

## From Domination to Dialogue and the Ethics of the Between: Transforming Human-Working Equine Relationships in Mountain Tourism

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**ABSTRACT.** The welfare of working equines is born of the relationship co-created with humans and the relational practices humans bring to this work. Our understanding of this relationship remains elusive, however, for it involves attending to that which arises both within and between the equine and the human. Attempts to study such relationships have, arguably, been confounded by the liminalities of relational practices, power literacy and the limitations of language, propositional knowing and the dualistic thinking that characterises many scientific disciplines. This paper presents the theoretical framework that underpins an experiential awareness-based Action Research approach to transforming human-equine relations within the international mountain tourism industry. This approach privileges curiosity, compassion and *primary* or *contemplative knowing* and the development of self-awareness. Drawing on the work of Martin Buber on genuine dialogue and of Otto Scharmer on generative dialogue, this paper provides insights into what can arise in the *between* when attitudinal shifts are encouraged and facilitated that allow humans and equines to meet genuinely and be fully present to each other. This ultimately involves surrendering control, letting go, the dissolution of subject-object awareness and access to non-dualistic ways of knowing. An awareness of the importance of such shifts and of the source from which we operate is of fundamental importance to the realisation of the co-creative project that humans and equines can engage in. Failure to appreciate this distinction, arguably, leads and gives rise to relationships, whether human-to-human or human-to-horse, characterised by domination rather than partnering, absencing rather than presencing, by monologue rather than dialogue. The ethical and practical implications of this awareness are profound, with implications felt at the level of the individual, for whom the *I* deepens the more you pay attention, and at the level of the relationship, but also at the level of communities, whether these be constituted locally, nationally, internationally or indeed globally.

**Keywords:** human-equine relationship, Domination, Dialogue, Partnering, Martin Buber, Awareness-based Action Research, Working equine welfare.

### INTRODUCTION

The complex working relationships that humans and equines have created throughout history have somewhere close to their heart, an equally complex relationship with, and understanding, of power. Whether the working equine is carrying, pulling or being ridden; they are contributing labour and are mandated (Coulter, 2016; Cousquer & Alison, 2012) to do so. As such, they are vulnerable to exploitation. Their owners and handlers are often, however, similarly mandated to work and are themselves easily dominated and exploited. This paper sets out to explore how this (ab) use of power can be understood and how power-literacy and awareness of the *source* from which we operate can inform and transform relational practices and therefore the welfare of working equines and the communities that dependent on them. This paper further sets out to explore how an awareness based systems change practice that privileges sensing journeys can be applied to industries that have historically exploited pack mules and muleteers.

The literature on power is spread across many disciplines, ranging from pedagogy (Freire, 2000) to theology (Wink,

1992; 1999), human ecology (McIntosh, 2004) and deep ecology (Macy & Brown, 2014) to peace studies (Galtung, 1996), public and planetary health (Baquero *et al.*, 2021) and more-than-human biopolitics (Baquero, 2021). Any synthesis of this literature with a view to critiquing the powers that impinge on the welfare of working equines, of necessity needs to adopt a transdisciplinary One Health approach (Baquero, 2021) when seeking to promote the health that stems from healthier, more equitable and reciprocal relational practices. What follows recognises that there is a need to bring the inner science characterising awareness-based Action-Research (Pomeroy *et al.*, 2021) and collective trauma studies (Hübl, 2020) into conversation with the more traditional objectivist sciences that have tended to dominate the literature on working equine welfare. This challenges us to adopt a systems approach and “shift our focus from objects to processes and relationships, from hierarchies to networks and from objective knowledge to contextual knowledge” (Harding, 2006: 38). In doing so, we start attending to the question of what it means to be human and recognising how it is inextricably intertwined with the question of who we will be to each other. By doing so, we are better able to compassionately inquire and live into the questions that confront us when we seek to promote better human-working equine relations. In tending to the interplay between inner life, outer life and the life we co-create together, in mapping out and drawing attention to the ways deeper levels of listening and awareness can be transformative, it is hoped that those working with communities who rely heavily on working equines can

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better appreciate their roles as critical pedagogues, capable of supporting these communities, who are all-too-often powerless, to transform the conditions that contribute to their pain and to the transmission of that pain to working equines. This work requires us to bring the domination system and the practices of domination that sustain it into view. By getting the “system in the room” (Senge *et al.*, 2008) we can then start considering what it takes to move from relational practices of domination toward practices of reciprocity and partnering.

Any understanding of the journey from domination to partnering (Eisler & Fry, 2019) requires us to understand what gets in the way of *genuine meeting* and *dialogue* (Buber, 2000) and the inner work required if we are to become available to the other. As Thich Nhat Hanh (2021: 187) says “in true dialogue, both sides are willing to change”; this willingness however is usually lacking for our wilfulness gets in the way and we typically lack both the intention to listen deeply and the necessary training in listening.

This paper explores the question of how we move from domination to dialogue in three parts. It starts with an overview of the history of the human-horse relationship, focussing on how systems of domination and oppression establish themselves. This allows the oppressor mindset rooted in the necessity of conquest, where “to be is to have”, to be named and unmasked (Wink, 1992) and made available for inquiry. In the second part, this paper presents an alternative that is distinct from the ways Human Animal Studies scholars have considered human thought within multi-species relations (McVey, 2017), drawing on an established Action Research approach (Arts *et al.*, 2021; Koenig *et al.*, 2021) that delivers transformational change through deep listening. This approach draws its inspiration from Martin Buber’s dialogical encounter with a horse to explicate how *turning* to the *I-Thou* can transform our selves (the *I*) and our relational practices. In doing so it explores the promise offered by dialogical theory and practice, highlighting the transformational power of genuine dialogue. This *turning* represents a key threshold that we must learn to cross in developing relational practices within an awareness-based systems change programme. A brief outline of this constructivist methodology is provided (with an emphasis on why Action Research privileges experiential and presentational knowing over propositional knowing) before moving to the third and final part of this paper. In this section the application of this shift from domination to partnership and the accompanying eschewing of “power over” in favour of “power with” (Macy & Brown, 2014) is explored by considering what we choose to place in the mouth of working equines and how we then engage in partnering. It will do so, drawing on empirical examples drawn from a review of, and reflections on, ten years of ethnographic and awareness-based Action Research field work (Cousquer, 2018) on how the international mountain tourism industry became aware of and addressed the welfare

issues associated with systems of control – specifically the traditional Moorish bit. – and co-created opportunities for pack mules and muleteers to develop relationships based on deep listening, where compassionate inquiry is privileged leading to greater self-awareness and awareness of the mule.

#### A HISTORY OF DOMINATION

To understand and better appreciate the oppressor mindset, it can help to examine the long history of collective and generational trauma that has marked humans and equines and their working relationships and that we are caught up in and enculturated into.

The domestication of equines provided horsepower and a means of transport that revolutionised the way humans could farm the land, control and trade resources, travel and fight each other (Bendrey, 2012; Hallberg, 2008; Hall, 2005; Levine, 2005; 1999; Mitchell, 2015). According to Buffon (1791: 306), “the reduction of the horse to a domestic state is the greatest acquisition from the animal world, which was ever made by the art and industry of man”. The term ‘reduction’, however, hints at the manner in which such a powerful creature came to be, not domesticated, but ‘dominated’ (Baratay, 2003: 21). Vignes (2011) suggests that domestication represents the ultimate phase of the intensification of the relationship between animals, plants and humans, hinting that such domination only became possible for animistic and totemic human societies when they abandoned the view that they existed on the same hierarchical level, changing “their horizontal conception of the World into a vertical one”. This suggests a shift in the relationship from one of equals to one of subjugation, from a networked system to a hierarchy.

Buffon (1791) praises the horses’ perceived merits, but in doing so, appears to paint over the horse’s own intentions, preferences and welfare, creating an impression that horse and master share the same intentions, qualities and pleasures:

Equally intrepid as his master, he encounters danger and death with ardour and with magnanimity. He delights in the noise and tumult of arms, and annoys the enemy with resolution and alacrity. But it is not in perils and conflicts alone that the horse willingly co-operates with his master... (1791: 306).

The stories humans tell about horses thus render the horse’s exploitation justifiable, admirable even. As Paolo Freire (1985: 73) points out: “the relationships between the dominator and the dominated reflect the greater social context. ... Such relationships imply the introjection by the dominated of the cultural myths of the dominator.” Elsewhere (1985: 71), he states that “in the fields as well as in the circus, the apparent work of horses reflects the work of men”. The dominator is thus able to impose objectives on the dominated (whether they be human or

equine) without the latter being aware of this or having much choice. It is then, arguably, convenient to deny the possibility of an equine having intentions and goals that could be aligned with those of a human. This makes their exploitation easier to prosecute because, not only are the methods to keep the exploited under control presented as entirely necessary but the myth that this oppressive system is fixed in the order of things is also imposed and any means to contest this denied.

This does not mean, however, that the impact on equine welfare was entirely invisible. Buffon recognises at least some of the effects of the devices and practices used to dominate, direct and exploit the horse:

If sometimes permitted to roam in the pasture, he always bears the marks of servitude, and often the external impressions of labour and pain. His mouth is deformed by the perpetual friction of the bit; his sides are galled with wounds or furrowed with cicatrices... (1791: 307).

These quotes juxtapose the many ways humans have come to know horses and other equines with the invitation offered - when we detect signs of the real impact of our practices and actions on the equine - to attend to, know and care about the equine. Berger (2009: 21) commends Buffon's "tenderness towards animals which temporarily reinstates them as companions" at a time when the Cartesian division of body and soul had reduced the animal to the status of a machine. This leads us to consider to what extent the horse's experiences and welfare were accessible to Buffon and others and what might render it more-or-less invisible. How then are we to know both the equine and the knower who claims to know the equine? What does this then say about the relationship that they share and the extent to which systems of domination prevail because they remain unnamed, veiled and are not engaged?

Historically, the human-equine relationship was founded on militaristic ideas and culture; a culture in which the male values of control and domination came to characterise the relationship (Birke & Brandt, 2009; Enoff, 2014; Goldstein, 2004; Van Weeren, 2017). That is not to say that such practices are entirely born of cruelty and brutality for we must remember that the harsh life of the desert nomad (Thesiger, 2007) gives rise to what the Général Daumas refers to as "les moeurs du desert"<sup>1</sup> and that the love the Arabs bear for the horse reflects this (Abd el Kader & Daumas, 2008: 95-107). Cousquer (2018: 202) argues, however, that while these practices may be the product of circumstance and necessity, they are also "born of singularity - of a hierarchical way of ordering the world that leaves little room for tyranny to

be challenged and reimagined". This hierarchical and typically paternalistic way of being and acting in the world informs thinking around communication and relational practices, including training in what communication is or might be, in communication practices and the ends to which communication is used. According to Hall *et al.* (2008), the "main aim of traditional training techniques is often stated as gaining control over the behaviour of the horse". This is further reflected in Esterson's (2014: 6) description of the bit's role and purpose in which it is asserted that "fundamentally all bits have the same purpose: to allow us to control our horses better." This should be contrasted with alternative characterisations of the bit (and alternatives to the bit) that place listening (or at least communication<sup>2</sup>) at the heart of the relationship, emphasising mutuality understanding and trust as essential constituent parts of the relationship (Cook & Kibler, 2018; Cook, 1999; 2013) - of which more later.

For much of history, the equine was a tool or servant that served the needs of man. In terms of how we are, view and communicate with the equine: doing prevailed over being, unilateral telling or demanding (Argent, 2022, p.45) over asking, monologue over dialogue. This then is the domination system that privileges the perspective and realities of the dominator and obscures those of the dominated.

#### TURNING FROM DOMINATION

In this, the second part of this three-part paper, we consider how the domination system has been disrupted and consider alternatives to domination based on the dialogical principles of respect, mutual reciprocity and the self-transformation that arises when we open ourselves to the possibility of change and create space for other possibilities to emerge. We start with stories for as Donna Haraway (2016, p.12) says

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

The stories we tell about equines evolved whenever a shift in emphasis occurred from what we do with horses to who we are with each other. Bieri (2008) argues that literary works such as Anna Sewell's "Black Beauty" created animal biographies that have allowed the reader to identify with the animal and develop a "sympathetic imagination"

<sup>1</sup> This phrase can be translated as the ethics or honour code of the desert nomad.

<sup>2</sup> All too often we listen to speak rather than to hear. There are thus significant differences between listening and communication. Communication can often be practised without shifting the source from which we listen in order to listen more deeply.

that allows us to empathise with the suffering they endure at our hands. Élisabeth de Fontenay distinguishes between two ways of writing for animals, distinguishing between two types of author, those who make animals speak and those who speak of them:

Car après tout, ce parler des bêtes on peut l'entendre en deux sens. Comme un *génitif subjectif*: les bêtes parlent, disons que nous les faisons parler. Ou bien comme un *génitif objectif*: nous parlons d'elles. Je placerais ceux qui font parler les bêtes du côté de la *mimesis*, de l'allégorie, de la prosopopée, et ceux qui parlent des bêtes du côté de la *diegesis*, du récit, de la narration, de la description<sup>3</sup> (2008: 27).

There is thus a choice of narrative voice that can speak for and help us know the equine. These are to be distinguished from the animal voices produced when co-opting an animal into the human family and into spectacle (Berger, 2009: 26), marginalising their needs and turning them into human puppets, projecting “the pettiness of current social practices ... onto the animal kingdom”. Animals are thus marginalised, not just physically but culturally; this represents a barrier to knowing. Bringing non-human animals back in and giving non-human animals their voice is no easy matter, however: As Buller (2015: 376) puts it: “What is required are approaches to animals that do not rely upon wholly human representative accounts – the animal as it is seen (Derrida, 2008: 82) but find other ways of letting animals speak – the animal that sees”.

Murphy (1991: 50), in his call for “an ecofeminist dialogics” in which humans learn to read the dialects of animals, claims that “non-human others ... can be constituted as speaking subjects rather than merely objects of our speaking”. Donovan (2008: 50) argues that it is possible to pay attention to and study what is signified by such things as body language, eye movement, facial expression and habits, thereby restoring these absent referents to discourse “allowing their stories to be part of the narrative, opening in short the possibility of dialogue with them”. This, however, raises intriguing questions about what form(s) that dialogue might take and whether there is a need for perceptive people to translate or otherwise plug the gaps that exist between our understanding of animals and their own lived experiences. It is to the filling of the gaps that we now turn.

Temple Grandin (2008) has drawn on her own perceptual abilities as an autistic person to develop an empathic understanding of how cattle can experience fear and panic

in the abattoir environment and how this awareness can be used to transform the design of American slaughter plants. Despret (2009), in her critique of Grandin's work, recognises that whilst animals and autistic people may be visual rather than verbal thinkers and therefore “geniuses of perception”, this suggests that being able to understand the animal and speak for them is something of an exceptional quality. These are qualities of attunement, empathy and listening but are they exceptional or simply unrealised possibilities? Grandin (2008) argues that cattle and other animals think in pictures and that her own autism has allowed her to imagine herself in an animal's body and see things from their perspective: thinking in pictures without words, tuning into the fear that she believes is the dominant emotion in both autistic people and animals such as deer, cattle and horses. I have argued in my own Action Research work, that the use of well-taken film and still images (presentational knowing) captures a story and allows the viewer to revisit, explore and make sense of that story.

Whilst the ability of words and pictures and therefore of story to help us see and care about animal suffering is undeniable, it is also easily dismissed as anecdote by those (see for example Hall *et al.*, 2008; Waran & Randle, 2017) who argue that objective measures (i.e. ‘scientific evidence’) are required for us to know that an animal suffers. This reflects the perception that sufficient evidence is required to persuade practitioners to evolve (or transform) their practices, to change themselves. It also reflects a hierarchy of epistemologies in which our ability to see and feel an animal's fear and know they are afraid is demoted, whilst other forms of knowing are arbitrarily promoted. We thus end up with the proxy of cortisol blood levels being accorded more importance than the look of fear we read in an animal's eyes. This raises interesting questions about the criteria used, not for truth, but for sufficiency. How is it that we lose sight of people's willingness to disbelieve the evidence of their own eyes? Why is that responsibility for knowing is delegated to those who can see and (or?) gather persuasive evidence; how is it that we, as Hinchliffe (2005: 644) puts it, “divide human off from the non-human” and “matters of choice from matters of fact”? Hall *et al.* (2008) argue that quiet, withdrawn (and even calm, bombproof) equines should not be assumed to be “happy” and “relaxed”. This represents a challenge to the orthodoxy that an unhappy equine shows obvious behavioural problems and encourages us to consider the subtler, harder to interpret signs that hint at a disturbance of their inner world. They bemoan, however, the lack of “scientific work in this area”<sup>4</sup>. In doing so, they point to a gap in our knowledge, an ‘information gap’ (Brown,

<sup>3</sup> Translation: “After all, speaking of animals can be understood in two ways. As a *subjective genitive*: animals speak, that is to say we make them speak. Or as an *objective genitive*: we speak of them. I would place those who make animals speak on the side of mimesis, allegory and prosopopoeia and those who speak of animals on the side of diegesis, narrative, narration and description.”

<sup>4</sup> They do not, however, question the limited “ways of knowing of positivist-oriented academia” that Heron and Reason (2008, p. 367) “see as based primarily on abstract propositional knowledge and a narrow empiricism”.

2015) and draw our attention to how such gaps have historically been plugged by those with vested interests and orthodox views. Attending to these narratives is thus as much about noticing how information is organised and strung together as it is about noticing how information gaps are plugged to allow a story to hold together. This is why alternative narratives can be so destabilising (Buller, 2013) and disruptive. McManus (2014: 120) proposes that “orthodoxy may be little more than the heresy that won, and we are becoming more sensitive to the voices of the defeated”. Françoise Wemelsfelder, who has devoted much of her career to validating our ability to understand the rich inner life of other species and language animal expressivity expresses this beautifully when she proposes that “the notion of sentience is about standing in relation, about ‘relating’ humans and animals into an evolving story” (2012: 244). When we learn to deepen our listening, compelling alternative narratives become available. We no longer feel compelled to dismiss their story and can seek alternative ways of staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), of sitting with the challenges involved in understanding how (not whether or to what extent) the equine suffers.

In France, Pierre Enoff (2014) has articulated (and, through his own >40 year example, enacted) a particularly strong challenge to the traditional cultures and beliefs that have resulted in horses being broken, shod, stabled and denied grazing and social interaction with other horses. Birke (2007: 236)<sup>5</sup> provides an account of the emergence of “natural horsemanship” (NH), concluding that the movement is, in many ways, a reaction against the instrumentality and brutality that exists in the horse-world, advocating instead that we need to find ways of working with equines based on kindness and respect:

The growth of NH forces the horse’s well being and relationship with humans into the spotlight: Whatever methods we use should take into account the horse’s point of view.

Whilst the rejection of ‘horse breaking’ in favour of ‘joining up’ represents a revolution in horsemanship and a clear rupture with the exercise of force (Miller & Lamb, 2005), it is still, ultimately “concerned with getting into the saddle. Horse riding . . . is its teleology” (Smith, 2011: 10). Treating the equine with kindness – and it should be stated that there will always have been some horsemen that were kinder than others - is, for some, still not enough. It is not enough to question how we do something, we need to question what we do and why. Letting go of any claim that horse riding reflects a shared intention, letting go of a pre-determined objective and focussing instead on what the horse might truly want means attending to the horse. This is beautifully captured by David Walser’s account of

Delgado’s and Pignon’s training approach to their Lusitano stallion, Templado:

Instead of saying to themselves, as they had done so far, “How can I get this horse to do what I want, albeit in the kindest possible way?” they learned to ask, “What would this horse *like* to do?” Then slowly but surely they built on what the horse told them. Instead of thinking of themselves as teachers, they had to become pupils. They felt they were entering new territory, one that could only be explored by an absolute determination to put the horse on a more equal footing with themselves and to abide by an immutable set of principles, based on respect and love. (Pignon *et al.*, 2009; 17-18).

This example of “relational practice not only eschews forceful dominance and the subjection of the horse by restraint, pressure and coercion into fearful compliance, it also advocates an appreciation of the horse as a sentient being whose interests and inclinations need to be respected” (Smith, 2011: 10). The interplay between the need to dominate and the need to care for and be kind has perhaps been present as a constant throughout the history of horsemanship (Morgan, 1962). With the arrival of animal behaviour science, a distinction was made between negative reinforcement (e.g. pressure and release) and positive reinforcement techniques (e.g. clicker training); see for example Foley (2007), Grandin and Johnson (2009), Karrasch *et al.* (2000), Kurland (2007), Waran *et al.* (2002) and Warren-Smith and McGreevy, (2007). This has given rise to intense discussion about the relative merits of goal-focussed versus process-focussed approaches<sup>6</sup>.

Methods of shaping horse behaviour through positive reinforcement, whilst gentler and more responsive (Grandin & Johnson, 2009: 135) cannot escape, however, “the critique of subjugating the horse’s natural inclinations to the actions the trainer wants the horse to perform” (Smith, 2011: 12). Such critiques challenge us to consider the extent to which the intentions of equines and humans are aligned. Knowing the equine is thus a complex undertaking for it requires us to consider not only how (and how well) we know the equine but also the ends to which that knowledge is applied. Questioning the ends to which we exploit our power over animals reflects the increasing tendency to view and treat animals as subjects and the increasing attention being paid to animal’s capabilities and their moral consideration (Armstrong & Botzler, 2008; DeMello, 2012; Fennell, 2012a; 2012b, Gruen, 2011; Markwell, 2015). Holding ends up to scrutiny encourages us to take responsibility and develop response-ability (Haraway, 2008). McVey (2017) recognises a shift of responsibility onto the rider/student that comes when pedagogy privileges a coaching

<sup>5</sup> See also Birke and Brandt (2009).

<sup>6</sup> Process focussed approaches tend to respect core values as a priority over delivering outcomes.

approach over traditional didactic learning, where knowledge transfer and rote learning are emphasised. Such approaches recognise that the student

must activate their own learning, reflect on their own performance and take an evaluative role in choices that enable ‘partnership’ to flourish between horse and human. They must ‘reach out’ towards an infrastructure of information from a position of bounded responsibility (2017: 103).

This switch in emphasis highlights the opportunities to transform welfare that avail themselves when training interventions shift their focus from explicit and tacit embodied epistemologies to self-transcending epistemologies (Scharmer, 2016). This involves opening ourselves to change and learning to listen deeply. To do so, however, “we must cease merely asking, telling and demanding. Rather, we must listen, with all of our senses, with openness, with care, and with humility” (Argent, 2022: , p.47). This section has traced elements of the evolution of the human-equine relationship and of the stories we tell about these relationships. Our need to dominate the equine and impose our own intentions and priorities on the relationship has seen knowledge about horsemanship challenged by knowledge about the equine’s inner life, their well-being and the cultivation of our own ability to see, understand and care about the relationship we create. This represents a “turning” and a radically pivotal one, where “to turn is to give up the false self-asserting self, but not to give up the “I” and “the ever-new turning toward relationship is turning to deep bondedness” (Kramer, 2003: 159)<sup>7</sup>. Caring about the other thus gives rise to concern about the relationship we co-create together. Gala Argent (2022: 43) has argued that horses make communicative bids that we can answer by turning toward, away from or against. She proposes that “the attentional and emotional availability shown through turning toward fosters attachment, connection, and trust which allow both partners to feel calm and safe” (p.43). The next section builds on this account of how turning from domination to partnering (Eisler & Fry, 2019) can give rise to a qualitative shift in the human-equine relationship from the “hard narratives of control and management to the soft narratives of care, respect and enlightened equitation” (Smith, 2011: 15). The next section explores what surrendering control creates space for and considers how being present to ourselves, to the equine and to the “space between” (O’Donohue, 2008) contributes to how we can better nurture relations that privilege power with rather than power over. This section is thus about the emergence of embodied possibilities, where being with in the present moment brings us back

into the present, into our own bodies<sup>8</sup> and into whatever is waiting to emerge through us when we are fully present on this co-creative frontier.

*Embodied knowing: of centaurs and hybrids.* Ann Game’s (2001: 1-2) exploration of the relationship and deep connection that can develop between a horse and a human, allows her to propose that “we are always already part horse and horses part human; there is no such thing as pure horse or pure human. The human body is not simply human”. Game emphasises that “people who live with animals experience connectedness and cross-species communication daily” and, arguably, shatters any illusions that we might have that we are separate from the other and unable to communicate or connect across the species divide. The capacity we have for ‘horseness’ goes beyond a process of entraining, of tuning into one another. It is what Gaston Bachelard (1969: 14-15) described as an ‘inhabitation’, when horse and rider come to inhabit riding. And, when the rider achieves “the ideal of a horseman who knows full well that he will never be unseated” (Bachelard, 1971: 31), a true humility is reached for the rider has surrendered to the Self and has become one with the horse. Game describes this moment of connection, of flow<sup>9</sup>, as a ‘rapture’ (2001: 10) and declares that “Connectedness in living the image of the centaur comes of opening ourselves to the otherness of horse and letting go of self in order to be open to a connecting spirit.” There are echoes here of Snyder’s “in-between world”, a world we can enter, one that is “not exactly human, not exactly animal, where rain might look like fire and fire might be rain” (1990: 177).

The relationship is, arguably, not just one of co-being and intra-action (Maurstad *et al.*, 2013); it is one of co-creation. It is what is created together although this still leaves open the question as to how contributions are made equitable and to what extent the self is allowed to slip away and is replaced by oneness. Drawing on the grammar of the social field, proposed by Scharmer (2016: 231-253), this ‘letting go’ and a ‘letting come’ is the essence of presencing. It should be noted that the concept of the ‘centaur’ also figures strongly in the humanistic approach to Action Research (Rowan, 2006). This emphasises the transpersonal as a form of psycho-spiritual development that concerns itself with experiences that involve “an expansion or extension of consciousness beyond the usual ego boundaries and beyond the limitations of time and / or space” (Grof, 1979: 1555). The shift from the mental ego to the Centaur stage is marked by peak experiences that are considered a harbinger of change and transition;

<sup>8</sup> The body, together with the breath offer us two important anchors to the present moment.

<sup>9</sup> This term should be understood in the sense used by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014).

<sup>7</sup> Citing Smith’s translation of Martin Buber’s *I-Thou*.

it is part of the call to adventure. In this case, the change or transition is an important one, both at the personal level and at the level of the horse-human hybrid:

The name Centaur was chosen to mark the contrast with the Mental Ego stage, where the basic image is of a controlling rider (the intellect) on a controlled horse (the emotions and body), separate and distinct. At the Centaur stage we think in terms of bodymind unity instead. (Rowan, 2006: 107).

To understand this better, we have to recognise the unity of living source across species that gives rise to multiplicity in unity. Difference, however, appears first and one is left struggling to recognise oneness. According to Bortoft (2012: 119), the “organism of the work is an inexhaustible multiplicity in unity of self differences, which are the work’s own possibility of meaning manifesting in a variety of contexts and situations”. For Buber (2000), oneness comes first and comes to develop a separate identity, as objectifying relationships are formed<sup>10</sup>. The resulting *I-It* seeks and is capable of returning to the inborn *Thou*. For Buber, truly becoming a human person requires us to meet the World as *Thou*. (Kramer, 2003)<sup>11</sup>. The embodied oneness that can arise between horse and rider may therefore represent an immanence (Smith, 2011), a genuine encounter, a return to the *Thou*.

This transformation in human-equine relationships can be summarised as a journey from domination towards and into dialogue. It is so much more than that, however: In turning to the other, we are opening a listening organ within ourselves and letting go of our own agendas. It is this willingness to co-create rather than command and coerce that gives rise to what Buber terms *genuine meeting* and *dialogue* and Scharmer develops further in his work on *presencing* and *generative dialogue*. How can we realise the transformative potential that knowing through the body and through the present moment makes when possible when we turn to the working equine? To understand this, we must consider how to cross the threshold and meet genuinely. It is to the knowing of such encounters that we now turn.

*Knowing through shifting our source of attention.* In seeking to understand how to deepen one’s sense of self as a relational being, one has to go deeper and explore new fields of awareness. In the same way that Ingold (2010:

<sup>10</sup> This represents the interplay between alternating ways of engaging with the other: meeting them in the realm of *I-Thou* and acting in the realm of *I-It*.

<sup>11</sup> Whilst the World of *It* is necessary for human life, one who lives continuously and exclusively in the World of *It* does not become fully human (p. 74). A healthy alternation between *I-Thou* meetings and *I-It* mismeetings is interrupted when humans and institutions overemphasize or valorize the *I-It* approach to experience (p. 46).

S122) reminds us that “a mindful body that knows and remembers must also live and breathe”, we recognise that there are aspects of life and of being that we often fail to attend to. Knowing the equine involves becoming present to ourselves, to the other and to the world whilst learning to recognise when and how we absent ourselves (Scharmer, 2016). Absencing arises when the judging, dualistic, thinking mind intervenes and imposes itself. Staying mindfully present provides us with an opportunity to observe the mind and see how non-humans are judged and categorised. In doing so, non-human orderings and ‘otherings’ are exposed and it becomes possible to question the authority of those who insist that “their statements are literal depictions of a reality thereby made manifest” (Law, 2004). Staying present thus challenges us to attend to the lived encounter, wherein, according to Donovan (2008: 48), “humans pay attention to—listen to— animal communications and construct a human ethic in conversation with the animals rather than imposing on them a rationalistic, calculative grid of humans’ own monological construction”. This is essential if we are to know the other according to Heron and Reason (2008: 367) for whom failure “to honour the experiential presence – through premature abstraction, conceptualisation and measurement, or through a political bias which values the experience only of socially dominant or like-minded groups – ignores the fundamental grounding of all knowing”. The extent to which one can suspend habitual ways of seeing and open up an organ of seeing is thus a key step to deepening awareness. Scharmer (2016) describes this as “suspending judgment,” proposing that this involves a shift in the source of our attention from *I-in-Me* to *I-It*. In suspending judgment, curiosity becomes available to us. A further deepening of awareness becomes possible when we suspend our reluctance to feel (our cynicism) and embrace compassion as a way of knowing. This involves a shift in our source of attention from *I-It* to *I-Thou*. This reluctance to feel, traps considerable energy within our bodies and any shift into sensing<sup>12</sup> therefore represents a significant barrier to awareness but one we must learn to navigate if we are to transform working equine welfare and the human-equine relations that shape the equine’s faring. This barrier can be thought of as a threshold, one that must be explored if we are to move beyond factual knowing and engage empathically and more holistically with the systems that enact welfare. Crossing this threshold requires us to understand how to turn to the other and be present to the other and to the between. There is perhaps no better way to summarise this than by means of Martin Buber’s life work that distinguishes between *I-Thou* and *I-It* relationships (Buber,

<sup>12</sup> According to Art et al (2021, p.129) “sensing refers to expanding one’s perception by moving beyond one’s own ‘bubble’ as an individual observer to begin to perceive reality from the social field. It involves shifting the inner place of observation from the head to the heart.”

2000). In the former, the *I* is open to the other and the mutuality and reciprocity experienced is dialogical. An *I-It* relationship is, by contrast, a “one-sided experience of knowing, using and categorising people and things” (Kramer, 2003: 42). According to Buber, the most powerful moments of dialogue occur when *I* and *Thou* meet: Genuine meeting, requires unconditional trust and a willingness to be vulnerable to the other. Remarkably, one of Buber’s early insights into how we meet the other came, at the age of 11, from a dapple-grey horse:

When I stroked the mighty mane ... and felt the life beneath my hand, it was as though the element of vitality itself bordered on my skin, something that was not I, was certainly not akin to me, palpably the other, not just another, really the Other itself; and yet it let me approach, confided itself to me, placed itself elementally in the relation of *Thou* and *Thou* with me. The horse ... very gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal meant to be recognisable only by his fellow-conspirator; and I was approved. (Buber, 1967: 26-27).

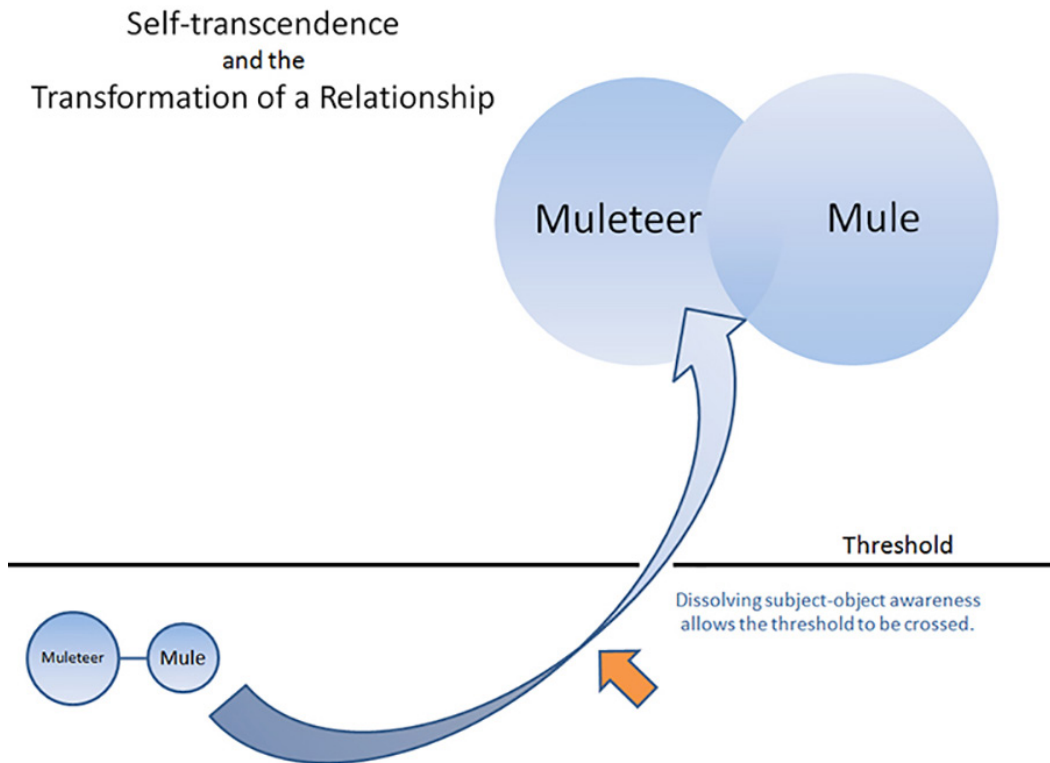
Somewhere within this exchange, there is an element of non-judgemental awareness, of approval, of acceptance.

This is a genuine meeting. When, later, the stroking becomes pleasurable, something shifts, the other is objectified, judgement creeps in and dialogue ceases.

Buber distinguishes such genuine meetings (*Begegnung*) from mismetings (*Vergegnung*). Only in the former do the most powerful moments of dialogue appear; these are transformative, leaving the “man who emerges from the act of pure relation” with “something more in his being, something new has grown there of which he did not know before and for whose origin he lacks any suitable words” (Kramer, 2003: 47). This is what David Whyte (2016) means when he advises us that “alertness is the hidden discipline of familiarity” and that the *I* deepens the more you pay attention (Figure 1).

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO MEET GENUINELY AND NURTURE THE “BETWEEN”

Having presented the theoretical underpinnings to transforming the human-equine relationship through awareness based Action Research, this next section provides a brief overview of the research approach followed by an empirical example to illustrate how the seed of compassion we all carry (Hanh, 2021) can be nurtured and a shift from domination to dialogue promoted. This example is drawn



**Figure 1.** The tendency for the muleteer to view and treat the mule as an object rather than as an extension of himself has come to define the relationships that exist between man and mule. Transforming the self and the relationship requires us to see ourselves in the other. It is this that allows us to transcend and dissolve subject-object awareness and attain a new, higher level of awareness. Both mule and muleteer grow through this transformative process as they let go of the ignorance, judgement, cynicism and fear that limited who they could be.



from ten years of multi-sited ethnographic and Action Research fieldwork in the international mountain tourism industry, studying and transforming how pack mules and humans meet and communicate.

*Methodology for action.* Action Research according to Reason and Bradbury (2008: 1) is “not so much a methodology as an orientation to inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues”. It brings together a range of “practices of living inquiry”, “engaging those who might otherwise be subjects of research” in “more or less systematic cycles of action and reflection”. These cycles integrate knowing and action, “responding to a desire to act creatively in the face of practical and often pressing issues”, opening new “communicative spaces in which dialogue and development can flourish” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008: 3). It “draws on many ways of knowing” and is “values oriented, seeking to address issues of significance concerning the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the wider ecology in which we participate” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008: 4). Perhaps most importantly (Reason & Bradbury, 2008: 4), it is a “living, emergent process that cannot be predetermined but changes and develops as those engaged deepen their understanding of the issues to be addressed and develop their capacity as co-inquirers. The approach developed within this project has been extensively reported elsewhere (Cousquer, 2018; 2022) and it is beyond this paper to provide anything more than the briefest of introductions to help explain how the theoretical underpinnings presented in the first half of this paper, inform the practical systems change work. The reader will see that the researcher makes extensive use of still images (and video) as part of the iterative cycles of experiential learning, reflection and development of practice undertaken with muleteering teams working for a number of travel agencies. These agencies learnt from the reports on mule welfare and muleteering practice and were willing to create safe spaces and learning and development opportunities for their teams to evolve their practice.

*Nurturing the between.* A primary welfare concern identified early on in the work concerned the biting injuries hidden away within the cave of suffering that is the mule’s mouth. Prototyping alternatives to the traditional Moorish bit, especially for ground work but also for ridden work, demonstrated how creating the “new” can render the old obsolete.

This section explores how the bit was replaced and the between nurtured and is arranged in two parts. First, the traditional bit as a monological device and tool of domination is presented. This allows us to name and unmask the powers and the stories told to justify the use of power over. We then consider how space was created for genuine meeting and dialogue and present the dialogical

relationships characterised by respect and mutual reciprocity that emerged.

*The traditional bit as a monological device and tool of domination.* The traditional Moorish bit has, for centuries, been placed as a “communication device” in the mouths of horses and mules. It has a high port that can be pushed up into the hard palate and thin bars that press down onto the bars of the mouth<sup>13</sup>. To understand the various ways the traditional bit ensures communication is one-way, or “monological”, we need to understand how the lived experience of the mule is denied, how feedback is blocked and how this lack of feedback comes to limit awareness of self and of the equine and of what might arise when partnering rather than domination is privileged. This allows the use and abuse of power-over to be named and unmasked and then engaged.

Cousquer (2018) reports how, during his fieldwork he became used to hearing claims that mules were too “strong” to be worked without a traditional bit. He came to recognise this as a prime example of habitual listening or downloading (Scharmer, 2016): a single truth that, once accepted, leaves little space for others. It was, a reaction rather than a considered response, a reading of the situation based on a lack of self-awareness and an inadequate knowledge of the mule. It was a reading that he profoundly disagreed with and devoted years to unmasking and developing a more adequate response for. To understand this better, it is helpful to consider how the traditional bit hides many sinister truths about the downstream physical, mental and spiritual impact of the bit on the mule and the upstream motivations and assumptions of the human. To render these visible requires us to start paying attention differently – to look in the mouths and the eyes of the mules, to explore the minds and hearts of the muleteers and ultimately to work in the liminal in-between space to transform the relationship (the spiritual connection born of two conscious intelligences).

Looking into the mouth of mules served as a starting point and from there it was possible to encourage the wider community to interest themselves in what lay hidden in the mouth (using still images, slide shows and film) and in the mule welfare. This led them ultimately to “turn the camera back on themselves” (Scharmer, 2016) and consider the source of their own actions.

Cousquer (2018) tells of his first meeting with an old, emaciated mule carrying guest suitcases up to a hotel above Imlil (Figure 2a). Concerned by her state, he asked the staff there to send him the mule to examine. What he found inside her mouth (Figure 2b) moved him to tears and angered him for he felt her pain and the pain of all the other mules who suffered in similar ways. Unseen and

<sup>13</sup> A more detailed account of the bit’s construction and action is provided below, together with images (see figures 2b-5a).



**Figure 2a.** Hassan’s emaciated mule labours up the path, carrying the suitcases of a holidaying couple who have walked up separately, oblivious to the state and suffering of the mule carrying their bags, oblivious to the traditional bit and horrendous injuries in her mouth, oblivious to the lack of polices in place to protect mule welfare. They, of course, were on holiday! And, as such, oblivious to their responsibilities. But who would spare this mule a second glance and, attending to her respectfully, recognise her emaciated state? Who would see and feel and act on her behalf?

unknown to all those<sup>14</sup> who exploited her failing body, this mule had suffered extensive trauma to the bars of her mouth, resulting from the abuse of the traditional bit (Figure 2c) that had been used to drive her on and keep her working.

The mule looked so uncomfortable; I could literally see the pain in her eyes, not to mention the blood in her mouth. What I found in her mouth surprised and shocked even me though!! The bars on both sides of her mouth had deep wounds where the bit had been pulled into the mucosa, cutting it up and leaving it raw and bleeding. No wonder she had not been able to eat. As we set about cleaning out the wounds, Brahim went past. He leant over the wall and commented – “elle mange pas bien henh? It is striking how the bottom line for many owners is their mule’s appetite and they

appear to have some difficulty seeing beyond that. Earlier, when coming past the Kasbah, we had seen a thin mule (perhaps even this one) and Brahim had said – “elle est très fatigué!”<sup>15</sup>

Eating badly, very tired: these descriptions of the lived realities of an old mule reflect how she is attended to. Her lack of appetite and energy are statements of fact. Or, perhaps, euphemisms for getting old and being unfit for work. Where Brahim and Hassan, the mule’s owner, saw a mule who was unable to do what she should be doing (eating and working), Cousquer (2018) describes seeing an old, abused mule who needed to be retired or euthanased.

The injuries were so severe that, despite being rested for several weeks, the mule died. Her plight had gone largely unnoticed by the tourists whose bags she had been

<sup>14</sup> There is no finger pointing here as the exploitation is hierarchical, the poor mule owner just as exploited as the mule because no one has stopped to consider his situation with curiosity and compassion.

<sup>15</sup> Field Notes 9, page 10 (5th May, 2014). “She is not eating well” ... “She is very tired”.



**Figure 2b.** Hassan's mule, when viewed from the front, has a fearful and pained look to her. There is blood pooling inside her lower lip and the traditional bit that has been used to force her to work is hanging from her mouth.



**Figure 2c.** The traditional bit removed from the mouth of Hassan’s mule is the obvious cause of the injuries she has suffered. If this were true, replacing it with a smooth modern bit would address the problem. Sadly, a focus on the equipment obscures more fundamental problems. These include the relationship between mule and handler, the muleteer’s lack of access to education, training and equipment and the circumstances that allow them to purchase and then work a mule that is unfit for work.

carrying, her suffering effectively ignored by those who had employed her owner to transport the luggage. Ignored yes. Obscured too by her work, her load, her passing and our inability to question. A few months later, Cousquer (2018) describes how he met Hassan with a new mule, again being worked in a traditional bit.

He told me that he had bought a new mule, a younger mule, for 5000 MAD from Asni. He showed me the mule and told me, when I asked why he was using a traditional bit, that it was because she was too strong.<sup>16</sup>

The up-stream causes of the horrendous injuries in this and other mules’ mouths were unclear, however. Where do we look for causes and causal mechanisms (Scharmer, 2016), to what should we attend? Superficially, one might be able to single out the traditional bit for it was this *Causa*

*materialis* that had directly caused the trauma to the bars of the mouth. If this was true though, simply replacing the bit with a modern (wider, smoother, stainless steel) more humane alternative would solve such problems. Why then, he asks, did he feel so uncomfortable seeing Hassan’s mule being given a well-made snaffle bit?

In the case of Hassan’s old mule, the problem was not that she was strong. It was not that she needed a different bit or even a head collar; she was simply unfit to work and her owner needed to work. In the absence of a viable solution that respected the mule’s need for rest and retirement<sup>17</sup>, she was given a bridle with a snaffle bit. This is symptomatic of the impotence one is faced with when trying to solve a much bigger problem: unable to see and address the underlying causes, one is left addressing a false

<sup>16</sup> Field Notes 16, page 12 (7th August, 2014).

<sup>17</sup> She was subsequently offered retirement by a retired British couple who were in the process of setting up a Donkey Sanctuary near Marrakech but died without being able to take up this offer.

cause. In the case of Hassan's new mule, he was needing to work her but did not have the means (the equipment, time, training and ability) to establish a trusting, respectful relationship with her. The bit is thus used to force a mule to work not because she is strong but because there has been no investment in the between.

Looking into the minds and hearts of the muleteers becomes possible when spending weeks and months with them and their mules in the field. Key to disrupting the status quo is opening the mind and heart such that a deeper awareness of the whole can develop and the bit be seen more clearly for what it does. Helping them to see and sense into the mouth and lived experience of the mule became part of the research approach with multi day treks undertaken in ways that promoted opportunities to do just this. Sitting down, of an evening at the end of a long day's trekking, with a team of muleteers allowed images and footage of the day to be viewed as well as slide shows of images, collected of the mouth injuries from the village of Tizi Oussem.

These injuries are easily overlooked, even by professionals, if one does not notice the subtle clues that lead one to seek out the injury inside the mouth. And it was important that these muleteers started noticing the tell-tale signs so that their awareness deepened.

The last mule that came in for examination arrived with a young lad on her back. I could see at a distance that there was blood in the mule's saliva and noted the force with which the young boy yanked on the bit. Houda did not spot the lesion – but it was not easy to find for it was hidden in a fold of mucosa under the tongue.<sup>18</sup>

The mule in question had been examined as part of a study<sup>19</sup> on the welfare of the mule in the two neighbouring valleys. The blood in this mule's saliva (Figure 3) drew attention to the biting injury and to the fact that oral examinations<sup>20</sup> were not very thorough and were probably missing a lot of pathology. This highlighted the fact that these examinations were not evaluating the roof or the bars of the mouth or the bars for signs of repeated trauma and would have missed injuries that were no longer bleeding.

This pathology is better known to archaeologists studying the origins of domestication (Bendrey, 2007a, 2007b, 2011, 2012) and to veterinary practitioners trying to study the relationship between bone pathology, the bit and the horse's experience (Cooke, 1999, 2011). Attending to the physical signs of trauma left behind by the bit is thus

a clinical matter, founded on an ability and willingness to examine the mouth: An ability, or competency, born of training, of familiarity, of an awareness of where the teeth lie and of how to examine without being bitten or upsetting the mule. Attending to the trauma is also, however, pathological and archaeological. In this sense, the materiality of the bit appears in the mouth (a place) and across time, both in terms of an individual's lifespan and the histories<sup>21</sup> of the domination and domestication of the horse. These materialities are different, hinting at the multiplicity of narratives the bit gives rise to.

The traditional bit's material productions lie hidden inside the mouth, beneath the overlying soft tissues, inscribed in the periosteum and in the nerves, mind and spirit of the equine. Hidden too by the gap between the stimulus of the bit and the response of the equine, a gap that is easily filled with the narrative threads that suit the intention of the storyteller. When attending to the loaded mules being worked with bits in their mouths, I saw the meals denied, the grass that wasn't there, the calmness denied; when, later, we sat down together to look at images of the mouth injuries I had recorded, we attended to what should not have been there. That which these narratives make present or absent is therefore welfare.

Attending to the relationships that the bit enacts allows us to appreciate how the bit transmits messages (Figure 4) and the directive, monological nature of those messages, how it renders a mule compliant, productive and invisible! Designed, made and used by man to direct and control, it is a telling device, not a listening device. It supports the status quo, imposing and sustaining a singular narrative. This both limits and determines how mules and mule welfare are known.

Mol (2002: 31) shows that, by foregrounding the "instruments that unveil the hidden reality of atherosclerosis", an atherosclerosis is enacted that is entirely dependent on the microscope. Cousquer (2018) similarly demonstrates that the instrument that is the bit, enacts a man-mule dyad and the welfare contingent on that one-sided relationship. He has furthermore shown how the bit enacts unequal exploitative relationships in which downloading (Scharmer, 2016) and the abuse of power deny mules the right to reply, eat and drink (Enoff, 2014). By attending to that which the traditional bit brings into being, it is possible to understand how its brutal efficiency and insensitivity can render those who use it inattentive, insensitive and even brutal. Possible too to understand the nature of the relationship between mule and muleteer that the bit creates through its redistribution of power. Power does not necessarily corrupt but it can be abused where humility and integrity are lacking (McManus, 2004). In cultures where we value task accomplishment over relationship building,

<sup>18</sup> Field Notes 6, page 12 (17th April, 2014)

<sup>19</sup> The study was undertaken by a final year student from the Institut Agronomique et Vétérinaire Hassan II, in Rabat. I had been charged with supervising the student and we had been collecting a wide range of data on different aspects of mule welfare.

<sup>20</sup> that the student had been conducting

<sup>21</sup> There are of course many ways of trying to piece together that history.



**Figure 3.** The blood-tinged froth on the gums and lips of this mule, the similarly coloured drop of saliva that is about to fall from this mule's lower lip might draw the attention to the fact there is an injury within the mule's mouth. The curled tongue, the open mouth, the owner's clenched fist, the control, the unnaturalness of it all, might all invite curiosity and concern... The easily missed bloody saliva prompted me to undertake an oral exam and determine the location and nature of the injury. This is not something the average owner, guide or tourist would ever do. It requires skill, confidence, curiosity and consideration.

the “culture of do and tell” dominates and we fail to inquire humbly of the other (Schein, 2013) and fail to see that with great power comes great responsibility.

(ii) Creating space for genuine meeting and dialogue

To transform the *I*, it is essential that the source of attention be shifted from *I-in-Me* and *I-It* to *I-Thou*. When attending and available in this way, genuine meeting becomes possible, providing the other is similarly available. From a pedagogical perspective the Holy Grail becomes to create space for and facilitate such encounters.

The shift from *I-in-Me* attention where the ego's world view is downloaded requires a shift into curiosity that allows disconfirming information to be noticed. This can be



**Figure 4.** This young mule has a traditional bit in her mouth. The bit's action commands her attention. The right-angled bar of the bit (arrow) is in contact with the bars of the mouth and can easily traumatise both the bars and the sublingual tissues. The port (A) is raised into the roof of the mouth when the reins are pulled, forcing the mouth open.

thought of as facilitating open-mindedness. A further shift into compassion is required for genuine meeting to occur and this requires an opening of the heart. It can be helpful to think of these two steps as (i) seeing and (ii) sensing. Facilitating these encounters requires the guide to be familiar with the territory involved and to have developed their own seeing and sensing practices.

The photos shared with the muleteers were collected during the earlier survey work that had taught Cousquer (2018) to attend to clinical signs. Restraining, handling, examining then lead to diagnosing and awareness. These were his seeing practices and he had to understand and draw on them to help others learn to see and to attend, to then feel and care. Looking carefully. Looking care-fully, attending fully with care. His own practice provided a window into

the mouth, one that led him to attend to the many actions of the traditional bit. What else lay hidden in the mouth or elsewhere? What was he not seeing? Where did he need to redirect his attention? One starting point was to consider how the traditional bit sits in the mouth (Figure 4) and functions<sup>22</sup>. But he also needed to step back and consider the issue more holistically: He needed to contemplate its appearances. As Bortoft (2012) emphasises we need to take appearance seriously and attend dynamically, paying attention to the material appearance and the way something comes into appearance in our minds and in our hearts. There is thus a need to move upstream, from the bit, through the reins, to the hand that pulls the bit, to the mind that causes the hand to clench and be moved backwards and thence to the heart that causes hands to be hard and minds unseeing.

But how do we engage the mind and the heart when it is so well defended? Cousquer (2018)'s account of the work required to establish working relationships and opportunities to explore this draws attention to the many fears that lead mule handlers to rely on the bit and on power over.

When proposing that muleteers abandon the bit and eschew power over, there was no appetite for this hard work. On the morning after sharing the slideshow, Cousquer (2018: 164) asked the muleteers if any of them would be willing to try the head collar he had brought with him. There were no takers! They were all of the opinion the mules were too strong and would run off. His invitation refused, he was left to ponder his next move. He needed to get into their map and, in turn, ask them to step into his, to understand each other's world maps (Wagner, 1986). The picture he was getting was that the traditional bit, their local tethering practices and their willingness to ride a loaded mule were all quite normal to them and they did not really see a need to change. His map had, at its centre, mule welfare and the pathological and psychological traumas of oppressive muleteering practices, theirs a muleteering practice that worked well and that they were satisfied with. And, if he imposed his map, he would be exerting power-over when what was needed was to free both the oppressed and the oppressor.

A few days later, he waited on a col for the mules and watched another group of mules arrive:

One of the shepherds arrived on his grey mule with a large log of juniper in the *chwari*. As he reined up his mule, the mule's mouth was forced open and she appeared to lift her head to relieve the discomfort provoked by the action of the bit.<sup>23</sup>

The image he captured captures a moment of attention. As the shepherd smiled and greeted him, he saw distress written across his mule's face. He could not return the greeting. He could not absent himself from the signs of discomfort and pain that he was learning to recognise. This image (Figure 5a) would, come to symbolise the hidden discomfort endured by mules and other equines working in traditional bits across Morocco. It is captured and glorified in images used to promote the country and the Moroccan's so-called mastery of the horse. The open mouth was something that Moroccans were familiar with and did not see the need to question (Figure 5b). McLean and McGreevy (2010) similarly comment on the need to recognise that "on the bit head and neck posture" seen in classical dressage (and hyperflexion in particular) is unnatural and typically achieved through force. The challenge was therefore not to fight the old but to create the new so that the old became obsolete.

This shift from fighting the old into creating the new proved liberating. It was also a significant commitment that involved spending months training a young mule to work in a head collar and then training her handlers to work to overcome their fears and establish a depth of trust and respect that had hitherto been unknown within the industry (Cousquer, 2018). Once the proof of concept had been established, trekking agencies were persuaded to send their teams for training workshops and treks where they gradually learnt to work with their own fears and those of their mules, learning to presence themselves and tune into the emotional state of their mules, checking in systematically as part of an ongoing two-way communication. Over a two-year period, the trekking teams working with the core members of the Expedition Providers Association were trained up to a point where their regular muleteers were confident working their mules in head collars rather than in bits and had developed an impressive ability to read situations and engage in reciprocal respectful working practices.

Mohamed was one such muleteer and his story exemplifies the shift from the bit to the between (Cousquer, 2018), exemplifying what can arise when an attuned handler turns to their mule and grows into and through the relationship, becoming with, becoming Mohamed-Mule, developing into someone who can find this path repeatedly and guide others along a similar journey.

Cousquer (2018) introduces Mohamed as a young twenty-year-old whose family make their living from a small shop and renting out rooms in the gîte they have built. Mohamed had recently become a father; his own father previously worked as a shepherd and now runs the shop. The family's one mule was worked by Mohamed and his younger brother. Mohamed was encouraged by his employer, James Kniffen, of The Mountain People, to take an interest in improving the welfare of his own mule and that of the mules they employed. This is the story of the co-sensing and co-creating journey undertaken

<sup>22</sup> Clayton (1985) describes how this can be undertaken fluoroscopically. See also McLean and McGreevy (2010).

<sup>23</sup> Field Notes 16, page 36 (11<sup>th</sup> August, 2014)



**Figure 5a.** A sharp yank on this mule’s reins forces the mule’s mouth open and brings the mule to an abrupt stop. The nostril is flared and the mule appears to be crying.

by Mohamed. This story captures how a safe collective holding space (Scharmer, 2016) was created in which a small team came together and supported Mohamed as he undertook a deep inquiry into how relations and working practices between man and mule could be transformed for himself, his family, his employer and his mule.

To do this, Mohamed had to give of himself. He listened attentively. He organised meetings for the muleteers from his village at which he spoke passionately. He put in hours

of training to develop his groundwork and riding skills, he organised training treks, participating in three of these and organised and gave riding lessons. This is classical fast-cycle learning (Scharmer, 2016, p.210) that constantly iterates the existing prototype and integrates feedback to improve practice. Mohamed’s contribution is thus highly significant for he helped prototype strategic microcosms of change as a “landing strip for the emerging future” (Scharmer, 2016: 210-212).





**Figure 5b.** The same mule continues to hold her mouth open after being stopped. Her ears are back, she is clearly uncomfortable and distressed. The bit thus ensures that she attends to her master even if he does not attend to her. The bit is not designed for this for it is a monological device.

Mohamed's journey started with his exposure to the generative dialogue James and Cousquer engaged in about the challenges involved in improving mule welfare. Both Mohamed and his father attended the Expedition Providers Association (EPA) workshop in March 2015 and, a few months later, Mohamed was taking lessons. *Turning to* his mule came easily to Mohamed and in opening to her, he opened his mind and heart to her welfare. In integrating head, heart and hand (Scharmer, 2016), he was discovering and embodying a different way of being and dialoguing with a mule.

Reporting on their early work together, Ellen Cochrane<sup>24</sup>, describes Mohamed's early progress as his awareness of how his mule feels and communicates emerges:

The relatively simple tasks of grooming and picking up the mule's feet have been made possible with the increased level of understanding in behaviour that Mohamed has now developed. The first time he worked on grooming his mule and picking up her feet she was quite difficult and giving him warning signals to stop. However, by taking the right steps to make her more

comfortable with him doing this, it has become very easy and enjoyable for them both.<sup>25</sup>

Ellen and Mohamed progressed from groundwork onto riding. This was made possible by Mohamed's willingness to "let go" (Scharmer, 2016) of control, to "surrender" (Buber, 2000) and to explore new ways of communicating with his mule, as they emerged dialogically.

Mohamed has also worked hard on developing his groundwork and handling skills ... on using his body language and voice commands to communicate his intentions. He has been working on the ability to stop and turn his mule while leading her, and is also able to do this without anything on her head.<sup>26</sup>

Communicating his intentions was something Mohamed could do gently for he was able to develop an awareness of, and feel for, his mule's response under his hands. His mule was listening and responding. Like a seam of mineral ore, this could be mined for Mohamed knew the value of such *I-Thou* moments. Mohamed progressed to

<sup>24</sup> For details of Ellen's background and approach to horsemanship see Cochrane, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Cochrane (2015d, p. 19).

<sup>26</sup> Cochrane (2015d, p. 20).

leading his mule with a hand resting on the top of her neck (Figures 6a-6b) and could reproduce this degree of subtle dialogue when riding (Figures 6c-6d).

An improved understanding of communication when riding has developed Mohamed to the point where he is able to ride his mule without a bridle, that is to say, without anything on her head at all. ... The communication between himself and his mule is at the point where he can ask her to turn by placing his hands on her neck, and can ask her to stop by the use of a voice command. He has given a great example of more advanced work by performing trot to halt without a bridle.<sup>27</sup>

Genuine meeting is born of mutual reciprocity and unconditional trust between two uniquely whole persons (Kramer, 2003). Mohamed's mule told us when this was absent, when Mohamed was not seeing her truly, when his "hinterland" got in the way. She was virtually blind in her left eye, making her wary of people behind her or approaching on her blind side. This had to be captured on film before Mohamed came to know this of his mule.

On a few occasions, Mohamed approached his mule quite suddenly on her blind side, without talking to or reassuring her. This frightened her, causing her to spook. She would slightly kick out, as she was aware something was there but didn't know it was Mohamed.<sup>28</sup>

Over a series of training treks, Mohamed learnt to recognise the need to empathise with her and adapt his behaviour so that she was not startled by his approach. This then helped us develop a similar awareness with his colleagues, during which he saw how they thought and how he no longer thought!

We then looked at Mohamed's mule and ... how he stopped his mule with his voice. They agreed that he had an excellent contact. ... There were other clips where his communication was not so good. They recognised that he had scared her but it took a while for them to recognise why. Their first suggestion was that maybe he had used the stick. They then suggested that he did have a stick in his hand when approaching her. Ellen asked what was particular about this mule. She had to ask specifically whether the mule could see Mohamed. Initially they said yes. It took them a while to recognise that she is blind in her left eye and that, because he did not speak to her, she did not know it was him approaching her. Ellen asked them how they thought the mule was feeling. They recognised that

she was scared. Ellen pointed out that she calms down very quickly.<sup>29</sup>

Mohamed's muleteers recognise that mules fear sticks. In this instance, however, they had to suspend judgement and redirect their attention to what the mule was feeling and why. Over time, Mohamed came to understand that he needed to talk to his mule and indicate his intentions to her, especially if approaching from her blind spot. His awareness was growing and with it, trust. Mohamed was growing through developing that part of him that was part-mule. Growing through the other (Rohr, 2016: 140-141), developing Buber's dimension of the *between*, Law's of partial connections (2004: 62-65).

During a later trek, Mohamed, in a hurry, did not place his mule's bridle correctly over her head, leaving the cheek strap over her left eye. When this was pointed out to him, he replied that it didn't matter as she was blind in that eye, prompting the question whether repeated stimulation of his own eyelashes was bothersome. He agreed that it would bother her, further developing his awareness of her World map. Mohamed was then able to share this awareness with his fellow muleteers to help them understand that all mules have blind spots, can be startled and are, indeed, unique persons.

The degree to which Mohamed cares about mule welfare was well demonstrated during a training trek in July. On this occasion, we encountered Abdellatif who was setting out with a newly purchased, mule on a multi-day trek with a Canadian client. We encountered them on the Tizi Tamatert. There we saw a young grey mule with a traditional bit in her mouth; she was uncomfortable and breathing hard.

We did not have a head collar to give him. It was clear, however, that he wanted one and was willing to give up his traditional bit. Fortunately, and to our surprise, Mohamed stepped in and gave his own bitless bridle to Abdellatif. This meant that Mohamed would be continuing to Tachedirt with neither a head collar nor a bridle! He placed Abdellatif's bridle in his panniers and we all headed off together. At one point, he and Abdellatif held hands and it was clear that something significant had happened<sup>30</sup>

I suggest this was an *I-Thou* moment. Mohamed felt empathy for both Abdellatif and his mule. He persuaded Abdellatif that the bit is cruel and unnecessary. He overcame any cynicism or fear Abdellatif might have that his young mule might be difficult to manage and, in lending his equipment, in letting go of any means of physically controlling his own mule, he turned to his mule

<sup>27</sup> Cochrane (2015d, p. 21).

<sup>28</sup> Cochrane (2015d, p. 24).

<sup>29</sup> Field Notes 36, p. 17 (11th June, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Field Notes 38, page 16 (27<sup>th</sup> July, 2015).



**Figures 6a-6b.** Mohamed leads his mule with his hand resting over her poll. Subtle directional indicators help her to understand when she is being asked to walk on and when she is being asked to turn.



**Figure 6c.** When riding, Mohamed can ask her to turn around a series of poles with a gentle tap to her neck. Soon, just by raising his hand he can instigate a turn. This, however, is less efficient on her left side where her eyesight is deficient.



**Figure 6d.** The trot is controlled using hand and voice commands to communicate Mohamed's intention to turn and stop.

and opened himself up to an emergent future. Mohamed thus surrenders himself to whatever the next few days of the trek will throw at him and sets out to explore ways of managing his mule with nothing on her head (Figures 7a-7d).

These experiences allowed Mohamed to prototype a good relationship with his own mule. This, in turn allowed him to provide instruction to muleteers who were to accompany him on treks with The Mountain People. Creating a holding space for training is not easy though: Mohamed had the support of his father and employer; he could afford to take time out from work. Many muleteers are reluctant to give up their time - especially when they could be working or socialising - and, unlike Mohamed, are not easily persuaded of the merits of training.

The investment required to establish a relationship is significant. The significance of such an investment is perhaps best appreciated by considering the consequences that can manifest themselves when there is no trust. Ellen and Mohamed visited one mule who behaves aggressively when she sees or hears the traditional bit and saw the manifest absence (Law, 2004) of a good relationship:

... he explained that when someone approached with the traditional bit the mule was worse. ... The handler could approach the mule in her stable without any problems the first time. He then carried the bridle and shook it so that the mule could hear the bit. At this point, the mule turned to kick the handler but caught the door causing it to shut. When the door was reopened, the handler stayed on the outside of the stable and the mule proceeded to charge at him through the doorway. It was very clear that this mule knew what the traditional bit was and didn't want it in her mouth.<sup>31</sup>

The owner could not see the mule's fear, the mule's dislike of the bit and that he was betraying the relationship by insisting on the bit despite her protestations. Mohamed's awareness and understanding of the mule's fear meant that he could communicate this to the owner and help him turn to her and understand that there might be another path... Mohamed could not insist on this, however, for to do so takes us into yet another dimension, that of the mule as private property.

And yet he can do that at work. To understand this, we need to consider his role and his responsibilities as James's head muleteer. The company have a policy of no traditional bits and expect all their muleteers to work their mules in head collars or bitless bridles. Those who don't and who have not attended training, receive a lower daily rate than those who do. This gives Mohamed some leverage. Enforcing rules is easy. Training staff and helping them experience and develop a feel for best practice is more difficult for rules cannot influence an individual to turn

to their mule. This knowing must be experienced. For this to happen holding spaces are needed in which muleteers and their mules can meet.

Mohamed's story shows us what is possible. Forsaking the bit for the *between* can travel from training to the work place, from ground work to riding and into situations where the desire and need to control (the *I-It*) dominate. The realities of work for Mohamed are tidy; he can resolve incoherences. His reality is one that can be centrally coordinated because he can, seek, enact and deliver a singular welfare (Law, 2004). What happens however when, this is attempted in a larger company where a variety of truths, a multiplicity of welfares exposes incoherences? This is explored in Cousquer (2018) but is beyond the scope of this paper.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the long history of domination and power-over that has characterised the relationship humans impose on equines. Such relationships are closed to the necessary feedback that allows awareness of the self to deepen (Macy & Brown, 2014). Recognising that opening to feedback is essential for self-transformation and wider systems change, this paper has then reviewed the literature on how approaches that privilege deep listening can lead to transformative change and the nurturing of relationships based on another understanding of power – that of power-with. Such relationships are founded on listening, mutual reciprocity and dialogue. This paper has argued that the journey from domination to dialogue is one born of an opening of the mind and heart to feedback and that this is dependent on a *turning* to ourselves and to the other, of being fully and compassionately present to our own inner condition and to the inner condition of the equine. This *turning* requires a shift in the source of our attention and mode of listening, a shift that can be facilitated if spaces are created for genuine meeting and dialogue. What does this mean for the relationships that humans and equines co-create? In the first instance, it means that our availability, openness and attunement develops future-oriented ways of knowing that allow us to better know and care for the humans and equines we exploit whether in modern industries such as leisure and tourism or older ones such as transport, agriculture and mining and other perhaps less industrial fields of collaborative endeavour such as warfare and sport. This allows dominatory practices to be increasingly seen for what they are and the absencing and justificatory narratives that sustain them questioned, challenged and forged anew into a more equitable alloy, one born of the *between* that arises dialogically, not monologically, when humans turn to equines.

This may seem somewhat romanticised and a strong cautionary note needs to be struck. In the wider equine world, there have been many attempts to explore partnering approaches and for these to be presented as improvements, without holding up to scrutiny the extent to which this

<sup>31</sup> Cochran (2015d, p. 12).



**Figures 7a-7b.** Mohamed and Abdellatif walk hand in hand; ahead of them Abdellatif's grey mule is wearing Mohamed's mule's bridle. Mohamed therefore manages his mule without any headwear. This helps develop his awareness by encouraging him to anticipate and manage potential hazards such as passing cars.



**Figures 7c-7d.** Approaching a steep descent, Mohamed guides his mule forwards with his arm cupping the side of her face. Further on, on the track, recognising that she loves thistles, he explores another way of asking her to move forwards.

is then used to justify ongoing exploitation or overlook welfare concerns and the extent to which deep listening is practised. It is therefore essential that we constantly revisit and engage with questions about the equine's wellbeing. This requires us to doubt and to practice curiosity as part of an ongoing process of inquiry into the wellbeing of the equine. This process of questioning involves accessing and interacting with reliable explicit knowledge. McVey (2017: 107) describes this as integrating "the right information in order to enable the relationship to flourish". In terms of deep listening practices, this arguably equates to a shift in the source of attention that allows us to engage with open-minded curiosity; this is what Scharmer (2016) would describe as Level 2 Listening (Debate) and Buber describes as Technical Dialogue. In order to facilitate transformational change, however, it is argued that we need to deepen our listening, moving out of our heads and opening the heart mind through sensing journeys (Art *et al.*, 2021) that involve meeting genuinely. Experiences of the *I-Thou* by definition change us. This leads me to sound two further cautionary notes: Firstly, these encounters can be very hard to interpret and the integration of such experiences and insights may require skilled facilitation. Secondly, these experiences cannot be sustained for we always move back to the world of *I-It*. This means that we should suspend any notion of a perfect authentic relation and recognise that we are born in relation and are always co-creating something together. It is therefore important to distinguish between what might seem an idealised end goal (a more authentic connection) and the listening practices that gradually allow individuals to become more open to feedback, to learning and development. We cannot escape the ongoing politico-ethical challenges that accompany the exploitation of power in the workplace and need to recognise that there will always be situations where domination cannot be escaped and that claims to practice 'partnership' may be overstated. This is why there is a need to develop power literacy so that we are better able to unmask, name and engage the power (Wink, 1999). By nurturing power literacy and self-awareness, benefits can be felt both in the relationship we have with ourselves and in the relationships we co-create with others, whether they be human or equine. McVey (2017) has highlighted the value of coaching as a way to nurture response-ability and I want to end with a vision for a community of practice, learning and co-creation that is encouraged by organisations who recognise that by providing opportunities for facilitated experiential learning they can nurture individual and collective awareness that can evolve our relational practices and our workplace culture.

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