

DISCUSSION GUIDE

[C] COMMUNITY
CINEMA

The Horse Boy

a film by Michel Orion Scott and Rupert Isaacson

*How far would you travel
to heal someone you love?*



How far would you travel to heal someone you love? For one Texas couple, it means a spiritual journey halfway around the world to Mongolia. When their son is diagnosed with autism, they seek the best treatments but nothing works... Until they discover their son's connection to horses and the effect it has on him. Part travel adventure and shamanic quest, this is the story of how one family found a gateway into understanding their son's life.



WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/HORSE-BOY

FROM THE FILMMAKER

I first met Rupert Isaacson at a talk he gave on the Kalahari Bushmen of Botswana. Rupert spoke passionately about the past, present, and future of a people who many anthropologists believe to be the first human society, and who are now on the brink of extinction. Immediately, I felt a stirring to help. I had just finished working on a large-scale Hollywood film shot in Austin, Texas, and was burned out by the frantic pace of the previous three months. I wanted desperately to spend more time with nature, and work for a cause I believed in. I took a bold step forward and told Rupert, "I want to help."

We began to talk about the possibility of creating a film about the Bushmen, one that would help them in their fight for survival. A few months into pre-production, I was sitting with Rupert in his kitchen. Our conversation paused for a moment when, out of the blue and in a breath, he told me about the incredible journey to Mongolia that he planned to take the following summer. He would be traveling on horseback throughout the country, along with his wife and son Rowan, who has autism, in search of the mysterious shamans he felt could help heal his son.

I was a bit shocked to say the least. At the same time, I knew immediately that this was a story that had to be told. I knew that following the love that these parents had for their child—and the lengths that they would go for him—would be a worthy project, regardless of what they found in Mongolia.

The logistics of the shoot seemed overwhelming, though. How would we manage to put together a film as inspiring and beautiful as the journey itself on our shoestring budget? I would also be taking on the responsibility of exploring one of the most challenging medical issues of our time: the complex and puzzling disorder that is autism. What a task – to try to explain what seems unexplainable even to the

experts in the field! To say that I didn't know what to anticipate is an understatement, but, of course, no one could.

So off we went – into the magnificent, unknowable land of Genghis Kahn, where horseback riding started; where the word shaman ("one who knows") originated; and where shamanism is, even today, the official state religion. As I galloped through the countryside in my attempt to keep up with the family, a camera in one hand and reins in the other, across the rugged and isolated Mongolian landscape, it all seemed surreal and impossible. I was thrown from my horse, contracted Giardia, and faced each day with a level of aching soreness beyond what I had ever experienced.

And all of this for a film? Yes, but even more for the sake of a boy with autism whose parents were willing to go, literally, to the ends of the earth to find healing for their son. To me, this is the true beauty of the story. The mysterious shamans, incredible landscapes, and harrowing climbs on nearly wild horses are all a backdrop for the story of a family willing to transcend logic and science in order to find a way into their son's world. When the Isaacson family took their first steps onto that plane bound for Mongolia, I realized that our film could share this important message with the world, no matter what the outcome of our trip. In fact, when we boarded that plane, I did not believe that Rowan would be healed. I was making a film about a committed family who was on a journey to accept the reality of their child's disorder. The beauty of the outcome is that the family did accept it, while at the same time, Rowan was healed. I challenge the viewer, as I was challenged in the making of this film, to imagine how we can embrace the idea of "healing," while understanding that unique individuals who think and behave differently than the status quo, are an integral part of human culture and development. Perhaps the line between the healer and the healed is not as clearly defined as it appears.

–Michel Orion Scott



THE FILM

The Horse Boy is the story of a family going halfway around the world in search of a miracle. Five-year-old Rowan is the “horse boy” of the film’s title, and the miracle is his parents’ hope to find healing for his autism. Narrated by Rupert Isaacson, Rowan’s father, the film documents the very unconventional measure the family took to help their child.

When Rowan was born, he seemed in every way a normal child. But by age two he began exhibiting behaviors that concerned his parents. Severe tantrums, refusing to use the potty, and obsessively lining up objects led to a diagnosis of autism. Rowan’s parents tried every form of Western medication and treatment, to no avail. One day, Rowan unexpectedly ran up to Betsy, an old mare owned by the Isaacsons’ neighbors in rural Texas, and to Rupert’s surprise, both animal and child were unusually calm in each other’s presence. Seeing the connection between his son and the horse, Rupert began doing some research. His knowledge of traditional healing prompted him to look for a place that combined horses and shamanic healing, and the place he found was Mongolia. After convincing his very skeptical wife that this was the treatment to pursue, Rupert arranged for the family to spend a month on horseback in Mongolia, seeking the help of shamans for Rowan’s autism.

The first shamanic healing session lasted four hours, during which Rowan was given a special drink, his mother performed a ritual washing of her lower body, and both parents were whipped by a shaman. Drumming accompanied much of the ceremony. Afterward, Rowan began showing some positive signs, laughing and playing

with the shamans, and hugging a small boy he called “Mongolian brother.” But on the next leg of the journey, Rowan regressed and had tantrums about having to ride a horse rather than traveling in the van. Upon reflection, Rupert realized he was forcing his own agenda, rather than taking his cues from his son.

After a stop at Lake Sharga, which was said to have healing properties, the family and their guides were off to far-north Mongolia, home of the Duka people, reindeer herders with a very strong shamanic tradition. There Ghoste, the most powerful shaman, agreed to perform a healing ceremony. In the darkness of his teepee, wearing his ceremonial eagle feathers and beating a drum, Ghoste performed the ritual and informed Rowan’s parents that the boy’s incontinence and tantrums would go away. And the next day, those things did indeed begin to improve. Did the shamans heal Rowan? His parents were at a loss to explain what happened. They knew that something had occurred during their visits to the Mongolian shamans, and that Rowan’s dysfunctional behavior was gone.

Although it presents one family’s unusual approach to dealing with their child’s autism, the film underscores the lengths to which parents of children with autism often go to seek help. Several experts appear on camera to provide brief explanations of autism and to point out factors that can help families and society cope with the condition. Rowan’s family has now come to terms with his autism, and they have founded the New Trails Center, which provides therapeutic riding near their home in Texas, to help Rowan and others like him lead full, productive lives.



INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN THE HORSE BOY

Rowan is the horse boy.

Rupert is Rowan's father.

Kristin is Rowan's mother.

Torga is a Mongolian guide.

Ghoste is a shaman for the Duka people.

Experts:

Temple Grandin, Ph.D., is a professor of animal science at Colorado State University and a person with autism.

Dale Rudin, Ph.D., is a psychologist and family therapist.

Simon Baron-Cohen, Ph.D., is a professor at Cambridge University.

Roy Richard Grinker, Ph.D., is an anthropologist and author of the book *Unstrange Minds*.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a spectrum of neurological disorders that includes autism, Asperger Syndrome, and PDD, or pervasive developmental disorder. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently found that about 1 percent of children in America will be diagnosed with an ASD. The number of people diagnosed with autism has increased dramatically since the 1980s.

Autism is characterized by pervasive difficulties in social interactions and communication, severely restricted interests, and highly repetitive behavior. It is a disorder of neural development with symptoms beginning before a child is three years old.

Asperger Syndrome is characterized by qualitative impairment in social interaction, as well as stereotyped and restricted patterns of behavior, activities, and interests. Intense preoccupation with a narrow subject, one-sided verbosity, unexpressive speech, and physical clumsiness are typical of the condition. Unlike with autism, individuals with Asperger syndrome do not display a significant delay in cognitive or language development.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) is a diagnosis usually used when there are impairments in social interaction and communication skills, but the patient does not meet criteria for a specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder (such as autism or Asperger's). This disorder is sometimes called "atypical autism" by autism specialists.

Causes of autism

Currently, the cause of autism is unknown. Autism spectrum disorders are most likely genetically based neurological disorders. Research indicates that other factors besides the genetic component are contributing to the rise in increasing occurrences of ASD, such as environmental toxins, which are more prevalent in our current environment than in the past.

Treatment

Numerous treatments are available, but because autism is a spectrum disorder affecting people differently and to varying degrees, a treatment option that has shown success for one person might not be effective for someone else. For this reason, no single approach is considered the best; treatment is typically tailored to the individual's needs and delivered mainly through the family and the educational system. Intensive special education programs and behavior therapy such as Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) can help young children acquire self-care and social skills, as well as decrease symptom severity and maladaptive behaviors. Other approaches include biomedical treatments, such as special diets or medication to treat some of the symptoms of autism (currently there are no medications approved for treating the core social and communication impairments of autism); and complementary therapies, such as those involving art, music or animals.

Because each person with autism is a unique individual, the Autism Society has an options policy which states that each family and individual with autism should have the right to learn about and then select the options that they feel are most appropriate for the individual with autism. The Society firmly believes that no single type of program or service will fill the needs of every individual with autism and that each person should have access to support services. Selection of a program, service or method of treatment should be on the basis of a full assessment of each person's abilities, needs and interests. To the maximum extent possible, the Society believes that the decisions should be made by the individual with autism in collaboration with family, guardians and caregivers. For more information about treatment options, visit www.autism-society.org.

Neurodiversity

An advocacy movement has developed that promotes the acceptance of autism as a variation in functioning rather than a mental disorder to be cured. Known by several names – the autistic rights movement (ARM), the neurodiversity* movement, or the autistic culture movement – the movement's proponents pursue a variety of goals. Among them are a greater acceptance of autistic behaviors and treatment that teaches individuals with autism coping skills rather than focusing on learning neurotypical** behaviors. One of the arguments of the autistic rights movements is that there is no ideal brain configuration, and that autism is a valid and unique way of being. Curing autism, they say, is like trying to cure left-handedness. Some members of the movement feel that their way of life should be respected and that they should be left alone.

Simon Baron-Cohen, an autism researcher who appears in *The Horse Boy*, believes that there is benefit in providing therapy to help individuals with autism learn to communicate effectively and regulate their emotions. He feels, however, that care must be taken to not eliminate the special abilities of people with autism, such as attention to detail and the ability to concentrate for long periods on one topic. These abilities can be of great benefit in certain fields of endeavor, such as math, computing, music, and science.

Information based on these sources:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autism_rights_movement

http://www.lumrix.net/medical/autism/autistic_culture.html



http://www.salon.com/env/feature/2009/04/27/autistic_culture/

**Proponents of neurodiversity assert that atypical development is a normal human difference, which should be recognized and respected as any other human variation.*

***A person who is neurotypical has typical or normal neurological development and is used within autistic culture to refer to non-autistic people.*

Shamanic healing

A *shaman* is an intermediary between the human and spirit worlds, who can treat illness and is capable of entering supernatural realms to obtain answers to the problems of his or her community. *Shamanism* is based on the premise that the visible world is pervaded by invisible forces or spirits that affect the lives of the living. It requires individualized knowledge and special abilities, and operates outside of established religions.

Referred to as “medicine man” in some cultures, the shaman treats ailments by mending the soul, thus allowing the physical body to regain balance and wholeness. As a messenger between the natural and spirit worlds, the shaman “travels” to another dimension to bring guidance to misguided souls, to separate evil spirits from souls, or to free the soul from elements causing illness. The shaman does not heal illness directly, but affects the natural world by traveling into the spiritual realm, which creates balance for the soul, elimination of the ailment, and restored health for the body.

Although shamans consider the cause of disease to be in the spiritual realm, they use both spiritual and physical methods for healing. Commonly, a shaman will “enter the body” of the patient to confront the spirit making the patient sick, and will heal the patient by banishing the infectious spirit. Many shamans have expert knowledge of the plant life in their area, and an herbal regimen may be prescribed as treatment.

Some of the shamans of Siberia and Mongolia use drums in their healing practices. The beating of the drum allows the shaman to achieve an altered state of consciousness and to journey to the spirit world. By being able to interact with that world in an altered and aware state, the shamans can gather and exchange information, both in the world in which they live and the one to which they have traveled, and thus begin to heal the soul of the affected individual.

Human-animal bond

What is it that draws humans and animals together? Aside from relying on animals for food and clothing, humans have been fascinated with animals for thousands of millennia. From Paleolithic cave paintings to modern-day involvement in pet ownership and animal welfare, humans have recognized and expressed their close bond with animals.

According to the Center for the Human-Animal Bond at Purdue University’s mission statement, “People in the presence of animals are often perceived to be more happy and healthy.” The Centers for Disease Control have conducted numerous studies that support claims about the profound physiological consequences of human-animal interactions.

Contact with animals reduces blood pressure, decreases anxiety, and leads to a general feeling of well being, and the therapeutic value of animals for individuals in nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons has been well documented.

A growing field of scholarship has been focused on the relationship between people and animals, and how each influences the psychological and physiological state of the other. Human-animal studies is a relatively new academic field that examines the complex and multidimensional relationships between nonhuman and human animals. In addition, many schools of veterinary medicine offer courses or conduct research on the human-animal bond. One day, we may have the answer to why Rowan and Betsy seemed so comfortable together (as documented in *The Horse Boy*), and why there is such easy acceptance between children with autism and animals.

Sources: <http://www.vet.purdue.edu/chab/>; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_bonding (section on human-animal bond)

TOPICS AND ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE HORSE BOY

A screening of *The Horse Boy* can be used to spark interest in any of the following topics and can inspire both individual and community action. In planning a screening, consider finding speakers, panelists, or discussion leaders who have expertise in one or more of the following areas:

- Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)
- Healing
- Developmental psychology
- Family therapy
- Neurology
- Anthropology/primitive societies
- Shamanism
- Traditional medicine
- Human-animal bond
- Animal-assisted therapy



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What was your initial reaction to seeing Rowan's tantrums? How do you think changes in behavior like those exhibited by Rowan might affect the rest of the family?
2. Why do you think Betsy, the horse, had such a calming effect on Rowan? In your own experience, what have you observed in interactions between children and animals?
3. Given that some people might disparage shamanism as sorcery or magic, do you think Rowan's parents do the right thing in taking their son to be healed by a shaman? Why or why not?
4. Is there a rational explanation for why Rowan's dysfunctional behavior went away? What do you think could explain the change?
5. In the film, Professor Baron-Cohen suggests that society can make adjustments to be more autism-friendly. Should it? Is that fair to neurotypicals, that is, "normal" people? What adjustments would have to be made?
6. Do you agree with Dr. Grinker's position that autism could be seen as a form of diversity? If his position were to be generally accepted, what would that mean for our society and for different institutions within our society?
7. Describe your reaction to Rupert's statement, "I'm a better father because of his autism."
8. Not everyone can take the extraordinary measures Rowan's parents took to help their child. Nevertheless, what lessons can be drawn from this film for parents of children with autism?



SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- 1 – Find out about animal-assisted therapy or learning programs in your area. Check with local hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, and schools to learn what needs they have (e.g., animal care, fundraising), and gather a group of volunteers to provide that assistance.
- 2 – Explore the opportunities in your community for working in classes for children with autism and other special-needs students, where you can volunteer your time as an aide or a special projects assistant. You can find organizations that work with people with autism at www.autismsource.org
- 3 – Consider volunteering with your pet. Learn about the Delta Society's Pet Partners program at www.deltasociety.org/Page.aspx?pid=183, which offers trainings around the country for people who would like to visit hospital patients or residents of assisted living centers, help children learn to read, and help others who might benefit from a visit with you and your pet.
- 4 – Organize an informational forum to help your community learn the rights of special needs children for early intervention and education services. More information on this topic, as set forth in the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, can be found at www.autism-society.org. Invite educators of special-needs children as well as regular classroom teachers to participate and talk about how they work with these children on a day-to-day basis.
- 5 – Stay informed about the latest research and legislation on autism. Contact your elected officials to encourage continued debate and exploration of this issue and to express your concerns.
- 6 – Connect with a local Autism Society chapter or visit www.1Power4Autism.org to find out other ways to help in your community.

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.communitycinema.org. For local information, check the website for your PBS station.

RESOURCES

The Horse Boy

<http://www.horseboymovie.com> – The website for *The Horse Boy* film contains the background story about the family's decision to go to Mongolia. The website also includes information on the bestselling book *The Horse Boy*.

<http://www.horseboyfoundation.org> – The Horse Boy Foundation runs the New Trails Center in Elgin, TX, a learning and equestrian center for special needs children.

Autism

<http://www.autism-society.org> – The Autism Society provides basic information on many aspects of autism, including an "Autism 101" online course that gives a general overview of the condition.

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm – The website for the National Institute on Neurological Disorders and Stroke provides a fact sheet with comprehensive information on autism, including a list of other organizations to contact for additional information.

http://kidshealth.org/kid/health_problems/brain/autism.html – The Kids Health website explains autism in easy-to-understand language.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism/complete-index.shtml> – This website for the National Institute of Mental Health provides complete information on autism spectrum disorders, including treatment options, for children, adolescents, and adults.

<http://www.autismsource.org> – A searchable database of nationwide autism-related services and supports by location or service type.

<http://www.autism-society.org/stateresources> – The Autism Society's most commonly requested local resources, listed by state.

<http://www.wrongplanet.net> – Wrong Planet is a web community designed for professionals, as well as for individuals with autism, Asperger syndrome, ADHD, PDDs, and other neurological differences and their parents. It contains a discussion forum, articles, chat room, and blogging feature.

<http://www.nichcy.org/StateAgencies> – The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities provides a listing of information especially for early intervention lead agencies and education departments to support their work in helping students with disabilities (including autism) achieve their full potential.

Shamanism

<http://web.archive.org/web/20000617121128/http://www.shamanicdimensions.net/ethnasha/mongol.html> – This section of the Shamanic Dimension Network website gives a historical background on Mongolian shamanism.



<http://homelands.org/worlds/shaman.html> – This web page, entitled “The Face of the Shaman,” profiles several shamans of northern Mongolia, including Ghoste, who appears in *The Horse Boy*. Ghoste describes the shamanic culture of the reindeer herders.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shamanism> – This Wikipedia article describes shamanism in cultures throughout the world.

<http://www.shamanlinks.net/> – This website describes the work of shamans and the various tools and symbolism they use.

Human-Animal Relationships

<http://vetmedicine.about.com/cs/diseasesall/a/humananimalbond.htm> – This About.com site on veterinary medicine provides a variety of information and links focused on the human-animal bond.

<http://www.anthrozoology.org> – This Australian website dedicated to anthrozoology – the study of the role of humans and animals in each other’s lives – contains news and abstracts on topics related to human-animal interaction.

<http://www.deltasociety.org/Page.aspx?pid=183> – The Delta Society is a nonprofit human-services organization dedicated to improving people’s health and well-being through positive interactions with

animals.

THE HORSE BOY WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* IN MAY 2010. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

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ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/communitycinema.

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