

Kids, horses, teachers, ...and other living things

Monty Roberts is known for his revolutionary work with horses, but he spends much his time today doing teacher and leadership training for schools, and management training for business and industry. If you wonder *why*, here are some additional things to think about when reading his books, watching his PBS videos, or listening to his presentations.

- Possibly because of the novel and movie by the name, many people refer to him as a "horse whisperer." But note that the actual title of this book refers to a *Horse LISTENER* -- "The Man Who Listens to Horses."

The difference between the two is the real power of what Roberts' work means for all of us who attempt to influence behaviors of living systems. How much of teaching is "talking" and how much is "listening?" Think of the teachers who most influenced you. Was it the content they delivered or what they seemed to understand about you? And how are the two "teaching skills" connected?

- Note that the key to Roberts' success as a "teacher" was that first he listened and found out what the horses could tell him about *how they learned*. Roberts' knew he *always* was dealing with a "whole horse" -- that had a *mind of its own*. And because he had figured out its learning process, he knew "what it *wanted*."

By going with the flow of the process already pre-wired in the brain he proved that changed behaviors can be effective, sustainable, and accomplished in far less time (from three-months down to 30 minutes) than any of the traditional way's people have used to teach [or "break"] horses.

- How does his *Join-up* process --(first *engage*, and establish *trust*; then use that trust to interact; and out of this *interaction* begin to develop an intrinsically-driven relationship that is the support of all "work" that may follow) -- compare to what you know about effective teaching and coaching?
- How does his "simple" logic of starting with the *learner you have* [and its already embedded learning structure], reinforcing it, and using that capacity to develop what *you don't have* relate to the beliefs and strategies underlying other effective approaches to individual and organizational change? For instance, where does "*developmentally-appropriate education*" start? And if you know about organizations and communities using "*Appreciative Inquiry*," or "*Assets-based Community Development*" what seems to be similar?
- How does this approach to intrinsically-driven change relate to the management goal of "*continual improvement*?"
- In his book, one can see that to develop understanding and acceptance of his way of "breaking" horses, Roberts had to address several conditions that similarly get in the way of understanding these learning/teaching processes in schools.

The old ways still "seem" to work. They take longer and cost more though, and increasingly people are beginning to realize that they have "consequences." For example, what is "broken" in traditional horse-breaking is not the horse, but its "will." The consequence is loss of the horses spirit.

We may not be used to thinking of schools as *will-breaking* institutions, but the structures and processes we ALL have accepted as the scope and nature of schools can produce that consequence. As Peter Senge points out:

"The young child learns very quickly that school is not about learning. School is about avoiding mistakes. School is about gaining approval and avoiding disapproval. These are the same lessons the first time worker learns. Don't screw up, do what you're told, if something is screwed up make sure you don't get blamed, at all costs look good.

In these post-Littleton days more people are recognizing that children are largely disconnected from the two institutions that are supposed to engage and nurture their growth - the family and the school. And both lack a "join-up" process because the need for it hasn't been seen as essential.

Most people don't understand the nature of learning as a *natural process*. Until the advent of scanning technologies in recent years, we've had no way to "listen" to the brain. School structures we have all accepted, and continually try to improve, turn out to be like almost all other organizational structures -- they force *unnatural behavior* on consenting adults...and children.

Unfortunately, this new knowledge isn't easy or natural for many people to accept because it requires a shift of fundamental beliefs. It's interesting to note how Monty Roberts was able to develop his unique capacity to "listen" - or actually "see" what others couldn't. He has a *learning disability*. As the author Laurence Scanlan notes in his introduction to *The Man Who Listens to Horses*:

"Monty is not just color-blind--born with a confused sense of color as many men and women are. He is what an ophthalmologist would call achromatopic: he sees no color at all, but a rich array of blacks, whites, and tonal grays."..."Military camouflage," he [Monty] told me, "is a confusion of color. It stirs the eye up so you don't see the shapes. The color blind just see the shape, but it also means we see so much more than the normally sighted.' ... His color blindness (which he hid, by the way, most of his life) meant that as a boy of twelve observing wild mustang herds for weeks at a time in the Nevada desert, he saw patterns of movement that you or I might have missed."

Today, as the public and profession have been learning about how the mind learns -- the fundamental truths about the "wiring" of living beings -- it is primarily seen as something that applies to children's minds. Another "thing" that adults need to be "trained" to apply.

If, like Oz's *Scarecrow*, adults in schools discovered they too "had a brain," how could this knowledge be applied to intrinsically drive needed changes in teaching and schooling processes?

Support of credible "believers." Roberts' book tells the fascinating story of the key role played by Queen Elizabeth in moving his concepts to the *fundamental belief* level throughout a nation. One can't read it without seeing connections to the types of resistance to educational approaches that derive from a fundamentally-different way of seeing the problem.

But the book also contains critical insights for overcoming that resistance. It's important to note that the Queen's transformation -- there was no way she would allow any of her horses ever to be trained the old way --was "results"-driven. But, as opposed to education's focus on disconnected results, the Queen saw "results" and the consequences of the results.

Yes, it was important that the process was reduced from three-months to 30 minutes, with obvious cost savings, but the consequence for the horses spirit provided the convincing data. "Problem" horses that had been sent to Roberts for "remediation" became World Class "winners."

Where, outside of schools today, can one find *credible believers* to make the case for approaches whose *consequences* are an integral part of the results being monitored?

Which approaches have consequences important enough to bring people to the *leap-of-of belief* similar to the Queen's?

How might they be mobilized to help schools and communities recognize the immediate relevance of these ideas for their children?