

# Everything left unspoken

Published: Mar 09, 2008

With its silent language of gestures, horse whispering is not only for the feverish esoteric, it's a way to connect humans to horses. Oliver Roberts attends a session and leaves a convert



It was like watching a mystical woman calming a violent ocean with her eyes. Making no sound, Koelle Simpson stood in the centre of the ring, following the panicked horse with her body. The thing — large and cruelly muscular — ran in circles and flicked out chunks of dirt with its hooves, panting with such force that the distress came out of its nostrils in a visible, white breath.



POETRY IN MOTION: Koelle Simpson trained under legendary horse whisperer Monty Roberts; a horse runs the ring, waiting to be whispered. Pictures: JAMES OATWAY

The beast must have felt trapped and, for a moment, it seemed cruel that its anguish was being turned into an educational spectacle. Part of me, though, felt a grim satisfaction at watching the creature, used to galloping across vast plains, determined to do the same in confinement. Its instinct to run did not fit inside this space, and so it became pressurised, ready to explode. That I was inside the crowd that was watching this animal with a kind of confused awe made me want to shout “Stop!”

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But from Simpson there were no exclamations, no sense that the horse was being damaged in any way. She just continued to watch and make secret gestures, unconcerned at the waves thundering onto the deck.

Then the horse began to slow, but not out of exhaustion or resignation of fate — it slowed because it had stopped feeling scared. Still saying nothing, a greater hush passed over Simpson's body, and the horse no longer seemed captured.

With the horse now still, Simpson approached it in an arc, a shapely approach signifying benevolence. Once beside the horse's face, Simpson stopped and waited. For a second, the space between the two animals — horse and human — seemed torn between trust and instinct. Then, in a movement so simple it belied its significance, the horse stooped and, without a pause, rested its head on Simpson's shoulder.

Watching this performance — it is more poetry really — made me understand why it's called horse 'whispering': it is a motion of quiet tenderness towards an animal surviving on suspicion. Horse whispering's allure is that man's exclusive gift to feel empathy works in juxtaposition to a creature's impulses to only have faith in its own kind.

Simpson, 28, grew up on a sod farm in Florida in the US, and was introduced to horse whispering by its godfather, Monty Roberts, when the two met by chance in 1998. She began instructing at the Monty Roberts International Learning Centre three years later and now works for him full time.

Her visit to South Africa last week coincided with that of Dr Martha Beck — the mawkish bestselling author, motivational speaker and 'life coach' with whom Simpson is completing an apprenticeship. This, as well as the workshop's promise to help you "discover yourself through the eyes of a horse", put me on high tweek alert. I pictured coiffed horse-lovers in snug Jodhpurs, weeping with joy while saying of their horse: "We spoke! I felt it — we connected." However, after witnessing Simpson's supernatural equine séance, I wanted to believe in it.

Tall and slender, and possessing the staunch, padded bottom of a lifelong horse rider, Simpson has the presumptuous confidence typical of those who tame wild

beasts for a living. Her flawless way of speaking — strictly no ‘ums’ or ‘ahs’ — lends her considerable authority, and she chews gum in that jowly American way.

Last Saturday, Simpson demonstrated her skills at a workshop for about 25 people at the Lipizzaner Hall in Kyalami. The tutees — all women — each paid R2000 because they’ve realised their horses do not speak English, and they want to know how to get the burly things to do what they tell them.

“I recently lost the horse I had for 16 years,” says one, “and over that time we’d developed an incredible bond of trust. I have a new one now — a bright, young warmblood — but I don’t know if I can develop the same trust with it.”

“Mine is a middle-aged mare,” says another. “I have a very strong bond with her, but as soon as we bring in another dynamic she becomes pushy and dominating. I’ve been told I should give up on her, but I’m not prepared to do that.”

One woman admits she was supposed to bring “her guy” along for Simpson to work on, but he refused to get into the horse box. “My horse is the most beautifullest in the world,” says the woman sitting next to her, “but six weeks ago he threw me off and I broke four bones.”

I am unsure whether Simpson’s initial concern should be towards the unhesitant use of the word ‘beautifullest’ or these people with their difficult horses, but she appears unflustered by both.

“The problem is that we think horses think the same way we do,” Simpson says. “I have a lot of clients who come to me and say, ‘Just fix it’. And I can do that in 15 minutes, but once the horse is back home it misbehaves again. The reason is that the horse is not always the problem.”

It is then that Simpson asks some of the guests to fetch their horses and demonstrates her silent skills in the enclosure. Hooves kick, dirt flies, nostrils burst, and then it’s all over.

With gestures, body posture and eye contact, Simpson and the horse are speaking a subliminal language known as Equus. The theory is that, because humans have a highly developed neo- cortex — the area in our brains responsible for rational thought and language — we're able to relate one thing, whether it's an object or a thought, to something else. The neo-cortex gives us rationality and the skills to adapt according to an environment. No other animal has this acute ability.

Equus works on the premise that the horse will respond directly to everything you do and, because it cannot understand spoken language, it is the non-verbal cues that create the conversation between human and horse.

“Horse whispering is all about creating a balance of leadership,” says Simpson. “While humans often think beyond the immediate moment, horses live in the present — they feel, smell and hear everything. The instant there is a leadership void, the horse will want to fill it. You need to convince the horse that you are an acceptable leader.”

Simpson compares the relationship to that of a parent and a child. By not setting strict boundaries, you sometimes believe you are being kind to the child, where in fact you are spoiling them and making it difficult for them to understand that no means no.

It is a strange, almost frightening, thing to watch an animal learning something. In one exercise, Simpson gets some owners and their horses to walk together at the same speed, the owner leading. The goal is to get the horse to stop directly at the owner's side when she stops walking. At first, the horse does not slow down in time, and either bumps into its owner or stumbles in a graceless, four-legged way reminiscent of a car when it runs out of petrol. Simpson intervenes with heavy yanks on the lead and I spot a kind of humiliation in the horses' faces that again makes me want to call a stop to it all.

However, within minutes, the horses are getting it right. They fall calmly into place, stopping at their owners' sides, all because of a relentless aptitude to learn from trial and error. Recognising this sentience in a horse's slow-blinking eyes is both beautiful and eerie.

Equally unsettling is the Equus idea that humans have something to learn from horses. "Horses mirror what you are feeling," Simpson says. "They are extremely sensitive. They can help us to reconnect with our inner compass and teach us how to be better at living in the present. You're solving two issues at the same time — yours and the horse's."

Perhaps, then, horses can tell us — in whispers of course — how to stop running too.

- Simpson will return to give demonstrations in Johannesburg and Cape Town in May. For more information, e-mail Fiona at [ghoekstra@mweb.co.za](mailto:ghoekstra@mweb.co.za). To find out more about Equus, go to [www.giftofequus.com](http://www.giftofequus.com). To watch Koelle Simpson in action go to <http://multimedia.thetimes.co.za/> and follow the link.