

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED FROM TEMPLE GRANDIN

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I am fascinated by Temple Grandin and what she has to say. Beyond her admirable life and accomplishments, it is more personal for me – I actually try to incorporate some of the information she provides when dealing with horses. Different kinds of perceptions and life-view should and do affect our relationships with animals (not to mention each other). We should not expect a horse, a herd and prey animal, to perceive the world or our intentions precisely as we do.

Many years ago I agreed to work with ‘handicapped’ children in vaulting and riding. Sometimes I would be asked to help using my riding and vaulting knowledge, and at other times my general horse knowledge. I was clueless about autism, Cerebral Palsy, mental problems, emotional problems, etc., but I was told that relating to horses seemed to be really helpful with these kids with their various complications.

In the vastness of my ignorance, I girded my mental loins and asked the experts, “OK what should I do and not do?,” and I plunged in. I rather think that in the final analysis I learned more from the kids than they learned from me.

As I worked with these children, it began to dawn on me that working with, particularly children with autism, gave me ideas about how to approach and work with horses. My first intimation was that a ‘Squeeze,’ as vets use to palpate a mare or other veterinary procedures, seemed to make the horses calmer. I would have thought that it would make them panic. Autistic children are sometimes calmed by a ‘squeeze’ – the physical pressure and limitations have a calming effect (this is covered extensively in the movie with Clare Dane). I was utterly bewildered by this concept, but I experimented with it in my horse handling.

Drawing on my miniscule exposure to autistic people (besides the riding and vaulting ‘projects’), my next-door neighbor's boy was severely autistic, and I used to watch him when his mother had to leave him at home. It quite alarmed me to be left in charge, but he also taught me a lot – this works, that does not. Slow time down. Tone down. Do not press relentlessly. Know when to approach or not. For some reason, it occurred to me that there were many similarities to dealing with horses. I experimented with using that mind-set I developed when working with the neighbor’s boy when I worked my horses. I found it fascinating that when I had that in mind, the difficulties in many horses often improved.

Grandin’s discussion about different kinds of learning leads me to think about horses and their sensitivities, perceptions, learning styles and limitations. Thinking about her work and her life led me to come up with one of my mini-lists. Horses respond based on their Visual, Auditory and Tactile reactivity level. Within a horse the degree of reaction between these three do not always ‘match.’ The horses learn based on our thoughtful way of dealing with those natural functions – per individual horse, not by applying a strict formula or system, regardless of the horse before us.

I would advise anybody to attend and read anything you can from Temple Grandin. Understanding that there are different perceptions, sensitivities and learning styles can help us as we train both riders and horses. It can help raise us out of the bog and dogma of dealing with responses like “More from behind,” “Make him sit,” “Half Halt” and help us to ride with greater empathy and effectiveness.