

Can We Learn Anything From Horses?

Equus offers life-changing “attunement” through the medium of horses. But how?

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SANTA FE, N.M. — The 11 acres of Thunderbird Ridge: the Equus Experiential Discovery and Learning Campus were virtually empty.

Raven, a horse, had been paid — or more correctly, her gentle caretakers had been paid — over \$1,000, including New Mexico state sales tax, on the understanding that she would lift the veil on my mortal existence and thus improve it in some way. Two hours had been allotted for this purpose. Time was running thin.

What Is Equus?

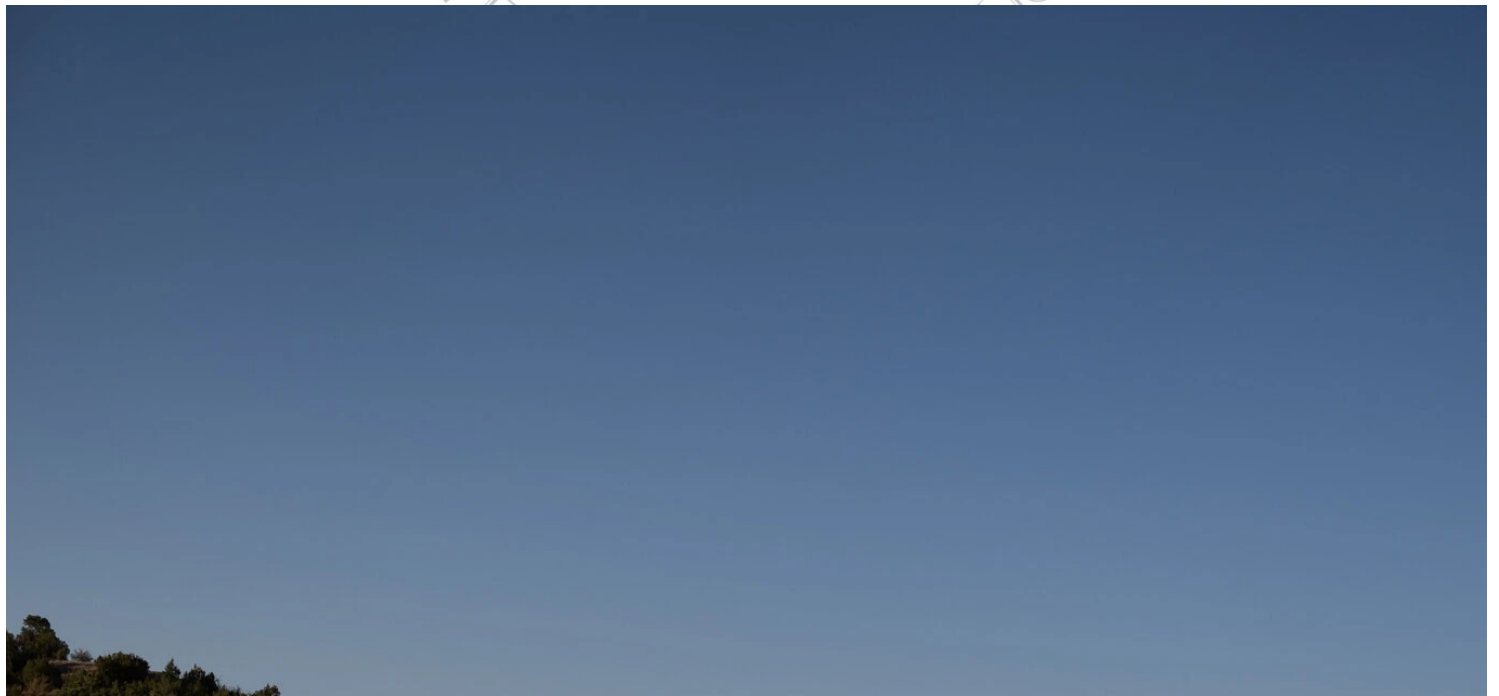
Apprehending the business of Equus from the Equus website is either simple or impossible.

A caliginous floating video of a glassy black horse eye blinks perpetually on the home page. Scrolling down, we encounter, close-up, a human hand and horsehair in intimate caress. On the “Animal Partners” section of the “Team” page — a kind of employee ID gallery for Equus horses — each horse at the property is rendered an artistic fraction of itself: Artemis’s eye. Dante’s eye. Most of Cisco’s mandible, viewed from below.

This disorienting horse portraiture is intentionally fragmentary, said Kelly Wendorf, an executive and personal development coach, who in 2016 founded Equus with her business and romantic partner J. Scott Strachan, who is also an executive and personal development coach.

“If you see a picture of somebody, let’s say, running with a horse during their two-hour experience, and you don’t end up running with a horse ...” said Ms. Wendorf, 56, reflecting on a hypothetical client’s expectations and the dearth of visual exposition on her website. She trailed off.

Mr. Strachan, 63, jumped in. “We don’t want to put anything in the space that limits the possibilities,” he said. “We don’t want to create expectations. The more curious you show up here, the more can happen.”





Dante, Cisco and Aedin represent a collective 168 million years of wisdom at home on their Santa Fe ranch. Ramsay de Give for The New York Times

In short, “The Equus Experience,” is tailored to each client individually. Participants may engage with one or more horses from the company’s private herd. They may or may not be asked to lead horses in tasks. No riding of the horses is allowed.

The possible effects, opportunities, outcomes, fruits, impacts, ramifications and surprises of Equus, according to the company’s website, include: “literally changing your brain to be wired toward presence, attunement and wisdom,” “creating the life you really deserve,” learning “in a joyful, memorable, yet powerful way that is sustained over time,” mastering “nonverbal skills,” sensing “‘emergent’ futures” and “much more.”

The program is derived from what the founders frequently refer to as “56 million years of wisdom” — an allusion to the debut in the fossil record of the equid ancestor of the modern domesticated horse *Equus ferus caballus*. This wisdom, said Ms. Wendorf “is in all the work that we do, whether the horse is physically there or not.” (In addition to in-person interactions, Equus also offers remote and off-site

coaching options with no horses present; all activities are “horse-inspired.”)

The horse’s herd system of living, Ms. Wendorf and Mr. Strachan assert in website copy, enabled it to become “one of the most successful mammals” on the planet. (Technically, yes, one could argue that domesticated horses are comparably “successful” to humans, given that both evolved from the same Cretaceous period placental mammal. Humans have done bigger numbers.)

The Equus business plan also proposes that the schema around which horse herds instinctively organize, when adopted by humans, can transform people into better, more successful beings.





For clients who never visit the New Mexico property, the most compelling element of Equus may be the becalming force of Scott Strachan and Kelly Wendorf, the founders. Ramsay de Giv for The New York Times

What *Is* Equus?

If the afternoon of my visit — radiating brilliant Santa Fe sunshine, exhilarated by its own tremendous wind velocity, grateful and excited to be a fine March day — were two people, it would definitely be Kelly and Scott.

But I was having trouble, under the calm supervision of Mr. Strachan standing some yards away, gleaning from the horse Raven not only “what she wants you to know about her” but also “what she tells you about yourself.”

I was, as instructed, deeply listening, my hand on her warm back, my eyes shut. Uncertain about the mechanics of information flow, I attuned my senses to perceive a message from Raven in any medium, such as the sudden existence of new certainty within myself, or an image popping into my head like an AirDropped file. Very still minutes began to pile up. “What are you telling me?” I asked her, finally, at which point Raven did nothing, and then walked away.

Had it gone like this for “Bette Midler,” “Margaret Atwood” or “Sally Jewell” — all listed on the Equus website as previous clients, identified respectively as “(actor),” “(author)” and “(Secretary of the Interior)” — Had “Jeff Bezos and family,” “Red Bull” and “Cici’s Pizza,” following their human coach’s direction to the letter, listened with their hearts to their horse teachers, and heard, in reply, only the sounds of light vehicle traffic to the nearby Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado Santa Fe carried on the wind?

It seemed unlikely — why would they be on the website? Perhaps they hadn’t done the in-person activity I was failing to execute; maybe it had been enough for them to receive 56 million years of wisdom through Equus’s remote executive coaching options. I was jealous, though I knew not of what. I wanted whatever Bette Midler had.

“In our experience, the process begins the moment you commit and book your date for your time with the horses,” read an email I received upon booking my Equus Experience. “So watch for synchronicities and other events that will invariably conspire to assist you between now and when you arrive.”



The Equus coach on hand poses questions and offered light guidance during sessions with clients. Ramsay de Giv for The New York Times

While a session is occurring, the Equus coach on hand poses questions and offers light guidance on how to spend time with the horses. The horses themselves might participate in two or three single-client sessions each week, and face one group of clients a month.

“They’re not going to show up and provide their greatest gifts if they’re being forced to work an eight-hour workday,” Mr. Strachan said. “And it’s also the same thing for us.” (“We’ve said no before to some very large dollar amounts,” he said. “It’s not about the money.”)

The bill for two hours of in-person horse interactions, plus a follow-up phone call, is \$1,044.47.

“If somebody calls and is ready to invest in themselves, they don’t even ask,” Mr. Strachan said. “If somebody calls up and they say ‘This is too expensive,’ they’re looking for a reason not to invest in themselves. It’s not necessarily about the money.”

Asked how Equus arrives at its prices, Ms. Wendorf estimated that the average cost to support the horses is about \$750 per month. She and Mr. Strachan also emphasized the time and effort expended customizing each participant’s encounter. For the in-person experience, this can include deciding beforehand whether to read a poem — and which poem — from a book of several hundred poems, at some point during a session.

Considerations such as possible poetry pertinence are made based on responses to an intake questionnaire emailed after booking. (One item asks respondents to describe their lives as if they were “in a balcony looking down at all the aspects and players.”)

“How much does it cost to free yourself from limiting beliefs?” Ms. Wendorf said.

Brio and Molly enjoy unfiltered face time with Ms. Wendorf — access celebrity clients and international corporations pay for. Ramsay de Give for The New York Times

What Is *Equus*?

Tim Hamilton, 50, the head of global creative design at the North Face, first learned of *Equus* in December 2019, when he saw a brochure featuring avant-garde horse photography at a Santa Fe hotel.

“I didn’t really know what *Equus* was,” he said. But on vacation with his partner and a friend from work, he booked an in-person *Equus* Experience. In the arena, he was drawn immediately to Artemis, the oldest mare and the leader of the herd.

“You think, like, ‘Oh, come on, that there can’t be that much connectivity,’” he said. “But there is, and there’s this charge.”

Mr. Hamilton, who manages a team of about 60 apparel designers, credited the experience of observing Artemis with “empowering my intuition” — particularly about “the importance of having open communication.”

After his session, he signed up for biweekly coaching calls with Ms. Wendorf. Last year, when the pandemic left him with an unused portion of his corporate travel and entertainment budget, he hired her to host a remote office session to help his team reconnect. (There were no Zoom calls with horses; instead, employees performed tasks like telling their co-workers what they admired about them as colleagues and individuals.)

Another client, Kathy Fiander, 61, a director at Microsoft charged with devising learning experiences for employees, said the *Equus* corporate team-building exercises are “not even close” to the strangest leadership activities she’s participated in since joining the company in 1989.

“In the old days,” Ms. Fiander said, “the ways they had you build trust were through physical things, like standing on the edge of something and falling backward and trusting people will catch you.”

Before meeting Mr. Strachan, she was skeptical about the potential impact of *Equus*. “I’ve been around corporate environments a while,” she said. “I’ve done all of the personality tests, and all of that stuff. I tend to look at it with a little bit of a jaded viewpoint, perhaps.” Still, she enlisted Mr. Strachan to lead a daylong session — and found it, to her surprise, “very successful.”

Mr. Strachan, she said, created an atmosphere of trust — and tables “covered with” Play-Doh — where people could “share what they felt they needed to” in “a way that people didn’t feel defensive about it.”

Horses at Thunderbird Ridge are generally free to do as they please. Aedin may share the arena with two or three individual clients a week, along with one client group a month. Ramsay de Give for The New York Times

“And there were people in that room who — we really didn’t especially love being with each other,” Ms. Fiander said.

Encouraged by employees’ feedback, she continued to book Mr. Strachan’s corporate services. Her team recently committed to participating in a two-hour remote “Wisdom Circle” with him every other week, for four months. “It has not been a hard sell for me at all,” she said, of the expense.

Although Ms. Wendorf and Mr. Strachan kick off workplace coaching sessions by explaining the foundations of Equus, Ms. Fiander and Mr. Hamilton both said horses did not play an explicit role in any of the subsequent activities. For clients who never visit the New Mexico property, the most compelling element of Equus may not be the horses, but the becalming force of its leaders’ personalities. “I’m not a phone person at all — I hate when people call me,” said Mr. Hamilton, who expressed mild disbelief at his decision to sign up for regular hourlong phone chats.

“Kelly,” he said, “just, as a personality and person — she’s so joyous.”

What Is Equus?

“What they are going to do,” Mr. Strachan had said when he and I first entered the outdoor arena, “is reflect back to you everything that you are, except the story you tell yourself.”

The horses, he’d explained, were mirrors for “what’s true inside you.”

From start to finish, my Equus Experience — which consisted mainly of cautiously approaching horses and petting them until they walked away, resting my head on one horse’s withers, and journaling about my experience — was refreshed continuously from a stream of such enigmatic information. While perhaps whimsical in premise, it was not an exercise in mollicoddling.

“Are you OK with receiving?” Mr. Strachan had asked at the start of my session. I was — I thought I was. Some people, he’d cautioned, merely think they are.

When I later admitted to not having received what felt like a single dispatch from Raven, Mr. Strachan suggested that perhaps I was not allowing myself to receive her messages — or that I had received them, but was unwilling to acknowledge them.

“Maybe what it is that she’s saying about you is you need to give yourself more permission to receive,” he said. At that moment, Raven began walking toward us, which Mr. Strachan accepted as validation of his interpretation.

Bearing in mind that I may be afflicted with what Mr. Strachan diagnosed as a possible “small problem with receiving,” his methods of drawing connections between the horses’ behavior and aspects of my life or character felt, at times, like someone picking out new constellations in the sky. A horse walking away from me was a sign I was welcome. A horse standing still was “so loving” being with me. Multiple horses lying down, as they did toward the end of my session, was evidence of my leadership “superpower” — of “something that you bring to others so that they can relax.”

“I hope that you take away from that how powerful you are,” Mr. Strachan whispered, “because they don’t do that for everybody. They don’t. They don’t.”

“That is a normal, natural behavior, especially based on the time of day that you’ve expressed,” said Chloe Wires, a research assistant at the Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine, when I asked her, over Zoom, if it was unusual for horses to lie down outside on a warm, sunny afternoon. “I’m sorry to say, it doesn’t have anything to do with your leadership.”

Candace Croney, a professor of animal behavior and well-being at Purdue, said, “Just out of human compassion, I feel like I need to say: Even if things didn’t go well for you with this group of horses, or it wasn’t the outcome you were hoping for, that doesn’t say that you’re a poor leader.”

“A paper bag could have blown by,” Dr. Croney said, “and I shudder to think what that would have said about your leadership — because they probably would have bolted.”

Having no prior horse history, I had contacted Ms. Wires and Dr. Croney after my session to run Equus’s interpretations by them. (Of the Equus founders, Ms. Wendorf has by far more experience with horses; she previously worked as a trainer and operated a riding school. Mr. Strachan, in addition to coaching, was a sailor and scuba diving instructor.)

Based on my account, Ms. Wires and Dr. Croney agreed that some of the Equus elucidations of equine conduct aligned neatly with animal behavior science. But, they cautioned, there could be grounds for confusion based on the additional layers of meaning ascribed to certain horse actions.

For instance, a person might wonder why a horse would bother to impart to random humans secret knowledge that will enable them to create the lives they truly deserve. For Mr. Strachan, the knowledge transmission is a byproduct of something practical: When a human enters a herd’s space, such as the arena at Thunderbird Ridge, he said, horses immediately interpret that person as “a herd member.”

“That’s how they’ve survived for 56 million years,” he said. “It’s incumbent upon them to make sure that you know how to work within the herd.”

“No,” said Dr. Croney over Zoom, “That doesn’t — that’s not a thing.”

“If you’re a prey species, you are designed by nature to scan the environment, make sure it’s safe for you to be in. If you’re not sure it’s safe, get out of there,” she said. “That’s it. That’s all you’re designed as a horse to do.”

Equus clients may interact directly with horses in the company's herd, but not ride them. Ramsay de Givé for The New York Times

Another Equus maxim is that horses recoil from what the founders term “incongruence” — for instance, a person who is emotionally distraught presenting a placid facade.

If horses, Mr. Strachan said, are “out there going completely nuts and they’re unsettled, then we like to lean in and find out what’s really deeply unsettled for you, because they don’t lie.”

“This person stated how calm she was, how grounded she felt, and she was lying,” he said, of one recent client. “Because inside she had a Force 5 hurricane going, over some professional and personal things in her life. And she wasn’t owning it. So they read that.”

Dr. Croney said that there was “probably” some accuracy “in that the horses can detect and respond to cues we are giving off, that we ourselves may not be aware of.”

For example, horses, which thrive on consistency and predictability, could be disturbed by a human displaying erratic breathing or movement patterns induced by stress.

But, Ms. Wires added, a horse perceiving signals outside the field of human awareness is not necessarily discerning “incongruence.” Because, to the horse, the signals are not hidden, there is no incongruence: It’s merely a human exhibiting stress.

“They’re only picking up on the internal actual physical metrics that your body is exuding,” Ms. Wires said. “They just know that you’re not right, so they’re going to be cautious toward you.”

Dr. Croney, who was not previously familiar with Equus, added, “We don’t want to bash what they’re doing.”

Humans “certainly can influence” horses’ behavior, she said. “But it doesn’t reflect some sort of inherent characteristic in us, is what I’m saying.”

Still, it is possible, Dr. Croney said, even outside the formal trappings of, say, leadership exercises, for people to obtain benefits just from spending time in the presence of animals. This is one premise of “the biophilia hypothesis,” which holds that people are inherently attracted to nature.

“My animal behavior work has made me a far better teacher,” she said.

Working with sheep, Dr. Croney said — “everything scares sheep” — requires her to be still and calm; to notice what the sheep are doing; to take stock of the environment they’re in and even to look at what they’re looking at “so I understand what’s going to impact them.”

“As long as the animals are comfortable, they’re in an environment where they feel safe and protected, and you have the ability to sit and watch them — or even better yet, interact with them safely — all of those are fantastic opportunities,” she said.

When asked what, exactly, Equus does, Ms. Wendorf’s answer was typically starry-eyed and expansive: “We create conditions for people to have breakthrough learning so they can have the lives that they’ve always dreamed of,” she said.

But the flourishing value for herself and Mr. Strachan may be that, in creating a business reliant on contemplative horse observation, they have found a way to perpetually hone skills that make them better than the average person at dealing with all unpredictable, skittish animals — including humans eager to improve themselves at any price.