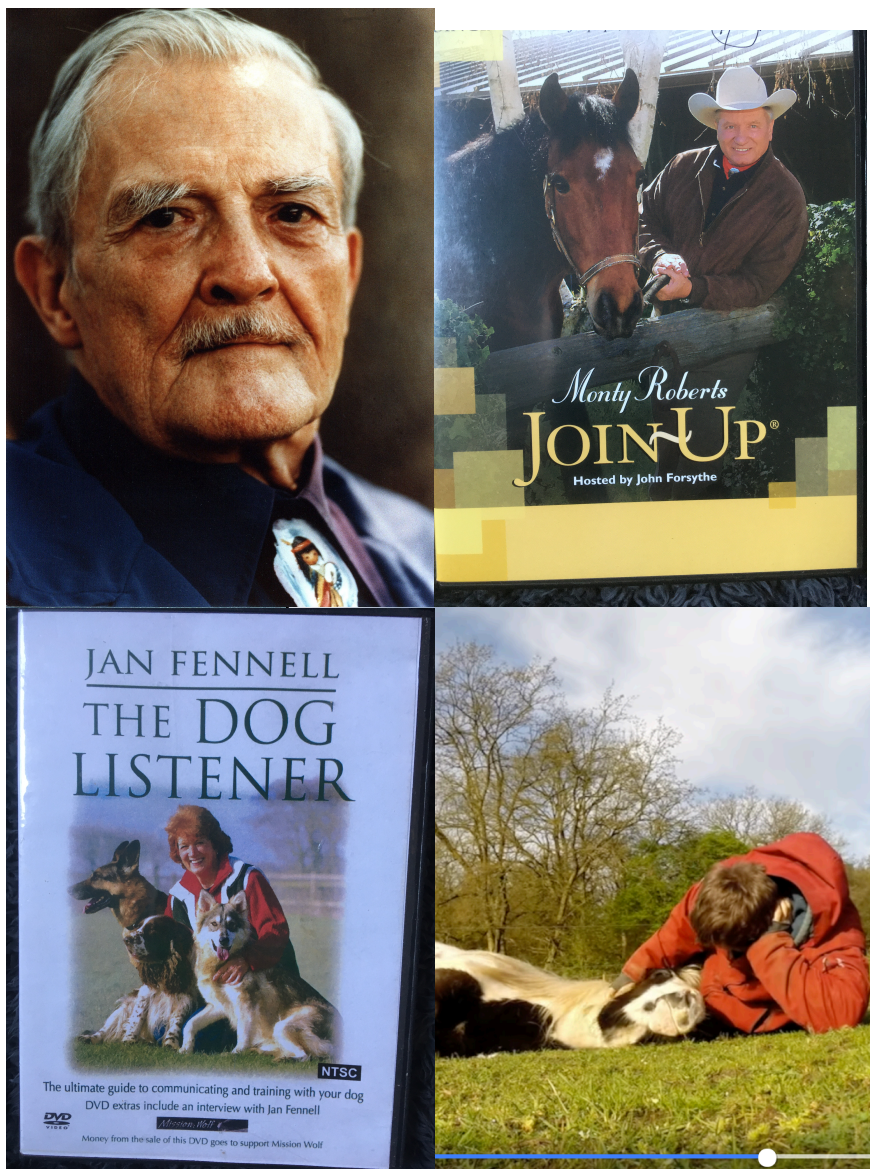


my teachers and other animals

what we can learn from animal trainers

with Rob McNeilly



Foreword by Barry Duncan Psy.D.,
CEO Better Outcomes Now

dedication

To my family, near and far,
and all the animals down through these decades
with gratitude for their gift of being part of my life.

Also to Milton H Erickson MD
for the privilege of continuing his heritage into the
future.

[with apologies to Gerard Durrell for the title]

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foreword

I have to start by stating my bias. I am a big fan of Rob McNeilly and the way he thinks about and talks about this work we do. Rob's personal connection to Erickson's teaching as well as his continued applications and creative expansions of his work are always a treasure to contemplate. Even more compelling and perhaps the thing I most value about Rob is that he provides a down to earth translation of ideas, like hypnosis, that are too often prone to muddled mystification. Rob's teachings always pass the smell test; they have the ring of authenticity and convey a reassuring feeling that this is someone who does the work, unlike many of the recognized speakers and researchers.

This little book is a gem. I have read a lot of books about psychotherapy and heard countless lectures, but I can safely say without qualification that I have never read one or heard one that suggested psychotherapy has something to learn from working with horses, dogs, and other non-human critters. But if you put this book in the context of the brilliance of Rob McNeilly, it makes total sense. *My Teachers and Other Animals* identifies a connection among living things, a common theme that runs across all interactions, whether human to human or human to other animals.

In doing so, *My Teachers and Other Animals* cuts right to the chase about what it means to do good psychotherapeutic work, representing an essential, dare I say, "truth" that Erickson understood all too well. Our clients are better served by an anthropological perspective, viewing ourselves as making first contact with a culture both unique and complete, seeking a pristine understanding of the client's idiosyncratic interpretations, preferences, capabilities, behaviors, and experiences. Call it "utilization" or "chumula" or whatever you want, but it is the space where trust develops, and change happens.

Rob invites you to sit in this perspective, a place of humility, deference, and curiosity, to receive and contemplate lessons from those who apply such a stance in working with animals. These lessons are both simple and profound, and worthy of your reflection about applications in your practice. And in true Rob McNeilly form, he invites us to play with the lessons, these humble but powerful ideas, in our own work. I can only offer my hearty endorsement to that invitation.

Barry L. Duncan, Psy.D., CEO
[Better Outcomes Now](#)

Erickson and anthropology



Hello. Rob McNeilly here and I wanted to speak about some novel areas that I found helpful in discovering how to add to my effectiveness in my work. And I want to speak about these just in case it's got some relevance to you.

Erickson, of course, is a place to start. And there's been a lot written about him, various approaches and so on. But one particular area that I think is not really sufficiently understood or paid attention to is his invitation for us to study anthropology. And this may have been stimulated by his friendship with Margaret Mead, who was married to Gregory Bateson at that stage.

And Margaret Mead told a very humorous and humiliating experience that she had talking with some people, some natives in some pacific island, who had no contact with Westerners previously. And she was interested in their language. So, she pointed to the ground and looked at the native and he said, "[chumula]."

"Ah," she thought. "Oh, that's interesting." Then then she pointed to the sea and he said, "[chumula]." And she pointed to the sky and again, he said, "[Chumula]." And she thought, "Well, this must be a very primitive language, that that seems to be the only word they have," until she discovered that '[chumula]' in this native language meant pointing with a finger.

So, that idea of studying anthropology is a way of expanding our limits to what certain actions and words and problems are. And also, we can look at the idea of studying anthropology and extend it to studying the anthropology of each individual person because just as different societies have different contexts and different shared understandings, so with an individual, or a couple or a family.

So, looking at the anthropological perspective gives us a way of expanding our observations, our certainties and allows us to be more open to find what's going to be helpful for this person. There's a lot that could be said about Erickson, but for the moment, I want to emphasise that anthropological contribution.

Some other unlikely sources that I want to speak about, first of all, Monty Roberts, who had the identity of being called the Horse Whisperer. Unlike the film, *The Horse Whisperer*, Monty Roberts had a very particular and individual way of working with horses so that changes could happen.

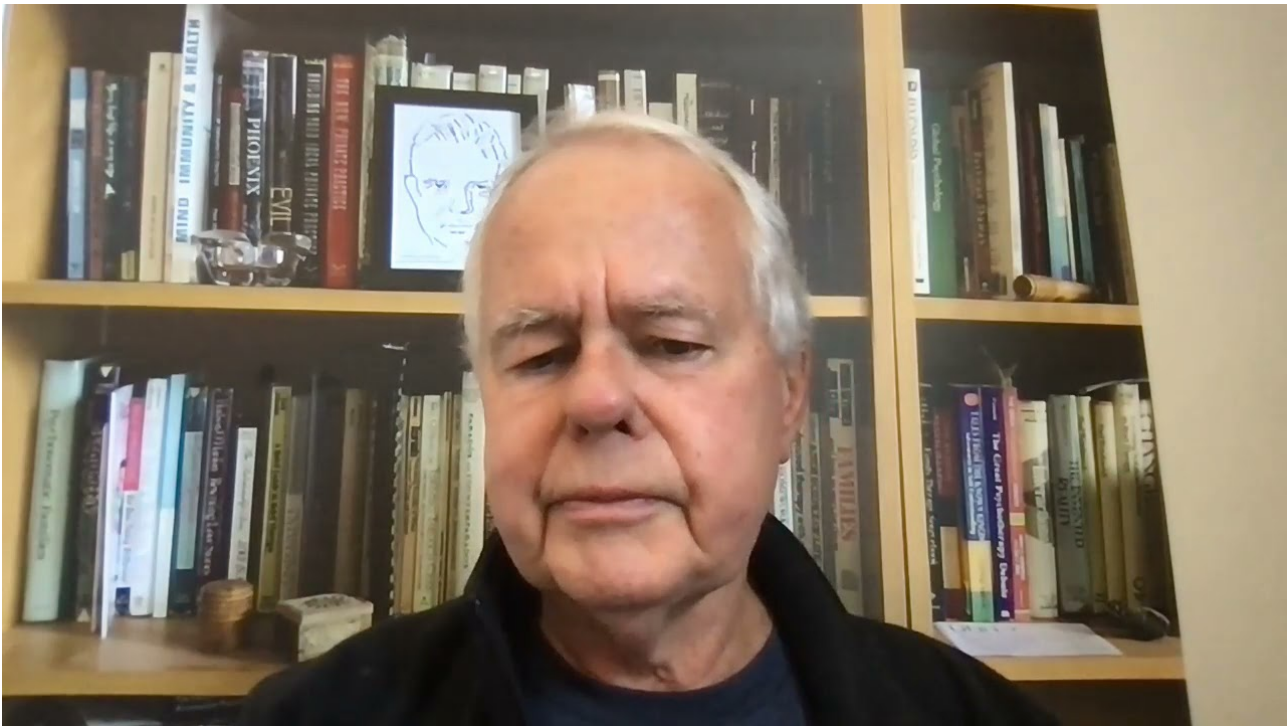
And I also want to talk about an English woman, Jan Fennell, who had a television series and she was called the Dog Whisperer, or the woman who listens to dogs. And she had some very interesting contributions to make in relation to dogs that I found really helpful for my understanding of how to be therapeutically useful for the individual client.

And the other person I want to speak about is James French, who I just recently discovered. And he has what he calls the Trust Technique and it's basically a mindfulness practice, so that he's mindfully with an animal. And he's found that this is relevant for working with dogs, and cats, and horses, and even lions and bears, would you believe.

But for the moment, I want to leave that emphasis on my invitation for you to explore the anthropological context of each individual client as a way of enlarging our perspective, increasing our options for observations and for being creative.

So, I'll speak about the other people in a separate talk, but for the moment, that's my invitation. Have a look at the anthropology and see what you can discover.

Monty Roberts - the horse whisperer



I wanted to speak about a man that we just discovered quite serendipitously. His name is Monty Roberts and he was often referred to as a horse whisperer. When he was growing up, his father was a horse breaker and Monty really didn't like the force and the power over a horse that his father used. And he wondered if there might be a kinder, more respectful way of forming a connection with the horse. And he went out into the wild, and he observed wild horses and he observed their behaviour. And he discovered that the herd was organised by a broodmare. And if any of the young horses were misbehaving, she would shoo them out of the herd, keep them at their distance, ostracise them, keep them away until they were ready to behave and then she would let them back in.

And he noticed this recurrently in a herd of wild horses, shooing the horse away. So, he came back and organised a circular enclosure. And he would stand at the centre of the circular enclosure and a horse that had had nothing to do with human beings previously would be let into this enclosure. And Monty Roberts used a long length of rope and he would flick the rope behind the horse to keep it moving and to keep it away from him. It was not a whip. It was not a way of forcing, but he kept the horse moving around and around the enclosure and kept the horse away from him just like the broodmare did.

And he noticed again, without any explanation, he noticed that after that he'd been doing that for a time, several minutes, there was a recurrent behaviour that he was able to observe. The horse, after that time, would lower its head, would alter the direction of its head towards him and would begin chewing. As soon as he noticed this behaviour, he dropped the rope, turned his back on the horse and just stood there.

And seeing a video of this is just extraordinary that when he did that, within minutes, that horse would move from the periphery of the circular enclosure and right up behind his

back, about a metre away. And then he could walk in a straight line or zigzag and this horse would follow his movements. It's really a touching experience, so unexpected, so surprising.

And within a number of minutes, maybe 10 or 15 minutes, he would have, having made that connection with the horse, having invited and allowed that horse to connect with him, within 10 or 15 minutes he was able to put a saddle on that horse and ride it peacefully with no force, no violence. And he did this with any number of horses. In this lovely DVD, there were several examples of how he did that and it's just remarkable to watch. Queen Elizabeth invited him to come over to London and to train the horses in the Royal Guard.

But his attitude beginning with not knowing, beginning following up them with being willing to observe what horses did left to be horses, allowed him to respond to that in a way that the horse could make the approach.

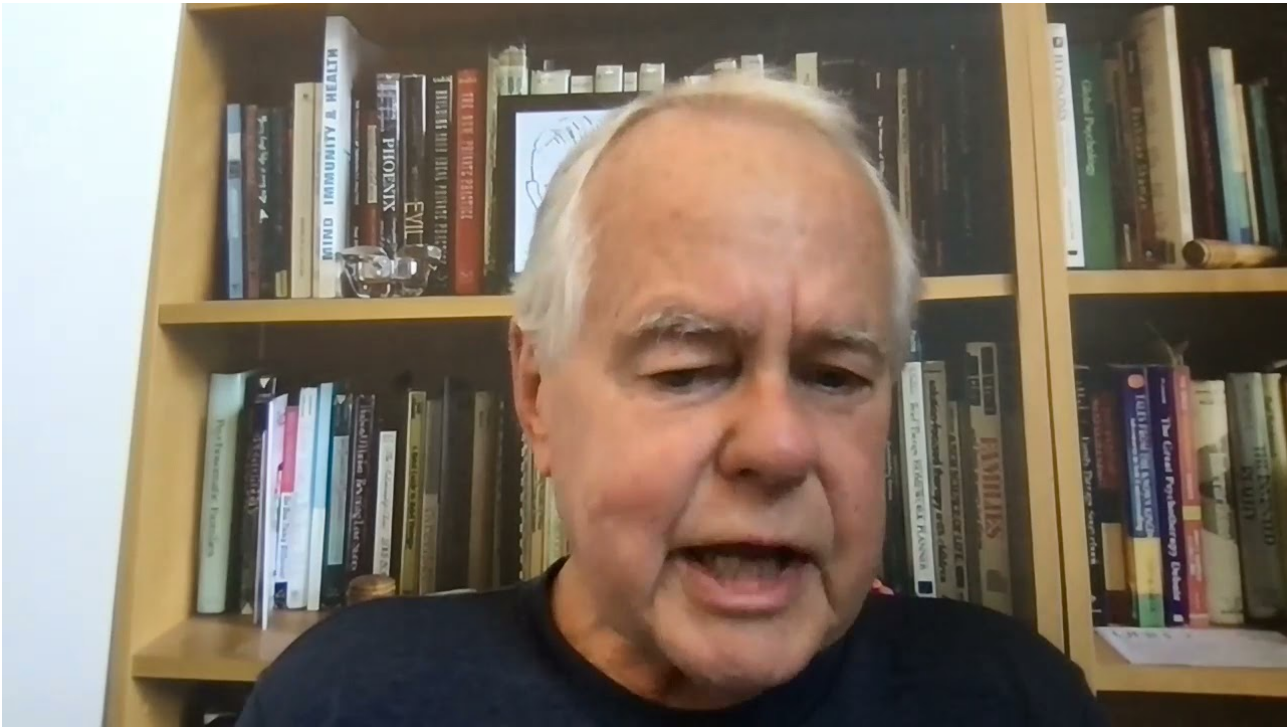
And it was such a remarkable discovery and I think it's pretty well mainstream now, but in relation to Monty Roberts and the horses, what I found is that it really affirmed what I'd learned from Erickson about not using force, about allowing, about connecting someone with the resources with their own innate performance, behaviour, preferences.

And so, my invitation is to have some kind of wondering about what it is that Monty Roberts did that we could do and that could be of benefit to our clients and for our practice.

So, thank you for listening to this and let's see what can evolve from this attitude.

Thank you.

Jane Fennell - the woman who listens to dogs



Hello. Rob McNeilly here again. And this time, I wanted to speak about and introduce you to a woman called Jan Fennell. She's regarded as and sometimes called the Dog Listener and sometimes the woman who listens to dogs. But Jan said that she was intrigued by what Monty Roberts was doing with horses and she was interested to wonder about how she might translate that into dealing with problems that dogs have.

Well, Monty, as I mentioned in the last conversation, Monty Roberts looked at wild horses. So, Jan Fennell decided that she was going to look at wild dogs. She was going to look at wolves. And what she observed in getting to know wolf pack behaviour, she noticed that the pack was organised by an alpha pair. There's an alpha male and an alpha female. And the alpha male and female were the ones who decided when they were going to go on a hunt. They got the first sitting with eating a kill and they were the ones who were responsible for the reproduction of the pack, keeping babies coming into the pack.

So, Jan was interested to notice that wolves were organised around an alpha pair. And she made a rather fascinating extension of that. And she said that when a dog comes to live with a family, a dog takes up the position of being an alpha and takes responsibility for the whole pack, including the parents, the children and whatever, as if it's his or her responsibility to take care of the family because the dog is treated as a special creature, and pampered and so on. And that puts the dog in this awkward position of being the alpha. And Jan says that's an awful burden for a dog to have. And as the alpha, when her children, the rest of the pack go out of the house and leave the home, she worries about how they are because that's her job.

So, she claims that the way to help dogs with their problem is to make sure that they are de-alpha'd so that the owners of the house of the dog get to be the alpha, so then the dog can just be one of the pack, and relax and just become a dog.

Jan had a series of very entertaining television sessions. And in these episodes of her working with problem dogs, she had a way of interacting with the dogs and the owners so that the dog could just be a dog and didn't have to be an alpha. And in one situation, this dog would wee on the carpet every time the dog saw someone in uniform. And the problem was that the owner was a policeman. So, you can see that that was not going to be a good combination.

So, Jan comes along and she had a most marvellous saying. She said, "Don't make something out of nothing. Something happens and you don't have to make something out about that. You don't have to make it important. You can ignore it."

And what she did was, she got for this dog that weed when he saw a policeman's uniform, she got the man to be sitting there in his uniform and someone else would bring the dog into the room. And as soon as the dog started to show signs of anxiety, they would take the dog out of the room. They wouldn't chide it, they wouldn't criticise it, they wouldn't discipline it. They'd just remove it.

And so, after a while the dog realised that the police uniform could stay there and the dog could come and go, and that was just fine. And within a very short time, maybe 15 or 30 minutes, I can't remember, the dog was able to just come and sit down and just be a dog and not get frightened of the police uniform. It was really extraordinary.

And there was another situation where a dog would destroy doors. And it had destroyed I don't know how many doors. And the door destruction happened when the owner closed the door and left the dog on one side and Jan, with her theory, said that the dog separated from the pack, started to worry and did everything that it could to get back to the pack and take care of it, including destroying doors.

So, in the same kind of way, Jan encouraged the owners to not make a fuss of this, to not make a problem out of it and to close the door, and as soon as the dog started to show any kind of anxiety or tendency to destroy the door, they would remove the dog from the door. And after a while, the dog started to realise, "Oh, I don't need to do that," and it could just settle into being a dog.

Now, apart from being amused, she's a very entertaining woman. She went up and down the lengths of the United Kingdom, from Scotland down to the south of England, she would arrive and a dog would have a problem and within half an hour or an hour, it would be completely resolved. So, it was amusing to watch the way that she played with this, but it was also very instructive to see how if we don't make something out of nothing, then it can be nothing and the whole situation can just dissolve.

So, how often do we as human beings, we have something happen and instead of saying, "Oh, that happened," we make something of it. And the clients come and they say, "This happened and that's been a problem for me." And with that idea of not making something out of nothing, making nothing out of nothing, just letting something be, I mean we've got to know that in some way, but the approach that Jan Fennell demonstrated again, and again and again somehow gives a form to and informs what we can do.

And again, all of her interactions were based on an observation of how wolves behave. She didn't focus on the human, but focused on what would be helpful for the dog so that it could just be a dog.

And in the same way that Monty Roberts found out a way of helping horses to be horses, they didn't need to be controlled or manipulated, or tamed, or controlled or broken in. But by observing and responding, he was able to get good results and Jan Fennell did the same kind of approach with dogs.

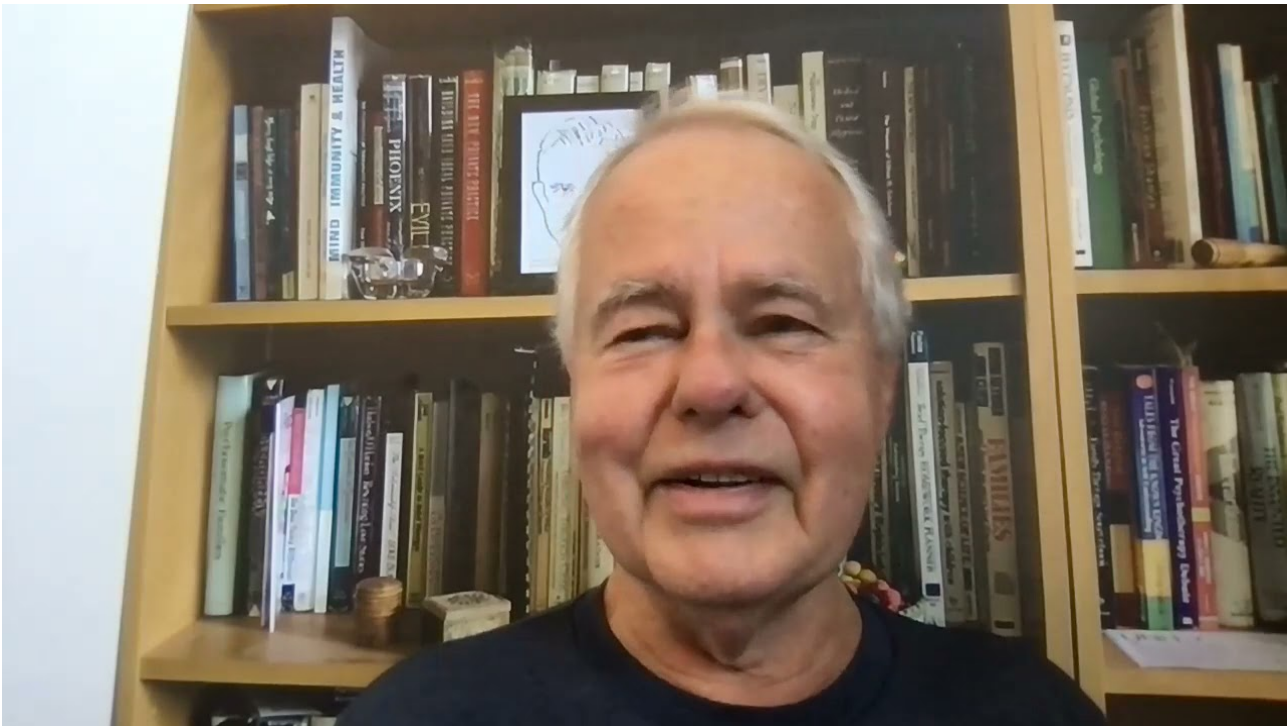
So, if you're interested to find out more about her, this was a DVD that we bought, and it sits on our shelves and we look at it every now and again. It's really quite inspiring as well as being entertaining.

So, thank you for being willing to listen and see what can happen when you play with this idea of making nothing out of nothing instead of making something out of nothing and also to observe that where to this person comes from, their family, the way they behave in the wild, so to speak, and somehow it leads back to the anthropological framework.

So, thanks for listening and I'd be curious to hear about anything that you were able to try as a result of this that could be useful for you.

Thanks so much.

James French - the trust technique



Hello. Rob McNeilly here again. And this time, I want to speak about another person who works with animals. His name is James French and he talks about something that he's created called the Trust Technique. And you can find details about this at his website, which is trust-technique.com. And I came across this and there was something intriguing about it. Unlike Monty Roberts and Jan Fennell, he doesn't make any conversation, any comment about how he came across what he calls the Trust Technique, but he has developed a way of working with difficult animals, which involves what he calls a mindfulness approach on behalf of the practitioner.

And he will sit and be just mindful of the animal and he just sit there quietly, patiently, not doing anything, but in this particular mood of being mindful, of just being present, being peaceful. And he notices recurrently that if he does this for some time, and it might be five minutes, it might be intermittent and he'd have to do this over a number of hours or perhaps even days, but the result is really quite extraordinary.

And I'd advise you to have a look at some of his work if I can interest you in that. And it's extraordinary that he has worked and used this technique with horses, with dogs, with cats, with lions and even with bears, would you believe. And the results are really quite remarkable.

And what's fascinating to me is that unlike the previous two and Erickson and the anthropological approach, there is no importance put on the explanation. He just generates a mood in himself and we know how infectious moods can be. If there's a dog, who's frightened and barks and bites people, then we are going to get scared. We're going to get fear and we're going to get anxiety, and we pick up the dog's insecurity and fear, and we feel frightened.

Herbert Spiegel was working with a woman who was phobic about dogs. And he said to her, "Do you know that dogs are very responsive to fear in human beings?" She didn't know that. So, he was going to help her to overcome her phobia, but as soon as she heard that she could create something, she could influence something in the way the dogs reacted to her, she went out and she found dogs and found that she could be peaceful. And the dogs could pick up her mood of peacefulness and they wouldn't bite her. They didn't attack her.

So, it's remarkable to see how James French's mood, and to just look at him, and his patience, and his stillness and his presence, it's very infectious even to just watch him. You know, I've noticed that I feel a certain kind of slowing down or quietening down that I pick up from him.

So, it seems to me to have a very relevant additional approach that we can have in our work that the mood that we are in, be it a mood of acceptance, a mood of possibility, a mood of quietness that we can, as James French speaks about with animals, we can engender trust in us because we can be in a mood of trusting the client. And when we trust the client and we are aware of them without any judgment, without any criticism, without any response, we're just sitting there being who we are, peacefully, allowing the client to pick up our mood of allowing themselves to just be there as themselves, peacefully, trustingly and open to possibilities, then the mood that we can be in and we can then invite the client to pick up, which they will do because moods are infections. Instead of us picking up their anxiety, their uncertainty, they can pick up our mood of peaceful, possibility, trust.

So, I've spoken about these four different approaches in relation to anthropology: Monty Roberts and his horses, Jan Fennell and her dogs and James French in relation to his horses, cats, dogs, lions and bears. So, I was touched by the possibilities that these people were sharing in relation to their particular animals and I was touched to see how those approaches, those attitudes are very, very easily translated into human interactions.

So, thank you for listening to this and my invitation is to play with that, the different components and see what useful results can come as a result of that. So, thanks for listening.

contact details

Rob McNeilly
191 Campbell Street
Hobart TAS 7000
Australia
www.cet.net.au
rob@cet.net.au
+61 433 273 352



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