

Of Horse Ropes and Parrots: What Horse Training Can offer Bird Trainers

Kelly Ballance

Ballance Behavior & Training

www.BallanceBehavior.com

Lake Oswego, Oregon

May 10, 2013

In 2012, I attended a learning lab taught by the renowned Alexandra Kurland. Kurland is a supremely talented and experienced horse trainer as well as a graduate of Cornell University. She is not a tall woman, but her calm presence fills a room. She wears long hair back in a thick braid. She has soft eyes and an easy smile, and her skill is legendary, especially among science-based animal trainers.

The demonstrations in her lab “Body Motion and Control” left a lasting impression on me. Deceptively straight forward and simple; they immediately improved my handling skills. *With birds.* Her lab might have been in the context of horses, but it was easy to adapt and apply the practices to parrots, pigeons and chickens.

Kurland’s exercises make it possible for novices to easily achieve grace in motion. Balance in every step and movement. Control and awareness when handling ropes, leashes, or birds. With each demonstration, I was able to understand how much we are communicating to animals with our own movements. That rope starts to seem a lot like a telephone line. Each vibration and tug sending a message.

Try this at home. You’ll need a friend to humor you. For the first example, hold the end of a leash or rope or necktie in the center of both your hands. Tightly clench your hands into fists, gripping the line as hard as you can. Feel the tension in your arms and shoulders. Close your eyes and tense every muscle in your arms and body. Once your eyes are closed, your friend should slide their hand up the line. You announce when you notice movement on the line. Make a note of how close it gets to your hands.

In the next example, close your eyes, relax your hands and body. Say when you feel their hand moving up the line. See the difference?



In the first trial, most people don’t notice the movement until it is inches away. The second example shows a stark difference. Most people notice the motion almost immediately, before the other person has even really moved much up the line at all.

The first take-away lesson is that any movement at any point of the rope or leash sends vibrations along it and to the horse or dog. Animals *react* to those vibrations. Acknowledging this is a big deal. *Animals react to how we handle their lead ropes and leashes.* The next time you take your dog for a walk, you

better factor your leash handling as an aspect of their behavior. What they do will depend, in large part, upon what *you* do. It's terrifying and empowering all at the same time.

Now, extend that lesson to bird handling. If that much information is conveyed through an inch thick lead, how much is conveyed when an animal is physically standing *on your hand*?

We pass a lot of information to our birds with every interaction. Short trips from here to there hardly register with most of us. Start paying more attention. We should be aware of what we are teaching our bird every time we handle them. Your bird will use that information when making choices in the future.

Birds bob and weave on our hand as they react to things in the environment. Typically parrots will lean towards things or people they are interested in. They lean away from aversive objects, places or people. The weight shifts may be subtle or exaggerated. If we aren't aware of at least some of these movements and make changes, the bird will fly off our hand. I'm not an advocate of using my thumb to hold toes if there is a more positive, less intrusive way of getting the same behavior. With awareness and practice in body control we would notice even the most subtle weight shifts of our bird.



These weight shifts and movements could give you a better idea of what your bird might do before they actually do it. How a bird responds to something you are doing also gives you an idea of how the bird might respond to training under certain conditions. This information is crucial because it may indicate potential sources of reinforcement or potential aversives in the environment. The tensely upright bird generally isn't open to learning. By paying attention to subtle weight shifts you could determine possible environmental changes would be beneficial for a successful interaction.

If you would like to practice some bird in hand activities that help increase awareness, try this game that Dana McDonald, an experienced bird trainer, shared with me. She plays it regularly with her birds. She learned it from someone else who calls it "Sapien Driving". The idea is teach your bird that you will stop or go based on their weight shifts. You respond to backward shifts or increased toe grip by stopping or moving away from whatever your bird leaned away from. If they lean forward or towards something, you move forward.

Here's how McDonald describes it: "...I start out with a bird on my hand. If I walk towards a door or something, they will usually make body movements of hesitation right at the door...usually a subtle shift back, or a grip with the feet. Then I'll peek around the corner and offer them a look. As I move them to the door to look, I pay careful attention to the feet and body language. Are they leaning forward? Proceed. If they grip or shift back, I stop and wait. It doesn't take them long to learn how to 'steer'!"

Under this light of sensitivity to subtle movements, consider having your bird on the shoulder instead of on your arm or hand. Forget about 'dominance', or easy access to sensitive eyeballs, the shoulder area is not nearly as sensitive to pressure or weight shifts as a human hand is. It's like traveling with the mute button on. Your shoulder won't be able to tell you what bird might be 'saying' at any given

moment. You'll have to turn a vulnerable eye to that hardened dinosaur beak. Now tell me this, why do pirates have a patch over one eye?

It's also important to consider what people might be telling the birds while on the hand. Anything that threatens the well-being of the bird, from falling to unwanted restraint, is a problem. It is possible that people unconsciously offer 'corrections' with tiny and subtle shifts of hand, especially if there is a fear of the bird flying or falling off the hand. You want to be aware of any sort of punishing procedure that may be occurring. In addition to ethical considerations, it is one of the variables that affect learning. A miniscule tilt of the hand may slightly throw your bird off balance, even if for just a fraction of a second, and that could lead to a bite for you, and an injury for your bird.

The second lesson is that your animal can understand you better when they are relaxed, not tense. Remember how we have been admonished to be calm when we are training and make sure the animal is in the right frame of mind? Ever wonder what that LOOKS like? It looks like a relaxed animal. The body postures that show relaxation are different for each species. For dogs, soft eyes and easy open mouths are some indicators. For birds, almond eyes and closed beaks are a couple. Take the time to notice what your bird is telling you with body posture before you start training.

It seems plausible to me that muscle tension in either bird or human reduces sensitivity to vibration/movement and therefore inhibits communication. When I did the lead rope experiment, it seemed to me that I could 'listen' through that lead rope and I could sure 'hear' a lot more when I was relaxed.

Tension, especially in the neck, arms, shoulders and back can dilute our ability to feel what our bird might be 'saying' with subtle weight shifts.

Human tension also gives the bird information. We rotate our arms and hold them differently when they are tense. An overly tense hand is *not* a stable and steady platform. If your bird has ever been reluctant to step-up or travel with you, you might pay attention to how you are holding them for some insight as to why. If we don't offer a stable 'perch' with our body, our bird might lose their balance and increase their grip on our hand. This hurts. Especially if you have been putting off a much needed nail trim. That pain starts a potential cascade of poor interactions that may end up in a dislodged, injured bird and a bleeding human. You'll get a dirty look the next time you offer your hand for step-up.

Kurland's workshop introduced me to several exercises that improve awareness, relaxation and balance. I believe that she has borrowed from Tai Chi, Feldenkrais, and other areas to help horse trainers. These exercises seem to help increase the range of motion in neck, shoulders, arms, core and hips, which could be quite helpful for bird trainers. I like to use them before a training session because they are easy and give nearly instant results. My favorite is the shoulder rotation exercise which is named, funnily enough, the "Flying Lesson" exercise.



The day after the workshop I arrived at the avian veterinary practice where I work as practice manager. A contentious Congo African Grey by the name of "Elmo" was

already occupying the counter space in our front office. Elmo's favorite activity was something we called 'land sharking'. He would walk through the front of the clinic, tapping toes along linoleum floor, head down, feathers up on end, eyes dilated to tiny aggressive beads of darkness. He looked like a circling shark. Once he located a 'victim', he would relentlessly pursue their shoes. In the past, Elmo seemed to take a special fancy to my footwear.

That morning was different though. I had done two things out of the ordinary. One, I had completed the "Flying Lesson" shoulder rotations as well as the hip circles exercises before leaving my house. I was feeling really relaxed, centered and well balanced. Two, I waited to put on my typical scrub top uniform. Incidentally, his favorite person wears one identical to mine, and he hasn't seemed to care in the past. This time, Elmo did something out of the ordinary too. He remained relaxed even when I was only inches away from him. He had no interest in my shoes. He even danced with me, bobbing his head up and down with my finger snapping. Everyone commented on it. I took video with my phone.

The interaction with Elmo was not an experience that I took lightly.

Birds are aware of body motion and posture, both theirs and ours. It would make sense that we should be as well. Going into interactions with our birds relaxed will help us see and feel subtle weight shifts. It will help us provide a solid and stable perch for our feathered friends. With practiced awareness, we can begin to understand the impact body motion has on learning. It will help us become even better teachers and trainers of horses, birds and ourselves.

After attending the workshop, I made it a habit to do both the shoulder rotations and neck stretches daily. I even scheduled the exercises into my phone calendar, so I got a reminder every morning when I was at work.

One way to learn the exercises is to attend Kurland's workshops. If you can't, I would recommend watching her DVD (which is #7 in her series on equine clicker training) titled, "T'ai Chi Rope Handling". You can find it at this link: <http://theclickercenter.com/clickerstoreLesson7.html>
To read about it, visit Kurland's blog: <http://www.theclickercenter.com/ClickerBlogAugSept2007.html>

May 2013 - an update on Elmo-

In the past, Elmo would expand like a balloon fish whenever I walked by his cage, exclaiming, "TIME TO GO! TIME TO GO TO BED!" It's a command. One the days that I am relaxed and have done some shoulder exercises, he doesn't respond to me that way. At all. I might get an eye pin if I offer my hand, which quickly causes me to remove it and myself from his space. I am grateful for the warning! I realize that this is anecdotal, and could be attributed to other variables. I will be continuing to observe for more information.