

Craniosacral & the Preservation of Wildness

by
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*The finest qualities of our nature, like the bloom on fruits,
can be preserved only by the most delicate handling.
Yet we do not treat ourselves nor one another
thus tenderly.*

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

Whenever we search out the spiritual essence of a healing modality, we almost always find that the mystics, shamans, and poets had long ago mapped the territory. When I think of the lightness of craniosacral touch, my mind goes to the words of Henry David Thoreau quoted above. Craniosacral is the “most delicate touch,” a touch by which we treat one another tenderly. Behind all of the learning of anatomy and cranial techniques, behind all of the patience and skill that goes into learning to listen to the cranial wave movement, there is Thoreau again showing us the heart of our work: attending to and preserving the finest qualities of our nature.

What Thoreau meant by “our nature” is our original nature, our wildness. In his essay, “Walking,” he wrote: “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society.” Like the ancient Taoists, Sufis, Hindus, and Native Americans before him, Thoreau was speaking to the health and vitality that comes from an alignment or right relationship with Nature in both body and spirit. In our modern world with its preoccupation with consuming, making money, absorbing superficial entertainment, and having our hands glued to the cultural umbilicus of our cell phones, it has been all too easy to disassociate from our wild natures. Technology appears to have replaced Nature as the host within which life unfolds. Living within the artificial reality of our mind constructs, we have domesticated ourselves at the expense of our wildness. We have in so many ways lost our natural compass for our earth walk and soul's journey.

What distinguishes craniosacral and other modalities of healing touch is the tender treatment of the whole being on its earth walk and soul's journey, treating not just the physical body but the spirit that lives within humans and animals. And nowhere have I seen a greater display of the gift of cranial touch for body and soul than when my Craniosacral for Animals class recently descended on A Chance for Bliss Animal Sanctuary in Penryn, California. The spirit of the place at A Chance for Bliss is one of unconditional love for animals that emanates from its founders and owners, Deanna and David “Woody” Bartley, who have generously opened the sanctuary and its nearly

seventy animals as a place for us to teach and work.

Prior to working with the animals at A Chance for Bliss we spent our classroom time learning about craniosacral and practicing on each other, aware that our challenge would be to transfer the knowledge and cranial techniques based on human cranial anatomy to the structural differences of animal cranial anatomy. From the experience of working with craniosacral on humans and animals in my own practice, my sense is that while there are anatomical differences between humans and animals, the “bone energetics” are remarkably similar if not the same. What I have beheld experientially in working with animals is that they are, just like us, on an earth walk and a soul's journey. I will leave to academic debate the argument about animals as lesser beings with lesser consciousness. I have long ago let go of those cultural and scientific sound bytes in favor of actually feeling the presence and consciousness of animals. What I do see are some differences in the way humans and animals perceive the world—for example, the way animals see detail more acutely, while humans see more globally or abstractly. When we roamed the savanna together in kinship, humans kept their eyes on the forest while animals kept a watchful eye on the trees. We had something mutually beneficial to offer each other.

In class we focused on the craniosacral system: the craniosacral fluid, the brain, the reciprocal tension membrane, the bones, the dura, the cranial rhythmic impulse, the still point, and protocols for treatment. Isolating each bone, we felt the cranial wave movement, our hands listening like sonar to its echoes in tissue and bone, and felt the subtle dynamics of the system. Craniosacral listens with the lightest of touch because it is not about our finger pressure or manipulation, but all about a deep listening for sensation and movement of energy in an animal's body. We want to allow the needs of the animal to rise up into our hands. Our work is about what is revealed by following the flow of energy, sensing movement and unwinding in the cranial system. If we can simply be with another and wait, the cranial system will harmonize itself. We can, if needed, also gently touch, engage, and invite the system to reestablish physiological flow and motion. On the esoteric level, it is the stillness of our own energy field, our presence, and our touch that assist another being in going home to its core, which in turn restores clarity about the life's journey and resolves physiological flow and motion as well.

Working with the lightest of touch, the students waited patiently and listened deeply to the movement, rhythms, directions, and amplitude of the cranial wave formations. As the proof is always in the pudding, we watched students getting off the tables transformed, amazed at what happened inside them, feeling the deep relaxation, the lightness of spirit, the oceanic sense of oneness with existence. Those giving sessions could see the luminous radiance of spirit or “shen” emanating from the eyes of students. We were now ready for a day of clinical work at A Chance for Bliss.

The animals at A Chance for Bliss are all rescue animals who have been down some very rough roads on their life journeys, including abandonment, abuse, extreme confinement, and illness. And for many of the animals, they faced being “put down” as a solution to their age or their physical, emotional, or behavioral problems. At A Chance

For Bliss, all of the animals truly have been given sanctuary, a loving home, the companionship of other animals, and a chance to live out their lives with dignity and respect. Our work, accordingly, would focus on all aspects of their beings—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. With our five grams of touch and cranial techniques, we were ready to address our animal friends as conscious beings, to bring our attention to what Thoreau called “the finest qualities of our natures”—that is, to preservation of their wild natures on their earth walks and soul journeys.

We started our clinical work with a demonstration of adapting human cranial work to animals. A characteristic of craniosacral work with humans is holding a cranial bone for a long time, waiting patiently for its process to unfold. It is often the case with animals that they may not let you have that kind of time. We knew that we might have to adjust for that difference, as well as have to work with the body positions they offer us, rather than have them be in optimal positions. For learning and practicing purposes, we brought our focus to the Core Link between the occiput and sacrum. The Core Link begins at cervical vertebrae 2 & 3 and ends at the 2nd sacral segment. We wanted to bring our attention to freeing the sacrum for optimal movement in the pelvic structure and to relaxing the piriformis and psoas muscles with acupressure points in the pelvic region. We would then work our way up the body focusing our attention on the dural tube on its way to the head and the energetics of the cranial bones.

The photo below shows Jilly near the end of our initial demonstration of cranial techniques. Jilly had been a bit nervous at first, so I began by holding her sacrum with one hand and her heart area with the other hand, with my finger tips on Conception Vessel 17, Sea of Tranquility, to calm her nervous system. Then I worked my way up from her sacrum to the head where I held her frontal, parietals, maxilla, mandible, temporals, ethmoid, and sphenoid bones. I was drawn to move my fingers back a bit from the sphenoid bone, and Jilly went spontaneously into a still point, as can be seen in the photo. Her breathing and heart rate slowed down as the cranial system helped to calm her nervous system and harmonize the endocrine system. She was not asleep, but in a very deep state of inner relaxation and awareness. A still point in craniosacral is the temporary cessation of the cranial wave pattern. In essence, the cranial system is simply taking time out, or letting go of a discordant wave pattern and resetting itself with a new wave pattern. The still point took Jilly on an inward journey to her core, home to her original nature. I maintained this contact with her for several minutes until she came back from the still point.



Following the demonstration with Jilly, the class worked on the approximately 20 dogs in the house. The results of the work were simply beautiful. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the skill, artistry, dedication, and love that the students in my Animal Acupressure Certification Program, as well as those in class for the first time, brought to their work. Following our sessions with the dogs in the house, we took time for lunch and then headed outside to work on steers, pigs, ducks, geese, goats, cats, rabbits, and chickens—and then on to the horse pastures.

Though the cranial work with all of the animals was amazing, it was the horses that so visibly revealed the depth of craniosacral work. The photo below shows Victoria Tugwell with her right hand on the horse's occiput and her left hand on the mandible. It is the attitude of the head that illustrates the power of cranial to calm the nervous system and take the animal into a place of inner stillness. Note that the horse's head is bowed, not in an attitude of submission, but in an attitude of deep relaxation and trust. You can see the inner stillness in the horse's eye.



During this session the horse moved into a series of still points along with the characteristic ways a horse energetically releases its nervous system. As a horse releases tension and discordant energy, the first signs are a slight quivering of the lips, followed by a more intense quivering, and culminates in the horse lowering its head close to the ground and vigorously shaking its head back and forth while blowing energy through its lips and mouth. In this way, horses can release long held tension and old trauma, very much in accord with the way wild animals shake off trauma as described by Peter Levine in his classic work on somatic experiencing, *Riding the Tiger: Healing Trauma*.

As we worked on the first horses, the other horses began to come closer as if getting in line for cranial sessions. They clearly could feel the energy moving in the horses receiving sessions. We all shared the sense of being in a larger field of energy with them. The energetic resonance around us was palpable. Horse after horse went into the same place of stillness and engaged in large releases of energy. They knew what we were doing, sensed that we were there for them, and gently cooperated with us in the work. We were sharing a common language of touch and energy. We were working together in partnership in a gentle and non-invasive manner. We were there for each other in right relationship with natural healing.

Reflecting on our craniosacral work at A Chance for Bliss, I am mindful of how we are all on a journey through life and the role craniosacral can play in bringing us back into contact with our original natures. For both animals and humans, the freedom of the open range and a life lived in harmony with Nature has all but vanished. But our need persists for the sustaining power of Nature in our lives. In the ancient traditions, the sacred path of the soul on its life journey has often been expressed in an esoteric or invisible

anatomy related to the spine. For Native Americans, the Red Road is the path through life. To the Taoists, it is the Kunlun Mountain, the home of the five spirits vertically uniting heaven and earth. The spine is also related esoterically in Taoism to the Lower, Middle, and Upper Tan Tien (Hara, Heart, and Third Eye). In acupuncture, the spine is related to the Governing Vessel. In the Hindu cosmology, the spine is related to the journey through the Chakras, beginning at the perineum/coccyx and ascending up the spine to the crown soul, the 7th Chakra, the Thousand Petaled Lotus or enlightenment.

All of the bones of the craniosacral system have an esoteric anatomy of the spirit and are related to aspects of our journey through life. The sacrum, the “sacred bone,” is the home of our ascension or Kundalini energy. The frontal bone is about “taking a heading,” knowing what is right for you and where you want to go. The ethmoid is about seeing the way ahead. The temporals are about listening and keeping your balance on the journey. The sphenoid bone, the master bone of the head, is the Visionary Bone. It is about seeing on all levels: physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It is about our ability to perceive clearly the journey itself. Optimizing the craniosacral system heals on the physical level and gives access to the light of consciousness, enables us to remember who we really are, and to see the way forward in life. Craniosacral is a special kind of attention, a deep patient listening, a way of being with another on his or her journey through life. This kind of attention to another's journey is an act of love and compassion.

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