

Believe What You Want

One of the greatest things about our country is that we are free to believe as we wish, as we choose or just plain believe what we want. I've been thinking about this article for a long time and wanting to write about the differing types of information that are available to us as horse people, and the different sources. Three types of information are anecdotal or story-like, empirical that is observed or experienced, and scientific or quantified information.

When I was in college, I had to read a book, "How to Lie with Statistics", by Darrel Huff. Statistics became very important in shaping my decision making process and my belief structure. Statistics is theory about probability, reliability and likelihood of occurrences. Understanding the theory of statistical formulas, how, when and why they were applied was not as difficult as learning long division when I was in the fourth grade.

I recently repurchased the Huff book, and though some of the inferences are quite dated, the theory is not. It is the layman's guide to understanding how conclusions can be presented in false ways. It is a must read for anyone who wants some guidance for evaluating what the big "They" say: "They say blah is true, blah percent of the time, and therefore BLAH"

Now here is an interesting one. When I look at my horse and nod my head, he moves in the direction I nod. This single experience has no more chance of being reliable than the odds of flipping a coin. Right? Well, there was a Hungarian study published in the journal, *Animal Cognition* that was recently cited in *The Horse* magazine. The results of the study applied to socialized horses which had no previous pointing training. 74% of the time, when the researcher pointed from a distance of four to 31 inches at a particular bucket, the horses selected the correct bucket and found apple slices. In the numbers game, this is statistically significant. When the horses chose randomly, they chose correctly only 48% of the time, about half the time. I am aware of two conclusions made about this study. First, at certain distances most socialized horses can follow the pointing gesture without previous training. The second conclusion was horses learn faster with food....Duuuuuhhhhhh.

Let's talk about anecdotal evidence, basically a story. My friend, Star, has a pony that is highly allergic to flies. He rubs his body raw scratching itchy fly bites. She read about the antioxidant value of flax oil and its omega acids. She began to feed a cup of flax seed to the pony. The following fly season, he did not have an allergic reaction. Was it the flax seed? There is no way to know. There are too many other things that could influence the pony allergies-- its environment, where its hay was grown, the amount of pollen in the air, the type of paint that was on the itching post.

Does this mean it wasn't the flax? No. It just can not be proved that it was. It doesn't mean that it is not true, just that this absence of allergy is random. Random, sometimes it flares up and sometimes it does not. The allergy trigger and its cure are a crap shoot.

It seemed to me like a very harmless thing to try on our allergic horse, so why not? I am feeding the flax seed too. Will it work? I have no idea, in fact I think it is highly improbable. It should not hurt in anyway and may be nutritionally valuable. If I get lucky and my horse's allergy is improved, great. My experience will also be just anecdotal.



One of the statements about horse behavior that drives me nuts, is when THEY say that the lead horse does not use force to control its herdmates. Next, this statement is blended into the horse and human relationship; therefore saying you never need to nor should you ever use force to influence your horse.

I have to get this off my chest. This no-force assertion is bunk, less than

a crap shoot, verifiably not true. The lead horse uses force, period. It chases, bites, kicks, threatens with bared teeth, squinted eyes and flattened ears. The force varies depending on the environment. If one horse does not give way, the force begins. Domestic horses use force.



Experiment 1:

(DO NOT DO THIS AT HOME!)

Have three paddocks in a row with gates connecting to the center paddock. Put two strange horses in each end paddock. Shake a grain bucket and put the bucket dead center in the empty paddock between the two horses. Next, open the gates so both horses can go to the grain. About now, most horse people are thinking I am crazy. But, there are people who don't know horses and who might assume a polite conversation ensues:

"Hi, I'm "Pretty Pony and I just noticed that yummy food in the paddock between us"

"Hi, I'm Happy Horse, I saw that too."

"Gee, Happy, you don't mind if I call you Happy do you? Do you like grain?"

"Yeah, Happy is fine, Pretty. And yes, I love grain, but I hate the way the little kernels stick in between my teeth. See?"

"Oh, Happy, your owner needs to find you an equine dentist. If we clean our teeth often, we don't develop those little spaces where kernels can hide causing cavities and halitosis."

"Aww, shoot, Pretty, when I was a foal, I learned the suck, slosh, spit method of cleaning my teeth. I can see my mom now, standing over the water trough, with water and bits of hay and grain dripping out of her mouth. The sun would shine just under her chin and make the green bits of goo sparkle like emeralds. I always loved how shreds of food would just dribble off her tongue, and then get caught and cling to her whiskers."

"Oh my, how nice. But, not to change the subject, Happy, but I was thinking maybe we would just walk on over to that bucket and share it. What do you think? Want to?"

“Well, ya know, Pretty, I think that’s a great idea. Let’s just mosey on over there and then you can tell me more about that equine dentist thing. I really like to share.”



The picture is the empirical conversation. And here is my interpretation. Happy’s teeth are bared he is not smiling, his ears are flattened against his head, the eyes are narrowed. The pretty horse has one ear directed toward Happy. If we could see Pretty’s other eye, it too is likely focusing on Happy. The next action is generally that Happy will lunge toward the fence in an attempt to reach Pretty. If Pretty does not move out of Happy’s reach, he will sink his teeth into Pretty’s hide. Pretty will not like it. Now, if Happy thinks of you as just another pretty face, he will treat you this way too. It may take time, but it can happen.

Anecdotally, I was once at a horse auction, where a pretty palomino horse was flattening its ears and charging the fence when people walked by its pen. The auction owner was later bitten in the face by this pretty horse. It did not go on the auction block, I guess it went to another kind of block.

Some people have called me because they don’t like the way their horse treats other horses in pasture and they wonder if training will fix that. Oh, have I ever said, --“Horses are not dogs; horses do not think like dogs; and often horses are not trained like dogs, unless one uses clicker training or Pavlovian Classical Conditioning.”

Let’s talk about empirical evidence. Empirical evidence is observed but not interpreted with



human meaning. For example, my horse pricks his ears toward me when I approach. I interpret that to mean something like: he loves me, he’s hungry, he wants me to untie him, he wants to go be with his friends, he is singing a song.

In an empirical study, the behavior would be noted and counted, and then compared empirically and statistically to some other event. Empirical science never assumes what it can not observe. Pure empirical scientists never say, “ a horse loves, thinks, feels, wants”. That is all interpretation. Sometimes I make a joke when people ask me why a horse does such and such and say, “I don’t know, I keep asking him and he won’t tell me.”



I am not an empirical purist by any means, but my thinking about my horses and the horses I train is an awareness that we are indeed different and I can not always assume what is going on in their experience of me, or their experience of the world. I have experiences with many different horses that lead me to make conclusions. I certainly believe there can be different types and qualities to the relationship we have with our horses. I do not like to use force, but I will not

hesitate to make my point, especially if I am defending my personal space and safety. I believe that horses have an amazing capacity for discerning our intentions based on the movements and sounds we make with our body. I do believe I have seen anger and fear in a horse's eye. There I times I've seen something in their eye but I was not sure what. And almost sure sometimes there was a smile on their face.

