



PARADIGM SHIFTERS

By Katrina Hays

Paradigm shift: noun

A fundamental change in approach or underlying assumptions

A paradigm shift in horsemanship began in the American West in the mid-20th century when Bill and Tom Dorrance began showing an effective, gentle way of horse training that emphasized feel and observations of horse behavior over the use of domination. Ray Hunt, Buck Brannaman, and Pat Parelli are notable figures who pushed that message out into the world, teaching humans and their relieved equines what became known as “natural horsemanship.”

Today, who are the teachers continuing this arc of what we can call “horse-humanship”? Who are the thinkers encouraging us to see, train and relate to horses from a grounded, scientific, and more humble platform of curiosity and wisdom?

This *EH* series interviews just a few of the notable people—from trainers to body workers to veterinarians—who are putting the pieces together a little differently and teaching us how to be better for our equines.



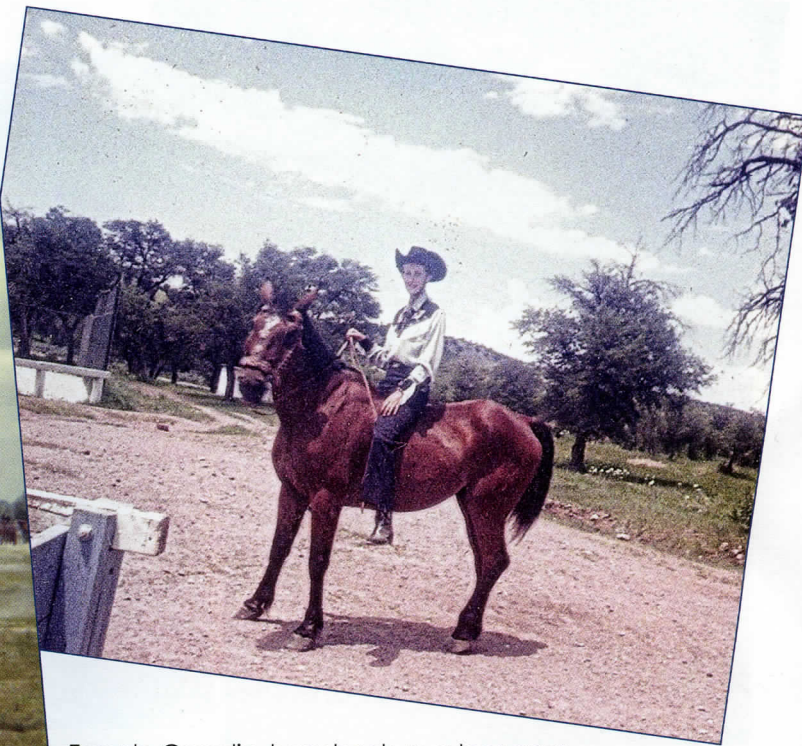
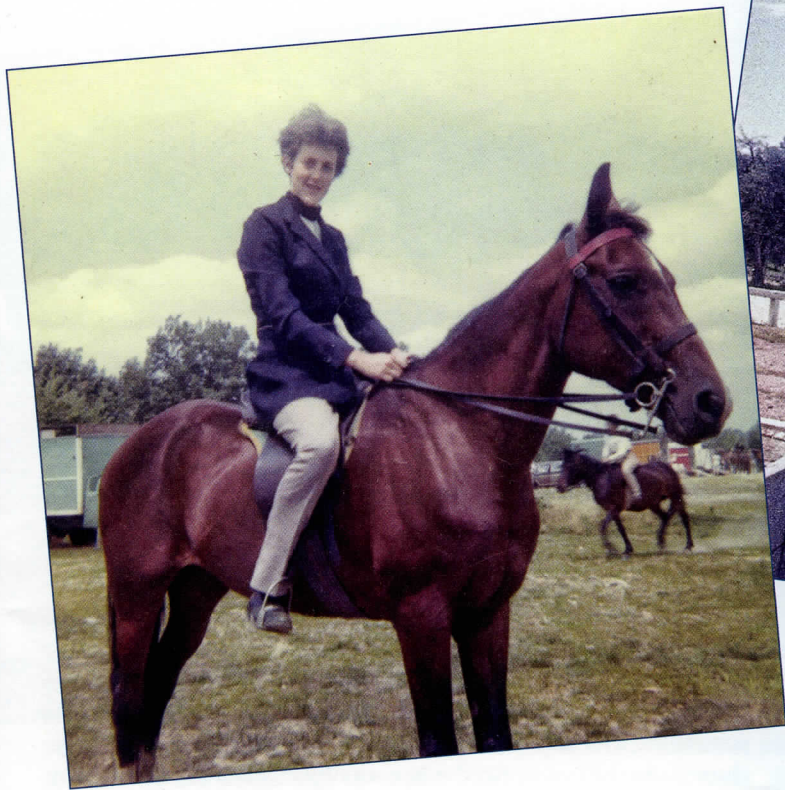
TEMPLE GRANDIN

A guide to the equine mind

Over a career spanning 50 years, Temple Grandin has become the public face, spokesperson, and intermediary for people and animals whose brains and actions do not match the neurotypical and excruciatingly human definitions of “normal and conscious.”

In case you have never heard of Grandin, a brief introduction is in order. She is justly famous for being a person who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the profound gift of showing others people how her brain works—which is vastly different from how a neurotypical or “ordinary” brain might function. Indeed, it could be argued that it is due to Grandin’s profound gifts of communication and self-awareness that the majority of people have now at least heard the term “neurotypical” to describe a human brain not affected by conditions that impact the way it processes information.

Born in 1947, Dr. Grandin is an academic and professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University. She is the author or co-author of more than 60 scientific papers focusing



Temple Grandin, horseback as a teenager.

on animal welfare, behavior, and genetics. She is an inventor, having designed and implemented a conveyor restrainer system for holding cattle during stunning at large beef slaughtering plants, and is an advocate for humane treatment of animals humans choose to eat. Grandin is also a *New York Times* best-selling author, who has written and co-authored over two dozen books that range from memoir to livestock handling and animal behavior to advice books for parents of autistic children.

Dr. Grandin was the focus of an eponymously-named HBO film that won a Golden Globe and multiple Emmy awards. She was named one of the *Time Magazine's* 100 Most Influential people in the "Heroes" category. She has been featured on NPR, and BBC, and been awarded multiple honorary degrees. She's a tireless proponent of rights for neurodiverse people, a sought-after lecturer, and still called upon by meat processing facilities worldwide to fix unfixable problems.

Not bad for a kid who was diagnosed as having brain damage at age 2 and was supposed to be institutionalized.

HORSES, HORSES, AND MORE HORSES.

During phone calls from her home in Colorado and hotel rooms while she was on her lecture circuit, Dr. Grandin is wry, funny, emphatic, and no-nonsense.

She insists on specific language: "Don't say 'Let's make an inclusive classroom.' Say, 'Let's get rid of LED lights that flicker, because that flickering is very distracting to the autistic brain.'"

She has a ruthless practicality and believes in actions that coincidentally happen to change the world. "As an autistic person, I am what I do more than what I feel. It makes me happy to do something constructive on the ground."

And Grandin confesses to a lifelong love of equines.

"Horses saved my life. That's just a fact," she says.

As a different kid in a time when the concepts of inclusiveness and respect in the classroom were unheard of, Grandin was ruthlessly bullied, with her junior high and high school years especially awful. After being kicked out of ninth grade for flinging a book at the head of one of her tormentors, she was sent to a boarding school that had horses. Interestingly, the horses, like the kids, were all emotionally damaged in some way, and yet the teenagers were encouraged to ride and care for them.

"I just loved the horses," says Grandin. "For me it was horses, horses, and more horses. I spent every moment I could at the barn. I learned how to work and I was proud of my hard work. I cleaned nine stalls every day. And at that school I wasn't bullied by other teens because we had a shared interest in riding. I made friends."

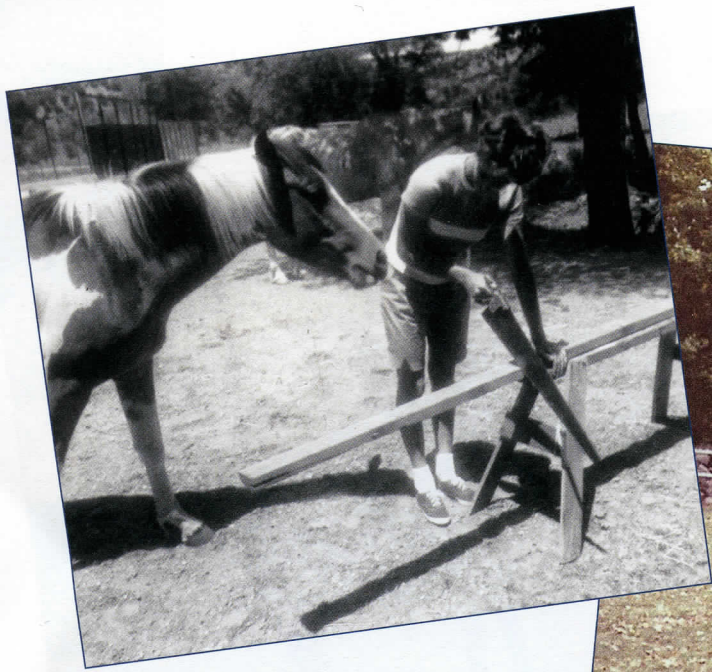
She pauses. "I really enjoyed practicing with them. I liked having time to train with horses. I wish more kids could ride horses today."

CHANGES IN PERSPECTIVE

For almost a half-century, Grandin has showed the world not only animals that do think but also how they think, which is very different from how most humans think.

"I'm what is known as a visual thinker," Grandin says. "I think in pictures, just like the title of my book *Thinking in Pictures*."

For photo-realistic visual thinkers such as Grandin, understanding the world comes from being able to see and work through a concept in images, creating what is in effect a virtual



More youthful horseback days.



reality program that plays out in the brain. That's very different from most of us, who use word-based language to create both understanding and communication.

Horses are more like Grandin.

"Horses are sensory animals," she says. "They think from their senses, not from language. It's hugely important for people to understand this. Animals and autistic people are super sensitive to sensory-based details, which are hyper-specific."

"With horses you have 'thinking in smells,' or 'thinking in touch,' or 'thinking in hearing.' It's a completely different way of navigating the world," she says with an infectious chuckle, that permeates our conversations.

Ever wondered why your horse freaks out when a chair is moved from one end of the arena to the other, even though you've both passed that same chair at least one thousand times?

Temple Grandin knows why.

She and two other Colorado State University researchers studied this this specific equine behavior. The resulting paper has the weighty title "Evaluating the Reaction to a Complex Rotated Object in the American Quarter Horse (*Equus caballus*)." In this case the complex object was a small, colorful, plastic child's playset. The researchers concluded: "When a previously familiar complex novel object is rotated, the rotated object may cause reactions similar to the initial exposure to the novel object."

That is, move something familiar so it looks different to the equine and the equine will react. Poorly.

Grandin remarks, "Horses are sensitive to the most subtle signals. They are way beyond our capacity in terms of awareness in general."

Okay, that confirms what most of us already know, so why is it important? First, there is a training myth that still persists which says a human should insist to a horse it must walk past

something that concerns it without stopping. The paper clearly shows, yes, horses noticed when an object was rotated, thereby changing shape, but it also notes that the horses decreased in concern with each pass of the novel object. In other words, give the equine a little time and it will cease to be concerned with the scary something.

"Just let a horse look at it, then ask it to walk by," says Grandin. "It's not hard."

Second, the study said if riders and handlers "can be prepared for how a horse may react, they may be able to help reduce risk by adjusting training methods to allow for investigation of all sides of an object..." which encourages horsefolk once again to consider the perspective of the horse: not to bull ahead with all of our human assumptions about what is correct behavior for an equine, all of which circle around what is correct from the human perspective.

And this is where Temple Grandin has changed the world of horse-humanship.

CHANGING BELIEFS ABOUT HOW HORSES THINK

The Grandin books that most impact the arc of horse-humanship are *Thinking in Pictures* (1995), which offered a view of what it is like for a human being to experience the world from the non-neurotypical place of a person with ASD; *Animals in Translation* (2005), which was a groundbreaking look at the emotional lives of animals; and *Animals Make Us Human* (2009), in which the animal scientist identified the core emotional needs of animals.

Jen Verharen, an equestrian-performance coach and former dressage trainer in Washington, says Grandin's book *Animals in Translation* helped her navigate a relationship with a 17.1-hand Dutch Warmblood that was reactive to the point of being dangerous.

"I read *Animals in Translation* and it gave me an idea," she says. "It got me thinking about my ability to help my horse shift from an anxious state to an expectant one. I realized I needed her to be curious—asking me, 'What do you want?' instead of just reacting to her environment."

Grandin refers to a particularly famous figure in the world of natural horsemanship:

"Tom Dorrance said, 'You want to have a feel of the whole horse.' Everybody who works with horses can learn to be more sensory-based, to keep sensory details to the forefront when you're working with them," she explains.

Verharen changed her relationship with her reactive mare by applying this principle.

"What I got from Temple Grandin was a sense of how necessary it is for us, as humans, to step into the experience of the horse," she says. "We need to learn about their emotional lives in order to work with them effectively."

"When I met Temple in person years later, she reinforced this for me. What I learned from her caused me to examine my work with horses through a new lens," she adds. "It is our job to understand our horses, not just try to get them to understand us!"

TEACHING US TO BE MORE THOUGHTFUL

Temple Grandin's superpower is an ability to see outside the box of human-animal relationships. She has helped facilitate a huge change in perspective about diverse ways of understanding the world, and this has added immeasurably to the current tipping point of horse-human relations, swinging more in favor of the horse and its welfare. Without Grandin's work we would, for instance, probably not currently be talking about "social license" around competing with horses.

Grandin sees improvement.

"In the last 10 years I've seen a huge change in approach and attitude about how animals are handled. In the 90s I could not use the word "fear" in relation to animals [in my books]. The editors didn't want to admit animals felt pain. Now people realize they do," she says.

Still, she is concerned about breeding practices that lead to extreme physical traits in equines.

"It's bad becoming normal," she says.

She talks of visiting a Thoroughbred sale and witnessing the panic of equines when they first heard the auctioneer chant.

"I couldn't believe how stressed those horses were. They go in the arena and the auctioneer starts the chant and those horses started squirting diarrhea. It was clear nobody had thought to get those horses habituated to the sound," she recalls.

"It's so easy to train them and slowly introduce the things that stress horses at sales. Make a recording of an auctioneer chant and play it softly in the barn and give the horses treats. It's not hard. It was obvious no effort had been made to make a half-million dollar horse comfortable in the sale arena."

The curious scientist part of Grandin is always in play.

"I would like to do more behavior research with horses. I imagine that a racehorse would do better on a racetrack if someone habituated them to the sound of the loudspeakers," she says.

Temple Grandin is relentlessly positive when it comes to teaching the rest of us to be wider in reach and more generous with our equine partners. It is why she is a paradigm shifter both by nature and in practice.

"I don't think people are mean or bad. I think they can just be clueless," she says. "People don't see what's right in front of them. They just don't see the stress in the horse. But they can change that. They can change their behaviors, which is better for the horse."

THREE QUESTIONS

What is a horse?

"A horse is a prey species animal that gets frightened easily if something novel suddenly appears."

Who are you?

"I am a professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University."

What do you hope people take away from this interview?

"I hope people will understand that horses and other animals are sensory-based thinkers. Horse memories are specific to sights, sounds, touches, or smells they have experienced."

"For example, a horse may fear a person wearing a black hat if it is associated with a painful experience. Or, horses will sometimes buck when they change gaits because a saddle feels completely different at a walk, a trot, and a canter, and that sudden new feeling can be scary."

"It does not take a lot of time to introduce a novel stimulus to horses. It takes time. It takes training. It's not hard."

MORE INFORMATION

- templegrandin.com
- Temple Grandin video "How Horses Think with Dr. Temple Grandin" on YouTube