

McCullough, PATH Conference 2019, Introduction to Lecture:

*Human-Nonhuman Animal Bonds & Bondage: Anthropocentric Practices In EAAT, and the Challenge to Change*

Human and nonhuman animal interactions can be traced to cave art dated 35,600 BCE that depict complex paintings of horses and bison both in their natural environment and in relation to one and other. Lawless (2017) explains that overarching animistic beliefs that all nature has agency, spirit, breath, and consciousness were likely driving factors. Wilson (1983) would claim that biophilia, a universal, organic human fascination with nature, drove this attraction. Around this same time period, wolf-dogs paired their speed and maneuvering abilities alongside homo sapiens brute strength and use of primitive weapons to create a formidable hunting team (Zeder, 2008; Shipman, 2015). History's version of barn cats showed up around 9500 BCE (Haye & Gerard, 2004), maintaining much of their same roles into the 21st century. Although a virtual late-comer to human connections, in their unparalleled role as allies in conquest and colonization, horses are often considered to be a "pivotal determinant in the ebb and flow of human civilization" (Apter, 2007, p. 2). So much so suggests Budiansky (1997), that it is rather daunting to consider where civilization might be without them. Indeed.

Fast forward to the 21st century where researchers, practitioners and participants in AAT/EAAL are telling us that human-nonhuman animal affinity, connection and cohabitation go well beyond coincidence or even, a mutually beneficial collaboration gone viral. On the contrary, we are discovering that on many levels, human-nonhuman animal connections hail from both conscious and not-so-obvious, mind-body-emotion-spirit places (see Shipman, 2010; Serpell, 2011; Olmert, 2010; Beck, 2014; Kohanov, 2013). We love, respect and care for our hairy and sentient partners. However, in our desire to serve our varied populations, while also maintaining professionalism (training, certification and licensure), meeting the demands of Boards, families, sending facilities, donors, budgets and all matters of time and money, it is all too easy to fail to address the "sentient partnership" aspect of the work. For practical reasons and often due to unfamiliarity, anthropocentric (human-centered) practices can emerge as the protocol for human-equine interactions in any areas of treatment and/or interactions. Without desire or malice, professionals and handlers alike fall into practices and mind-sets that invite and encourage objectification, projection and the equine version of dehumanization (automata). The results of ongoing anthropocentrism can be seen in equine malaise, refusal to be caught, poor health, bad habits and a lack of interest in the work. In other words, a partner in name only.

This lecture examines the equine-human relationship in terms of our fundamental desire to be together and what happens when the job and its expectations overwhelm this directive. We will see that as in human-human relationships, the imperative to "get the job done" and meet all the expectations can easily result in mechanical vs mindful, interactions and partnerships with our horses that relegates them to tools instead of the sentient partner we want and need them to be. Strategies, paradigm shifts and a call for reality checks will be offered, examined and discussed as interventions with audience suggestions for offerings of peace and friendship.