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From Horses

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Leading with Chi Instead of Words or Rope:
The Power of the Silent Half of the Brain

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Spiritual Leadership

By ALLAN J. HAMILTON, MD

Consider two recent images:

One image is of our president, tautly engaged and oddly displaced, as he watches half a world away while his orders to kill Osama bin Laden are carried out before his own eyes in real time. There's an eerie surrealism to it: a president close enough to this execution as to be splattered with the digital blood of a virtual but real foe. We don't see the hated terrorist who ended up little more than a ghost amid the dust and rubble of a decade of warfare. We don't have to see him.

The second image is a snippet of video focused on a beagle in the village of Minami Soma, a few miles from the stricken Fukushima Daiichi plant in Japan. The people were forced to evacuate, leaving behind everything—including their pets. The beagle is tied to a post, left to die from radiation and starvation. As rescuers and film crews make their way through the abandoned town, they are greeted by packs of dogs, skeletal and furtive. One dog circles nervously in place, torn between running away and guarding a fellow pack member, who is lying still on the ground next to him, already dead.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY THOMAS KACHADURIAN

In these images of our triumphant president and the dying dogs, we may experience two parts of the human psyche — and see how easily the human spirit can be pulled into seemingly opposite directions. On one hand, we may feel the blood-rush of retribution, the sense of great wrong made right when we know that Bin Laden finally was hunted down. On the other hand, when we see innocent animals trapped in ruinous, filthy, and deadly conditions that are not of their making and beyond their comprehension, we experience a profound sense of pity and, in many ways, shame too. While we know that thousands of human beings perished in the wake of the tsunami, somehow the images of those dogs seemed to evoke the tragedy and sense of devastation far better than others. And the loyalty of the one dog that will not abandon the body of its dead companion serves as a counterpoint to the abandonment the dogs experienced at the hands of their owners, who, in their defense, protested vehemently against authorities forcing them to leave all pets behind in the evacuation.

I call to mind these images because we humans are both lion and lamb. Inside our complex brains are attributes of both predator and prey. When we think of leadership, we traditionally and naturally look for those who embody our predatory attributes, the pack leader who can successfully manage the hunt. But in our current world — in which we humans seem increasingly likely to become prey to ourselves — perhaps it is time to focus on a different type of leadership and perhaps a different way of being that is also a powerful part of our nature.

Long before I became a brain surgeon, I fell in love with horses — one of the ultimate “prey” species. Nowadays, I spend a large part of my time not so much training horses but teaching people through horses. I think we have powerful lessons in spiritual leadership to learn from prey species like horses. Let me explain.

A Very Short History of Predators

Our success as a species was, in large part, born from becoming highly specialized as predators. Two and a half million years ago, our primate ancestors were forced to abandon their arboreal existence and take to the savannas because of global warming (the old-fashioned kind,

produced by a change in the tilt of the planet). When our ancestors stepped out of the trees, they had to compete in the new environment, so they learned to coordinate their groups to make packs. The mark of a predator that hunts in packs — whether they are wolves, killer whales, or humans — is language, and we became the world’s most articulate beings. Along the way we also became the world’s best makers of weapons.

Language ability and the dexterity for making weapons became the hallmark of our species; literally, our “killer apps.” And as language became so important, the left side of the brain, where speech is housed, became the overwhelmingly dominant influence over our thinking. In fact, as you read these words and weigh these ideas, there’s a little voice generated in the left side of your brain reading them inside your head. Experiencing our thought processes translated into words likely created our sense of internal identity, what neurologist Antonio Damasio has called the “autobiographical self.” That self-identity in turn created the predator dichotomy; namely, the hunter and the prey. The subject and the object; the inside — the me — versus everything else that is outside. Language in many ways gave birth both to me and my sense of separation.

The Alternate Language of Prey

Prey animals, especially herd animals like the horse, for example, do not experience an autobiographical self in the same ways that we do. Horses also do not rely on vocalization to communicate, because using sound would give away their position to predators. Instead, they rely on a very eloquent but silent method of communication developed millions of years before humans arrived on the scene. Using their body language, stance, and position, they convey a huge lexicon, a language, named *Equus* by horseman Monty Roberts. This language is built upon sensing energy, or chi, and of conveying meaningful, energetic messages. A mere twitch of the ears, a change in the slope of the shoulders, or a shift in the hips is enough to send ripples of energy throughout all members of the herd.

To best conceptualize this, look at film footage of zebras nervously sipping at the edge of a watering hole. Some zebras dip while others rise. Ears perk up, swinging back and forth. Eyes widen. Heads swivel. Nostrils test the wind.

And then they sense the predator. They feel the lioness crouching low in the grass. They experience the intensity of her hungry stare, the tension encircling her whole body. Even the nervous twitch of her tail is palpable to the zebras. A *live* zebra feels all that. The dead zebra is the one that waited to be sure.

With such profound connection, there is also an enormous difference in identity. Since their survival is tied to being a herd member, a prey animal has a strong communion with its group. As predators, it is hard for us to grasp what it means to belong to, to be a herd. A horse is only half a horse without its herd. Its identity is a “we.” In normal states of consciousness, we can only envy animals their sense of immersion, being of and in the world.

The Herd in Us

But that doesn’t mean we don’t have any access to the experience of prey animals. The experience is inside our brains as well. In fact, we can look at the division of functions between the left and right side of the brain almost like a parceling out of predatory, self-absorbed functions in the dominant left hemisphere and the prey-like, herd-connected functions in the silent right half.

The left brain, for example, will look at a photograph and determine when and where the picture was snapped. It sifts for clues like a detective. “When was my hair that long? Is that the Student Union building in the background?” The right brain, on the other hand, looks at the same photo and silently expresses the emotional content: “My, look at how happy we all are in that snapshot! I was so in love back then.” The left thinks; the right feels. The left makes diagrams, while the right paints pictures. The left develops painstakingly detailed instruction manuals, while the right translates the power of poetic imagery. And ultimately, the left separates the universe into what is “me” and what is not me, while the right feels a communion with all the life forms and energy around it, the way a horse might feel the world.

A Sudden Shift toward Prey

Harvard-trained neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor wrote a wonderful book titled *My Stroke of Insight*. In it, Dr. Taylor describes her experiences while she suffers a stroke in the

The Practice of Impeccability

Horses immerse us in an energetic context, beyond reason but within the reach of emotion. They provide us with a detailed feedback about how adept (or clumsy) we are at feeling energy and moving it. We learn from our equine partners how to clear our minds. We silence the incessant reminders our brain is producing about our personal needs, appetites, and anxieties.

When we do, our energetic output suddenly surges. Our ability to sense and manipulate chi sharpens. As we acquire the ability to concentrate and focus chi at will, our goals begin to clarify themselves effortlessly.

Along with this budding clarity of thought emerges the property of impeccability. Impeccability — to be without fault — is derived from the Latin *in* (without) and *peccare* (sin). When we clear our minds, we free ourselves of the collective flaws that fill up our daily lives and befoul our thinking. This helps us further amplify our own energy. As we do, our horse begins to respond with greater ease and willpower.

From *Zen Mind, Zen Horse: The Science and Spirituality of Working with Horses*, Allan J. Hamilton (Storey Publishing).

left half of her brain. A bleed begins to expand and as it builds, her left cerebral hemisphere, the dominant side of her brain; goes “off line,” like a power grid dimming until all the lights go out. And the right side, the mute, prey-like side of her brain, still with full power, begins to suddenly come into its own. Since her language abilities disappear, so does the overpowering presence of the left half of her brain. She describes her reaction:

“I look down at my arm and I realize that I can no longer define the boundaries of my body. I can’t define where I begin and where I end. Because the atoms and the molecules of my arm blended with the atoms and molecules of the wall. And all I could detect was this energy. Energy. And I’m asking myself, ‘What is wrong with me, what is going on?’ And in that moment, my brain chatter, my left hemisphere brain chatter went totally silent. Just like someone took a remote control and pushed the mute button and — total silence. I was immediately captivated by the magnificence of energy around me. I felt at one

Are You in Charge?

Every horse, every member of a herd, asks one question of the leader: *are you in charge, or am I?* Each horse is looking for someone to lead the herd — even just a herd of two. The horse needs an answer. If you exhibit the four C's (command, control, compassion, communication), the horse will accept you as *otancan* — the leader. If not, the horse must assume leadership over you.

Otancan is the Lakota word for “leader, the greatest.” Once the horse recognizes you as *otancan*, it has two obligations to fulfill. The first is to follow you. In return, the horse expects you to look after it by exhibiting the four C's. The horse's second obligation — one that many humans find difficult to accept — is to repeatedly challenge you as *otancan*. As the trainer, you are not permitted to remain *otancan* unless you consistently prove you deserve to be.

That's the *otancan's* burden. If you accept becoming the *otancan*, being worthy in the eyes of your horse, you must rise to the challenge by bringing impeccability to your relationship. You develop a partnership with the horse that frees you of your personal agenda, your private needs. Instead, you listen and look after the needs of your horse.

Finally, to be truly in charge, you can't really need to be. Leadership is something your horse bestows upon you, never something you get because you demand it. Being a leader is a reward, not a right, and it should come because the horse recognizes the leader in you. You must shift perspective from the left-hemisphere position, where you believe you deserve something, to the more right-brain perspective, of seeking to earn the recognition. With respect to the results of natural horsemanship, I am inspired by the quote from the Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu: “When the effective leader is finished with his work, the people say it happened naturally.” So it should be with your leadership of your horse.

From *Zen Mind, Zen Horse: The Science and Spirituality of Working with Horses*, Allan J. Hamilton (Storey Publishing).



with all the energy that was, and it was beautiful there. And imagine all of the relationships in the external world and the many stressors related to any of those, they were gone. I felt a sense of peacefulness. I felt euphoria.”

It is intriguing that so many spiritual practices — prayer, mantras, and meditations — all involve techniques to help silence our inner voice. When we can bring our “selves” to be quiet, a sense of connection, of becoming a being that, as Dr. Taylor described it, is “enormous and expansive” can assert itself. When we lose our attachment to ourselves, a sense of profound connection to a greater awareness is often appreciated. Alan Watts, an author who tried to convey the intricacies of Zen philosophy, went farther in terms of connecting meditation with language: “We are sick with fascination for the useful tools of names and numbers, of symbols, signs. Meditation is therefore the art of suspending verbal and symbolic thinking for a time.”

The Path of the Spiritual Leader

In many ways, spiritual leadership follows a similar trajectory, moving from an individualistic, predatory point

of view to one that is wedded to a much more universal, prey-animal's sense of being immersed in a greater awareness. Of going from personal right to universal rights. Of shifting one's own perspective to a global one. Of seeing life as more than mere existence but rather as purposeful being.

Lawrence Kohlberg was one of the iconic thinkers in the field of moral development, and he delineated a developmental timetable along which morality emerges. Kohlberg has shown that children under the age of ten seem to grasp right and wrong as a matter of rules handed down to them by adults. After ten, children begin to conceive of moral decisions in terms of their consequences. In other words, perception of wrong lies not so much in one's own mind as it does in how others may see it. At this stage, wrongdoing is simply what gets punished. Adolescence is when morality becomes a matter of relationships: you don't wrong those you like or love. The fourth stage is where morality is a reflection of societal order, where the notions of justice, of crime versus duty, begin to emerge. Society is the arbiter of good and bad.

The last two stages, which emerge in early adulthood and beyond, represent, first, a sense of a social contract and, later, the notion of universal principles. In the former, there's a central algorithm that society exists to

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toward spiritual leadership.

uphold the liberties of the individual without infringing on the rights of others. And then, a rare individual (most of us don't) passes into the realm of universal principles of morality. For example, civil disobedience, as both Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. advocated, may be required to ensure a more just society. Breaking the law is morally correct when it helps ensure a greater good and is eclipsed by a higher sense of justice.

So our sense of connection, of empathy for our fellow man and woman, becomes our compass guiding us toward

If You Still Don't Believe in Chi

Recently, I had the great pleasure of spending part of an afternoon in the ring with Allan Hamilton and one of his horses. In that brief time, I learned that the horse could be made to shift position simply by focusing my intention. I also learned that how well the horse behaved in my presence — whether it followed me obediently or took control of the situation — had more to do with the state of my mind than my body. For me, a lifelong athlete, it was heady stuff to experience such dramatic movements in such a large creature with a shift of thought. My skeptical left brain is still trying to explain it away — and not having much luck. (My right brain is probably chuckling, but, of course, I can't hear it.)

Afterward, Dr. Hamilton graciously agreed to video the exercises so that readers could share the virtual experience. The video should be available at SpiritualityHealth.com by the time you are reading this. The videos should also be a great companion to his wonderful new book.

—STEPHEN KIESLING

spiritual leadership. When we watch the next nature show on television, we can see beyond the life and death struggle of a lion stalking a zebra on the savanna. It's not just a physical struggle for survival between predator and prey; it's a metaphorical contest between an “eat what you kill” view of capitalism versus a corporate notion of global responsibility — a “we share the food we eat” attitude. It is moving from an individual perspective to a worldview. The contest between right and left hemispheres is between differentiating and integrating. Between getting and giving. If, in the broadest sense of the word, spirituality is about connecting and, as Rick Warren states, “leadership is about stewardship,” then the path of spiritual leadership may carry us along the path of the lamb, of creating collective stewardship.

Allan Hamilton, MD is a horse trainer and a Harvard-trained brain surgeon. His latest book is *Zen Mind, Zen Horse: The Science and Spirituality of Working with Horses*. (Storey Publishing).