

I'M INSIDE THIS CIRCULAR PEN, with this very large horse, for a sampling of the Leadership Workshop led by Koelle Simpson, creator of The Gift of Equus, which offers programs to help people grow personally and professionally. For five years, Simpson was the head instructor at the International Learning Center run by Monty Roberts—the original “horse whisperer.” Under Roberts’ tutelage, Simpson taught horse owners how to improve their skills by “speaking horse”—how to read and translate horses’ nonverbal signals, and train even the most skittish or damaged ones nonviolently and compassionately. (She also worked with damaged horses herself.) She discovered that people who become fluent in “horse” inevitably become more effective communicators with two-legged travelers as well.

In Gift of Equus sessions, Simpson offers a fascinating fusion of horse whispering, biofeedback and life-coaching techniques to teach participants, whether they own horses or not, how to develop leadership skills and become more effective communicators.

“Ninety-three percent of communication is nonverbal,” Simpson tells our group. She maintains that our body language conveys more than half of what we mean. Our tone of voice expresses about 40 percent of our message. And our words? A measly 7 percent. “Animals only respond to the truth—your physical body language,” Simpson explains. “They get confused when our body says one thing but we say something else. The capacity for language equals the capacity to lie.” Working with horses helps us become better leaders, Simpson promises, by helping us synch up our verbal and nonverbal communication.

For the centerpiece of the Leadership Workshop, we’ve driven out into the Sonoran desert, perfumed with juniper and mesquite, to a gorgeous ranch in Scottsdale, Arizona. Simpson leads us into a light, airy barn more lavishly appointed than most SoHo lofts. Each horse that we work with is damaged in some way; they’re here to learn to trust humans, and we’re here to help them. One horse radiates unrest and fury; we all avoid him. Blondie seems a little skittish, but John, a massage therapist, bonds with her. Annette, an interior designer, chooses Monty, who seems good-natured if a little stubborn. I settle on Allie, who seems cautious but unlikely to flatten me into a tortilla.

I lead Allie into the middle of the circular pen and step into the “blind spot” directly in front of her head, giving her a firm nose rub. I’m safe, I’m telling her. You can trust me. I then unhook the longline from Allie’s halter, slapping it vigorously against my thigh, “sending” her from my herd of one. Allie leaps into action, galloping around the ring, glad to be getting away from the crazy lady making the loud noise. My job is to stand in her “driving zone,” about 45 degrees behind the line of her shoulder, and keep her circling around me.

Here comes trouble. As Allie approaches the side of the ring flanked by a flapping white tent, she rears like her



hooves are on fire. She’s scared witless by that tent. I’m scared witless by her. “Come on, Allie!” I shout, even as I shrink away from her.

Allie bucks and shies. My yappy primate frontal lobes, with their havoc-wreaking capacity for language, don’t fool her. “Don’t let her back away,” Simpson urges me. “Show her you’re in charge. Be the matriarchal mare.”

The matriarchal mare rules the herd. Horses are prey animals; it’s essential to their survival to know who’s in charge at any given moment. Put 20 horses that are strangers together, and in mere minutes they’ll know exactly where every one fits in the horse hierarchy. The matriarchal mare guides everyone to food and drink, and dispenses discipline by isolating, or “sending,” a naughty horse from the herd. As the matriarchal mare, I’ve got to be firm, directive, yet serene. “True leadership comes from a place of being truly tranquil, so others want your leadership,” Simpson explains.

I go into full Matriarchal Mare Mode now, squaring my shoulders, slapping my longline, and eventually I get Allie circling regularly, although she keeps glancing back nervously at the tent like a starlet pursued by paparazzi. “Now