Animal Assisted 'Grammar'?

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Image: Skye - Healing Hooves, Canada

Is the horse a tool we use in our work?

A mirror we gaze into for self-reflection?

Or a sentient being we partner with?

Is it a horse that we work with?

Or is he/ she/ they a horse who we work with?

Why does it matter?

This article explores these questions from several different perspectives as well as the implications of our answers, both for the effectiveness and safety of this work for our clients and for the wellbeing of our equines.

Grammar is not a topic I ever anticipated writing about and my English major daughter, who regularly corrects my grammar, may be somewhat concerned! Please also be reassured I'm not adding yet another acronym to a field that's over full with them. But I am increasingly aware of how much our words do matter in this field and that this requires us to consciously attend to the language we share. And sometimes, we need to break the rules.

I recall, early in my career, trying to describe this work to the new management team of a partner organisation. I realised I was doing a lousy job when one of them declared, "I get it! The horse is simply one of your tools. Like in our groups when we show a video to make a point, you're just using

horses instead." My heart sank as I knew this wasn't how I wanted our work, or these remarkable and sensitive living beings I share my life with, portrayed or understood.

In 2022 the UK Parliament passed the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act recognising all vertebrate animals and some invertebrates (e.g. lobsters) as sentient. While opinions differ on what is meant by the term 'sentient', which derives from the Latin verb 'sentire' meaning 'to feel' or 'to perceive', most definitions include being able to perceive and respond behaviourally to sensory input, and to experience emotion. Most of us would agree, and equine neuroscience can now confirm, that this certainly applies to equines. Equines are highly intelligent, have good memories and excellent abilities to learn (in some ways superior to humans) and experience different emotions. And if they didn't respond behaviourally to the information they receive through their senses they would likely not have survived as a species. Equines are sentient beings.

Recognising that we are working with sentient beings, as has long been an underlying guiding philosophy for both Healing Hooves in Canada and Scotland, and for our international certifying body Pro-EFW, has huge implications in terms of the potential within this work and our responsibility towards our equine partners. And how we talk about our animals and work can either reflect or refute this philosophy, whether we recognise this or not.

In the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, author and botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, discusses what she calls 'the grammar of animacy':

"In English we would never refer to a member of our family, or indeed any person, as **it**. *That would be a profound act of disrespect.* **It** *robs a person of selfhood and kinship, reducing a person to a mere thing. ... In Potawatomi and most other indigenous languages, we use the same words to address the living world as we use for our family. Because they are our family ... English doesn't give us many tools for incorporating respect for animacy. In English you are either a human or a thing ... (and) the only way to be animate, the only way to be worthy of respect or concern is to be a human ... Grammar is just how we chart relationships with each other. Maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world ... a world with a democracy of species, not a tyranny of one, with moral responsibility to water and wolves ... It's all in the pronouns."*

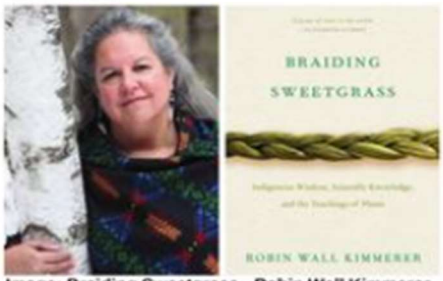


Image: Braiding Sweetgrass - Robin Wall Kimmerer

Robin applies this line of thought to all living things and reaches important conclusions regarding our responsibilities towards our world and environment. She argues that part of the shift required to heal our relationship

with this planet is to stop thinking of animals, plants, and elements such as water, rock and oil as objects, resources and things for us to use for our own desires. Rather, she encourages a view of them as subjects to whom, through a sense of responsibility and gratitude, we can find our way back to reciprocity, respect and relationship.

There are of course many other contexts where language has been used to facilitate exploitation. By depersonalising a race for example, people have used other people as objects or resources and justified this through language and thinking that aims to rob those people of any consideration of their humanity and sentience.

There is much we can apply from all of the above to our work with equines, including the shift from object to subject. An object is used for a time and can then be discarded, ignored or thrown away while a subject requires our ongoing respect, responsibility and understanding through relationship. Like that video tape. Or perhaps an older horse with health issues who can no longer be 'monetised' or otherwise used to serve our purposes.

If the horse is an 'it' that we 'use' in our work, we are also missing out on the huge relational opportunities and inputs our equine partners can bring to our clients. I have long believed and experienced, and am excited that equine neuroscience can now confirm and explain, that horses naturally offer the empathy, genuineness, non-judgement and unconditional regard described by Carl Rogers, founder of Person Centred Counselling, as pre-requisites for emotional healing and growth. But if we, including through our language, reduce our equine partners to tools or objects, to 'its', we hinder the ability of our clients to receive our horses' gifts.

Another pitfall I see regularly in our field, which is perhaps a more subtle expression of the equine as object perspective, is the '**horse as mirror**'. A mirror is another 'thing', existing to reflect back our own image for us to focus upon. We can certainly benefit from working with an equine viewed this way. In these cases we are exploring our own behaviour, emotions and thought processes in relationship with ourselves, any other people involved in the interaction, or our perception of some problem, person or situation we see the equine as representing for us in that moment. All of which can be valuable. Yet, if we view the equine as a sentient being, we open up so many more possibilities. Yes, the equine can provide us with a mirror, but he is also his own being, with his own emotions, thoughts, opinions and needs. Working within this broader context provides the potential for richer, deeper and more meaningful healing, learning and growth.

What we say matters and how we label other living beings is communication.

To us, to them, and to all who are listening.

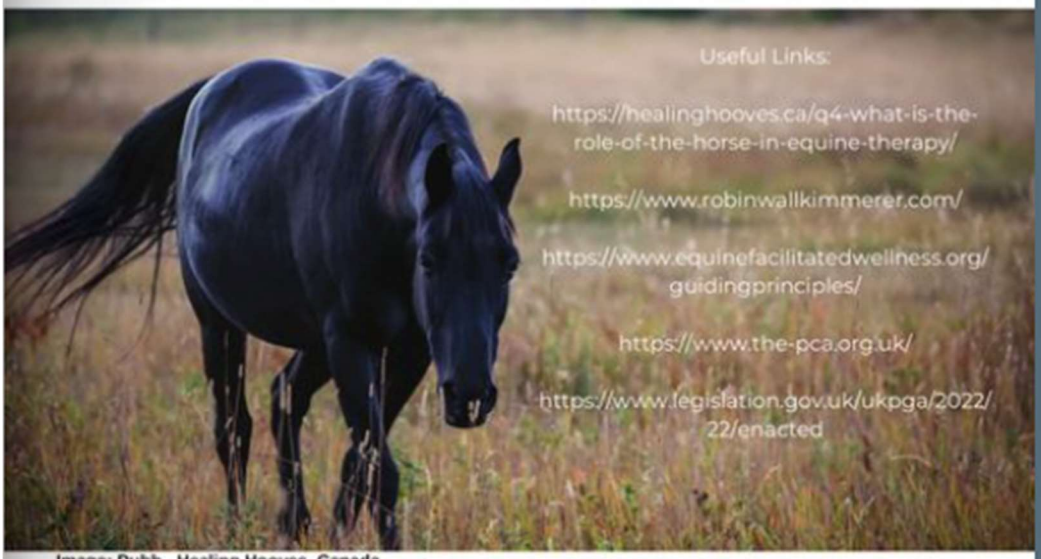
Safety is also a considerable factor in this debate. Mirrors and other tools don't generally weigh 1,200lbs with the

capacity to move at great speed at any given moment in response to us, each other and their environment. Equines, as sentient beings who perceive and respond to what they sense in their environment, to what they are experiencing emotionally, and to what they recall from past experiences, most certainly do. And that response is not tempered by analysis of the situation as ours might be, because the part of our brain responsible for this, which is also the part that judges others and dons masks, doesn't exist in the equine brain. We may also reduce our horses' (and our own) longevity and emotional health and well-being in this work if we don't feel the responsibility to care for them beyond the minimum necessary care extended to a useful tool, and if we don't experience the honour, feel gratitude and practice respect for all that our sentient equine partners contribute to us and to our clients through meaningful reciprocal relationship.

So I call for some changes in language all around. Some of these changes, such as the shift from tool to sentient being, have already become mainstream in our field, if not in all equine disciplines. But some may take time as much of language is habit and habits change slowly. And for many of us it may require sifting through old written material to make some pronoun changes. In summary, this is what I propose we aim to consciously change in terms of how we think, speak and write about our incredible partners in our work, our equines:

From using a tool or a mirror to partnering or working with a sentient being
From object to subject
From it to he/she/ they
From a horse that... to a horse who ....

And perhaps, in time, we can extend this to all of life in this place we call home. For everyone's sake.



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