

# The art of helping

## Helping through the eyes of the horse

By Ruud Knaapen



In most cases the help you need comes from an unexpected source. For me that help came some 17 years ago, on my 34<sup>th</sup> birthday. My wife got me a 10-lesson riding ticket at a riding stables and a pair of hard plastic riding boots. I could hardly suppress my disappointment, but heard her say: 'I never know what to give to you for your birthday. Surely it is not ever exactly what you are looking for, so I chose this as your present.' With strong reluctance I went to the stables. By the time I got back home, I was hooked. Not to the riding, but to the horses. That, was something I had not expected at all, but it was exactly the help I needed in that particular time of my life. \*

### Helping and problems

The coach exists by the grace of problems, or rather symptoms. That is not surprising in itself, because it is often the reason for turning to a coach for help. Bert Hellinger writes in his book *The art of helping (2004)* ('De kunst van het helpen (2004)'): 'You do not need a problem to be able to work on solutions.' When I mentioned this to a colleague of mine, he looked at me and asked me how I would be able at all to retain clients. I sincerely replied: 'If you ask me this question – what chance does a potential client have to get rid of his problem and to get rid of you?' I believe I unconsciously confronted myself with my response as well.

What does helping actually mean? What does helping have to do with my role as a coach? Who is helping whom? These questions were increasingly concerning me. Why did I want to help in the first place? For me the answer came, as mentioned, from an unexpected source, from the world of horses.

*“Some time passed after my birthday gift and at one point I stood with my own horse in the arena. It was a Saturday afternoon and it was another of many attempts on my part to gain the trust of this horse. However it seemed she was turning even more and more away from me. After two years, this had become a familiar sight: my horse in the corner of the arena, ears pinned backwards, neck stretched high and her tail between her legs. I was in the center of the arena, waiting for something that was not going to happen. My intentions were good, sure: I felt that this horse needed help and I could give that to her. At the time I was working as a consultant at a consulting firm and we ‘sold’ help with the best intentions. However, this day turned out to be different. When I looked at my horse, standing there tight and tense in the corner of the arena, I suddenly saw something different than the other times. I could not name it. I only know that the image of my horse, standing in the corner, moved me. I could hardly look at her and my impulse was to immediately put her in motion. This time it did not work. I felt stuck between the reality of what I perceived and my good intentions to change something in that reality. I remember I turned away from her as if I pulled myself away from that situation. I wanted to do something, but I couldn’t. The image already stuck inside me. My head was spinning, my legs became heavy and I suddenly felt intensely sad, even though I did not know yet exactly why. I gave up or perhaps complied, I am not sure, but behind me, I heard a deep sigh, felt three long whiskers against the back of my hand. For the first time my horse stood right behind me.”*

It all happened so fast, that my brain could not comprehend what actually had taken place between my horse and myself. It was more a physical experience and in a strange way I felt ‘understood’ by the horse. I sat down on a bench next to the arena to figure out what was going on. But I did not manage to step out of the experience, or out of my head. My horse on the other hand stood there as if she had nothing to do at all with what just had taken place. The inevitability of the image of my horse standing in that corner, the impact on me, and immediate response of the horse to me, almost felt as if an intervention had taken place through the back door. I clearly remember sitting on that bench, looking over and over at my horse as if she would explain or reflect on what had happened. Of course **that** did not happen.

My pattern was literally jammed in that corner. My “problem” did no longer cooperate. All of a sudden an image unfolded that unexpectedly hit me. Sure there was a vague sense that the image of my horse standing in the corner represented some part of me; a part of myself that I had chased around the arena for years. Really seeing this, was almost like a physical observation, beyond good and evil, beyond feeling and thinking and most of all: beyond images I had about myself (and my horse) until then. In a flash it seemed a connection was restored with a part of myself that had not been accessible until then. I really had not been aware of this and was convinced that my horse lacked something, just as I would unconsciously think the same of my clients.

## **Interruption of patterns**

Helping is, if you actually consider it, a loving way of not cooperating with a pattern. Patterns have the tendency to keep themselves alive, to repeat themselves and to hire helpers who will keep the cause of these patterns out of sight. Often the cause of patterns is too painful to look at or does not hold a place any longer within the boundaries of good and evil. Exactly at this point is where the “inner herd” of the client becomes incomplete and the horses do their work.

My horse broke my pattern. Suddenly I was face to face with part of myself that I did not want to or could not see. I was being confronted with a part of my personal history that was too painful. The second thing my horse ‘did’, was offer a holding space to really look this in the eye; how did she do this? By any means, my horse, without judgment, had me experience how hurtful it is when my inner herd is not complete and in the same motion let me know what it feels like when it is. Horses make this happen in a split second, faster than we can protect ourselves.

Horses are interesting coaches, because they seldom let the problem formulation put them to work. They do not respond to analytical problem definitions or requests for help. They just respond instinctively to what is present in the here and now. They do not analyze what they are confronted with, but respond to that with their whole being. Also this counts for, or perhaps, especially if it concerns matters that may be too painful or too precarious for us to look into the eye.

I think that for horses ‘us’ and ‘them’ and ‘the world around us’ is always a whole. Their instinctive responses to us come from there: from the world as a whole, even if the whole by us is experienced as fragmented.

It is precisely this ability to experience the world around us, us, the client system as a whole, which offers space for a different kind of helping and coaching. As coaches we tap into that instinctive power of horses and work with that insight: we look through the eyes of the horses to see where the “inner herd” of the client is seeking wholeness.

More about horses as coaches in my book ‘*Coachen met paarden, het systemisch perspectief*’.