



The Profile Eclectic

By Katrina Hays

Intriguing people working in horse-humanship today



Joanna L. Robson, DVM

Braiding together healing modalities

It is unusual to find a person whose passions and curiosities lead them to a career that combines science (what is commonly known as evidence-based or Western medicine), so-called “non-conventional” medicine that focuses on a holistic or whole-body approach (and is often lumped under the term Eastern medicine), and alternative, intuition-based healing (sometimes unappealingly referred to as “woo-woo.”)

“I think of my work as a braid,” says veterinarian Joanna Robson. “If my job is to be the voice of the voiceless, then I have kind of a moral imperative to explore and integrate whatever I can.”

Speaking on Zoom from her home in Vallejo, California, Robson’s backdrop is a large print of multicolored horses dancing on open space, which seems an apt metaphor for a life-long horsewoman whose healing modalities as a veterinarian range from large animal science and medicine, equine thermal imaging, chiropractic and acupuncture treatments, and saddle fitting. For the human element of her practice, Robson is a human massage practitioner and offers emotional CPR (eCPR). Underpinning this is her trust in her intuition and listening to what it offers.

Robson, 46, laughs as she acknowledges the seeming contradictions.

“I’ve learned to tell new clients, ‘This is how I practice.’”

There has to be a better way

Born into a non-horse family, Joanna nonetheless became the kid with all the Breyer models who worked hard to support her horse habit. She rode hunter/jumpers, did eventing and dressage, and guided trail rides. Finally, she got her dream horse. She showed and loved him for a year and a half—and then he died following a horrific accident. That experience left her with physical and mental health issues, and also focused her determination to become a veterinarian.

“His death started my journey with many different therapists and types of therapies and made me want to prevent any other horses and humans from having to go through the same pain,” she says. “I’d always wanted to be a vet, but that really solidified my decision.”

With an academic and leadership scholarship at Washington State University, Joanna completed both her undergraduate and veterinary degrees, and was initially focused on becoming an equine surgeon. But despite years of training in equine medicine and surgery, she realized that plan didn’t feel coherent with what she wanted for herself and her veterinary practice. In a surprise move after graduation, she did an internship in small animal medicine in Canada and joined a clinic in San Francisco. But still she found the way veterinary medicine was practiced wasn’t holding true to her best instincts of how to help animals and people.

“We weren’t looking at the big picture, we weren’t looking holistically. And I kept saying to myself, ‘There has to be a better way,’” she recalls.

“I also realized I really wanted to get back to horses.”

From the horse to the human and back again

Dr. Robson decided to pursue more holistic veterinary training, and went to the Healing Oasis Wellness Center in Wisconsin to train in veterinary spinal manipulative therapy, also known as chiropractic therapy. While there, she realized how the nervous system affects everything in the body.

“Yeah, so I’m years into my work (as a vet), and at Healing Oasis I go through this hardcore reeducation about neurology and looking at dysfunction in the body and how it relates to the brain and the nervous system. And then I realized, oh, my gosh, everything’s connected—and I’m actually just getting started,” she says. “I was really dropped down the rabbit hole at that point.”

Joanna loved working as an equine chiropractor. And...

“Really quickly I got tired of putting crooked riders on my straightened horses!”

Determined to help her clients and better understand human biomechanics, she went to (human) massage school and studied Transformational Bodywork™, which is a process that utilizes a variety of massage techniques to realign the body's structure and release old traumas and pains it holds at a cellular level.

About the same time she became an equine acupuncturist and herbalist. And then was certified in equine thermography—in which an infrared camera is used to create images to evaluate physiology—and was hired by United Infrared to be the technical director for EquineIR.

If your head isn't already spinning from the breadth and width of Dr. Robson's interests and abilities, she became a certified saddle fitter shortly after returning to equine practice, because she saw a real need for her clients to understand the impact saddle fit has on the horse—and the relationship of the human with the horse.

“Really—good saddle fit is just critical. Those (equine) backs just were not made to carry us. I find so very many problems with horses lead right to how the saddle does or does not fit the horse,” she says.

All veterinarians, great and small

Veterinarians suffer disproportionately-high rates of burn-out, compassion fatigue, and—awfully—suicide. High student debt, client and collegial bullying, false online reviews, staffing losses and clinic closures, corporate buyouts, emotional blackmail, poor boundaries, and even physical threats of violence, may be common factors for both small- and large-animal vets.

“Veterinarians have to be doctors, dentists, social workers, family counselors, grief counselors, hospice workers, pediatricians, surgeons, and so much more... and for more than one species. We are also mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, children, and have lives outside of practice that are often challenged by the stress of work and by clients who can lack boundaries,” says Dr. Robson.

A few years ago, she wanted to go back to school and was drawn to veterinary social work. Joanna saw a gap between how veterinarians communicate with clients and how the clients can receive information; she also witnessed barriers to care that operate in the background of a person's life, which can affect the decisions clients may make around their animals.

She took a class on eCPR, which is an educational program designed to teach people to assist others through an emotional crisis. It is designed for everyone, and requires little cost or training. The experience was so profound for Joanna she wanted to know: “Why isn't this course mandatory everywhere?”

She became an eCPR trainer and began using the techniques with her clients and—in hope of helping others in her profession—began co-teaching the eCPR course for the University of Tennessee colleges of veterinary medicine and social work.

“My wish is for eCPR to grow to broad implementation in all animal health professions, as I believe it helps with understanding our clients and how to diffuse difficult situations, whether with clients or peers,” she says.

Best friends, teachers, and critics

“Horses have been my best friends, my saviors in very dark times, my best teachers and critics, my therapists, and, most importantly, my mirrors. Horses have taught me incredibly difficult lessons about grief and loss, ego and striving, forgiveness, humility, frustration, and acceptance,” says Joanna Robson.

Some people seem to have the ability to find an extra six or seven hours in a day. Lest it seem Joanna is all work and no horseplay, the veterinarian also competes in Western Dressage with her Quarter Horse gelding Nevan, whose early injuries should have permanently put him out of competition. Instead of listening to her colleagues and having her horse euthanized, Joanna listened to her deep intuition and greater wisdom and gave him time to heal with no agenda. Nevan recovered—and went on to become a state, regional, and national Western Dressage champion.

Karen Loshbaugh is one of the founders of Art2Ride, an organization that promotes classical dressage foundation training, as well as offering saddle fitting. She has known Joanna for 15 years.

“I have known Joanna as a friend, as a vet, as a saddle fitter, as a chiropractor, as an acupuncturist, and as a fellow horseman. I have never met a practitioner who is so incredibly educated. She truly cares about the horses [and is] forever trying to educate horse owners and help them be the best advocate for their horses that they possibly can be.”

“There are very few minds like hers out there that can combine so many different facets of treatment with a whole-horse approach. Everything is so interrelated, and I believe Joanna is one of the best professionals out there who can see the whole picture.”

Inspiritus Equine

Dr. Robson is a sought-after lecturer and has spoken nationally and internationally at Equine Affaire, Equitana Germany and Asia-Pacific, Rolex Kentucky, and the World Equestrian Games. She has a book and DVD: *Recognizing the Horse in Pain and What You Can Do About It*.

Her company is called Inspiritus Equine: Inspired Integrative Medicine. She chose the name from the Latin word *inspirare*, which means “to breath in.” Her work as a veterinarian is to use inspiration to find solutions to help animals be pain-free and achieve both mental and physical health. She is committed to breathing in everything—and using everything at her disposal to help.

“Chiropractic, acupuncture, saddle-fitting, bodywork, applied kinesiology, thermography, herbal medicine... The learning and applications are endless, and they're all connected. My work is to choose the best tools in my box and use them appropriately—and to know when to take a step back.

“I'm honored, truly, to work with my clients and their horses.”

More Information

Inspiritus Equine: inspiritusequine.com/
Emotional CPR: emotional-cpr.org/about-ecpr/