

Interview with Duey Freeman and Joan Rieger

DEAN SMITH

In January 2010 Duey Freeman and Joan Rieger visited Daylesford Australia to conduct workshops in Gestalt Assisted Psychotherapy for Gestalt Equine Psychotherapy Australia. They agreed to be interviewed about this interesting and emerging approach to psychotherapy.

Dean: How have you found Australia? Is this your first time here?

Duey: Yes, it is.

Joan: I love it, it's beautiful.

Duey: We're moving in pretty soon. (Laughter)

Joan: I don't know that yet. (Laughter)

Dean: How have the trainings gone so far?

Duey: The training is going incredibly well. We just finished the first one.

Dean: That's good that they're open to the work.

I'm assuming that a lot of our readers don't even know what a Gestalt assisted equine psychotherapy is, so maybe we'll start with a bit of a definition if that's okay?

Duey: Our definition of Gestalt therapy - is the exploration of our experience in relationship, and of relationship, while we're in a relationship. So it's an incredibly relational approach. Horses have survived for thousands of years only because of their herd relationship. Essentially what they've done from our perspective is lived the essence of Gestalt, which is a relational and interdependent present relationship which I think we as humans miss a lot of times. Did that make sense?

Dean: Yes. Can you tell me a little bit about your backgrounds and how you got involved in this because it seems to be quite an unusual type of practice? I don't know if I've heard of anyone doing it in Australia.

Joan: I've been a therapist for about ten years and I've been in private practice for about five or six, and while I was learning to become a therapist I was also learning how to horseback ride. At that point in time I did not know that the two could go together so it was like a parallel process, learning to ride and also learning how to be a therapist. Both of them are my passions in life. Then about six or seven years ago, I was in a conversation with a colleague who

told me about Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and I had no idea that they could go together but it was from that point, from that conversation, that I decided to put both of my passions in life together. So probably for about five years now, I've incorporated the equine work into my private practice, and have seen some pretty amazing shifts in my clients from working with the horses.

Dean: What a great thing to be able to combine, both your passions in one thing.

Joan: Yes. That was a nice surprise for me.

Dean: That's great.

Duey: Your question was, how did I get started working with horses in this capacity?

Dean: Yes, and a little bit about your background as well.

Duey: Okay. I've been working with people in one form or another for almost forty years. I started in 1970. A lot of that work has been outdoor wilderness work as well as working in schools as a school principal, and later as a therapist. I did my training as a Gestalt therapist in the 1970s and in the early 1980s and was one of the founders of the Gestalt Institute of the Rockies. I had been teaching there and at Naropa University since 1991. I've always looked for alternative ways to work therapeutically, and about nine or ten years ago, began exploring horses and that relationship, which slowly deepened into working with horses from a Gestalt perspective. There are a lot of approaches out there, and I think what makes sense to me is, because the horse is such a relational animal (horses literally survive in relationship), that their process of living in relationship, living in the present, and being completely authentic in both of those, to me fits perfectly with Gestalt. I sort of said this before, but it's sort of like they've been doing what we're just learning to do.

So, working from a relational perspective with horses just made sense to me. The other piece it brings in that also makes sense to me, is therapeutically, with many of our clients, we're not able to touch physically, especially for instance if somebody has been very abused or sexually abused or sexually assaulted, those kinds of things. Whether it is through that, or issues around attachment or that kind of work; therapists touching clients can be a pretty tricky kind of thing. However, because horses are so authentic and so plain - so to speak - around their relationships, they can provide that touch that people need to heal, and that touching relationship that's authentic and kind and non-threatening. There's an integration of relational work that we try to do from a Gestalt perspective and the relational life that horses lead.

Joan: Often our clients that are coming into counselling have experienced wounding in relationship with other people. In order for them to work through that, they have to enter back into relationship to work through that, and the

horse, because it doesn't have the same psychological makeup that we do, and it's not a person offers another possibility. Because horses do connect and create relationship just like we do, in similar ways, a person can feel relationship in a very safe way, if that makes sense.

Dean: Yes, it sounds like you're saying two things. The first one, I think it sounds like you're saying that the horses almost role model a lot of the goals of Gestalt and so it enables the client to really engage and be aware and be relational and so on. It sounds like you're also saying they have quite a powerful role in relation to touch and the healing of trauma.

Duey: Yes exactly, both of those.

Dean: I was going to ask you about body process later on because it's an interest of mine, but I might stay with that now because you've raised it. Can you say more about touch and the body process aspects of your work?

Duey: The touch is around both the horse being willing to be touched and the horse touching. Anybody who's been around horses will know that horses want touch, they want contact, and they want closeness. They actually both make and create touch, and they lean into it. In the body process we work with there is a great deal of grounding through touch - grounding through touch with a horse. The other way that we work the body process, is someone actually being on a horse, because when a horse walks and moves, it's the exact same kind of walk and movement that we have. If we're looking at really early issues around attachment, it's the same sort of walk and movement that a mother would have when she walks. The actual hip joints of a horse are very similar anatomically to that of a human. So you actually give that to people in a way that we can't give in any other way.

Dean: That's quite an interesting idea, that riding the horse mimics the movement of the mother.

Duey: Exactly. It sounds funny to say, but if you walk behind a horse and watch it walk, its hips will move the exact same way a woman's hips will move when she is loose and grounded. It's uncanny. That movement when we're on the horse is something we can feel, and that movement will actually move our hips. If we have experienced trauma either physically or emotionally we stiffen up and protect ourselves, and the horse work can literally help move that. If you look at it from a chakra system or an energetic perspective, it also is moving that chakra which gets energy moving, through that chakra which lets us be grounded.

Joan: Dean, I see there is another way too that I work, or that we work with the body with the horses, and that is congruency. Horses are considered prey animals which means they're preyed upon in the wild, and they have their eyes on the side of their head so they're constantly scanning their environment.

Humans are actually considered predators to them because we have our eyes in front of our head. We are very goal-oriented; we go after and towards them. So even though horses are domesticated now, there's still that underlying instinct between horses and humans, the predator-prey dynamic. Horses are always wondering if we're going to eat them for lunch, or, are we safe? So what they need from us is to be congruent, so therapeutically, what I often work with in people is helping them get congruent in their body.

So if a person walks into the stall with the horse and they're pretending to be fine but really they're angry, the horse is going to feel the energy of the anger and react to that. Or if a person has a happy face on, but they're really sad or anxious, the horse is going to respond to the underlying energy. So a lot of work that I do is helping people move into their body, track their sensations, track the energy in their body, and be honest about what they're actually feeling. Well the horse will always read what energy is actually there.

Duey: Instead of what energy we think we're projecting.

Joan: Often someone might be giving a mixed signal, like pretending I'm okay but really there's something else going on underneath, but the horse will always read what's actually present and respond to that. So the work is about helping a client get congruent with what's actually going on for them.

Dean: It sounds like a good sort of lie detector almost.

Joan: Exactly. They actually do call horses lie detectors sometimes.

Dean: Okay. I have no experience with horses so all this is new to me. It is fascinating.

Joan: Well you'll have to come out and try it. (Laughter).

Duey: Yes. We have some friends here in Australia that do this now. The other piece that Joan brought up regarding horses as prey animals, and humans by nature are predators connects to trauma and attachment work. When someone has gone through trauma, major loss, or attachment issues, humans end up feeling like they're prey. Another way we use the relationship with the horse is because people can feel they're someone who has been through that kind of trauma and literally walks in the world feeling as if they're prey from that traumatic place. It's what at least we in America would call a trauma response kind of place. Horses live in a place of being prey and they're grounded in that place.

What we have found often is that someone who has been very traumatised is able to begin reconnecting and forming a relationship in a way they can't form with even another human or a therapist in that moment and at that time. What's been interesting to me is no matter how traumatised someone has been, it's almost the more traumatised they are the more gentle the horse is with them. I've seen that over and over. There's no way for anybody to train

a horse to do that.

Dean: After reading your website this morning it seems like you offer a one to one therapy or group therapy or even relationship therapy so this might be a bit of a hard question but I was wondering if you could share with us what is the typical process for clients in this type of therapy?

What is the typical way that the process unfolds for clients? Is it a one to one sort of once a week thing, or is it more intensive groups or workshops, and what are the actual nuts and bolts of the process for clients?

Duey: Let me try to answer it and then Joan can and we'll see how close we get. If we're not getting close let us know.

I have what I would say are two primary processes that I do. One is meeting with people weekly or every other week and I meet typically for a minimum of two hours, sometimes three. I rarely do one hour or fifty- minute session like I would do in the office, just because the one hour isn't really enough time to come in and connect. Most sessions would look like something where people would come in, whether it be an individual or a couple or a family, come in with me, do a quick check in, and fairly quickly, within 15 minutes or so, I would move into my work with horses. Then whatever someone would be offering in the check in, we would begin working on with on the horses.

If the issue is not connecting, if it's not being grounded, if they've been in an argument - whatever that happens to be. Sometimes I work with the entire herd, sometimes it's with one horse at a time, and sometimes it's with maybe two different horses. It can be anywhere from working with grooming to riding to just being with a horse to using the horse for ground, for contact, for connection, or just being surrounded by the herd in a way that is supportive to whatever process the people are going through. That's one general way.

Dean: It sounds like it's quite varied, depending on the client and their needs.

Duey: Exactly. There's no one typical thing. One of the appealing things for me and I think for Joan too, is that the level of creativity that we have access to, it's basically limited to our own creativity. So there isn't the, "How are you doing?" in the office. Then you problem solve or you do this or that. The work is extremely experiential and the core of the work is working with the relationship between the client and the horse or horses. It's not so dissimilar from couple's therapy in the sense that even if we have an in office session and we're working with couples; the real client per se is the relationship between them. That's what we're working with in this case too; it's just the relationship between the person or people and the horse or horses.

Dean: You were saying that the relationship is important like any with psychotherapy but especially in Gestalt, but in this instance you've got the

client or clients, the horse or horses, and the therapist. I wonder if you can talk on how it changes the dynamic in the relationship and what are the strengths and the challenges of that three way relationship in the therapy.

Joan: I can speak to some of that. Like Duey alluded to, it's very similar from a therapist's perspective to working with a couple, so facilitating the relationship between the client and the horse. I really get out of the way quite a bit and I let the horse do a lot of the work or I facilitate the relationship with the client and the horse.

Duey: The biggest shift is that usually some of the work is the relationship between the therapist and the client. In this kind of work there's an emphasis on the relationship between our client and the horse, and the reflection from the horse and the congruency of what's happening. Let's say a couple comes in and they're fighting. One possibility would be to have them (maybe one partner, even silently) go down into the herd, pick out one of the horses and I might ask them to pick a horse that would represent their relationship. So the first piece that often happens is the couple starts arguing about which horse that is. (Laughter) That might be the whole session sometimes. (Laughter) Another time it might be one person wants a certain horse and the other one would settle so that becomes the issue and we begin working with that. So we're working with the relationship for instance between them and also between whatever horse they may choose or may not choose. So the big shift is that our role when working directly with the horses is to facilitate.

Joan: The other thing that starts to happen when I begin to work with clients is just asking them to check in with themselves and see what's present, and become aware of their own body, become aware of what they're bringing to the session. Something always becomes figural and if I'm in the herd of horses oftentimes that figure then gets projected out onto the horses and horses start representing different parts of that person's life. Either the horses start acting out different people in their lives or the horses assume different aspects or parts of that person. So there's some sort of energetic container that starts to get created where it looks like magic but I think it has to do more with the relationship that's being formed between the client and the horses where the horses start to come alive in a way that's playing out for the client in their life.

Dean: I don't know a lot about play therapy but it sounds a bit like play therapy, but a lot more alive and active because of the horses.

Joan: Right. They have their own will and they're going to do what they want to do.

Duey: I know a fair amount about play therapy and the actual difference Dean is it's a relationship with another being versus a projected relationship onto a particular toy or object. That's the really big difference.

Dean: That would be a strong difference I would think.

Duey: Yes, very much so. In part what happens, at times it's uncanny because a horse will pick up on something and actually become active in the relationship in a way that obviously a toy couldn't but also in a way that the client might be going, "What's going on here?" It literally will trigger something to the point that they're going, "Oh my gosh".

Dean: You've already answered this a little bit but I'll ask it anyway. What else do you think your work offers the client that they wouldn't get in a normal psychotherapy environment?

Joan: Off the top of my head, I think things arise for the client quicker. Often I can work with a client for many sessions in the office and then I go out to the horses and in one session what we were not able to get to in the office will come up with the horses in that one session. The horses can get to it quicker because it's experiential and it's so right in the moment that things come up pretty quickly.

Duey: Some other examples; when Joan was talking I thought about a 15 year old boy that I work with who has been in the past diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and hyperactivity, etc. When I'm in the office I have to spend all of this time, "trying to manage him on some level". When I'm with the horses I have none of those issues. 1) If he needs to move he has plenty of room to move. 2) If he's not making contact the horses will pick that up and do something about it. So those are the kinds of things that I can't do in an office.

The other piece, and we talk a lot about it, is disturbance of homeostasis in our work. We're not talking about blowing people out of the water; that's not what we're talking about. But the level of contact and connection that a horse provides, and the congruency and authenticity of that, actually does disturb the homeostasis of many people because that's not what we're used to in our lives. The third aspect that I think it brings is a piece that we've looked at that I would call nature deprivation or wilderness deprivation.

In America the average person is outside three minutes a day. So just the idea, whether it be that this beautiful centre that Meggin and Noel have put together or whether it be where Joan works, which is a large ranch, or whether it be where I work, which is up in the mountains in Colorado, just the fact of being there and just the fact of being outside is a piece I feel people have missed for some time. Again, it brings us back to the core of who we are as human beings.

Dean: Yes. I agree that a lot of our modern life is so divorced from nature and it sounds like you're saying that this type of work really grounds people in nature again, and in a very quick and immediate way.

Duey: Exactly, and the piece that the horses bring is not just sitting in nature, it's being in nature with an animal or another being, and I prefer to use the word being, another being that is so natural. So it brings the peace of literally being in nature and the peace of that relationship piece again with it.

Joan: I also work in my private practice with a lot of people with severe trauma who don't trust anybody in their lives. They have relationships but they're pretty superficial and don't trust on any sort of deep level with another human being, and when they come out and start working with the horses it's the first time in their lives that they can feel a connection with another being that they trust. It's quite powerful and quite moving for them, and I think there's a secondary benefit and for me as a therapist it's because I'm facilitating that relationship between a client and the horse that they begin to then trust me also.

Dean: I'm thinking of a number of clients who fit that description as well. They're very traumatised and they won't trust anyone. I'm wondering if you could say a little more about how that relationship, the trust relationship, with the horses developed and why it seems to be so easy.

Joan: From my clients' side I think they are desperate and longing for connection, but terrified of it with people. From the horse perspective I think that's what they always want to do, is to connect. They're always open and willing to connect, that's their natural state of being, to be in connection. Where I see the connection happen is whenever someone drops into their heart, drops into what is really going on for them even if it is deep pain, all they have to do is drop into what's really true for them and what I see is the horse connects. They connect with the person exactly as who they are in that moment and that surprises people. And what I witness and what I experience between witnessing my clients with their connection with their horses is that there's a very deep connection and it feels like love to me. My clients are experiencing love with another being.

Duey: Were you going to ask something else?

Dean: No, if you've got some more to add there that would be great. I'm finding this really interesting.

Duey: Okay. Let me add a little more and then I'd love to hear your thoughts. The other piece that I think your question was, "how can this happen so quickly and why does it happen"?

My experience is that most people who have actually gone through some fairly severe injury or even not so severe emotional injury and sometimes physical injury whether it be abandonment or assault or whatever it may be, the horse does not care. There is absolutely no judgment. The horse does not care if someone is tall or short, or the colour of their skin or the colour of their hair

or their accent or what language they speak or what they have experienced in their life. The horse only cares about whether or not they're present and whether they're congruent. Those are the things that the horse would care about, so when people have been hurt or injured or traumatised there is a projection that others think they're damaged goods so to speak. Frankly, there's no such thing as a being that's damaged goods to a horse. It doesn't exist.

They can have experienced tremendous abuse and the horse will connect to them just as plainly and just as clearly and just as authentically as somebody who has known horses for 40 years and knows exactly what they're doing around horses and has never experienced anything negative in their life. As if there is anybody like that in the world! But again, the lack of judgment and the clear authenticity of connection is, in my perspective almost that moment when a mother sees her baby for the first time after she's given birth. It's been a very healthy pregnancy and the look of love and that look of caring and that look of total acceptance as a being in the world is really what horses bring. So it's a pretty big deal and it's a pretty big deal that again that lack of judgment is key.

Dean: Yes. I know that in Kepner's book, 'Healing Tasks', he talks a lot about the relationship and trust as being the first real goal in trauma work and it sounds like you agree with that and the process that your approach offers really facilitates that and may even speed it up quite substantially. I suppose anything that speeds it up in my view would be a good thing.

Duey: Exactly, and we've said for years that the contact and the trust and the relationship is the healing. It's the beginning. It's actually the first stage of development in a healthy human relationship and when we're working with horses we don't have to overcome the projective process of someone onto a man or a woman or a human being that most likely will really injure a client in the first place. It's like we get to take a step back from that whole process.

Dean: Obviously you sound like you're both quite passionate about Gestalt and about horses as well, and their use in psychotherapy. I'm wondering if you can say a little bit about, why was Gestalt a good fit? What were the theoretical underpinnings that made it a good fit as opposed to maybe like Psychodynamic psychotherapy or CBT or something else?

Duey: What makes Gestalt a good fit is the tenets of Gestalt are about relationship, being present and contact. Part of what we talk about is contact over time creates connection, connection over time creates relationship, relationship over time creates intimacy. The core part of Gestalt is about contact, it's about being in the present, it's about being in the relationship and being in the now, and it's really the only therapy that does that.

It's also about the wholeness of not just figuring it out or not just changing

what we think so we change what we feel. It involves all of us, every bit of us. It's that non dualistic belief that we're a whole being and that's exactly what a horse brings. One of the things I often say is that our brains and our gallbladders are the two organs in our body that we can live without. We can actually live without our brains as long as we have a brain stem, and we don't need our gallbladder either - or appendix, those are the three organs we can live without. What I'm saying is that the work is about entering in from our heart and connecting from the core of our being. Gestalt is the only therapy I know in which that is the essence of the therapy. Horses have lived that for years. It's almost like we haven't found the horse, we let ourselves be found by the horse.

Dean: Is there anything else that you think either of you could add to help us get a better understanding of your work and how it might be useful for clients?

Duey: The biggest thing that I would add right now is the concept of time. This work takes time, relationship takes time, and healing takes time. So the patience and the support - that would be the other piece I would add. The patience and the support in this kind of work are essential. Our job as therapists is to support the process, both of the horse and our clients, and to let it unfold to truly be a facilitator of that unfolding from a very supportive place. Erv Polster speaks a lot about that, about supporting that process. He has certainly been one of my mentors and that's probably the biggest learning, the time piece and the support piece, and our job is to facilitate that through the process of relationship through support and time. That's been essential for me.

Joan: The only thing that comes to mind for me that we haven't mentioned although we alluded to it, is that horses live in herds that are very similar to our family systems. In a herd of horses there's a hierarchy, there's always an alpha male and female, and then there's always someone on the bottom and then all the other horses in the herd kind of jockey for position. They all have their own roles and responsibilities, they have emotions that they communicate clearly with and no one takes it personally. They have relationships, there are horses that are best friends or hang out together and things like that. They're just authentic in that herd and they all need each other and they all stay connected but they also hold their own individuality. They are in their own power, they're authentic, and so people working with horses can begin to watch how horses live together.

They can begin to tap into - often people come out and say, "Wow that horse is so powerful", and they're intimidated by the horse's power but working with that horse they begin to tap into their own power and become comfortable with their own power. They learn to express their emotions and not judge

themselves and do it without judgment. You know, how horses do it, they just stick their angry bit in their ears and tell the other horse to back away and no one's feelings are hurt, so clients get to see.

Duey: Yes, they are very concise and direct at communication.

Dean: It sounds quite amazing and fascinating, so I'm wondering as a therapist if I was interested in doing the training that you guys are offering, what would I expect in the training and what would be the skills I would come away with?

Duey: Wow. That's a really big question.

Dean: Was that too big? You can give me the short version, it is okay.

Duey: The short version would be that in the training we'd be teaching you about Gestalt, the essence, the process of Gestalt, from not just a technique or a theoretical but from a practical level. We see Gestalt as a way to live, not necessarily a therapy. It's nice that therapy comes out of it, and that's what we teach. We also would teach a great deal about horses and everything from all that we've been talking about from the relationship of the horse to the health and care and caretaking of horses, and horses in a herd. Actually part of our program is asking people to learn how to ride in a natural way, so we combine those three things. It's actually quite an intense program. The feedback we received from the three day workshop we just finished here was actually quite good. Part of the feedback is, "Wow this is intense stuff". Not intense in - I really want to be clear about this. Not intense as face intense but intense as just the process itself is intense, and the connection and the contact is intense. It's deep. That might be a better word.

Dean: Yes, I'm interested that you spoke about it as a way to live and not just a therapy, because that is one of the things I like about Gestalt as well.

Duey: Yeah, exactly.

Dean: I'd like to thank you both for your time, it's been a really interesting discussion for me and I've really enjoyed the process. It sounds amazing and I would love to give it a go at some stage.

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