

# **MAGIC HORSES**

2000 words

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## MAGIC HORSES

Normally I divide my time between three different worlds: that of storytelling, that of psychotherapy and that of horsemanship. During 2001 something startling began to happen which broke down the barriers between these worlds. The horses I ride, and with whom I have contact daily, started to become more like the ones in the stories. That is, they became more able to talk to me and hear me. They became more willing to offer themselves to be ridden without bit or whip (or indeed any kind of bridle at all). I became more able to trust them and allow them to carry me to unknown places. Though the way this came about can be explained easily enough (and will be below), it raised questions for me about how we limit our perception of the possible, and how the content of old stories – those ‘fantastic’ narratives in which such behaviour is common – can be taken even more seriously as a description of a possible reality, rather than charming fancy, than many of us suppose. Just as we have been reclaiming the wondertales by telling them, events in the “real”, daytime world have taken us a step closer to the territory of the tales. Many of the current tellers of tales with equine characters may be unaware of the recent change in the ways horses are ridden and understood and which have caused controversy in the equestrian community. Yet such changes mean a closer reflection in daily life of the images offered in those tales.

A function of story is that it keeps open the doors to a sphere of miracle which we have otherwise all but lost. We have rumours of this sphere in our dreams, and it is one symptom of the loss that we often treat our dreams as marginal and non-sensical figments, mental rubbish, rather than the matters of an importance equal to our waking deeds. In the story/dream world there is communication between species. There are non-physical beings. There is shapeshifting. There are objects of magical power. When such things are experienced as real, as they can be, they radically alter the texture of daily life. But we can easily feel locked out of that world, and this one, though drabber, can seem more familiar and thus safer.

There is admittedly a very straightforward explanation to the changes in horse handling. The media have made widely accessible the methods of a number of gifted individuals who challenged prevalent approaches. Monty Roberts and Pat Parelli are the best known, but there are a number of others. Modern communications (videos, internet) have enabled many other people to take up these methods, whereas previously it would have been difficult to gain access to those who practice them. They embody certain fundamental principles. The animals' own body language is studied and utilised as a channel of communication. The human adopts the animal's way of thinking and enters into its realm. The animal remains much more in its 'wild' state – tack, stables, shoeing are used far less. The result is that the horse/human partnership performs feats hitherto deemed rare or impossible, such as transmission from full gallop to instant stop with no reins or bridle. In other words, by achieving mutual understanding with an alien and very powerful being, we go beyond our limits, we can move with a speed, power and freedom hitherto impossible.

To ride without a bit or even, as some are managing to do, without a bridle, requires a leap of mutual trust. It is both a feat in the physical world and a step towards dreamtime and the mythic. In both spheres the horse carries us beyond our limitations. The creature has always recalled for us the crossing-over point, and the memory that some have gone and returned, that there were places and times when this happened. I speculate that a sacred artefact like the Uffington white horse stood not just for fertility or power in war and hunting, but for the power to pass over.

The language I use here is already akin to that of shamanism, in which mobility in the spirit world is achieved with the assistance of animal allies (see Shamanism by Mircea Eliade). It is also akin to the phenomenon of artistic inspiration, in which a power, apparently from elsewhere, enables the artist's imagination to take flight (this is recently explored at length in The War of Art by best selling author Stephen Pressfield). On both counts, therefore we also enter the territory of storytelling.

When someone's material circumstances are stable and their close relationships are sound but there is still a lingering discontent, this is often the unmet need: to be swept away, to reach that mysterious state where you find yourself by losing yourself. When a young person nearing adulthood senses that their home/school setting fails to offer something unnamed but desperately longed for, it's similar. And of course, in many cultures this would be offered in a more perilous but more soulful rite of passage than our nearest equivalent, the exam system. For instance, Malidoma Some (Of Water & The Spirit, Arkana 1994) describes the puberty rites of his people in West Africa, in which he encounters a tree spirit. Drugs can offer a version of this kind of experience but are unnecessary, while the passage is unguided and the spilt between the worlds devoid of meaning.

In many tales (for example Marya Morevna from Russia), the power of the willing and confiding horse carries the hero into a heightened state of increased power in which he can achieve the hitherto impossible. Only when he has won the co-operation of the "bedraggled colt", can Prince Ivan overcome Koschei the Deathless and retrieve Marya. But, in three of the greatest tales of the British Isles, the hero must, in addition, give control of the mount to the Woman from the Beyond. Not only is the otherness of the animal invoked, but also that of the opposite sex. Thomas the Rhymer and Oissin are both invited to cross over to the land of joys if they surrender themselves to the dazzling beauty who invites them to leave the human realm, and mount the horse which she guides. Tam Lyn is given no choice in the matter. For all of them, the limitations of mortality fall away.

The creature is linked either with hero or seer figures or with rulers and envoys of the Otherworld. To cross the divide and mediate between the worlds, a man must unite with either the special horse or the special woman, or most potent, with both. Two popular contemporary novels have ardently evoked the figure of the woman who utilises equine power to ride the borderland of myth, and draws or leads men into the unknown realms; that is Manda Scott's Boudicca series and Stephen Pressfield's fabulous The Last of the Amazons. Apparently there are several Boudicca films in

preparation, which fact testifies – whatever our criticism of the actual presentation – to the continuing,, indeed renewed, allure of these figures.

Oissin lives for centuries, Thomas returns with the gift of prophecy. They taste joys beyond measure when they consent to be ‘transported’ by the power and otherness of the horse and the allure of queenly beauty. Both of these have the potential to bestow rapture or inflict injury. They are terrifying and entrancing. To taste the splendours and to gain the powers which defy the workaday restrictions of time and matter, the hero must give up control. This is something increasingly difficult today in a culture of safety, insurance, litigation, timetables and supposed efficiency, but it is yearned for none the less.

The moment a fine horse bounds forward into the canter carries an echo of that experience. Likewise, the moment when the mutual passion of the sexual encounter takes over. Or when we hover between waking and dream and are aware of doing so. Or again, when the wording of a story suddenly tumbles freely and artfully from our tongue. Many storytellers know this moment. Sometimes it happens in front of an audience. Sometimes it happens during solitary contemplation of a narrative, when phrases and images suddenly crowd the mind and we can, if we choose, take flight. This feels like a joining with another, exhilarating energy, apparently not our own – like a union which lifts us high. And so it answers the longing to which all human life is subject, for it soothes the pain of isolation, fear, restriction and self-loathing which is so often the human norm.

The old stories describe surrender to that force which carries us over the border or which suddenly fills us with impulses or utterances from elsewhere. “Sorry” we sometimes say when we’ve taken over the conversation, “I got carried away.” But to join with the beings of dream and imagination we must do just that, become transported. Likewise, to join with the beings of the horses we aspire to ride. Or for that matter, the partners, sexual or spiritual with whom we long to merge. As we tell more of the old stories, these things increasingly happen, for we call the beyond into

the near-at-hand. So we uncover the potent and startling relationship between stories and “real” life.

Such a union is one of the perennial human goals. In more overtly religious times, it was customary to speak of union with the Divine. Whether this is the same thing is another question which could trigger lengthy and complex debate. But at the very least, the two echo each other, both part of that spectrum of experience which involves joining with some momentous other and in which the individual both loses and finds himself at the same time. A psychology which ignores this need is partial, and a psychotherapy which neglects it will fail to offer full health. Characteristically, the stories portray it more accurately than the textbooks. It was more obvious to the ancients than to our age of advanced understanding. In his celebrated essay on the duende, Garica Lorca described the elusive ingredient, the “x” factor which imbues a live performance with an indefinable but unmistakable quality. This is yet another variation on the same theme (indeed, Lorca speculates that the “olé!” exclamation in flamenco is derived from the Moorish “Allah!”).

So the horse in story and the horse in the flesh can both offer this, particularly if we let these two beings inform us of the other. Also if, as storytellers we be aware of being too firmly stuck in the imaginary world, and if as equestrians we learn to honour the imagination. If, indeed, we do not cling too fixedly to limited notions of what is possible.

Last spring, I had already penned those thoughts when the programme for the St. Donat’s Festival, with its horse theme, arrived at my door and provoked a further sequence of thoughts. An unfamiliar feeling arose when I saw the line-up, including some tellers of my acquaintance whose experience of horse is scanty. Yet it seemed to me that by telling the stories they were implicitly claiming, knowledge of the theme. Of course, these may be the thoughts of a teller who has failed to impress, inform or befriend the festival moghuls. But it is also possible that I got some possible insight into the way an Aboriginal, say, can feel when he hears a white storyteller tell one of

his people's tales. It was curious, for instance, to be informed in the programme, that in Kazakstan, horse sense still matters, as if this was not the case in Gloucestershire!

I was also reminded of the talk Alan Garner gave at the foundation meeting of the SFS in 1993. He forcefully asked the question, what entitles one to be called a storyteller? He referred to shamanic cultures and the hazardous ordeals undergone by its initiates. For my very incomplete knowledge, I have paid a price – been kicked, bitten, thrown, lamed, terrified. I have also treated suppurating tumours and cleaned maggot-infested hooves and held horses while they died. I have struggled to achieve connection and mutual understanding with partial but precious success. I therefore questioned the authority of some (not all) of the tellers, and this was not dispelled by the tellings I attended.

George McPherson, the formidable Skye storyteller, now in his seventies, attests to the skill of his own father in achieving compliance from difficult horses in a way which seemed uncanny to the untutored observer. But he was one of the last of the Horsemen, who had earned a recognised and prized grade in expertise on the farms through long and arduous labour and, according to some accounts, a secret initiation ceremony. There are records of such ceremonies bonding man and horse; for those who had shown that they fully belonged to the horse-handling fraternity, continuing into the twentieth century. Someone like George's father had a hard-won right to his knowledge, and to tell the stories he passed onto his son.

Do I mean that I would only allow people who have direct experience of a subject to tell stories about it? This is clearly neither possible nor desirable within a culture with blurred traditions, fractured by the pace of technological change, whose members lack shared allegiance to a recognised community structure. I mean only that tellers should ask themselves what they should undergo in order to tell a chosen story with authority, and that this affects the storytelling as much as technique or personality. George McPherson's father knew secrets about horses, now lost to us. And his stories were informed not just by teller's skill but by intimate knowledge of mysteries. We should,<sup>7</sup>

I hold, be in no doubt that in order to tell such stories with integrity we should humbly recognise the gulf between us and those who told them in earlier times, and we should seek re-acquaintanceship with the mysteries they know instinctively. Without that, our tellings are in danger of becoming a sham.

In all this, are we gradually re-connecting with the world of nature and the spirits? Is storytelling a means towards this? Or is this a naïve, escapist, minority fantasy in a denial of an increasingly unsettling and unmanageable global situation characterised by congested roads, terrorism, super power violence, climate change? These are the questions to which I do not expect an answer, but which I do expect to carry and ask repeatedly throughout the coming years.