



Lost in Translation Understanding a Wordless World

by Gwynn Turnbull Weaver

Our world has changed dramatically in the last decade. The Internet, in large part, has influenced all of our lives. We communicate digitally now in so many ways.

That communication, based on the binary code of the digital age, is most frequently done using words. Though the use of video to communicate is on the rise, text is still the most cost-effective method of communicating in this "word based" society. Indeed, talk is cheap.

With all the information free flowing across the Internet we, as riders, know more about the nature of horses, their thought patterns, their intentions, and how to influence them. We study horse psychology, we study maneuvers and the mechanics of executing them. We study how to motivate the horse, how to manipulate the energy or "life" of our mounts

and how to direct it like some huge electrical schematic with receptors and conductors leading always back to the center. And while we do this, bent over our laptops, textbooks, iPads and smart phones, we amass an arsenal of data.

Then we walk out to the barn and try to apply it. Why then, you may be asking, do we feel so lost?

Dave and I travel around the country helping folks navigate horses and horsemanship. Though our discipline of choice is centered around the stock handling and horsemanship of the Great Basin and old California, that only serves as a backdrop for the bigger picture: establishing, strengthening, then deepening our horse-human connection.

As a teacher, I can tell you that it is a joy to communicate with a student who is well read, has a big vocabulary and has the words to express themselves very succinctly. They put forth fascinating questions, they are able to grasp complex, often abstract, concepts and are willing, open-minded and stimulating to be around. I wish I could tell you that they are also the best horsemen in our group but I can't. Frequently, they are the underachievers. This can be a very frustrating experience for those riders. They are usually used to being a "quick study" and often have accomplished an impressive level of success in their careers. Why then are they often handicapped when learning to ride?

In a word? Words.

By now we have all heard the famous mantra "you can't teach feel." I will not deny this claim, though, in the world of horse instruction, I feel it is all too frequently used to cover poor teaching skills. Perhaps a better way of saying it is that "feel is not gained through words." The part of our brains that has to do with "words" is not the part of our brain that "feels" in the moment. This is easy to prove. The times in a person's life when they are feeling the most intensely (fear, anger, grief) are



the times they are rendered "speechless."

I can tell you that when students of ours usually have a breakthrough when riding their horses, it is almost always precipitated by a period of silence.

As a rider, a person has to "get out of their head" and be in the moment for at least brief periods of time. This requires that the rider stop talking and remain silent long enough that not only have they stopped forming words in their mouth but also stopped forming them in their head. I have told riders to stop talking while riding around me and I can see them still "talking silently to themselves," still translating feelings, instruction into words silently in their heads. They feel something then immediately translate the feeling into words, then have a brief conversation with themselves, in words, about what the feeling was and how they should respond. Then they try to take those words and translate them back into a feeling that they can offer the horse. But of course, by then, the moment is lost, the horse has moved on in that tiny time lapse and the feeling the rider is offering is no longer relevant. Now the horse requires a different feeling, and the cycle continues with the rider perpetually behind the action. The horse is not translating feelings into words. They are just feeling and responding in that beautiful pure way that animals exist, leaving the cerebral human in the dust.

I've spent a lifetime instructing riders and have watched many others doing the same. Consistently, if they are instructing horseback and school the horse they are riding while they teach. When things escalate and that person must tune in to the horse to achieve a complex maneuver, their microphone will go silent. When the chips are down and we must become



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present in the moment to make the correct adjustment or offer the appropriate feeling to the horse, all talking stops.

I frequently have folks ask me what they can do to advance their feel of the horse. There is a simple exercise I have found that can help people looking to establish more feel.

Go one day without words.

I say it's a simple exercise, but not an easy one.

A day without words has no talking, no reading, no TV. No product labels, no recipes, no ingredient lists, no "how to" manuals. I encourage folks to try it for one 24-hour period. IF they can accomplish it, it will change the way they ride and regard their horse forever.

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us to feel without words. Most of us do not know how to exist without words but horses do not know how to exist with them.

Intellectually, we are rich. Instinctually and on a sensory level we are on our way to bankruptcy. Our reliance on words has left us texting, reading and googling our own natural instincts into oblivion. When we find ourselves in a situation where words do not apply, like riding and connecting with our horse, we realize, without the use of words, we don't have the ability to offer much of anything.

Authentically connecting with another living thing is a difficult undertaking and the human should realize that something this difficult cannot be reduced into mere "words." It is not about adopting the horse's language, it is about abandoning our own. In the moment the communication is needed there is not room for both.