process information through multiple sensory channels simultaneously: movement, breath rate, muscular tension, olfactory signals, spatial dynamics. When a human enters a horse's space, the horse responds not to what the person intends to communicate, but to what their body is actually signaling. This distinction matters enormously, because most people are unaware of how wide the gap is between the two.

A well-facilitated equine coaching session uses this gap as diagnostic material. The coach does not interpret the horse's behavior as symbolic truth. Instead, they help the client observe the interaction, notice where their signals are incongruent, and begin to understand how that incongruence affects relational outcomes more broadly. The session is not therapy. It does not aim to resolve trauma, diagnose pathology, or produce catharsis, even if the latter sometimes happens. It aims to increase the client's awareness of their own somatic and behavioral patterns under conditions of mild relational pressure.

3. What Equine Coaching Is Not

Equine coaching is not equine-assisted psychotherapy (EAP), which involves licensed mental health professionals and operates within a clinical framework designed for patients with diagnosed conditions. It is not therapeutic riding, which addresses physical rehabilitation through mounted exercise. It is not animal-assisted therapy in the broad sense, which encompasses a range of interventions involving trained animals in clinical settings.²

¹ George H. Waring, *"Horse Behavior"*, 2nd ed. (Norwich, NY: William Andrew, 2003). The fossil record of the *horse lineage* - starting with *Eohippus* (also called *Hyracotherium*) - goes back roughly 55–56 million years. *Equus*, the genus that includes modern horses, appeared around 4–5 million years ago. The domestic horse that we know today (*Equus ferus caballus*), was domesticated roughly 5,500–6,000 years ago.

² Veronica Lac, *"Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy and Learning: The HERD Approach"*, (Cambridge, MA: Academic Press, 2017).

Nor is it a spiritual practice. It is not an encounter with a mystical guide. It is not a shortcut to enlightenment, nor a substitute for the slow, difficult work of understanding one's own psychology. The horse does not channel wisdom. It does not "see your soul." It does not validate your choices or reflect your essential nature. These claims, which circulate widely in some equine communities, are not merely imprecise. As we will see more in detail below (passage 5.), they are wrong in ways that matter, because they set up interpretive frameworks that actively undermine the value of the interaction.

4. Why Horses

The question "Why horses?" is asked so frequently in this field that the answers have calcified into platitudes. *"Horses are honest"*. *"Horses don't judge"*. *"Horses mirror your energy"*. These phrases are not entirely false, but they are sloppy enough to be useless as explanations. The actual reasons why horses are effective in coaching contexts are more specific, more interesting, and more empirically grounded than the marketing language suggests.

First, horses are large, powerful prey animals. Their size matters. A 1,100-pound animal that responds to your physical signals with immediate, consequential movement creates a form of feedback that no verbal exercise, role-play, or assessment instrument can replicate. The stakes feel real because they are real. Your body knows it is in the presence of something it cannot control through language or social performance.

Second, horses evolved to detect incongruence. Their survival depended on noticing when something in their environment did not add up: a sound that didn't match a movement, a posture that contradicted an approach. If you have never been around horses, you'll be surprised at how they detect the smallest variation in their environment. A different color of salt block, a sweater hung on the fence facing their paddock, 200 ft away. A different shovel.

I switch my horses between paddocks often, and every time, even if they have been in those same paddocks dozens of times, they will spend the first 20 minutes checking everything out, as if they had never been there. Janet Jones, a neuroscientist and horsewoman, describes this as "perceptual immediacy," a form of rapid pattern recognition that bypasses narrative cognition entirely.³ Recent research published in PLOS One has gone further, confirming previous studies that horses can detect human stress through olfactory chemosignals, responding with elevated heart rates and avoidance

³ Janet L. Jones, *Horse Brain, Human Brain: The Neuroscience of Horsemanship*, (North Pomfret, VT: Trafalgar Square, 2020).

behavior even when no visible signs of anxiety are present.⁴ This means horses are processing data about your internal state that you may not even be aware you are signaling.

Third, horses operate in a relational register that is fundamentally different from human social interaction. They do not respond to title, charm, or intellectual coherence. They respond to what ethologists call "signal clarity": the degree to which your posture, breath, movement, and intention align into a coherent pattern. When they do, the horse may approach, follow, or settle. When they don't, the horse creates distance. This is not a moral judgment. It is a biological response to equivocal input by an animal whose nervous system treats ambiguity as a potential threat.

This principle holds whether you are on the ground or in the saddle. Horses recognize mediocre riders right away - and here I speak from experience - because we are unconsciously inconsistent in our signals. We might signal 'go' with the left leg without realizing we are also holding tension with the right hand, while our body posture is limiting the horse's freedom to move. The horse is confused - *'what exactly do you want me to do?'* - and at times becomes anxious. Over the years, no matter my improvements, every time my trainer would jump on one of my horses I could sense a sigh of relief: *'Finally, somebody who is absolutely clear about what they want me to do.'* Horses feel the difference.

And they provide feedback in real time. Unlike a 360-degree assessment that arrives weeks after the relevant behavior, or a coaching conversation that reconstructs events from memory, and filtered through personal perspectives, the horse responds in the moment. Both in the saddle or on the ground, one can observe the consequences of a postural shift within seconds. From a coaching perspective, this immediacy creates a learning loop that is unusually tight and unusually difficult to rationalize away. And that is ultimately why horses work in coaching: not because they are wise, but because they are immediate, indifferent to narrative.

⁴ Semin, Gün R.; Scandurra, Anna; Baragli, Paolo; Lanatà, Antonio; D'Aniello, Biagio, "Inter- and Intra-Species Communication of Emotion: Chemosignals as the Neglected Medium", MDPI AG; Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI); Basel: MDPI AG, 2011- (ISSN 2076-2615), Animals, #11, 9, pages 887-, 2019 oct 31; Plotine Jardat, Alexandra Destrez, Fabrice Damon, Noa Tanguy-Guillo, Anne-Lyse Lainé, Céline Parias, Fabrice Reignier, Vitor H. B. Ferreira, Ludovic Calandreau, Léa Lansade, "Human emotional odours influence horses' behaviour and physiology", January 14, 2026, PLOS One.

5. The Problem with Mysticism in Equine Coaching

Let me be direct about something that will be uncomfortable for many equine coaching practitioners.

The equine coaching field has a credibility problem, and the source is internal. Since the modality emerged in its modern form in the early 2000s, its dominant discourse has been mostly shaped not by ethologists, neuroscientists, or even seasoned horsemen, but by life coaches, "energy workers," and personal transformation practitioners whose interpretive frameworks lean heavily on metaphysical claims that cannot be tested, verified, or falsified. This gravitational pull toward the metaphysical is easy to understand, for two main reasons.

The first is the obvious one. Horses are extraordinarily sensitive, biologically sophisticated, and relationally powerful. Churchill put it memorably: *"The outside of the horse is good for the inside of the man."*⁵ And famed horsewoman Sandy Collier captured something many of us recognize when she said, *"Horses reach into your soul, pull out the good and heal what isn't."*⁶ I could not agree more. They changed my life. Gave me a meaning I did not think possible. And it is precisely because the experience is so powerful that the language we reach for tends to exceed what the evidence can support.

The second is the symbolic role horses have played in human civilization — a role that, mostly unconsciously, predisposes us to project narrative meaning onto equine behavior where none exists. We will expand on this point in passage 7, below.

6. Horses Are Extraordinary, but They Are Not Mirrors and They Are Not Wise

Language matters as it shapes what the client expects, what the coach looks for, and what both parties treat as evidence. When the language is imprecise, the entire interpretive framework drifts. In equine coaching, the dominant language has drifted a long way from anything that can withstand scrutiny. What follows is not an exhaustive catalog, but an examination of the most consequential banalities circulating in the field: claims that sound profound, feel intuitively right, and are wrong in ways that directly affect client outcomes.

⁵ It is very possible that this quote is apocryphal, but it fits the persona.

⁶ M.J. Isakson, *"Down the Fence"*, 2017, Documentary

The founding claims from some prominent equine coaching practices are representative: *"The horse reflects your internal state."* *"What you feel is always right, the body never lies."* *"If you shift your vibration, the horse will respond."* Each of these is the literal definition of platitude: a statement that contains a grain of experiential truth wrapped in a layer of conceptual imprecision thick enough to constitute malpractice.

"The horse is a mirror." The horse does not reflect your internal state. It responds to externalized patterns of breath, muscle tone, and movement, all of which are observable and none of which are mystical. The 'mirror' metaphor is the single most damaging conceptual error in equine coaching. A mirror reflects back exactly what is in front of it, passively, without interpretation, without agency, and with perfect fidelity to the source. A horse does none of these things. It is not passive; it is a living organism with its own nervous system, its own priorities, and its own behavioral logic. It does not reflect what is inside you; it reacts to what you externalize, filtered through its own sensory apparatus, its own learning history, and its current physiological state. The metaphor implies a one-to-one correspondence between the client's internal state and the horse's behavior. What actually exists is a two-way interaction between two nervous systems, each operating according to its own logic, in a shared environment full of variables that have nothing to do with the client's psychology.

The mirror framework is seductive because it produces immediate, emotionally resonant narratives. It is also wrong. Horses respond to consistency, clarity, and congruence in their environment, they respond to visible cues, not to internalized human narrative.⁷ What we mistake for wisdom in horses is sensorimotor calibration across multiple axes.⁸

"The body never lies." As Lisa Feldman Barrett's work on constructed emotion has demonstrated, bodily sensation is not a transparent readout of reality; it is the brain's best guess about what might happen next, shaped by memory, context, and expectation.⁹ The tightening of your stomach during a coaching session could signal deep anxiety, or too many roasted peppers the night before. A stiff neck could be a reaction to deep concerns, or to a bad pillow. To treat every somatic signal as self-validating truth is to ignore how often the body gets it wrong, especially in clients with performance anxiety or dysregulated nervous systems.

⁷ Smith, A.V., Proops, L., Grounds, K., Wathan, J., & McComb, K. (2016). "Functionally relevant responses to human facial expressions of emotion in the domestic horse (*Equus caballus*)."
Biology Letters, 12, 20150907; Baba, C., Kawai, M., & Takimoto-Inose, A. (2019). "Are Horses (*Equus caballus*) Sensitive to Human Emotional Cues?" *Animals*, 9(9), 630

⁸ Michel-Antoine Leblanc, *"The Mind of the Horse: An Introduction to Equine Cognition"*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013)

⁹ Lisa Feldman Barrett, *"How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain"*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

"If you shift your energy, the horse will respond." The word "energy," as deployed in this literature, lacks any operational definition. It functions as a floating signifier: evocative, marketable, and analytically empty. And don't even get me started on "vibrations."

When a coach tells a client that the horse *is "responding to your energy"* or *"sensing your truth,"* they are constructing an ex-post narrative and presenting it as diagnostic fact. If the horse nuzzles, you are "authentic." If it approaches, you are "open." If it retreats, you are "blocked." If it moves away, you are "aggressive". Did the horse respond to the client's energy? Or was it responding to a visible change of expression, a sudden hand gesture, a shift in wind, a fly on its flank, someone walking in the distance, or the fact that the sun had moved and the shade was now elsewhere?

To the other cliché that "horses never lie" – which I admit having used myself in the past – well, they might not lie, but some of them excel at devious practices often linked to accessing grain.

Without ethological literacy, the coach cannot distinguish between these possibilities. And if they cannot distinguish between them, they have no business interpreting the horse's behavior to a client who is, by definition, in a vulnerable and suggestible state.

There is a great deal we do not understand about horses. Their sensory world is vastly more complex than most handlers appreciate. The way they approach children and individuals with serious cognitive and physical limitations defies belief, and it is precisely these moments, when the experience is most compelling, that the temptation toward magical explanation is strongest, and intellectual discipline matters most. Their social structures are more nuanced than most equine coaching literature acknowledges. Their capacity for learning, memory, and interspecies communication continues to surprise researchers. But the appropriate response to what we do not understand is intellectual honesty, not metaphysical refuge. When we don't know why a horse did what it did, the correct answer is "we don't know," not "it sensed your inner child."

7. Symbolism and Beyond.

As noted in passage 5, one of the most persistent confusions in this field is between the symbolic role horses have played in human civilization and their function in a coaching session. Understanding why this confusion is so persistent requires a brief detour into history. A detour that will pay off when we return to the round pen.

The horse is one of the most symbolically overdetermined animals in human history. He has been an icon of power, conquest, freedom, sexuality, and sovereignty for at least six thousand years. It appears in the Rigveda, in Plato, in the Bayeux Tapestry, in Jung's dream analyses.¹⁰

But horses were not merely symbols. They were material agents of civilizational transformation. The Scythians of the Eurasian steppe built an entire nomadic empire around mounted warfare and horse husbandry; their burial kurgans, in which horses were interred alongside warriors in full ceremonial regalia, tell us that the horse was not a metaphor for power but its literal vehicle. The Mongol expansion under Genghis Khan would have been physically impossible without the steppe horse: a small, hardy animal whose endurance allowed armies to cover distances that European military strategists considered inconceivable. For the Plains Nations of North America, the reintroduction of the horse by Spanish colonizers in the sixteenth century restructured economies, migration patterns, warfare, spirituality, and social organization within a few generations. The Comanche, Lakota, and Nez Perce did not simply ride horses. They became, in the anthropological sense, horse cultures: societies whose material conditions, kinship systems, and cosmologies were reorganized around the presence of the animal.

In these contexts, the horse occupied a status that exceeds what Western semiotics typically means by "symbol." The horse wasn't just representing power or freedom or the sacred. It was part of it. For example, the horse didn't symbolize the Comanche way of life; it materially constituted it. Remove the horse, and the entire social structure, economy, and cosmology collapse. Anthropologists of religion and material culture would recognize it as "ontological partner": a being whose agency is not representational but constitutive, woven into the social and spiritual fabric of daily life. The Lakota vision quest in which a horse appears is not a Jungian archetype surfacing from the collective unconscious. It is an event within a coherent natural system that includes specific ritual obligations, relational protocols with the animal world, and an understanding of personhood that does not separate the human subject from the ecological field it inhabits. The Scythian horse burial is not a decorative gesture. It is a material theology, an assertion that the relationship between rider and horse persists beyond death because it was never reducible to utility in the first place.

These cultural practices have meaning. They have internal coherence. And they deserve intellectual respect, even when they exceed the explanatory reach of contemporary western science. The error is not in recognizing that horses have occupied sacred, transformative roles in human societies. The

¹⁰ Ulrich Raulff, *Farewell to the Horse: A Cultural History*, trans. Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017)

error is in extracting the imagery while discarding the cosmology. When a modern equine coaching practitioner borrows the language of "the horse as spirit guide" or "the wisdom of the herd" without any of the ritual context, or cultural framework that gave those phrases their original force, the result is not synthesis. It is appropriation in the precise sense: taking the aesthetics of a tradition while refusing its discipline. It is the equivalent of borrowing "Dukkha" from Buddhist philosophy, translating it loosely as "stress," and building a corporate workshop around it. It becomes meaningless.

This cultural inheritance matters in coaching, but not in the way most practitioners think. It matters because clients bring these projections into the round pen with them. The executive who stiffens her posture and deepens her voice in front of a horse is not simply nervous. She is running an inherited script, one drawn from centuries of equestrian imagery in which the rider is sovereign. The leader who suddenly sheds tears when a horse approaches him is not necessarily experiencing a therapeutic breakthrough (although it can happen). He may be responding to a culturally encoded narrative in which horses represent unconditional acceptance: the beautiful creature that chooses you. It's understandable, we have all fallen for it, but especially for this reason it is also treacherous.

The coach's job is to recognize these projections for what they are, to name them when appropriate, and to redirect the client's attention from the symbolic to the actual. *"What did you do when the horse stepped back? Did you notice that your hand came up before the horse moved? What were you expecting to happen, and what actually happened? When the horse turned away, what was your first impulse? And did you act on it?"*

This is the work. The horse's value lies precisely in its indifference to our mythologies. It does not care about your origin story. It responds to your physiology. The moment we allow symbolic interpretation to override behavioral observations, we leave coaching and enter theater. And the client, who came for insight, leaves instead with a story that was never theirs. It was the coach's.

8. The People Who Mystify Horses Understand Them Least

There is a pattern in equine work that is difficult to ignore: the degree of mystical language a practitioner uses tends to be inversely correlated with their actual horsemanship, defined here not as only riding skills, but as an overall understanding of the equine world. Having said that, experienced horsemen and horsewomen - people who have spent decades working with horses in competitive, ranch, or training contexts - tend to describe equine behavior in concrete, functional terms. The horse spooked because of the tarp. The horse moved off because the handler's pressure was inconsistent. The mare pinned her ears because the gelding entered her space too quickly. I would like to believe that every day my horses run to me because of my positive energy when I enter their paddocks. The reality is probably much more prosaic: they are very well aware that the bald man usually carries alfalfa with him.

This language is not romantic and it does not necessarily sell workshops. But it is accurate. And accuracy is what clients deserve when they are being asked to make inferences about their own psychology based on an animal's behavior.

It is almost a cliché in the horse world: the person who speaks most effusively about the "special bond" they share with their horse, how they *"just understand each other,"* how the horse "chose" them, is very often the person with the least realistic grasp of what the animal is actually doing and why. The horse that "chose" them walked over because they were standing downwind with treats in their pocket. The deep connection they describe is, more often than not, a projection that the horse tolerates because nothing about it registers as a threat.

Along the same lines, and trying not to fall into broad generalizations, in my experience the practitioners who describe horses as "sentient healers" or "wisdom keepers" tend to be those whose primary equine experience is limited, based on the interactions with quiet geldings or older draft horses - animals selected precisely because they are unlikely to do anything completely unpredictable, - often in a safe, confined environment. They have not mucked stalls with kicking babies at five in the morning, dealt with colic at midnight, managed a difficult birth at 3am, halter-broke hot fillies, spent exasperating hours convincing an unwilling stud-colt to load into a trailer, or managed a herd dynamic in which one horse's behavior had nothing to do with human emotion and everything to do with establishing rank over feed. They have not, in other words, spent enough time with a variety of horses to see them for what they actually are: complex, sensitive, sometimes frustrating, often inscrutable animals that deserve the respect of being understood on their own terms, not ours. The refuge in the mysticism is therefore a defense mechanism for behaviors they can't really explain.

This is an exercise in observation, devoid of cynicism or conceit. And it matters, because when that same interpretive habit migrates into a coaching session, clients end up receiving feedback not from the horse, but from the practitioner's fantasy of what the horse represents. All I know after living nine years with my horses is how little I know. Pretending otherwise, believing oneself gifted with peculiar energetic wisdom, and projecting it onto the client through a magical thinking frame, is both dishonest and ineffective.

9. Forget the "Authentic Self": Equine Work Under Pressure Triggers the Dark Side

Perhaps the most pernicious claim in equine coaching is that working with horses "brings out your authentic self." This phrase, borrowed from the broader, flawed, self-help lexicon, assumes that beneath the social masks and professional personas lies a true, coherent, fundamentally good self, waiting to be revealed. The horse, in this narrative, is the instrument of revelation. I reject this premise entirely. There is no singular authentic self to be found, with or without a horse. The subject is constitutively divided. What we call "identity" is a narrative construction, a story we compose and revise in dialogue with our history, our communities, and our commitments. It is not a buried treasure to be excavated.¹¹

What equine work under pressure actually does is something far more interesting and far less comfortable than revealing authenticity. It triggers what the Hogan Development Survey calls the "dark side": the dispositional strategies that emerge when conscious self-management fails.¹² These are the interpersonal schemas, organized around Karen Horney's framework of moving toward, moving away from, or moving against people, that surface under stress, fatigue, or ambiguity.¹³ The meticulous professional becomes a paralyzing perfectionist. The confident leader becomes grandiose. The cautious strategist becomes avoidant.

A horse creates exactly the conditions under which these patterns emerge: mild pressure, unfamiliar context, no verbal control, no status advantage. When the horse doesn't respond as expected, the client's habitual coping strategies intensify. They push harder, withdraw further, or attempt to charm. None of it works. And in that failure, what becomes visible is not the authentic self, but the unmanaged self, the dispositional patterns that the client's usual narrative keeps regulated. This is clinically useful. It is diagnostically precise. And it is the opposite of what many equine coaching practitioners claim to be doing.

¹¹ Federico Malatesta, "The Myth of the Authentic Self", 2025: <https://www.federicomalatesta.com/the-myth-of-the-authentic-self-issue-n-7-may-2025>

¹² Robert Hogan and Joyce Hogan, "Hogan Development Survey Manual", 3rd ed. (Tulsa, OK: Hogan Assessment Systems, 2009).

¹³ Karen Horney, "Our Inner Conflicts: A Constructive Theory of Neurosis", new ed, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992)

10. One Tool in the Arsenal, Not a Mystical Answer to Everything

Equine coaching is a tool. A remarkable one, when used correctly. But a tool nonetheless, with specific applications, specific limitations, and a specific place within a broader developmental architecture.

Hugging a horse in the pasture or in the round pen feels wonderful. The warmth, the breath, the weight of another living being choosing to stand next to you: it is genuinely moving. But it will not resolve your developmental challenges. It will not rewrite the narrative patterns that drive your relationships. It will not address the gap between the leader you perform and the leader your team actually experiences.

What it can do is create a moment of somatic awareness that interrupts habitual patterns long enough for something new to be noticed. That noticing is the beginning of coaching work, not the end of it. A single equine session without cognitive integration, without framework, without follow-up is an experience. A powerful one, perhaps. But an experience is not development. Development requires interpretation, structure, and sustained practice.

This is why equine coaching should be situated within a broader methodology that includes dispositional assessment, narrative identity work, somatic regulation, and structured integration. The horse provides data. The framework provides meaning. The coaching relationship provides continuity. None of these elements works in isolation.

11. Why Leaders Need This Work

The executive coaching market is valued at approximately \$15B. billion (USD) globally, and most of it addresses only part of the problem. The standard model assumes that leaders need better strategies, sharper communication skills, or more refined emotional intelligence. These are not wrong, exactly, but they are insufficient for the challenges that bring most senior leaders to coaching in the first place.

The leaders who reach out to me are not, generally, failing at execution. They are experiencing a narrative collapse: the progressive dissolution of the story that once made their professional life coherent and their authority legible. Their strategies are sound. Their teams are functional. Their results are strong. They have achieved what they set out to achieve. And yet, this achievement has not produced the meaning they expected, in a process I call “success inflation”: the phenomenon by which sustained achievement produces diminishing returns of meaning, where each new accomplishment requires

greater effort to generate the same sense of purpose that earlier, smaller victories once provided effortlessly.¹⁴

This is not a performance problem. It is an identity problem. And identity problems cannot be solved with better tools, more data, or another 360-degree feedback cycle. They require a different kind of intervention: one that operates at a narrative, somatic and relational level simultaneously.

12. What Remains

There is a version of equine coaching that deserves to exist: rigorous, grounded in ethology and neuroscience, honest about what we know and what we don't, integrated into a broader coaching architecture, and respectful of the horse for what it actually is rather than what we wish it to be. There is also a version that should be allowed to fade: the version that trades in projection, mystifies the animal for commercial effect, and mistakes a powerful experience for a completed intervention.

The distinction between the two comes down to something simple: whether the practitioner has done the work - in horsemanship, in science, in their own development - or whether they have substituted intensity of feeling for depth of understanding.

It comes down to whether the framework can survive scrutiny from someone who actually works with horses, not just someone who facilitates encounters with them. And it comes down to whether equine coaching is treated as one tool among many, or elevated into a quasi-spiritual practice that promises transformation while delivering only affect.

The horses, for their part, are indifferent to this debate. They will continue to do what they have always done: respond to the world with precision, without narrative and without any interest in whether we have understood them correctly. The least we can do is try.

¹⁴ Federico Malatesta, "Success Inflation", 2026: <https://federicomalatesta.substack.com/p/success-inflation-when-winning-stops>