

The Miracle within Michael: A Barn, a Boy, and a Horse

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Abstract: Working with children who are survivors of abuse and neglect can be both rewarding and heartbreaking. Animal assisted therapy utilizing dogs, rabbits, horses or cats facilitates amazing progress on the journey of healing and recovery. This article describes one such progression in the life of an eight year old boy who began his journey of healing while riding a horse named Dumbledore.

Keywords: child abuse, child neglect, social work, animal-facilitated activity.

Introduction

Animals used to enhance the therapeutic and helping process is not a new nor novel idea in the field of social work. Animal-assisted therapy dates back to the 18th century in England. Patients housed at a mental institution were often allowed to wander freely around the grounds and play with domesticated animals on the property, including dogs and cats. Facility administrators noticed that patient's moods improved and they appeared visually happier during and after their interacting with the animals (Serpell, 2006). The field of animal-assisted therapy now includes work with dogs, dolphins, horses, cats, rabbits, and birds and has expanded into hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, hospice homes, juvenile detention facilities, homes, and schools. The animals used in these programs are assessed and certified as physically and mentally sound. This requirement protects the patients and clients whom interact with the animals. The protection and welfare of the animal is equally important.

Therapists who bring animals into their practice are also required to become certified in their area of animal expertise to ensure the safety and well-being of the animals. My propensity to be around horses began as a young girl when I rode horses nearly every summer. One summer, however, I developed an allergic reaction to horse dander and hay and could not be around my horse. I was devastated, sad, moody, and mad. The next summer, after my doctor informed me I had apparently grown out of the allergy, I returned to the barn. Before I even got to the barn, my horse, sensing I was coming, put both front legs on his door and was whinnying uncontrollably. Until that day, I had no idea the strength and intensity of the bond between a child and a horse. The literature explains that such a bond exists due to the instinctual nature of the horse as a prey animal and its heightened sense of its

environment and especially humans, since humans are predatory. Horses have an uncanny skill way of reflecting human behavior and emotions back to us and it is in this reciprocal relationship that the bond between human and horse is formed (PATH International, 2015). The following story is a true story, in which I witnessed the miracle of that bond, between a young boy named "Michael" and his horse, "Dumbledore."

The Day of the Miracle

My day begins at 5:00 a.m. Temperature today is a hot 102 degrees with sweltering 100% humidity. A typical day. I am not ready for today. My body is not ready for today and it knows it. I ache all over from my work from yesterday as I lean over to put on my boots. Coffee in hand, I get in my SUV, loaded with drinks, sandwiches, art supplies, horseshoe games, paints, coloring books, jump ropes, riding helmets, stirrups, bridles, horse blankets. My SUV smells like an old wet, dank, musty barn. My shirt is wrinkled. I know 12 hours from now I will be covered in dirt, mud, sweat, and will be aching. And so my day begins.

I get to the barn at 5:45 a.m. and start setting up the tables. I have two hours. Not enough time....not enough time. My volunteers from the Navy base will be here at 7:30 a.m. They can help set up too. I spend the next two hours setting up painting and art stations, horseshoe/activity stations, getting the round pen ready, disinfecting the riding helmets and blankets, putting basketball hoops all around the riding pasture. At 7:45 a.m., ten horses, saddles, riding blankets and stirrups are delivered. My volunteers and I begin to tack the horses and line them up. I stop and gulp down a bottle of water. I am tired and hot and sticky and sweaty all ready. The Navy Shipmate volunteers, all 30 of them are here, trained, and ready. Our first bus of 10 children with special needs pulls up, blowing up dust from

the trail to the barn. The children are quiet as the bus rolls in and comes to a stop. My staff and all 30 volunteers are getting excited to see these children and spend an hour with them. The bus driver turns off the engine, the teachers give directions to the children, the bus doors open, and the children cheer.

The Children Arrive

All 10 children get off the bus and meet their volunteers. This is a part of the day that the children love. THEY get to choose three volunteers to be on their team from a huge group of military soldiers. THEY are in charge! Slowly, children point or nod their heads in the direction of the soldiers they select. The military volunteers are assigned to stay with that child for the next hour. The volunteers tell me they love helping these children because they remind them of home, remind them of their little brothers or sisters. Because they enjoy working with these children so immensely, these soldiers often sacrifice their vacation time away from the base to come volunteer with us. The soldiers also tell me they enjoy giving back to the community and being part of a worthwhile program and being around children who are happy and smiling. The soldiers help the children get on the horses, sit straight in the saddle, and adjust their stirrups. One volunteer holds the lead rope, which guides the horse, and the other two volunteers walk beside the horse, holding onto the child to make sure they remain balanced and safe on the horse.

Michael, a slight, shy eight year old little boy, is riding Dumbledore today. Michael is a beautiful little boy whom I have yet to see smile. A survivor of severe chronic abuse and neglect and school bullying due to his short stature, he rarely makes eye contact. Michael also has trouble with balance due to a damaged eardrum and has slight brain damage. The first day he ever came to this program, I could barely get him to come close to Dumbledore, one of the larger of the horses. He was afraid to touch the horse, did not want to groom him, and did not want to look in his eyes. Michael's spirit had been broken and I knew Dumbledore could and would heal and strengthen this little boy's spirit. Dumbledore and Michael would bond and that bond would change Michael forever.

There are hundreds of research studies and books written on the unique and special bond that develops between horses and humans, going back to the intense and reciprocal relationship of prey and predator, and the emotions and behaviors that horses could sense in humans. I was confident that bond was going to move mountains. I felt it. I had taken a special interest in Michael. I don't know why. I just looked at him the very first time and my heart lurched. I loved this little survivor, head hung low, sad empty brown eyes, stick straight brain hair, little arms, little hands. I just loved him.

So I loaded all the other nine children onto their horses and the riders and their team of volunteers walked into the pasture. Today's class was the 4th week out of 8 weeks these children were coming to my program. They knew what to do so I stayed behind to work specifically with Michael. Michael was just standing there and his team was looking at me like "we don't know what to do with him." I smiled and kind of jogged over to Michael. Michael's head wasn't hanging low today. He was actually watching me jog/run over to him. As I bent down next to him, I told him I was tired of running and asked if I could sit down. He nodded and I sat on the hard, wet dirt. In this position, Michael would be looking down at me as we talked, putting him in a power position.

I told him that Dumbledore had been sad all week and had missed Michael and was so ready and happy for Michael to ride him. His little brown eyes began to twinkle. I told him that two of the other horses has not been nice to Dumbledore and had been picking on him all week and that I had hoped that Michael could help Dumbledore feel better about being bullied. I explained that I really thought Michael had this magical gift of helping animals and people and that I think Dumbledore had been waiting on him all week to help him. More twinkles. A little hopeful, not acting scared, Michael put on his riding helmet and walked over to Dumbledore. I leaned forward and said to Dumbledore that Michael was going to be talking a lot while he was riding him and that Dumbledore needed to listen super carefully to everything Michael was saying. I then blew a little breath toward Dumbledore's nose, knowing that would make him nod his head up and down. I looked over at Michael and winked.

The Miracle

Michael climbed up on Dumbledore and we walked into the riding pasture. I was one of the side-walkers so I could hear everything that Michael told the Dumbledore. Michael shared that some people are mean sometimes and some people are nice. Michael explained that his dad and brother were mean and didn't always give him food or let him sleep in his bed. This was cue for me to pull out a small baby carrot from my satchel and ask Michael if he wanted me to feed Dumbledore. He said yes. We stopped and I gave Dumbledore some carrots. Michael told Dumbledore to stay away from the mean horses and stay with the happy ones and then he would be happy. The conversation lasted about 30 minutes. All we were doing was rhythmically walking around this big open pasture. No exercises, no games, no arm raises, just walking. My arms were aching from holding onto Michael while he was in the saddle, helping him work on balance. Finally, I told Michael he had to hold onto the reins and sit up straighter because I and the other volunteer were going to let him ride the horse without us holding on. I said "Dumbledore told us you are ready." I told him that he needed to ride Dumbledore, unassisted, with no help from me or the other side-walker for about 1 minute.

For an abused child to be in charge of a 1000 pound animal for 1 minute can seem like an eternity. I looked up into Michael's eyes to see if there was fear or hesitation. Nope. Just more twinkling. Man!!!! I love this little boy! So we dropped the reins and took one step away from the horse. And Dumbledore began to walk. My heart lurched and melted. I was actually seeing it. I was seeing this miracle of a broken little boy beginning to revive his spirit, heart, and soul with this horse. It really was happening, right in front of my eyes and I was part of it! The other side-walker and I counted to three and dropped our hands. And Michael rode that 1000 pound horse all by himself. There was no talking. Just riding. After about 2 minutes, I asked Michael what he was thinking and he said really nothing, just about bringing his sleeping bag to the barn and sleeping in the stall with Dumbledore. We all smiled. I told Michael that that was a fun idea and that one day I would take him on an official cowboy trail ride and he would have to stand up to sleep, just like Dumbledore does. He giggled and told me that

was silly. He giggled. He finally smiled and on that day, in that pasture, his teachers watched Michael smile for the first time. Our session ended and Michael hopped down off of Dumbledore, head held high, eyes just twinkling, and said he would be back next week and would ride the entire time without help. I nodded and said that I expected nothing less from my favorite little cowboy. Michael looked up at me with those ridiculously adorable eyes and reached his arms out to me. I leaned down and hugged him. My heart melted and twinkled.

It is now 5:00 p.m. and the temperate is a chilly 99 degrees with only 100% humidity. My day is done. About 50 children rode horses today. I witnessed miracles. I saw smiles and heard laughter. The day flew by. I am filled with joy. I am happy. I am no longer tired. My body does not ache. I saw the first smile on a little boy's face. I saw and heard an adorable chuckle. I was silly. I made a difference. I facilitated that difference. I don't care if I smell like a musty old barn and am covered in dirt from head to toe. I am filled with joy from being part of a miracle that day. The reflection back on my day overwhelms me, aches my heart, and refills my spirit. I did change a life. I actually really did do it. A little boy with a broken spirit started to smile today and actually chuckled. It was a good day.....way too short, a mere 12 hours, but still a good day.

References

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