



DISCUSSION GUIDE

Developed by Heartland Truly Moving Pictures to accompany *The Horse Boy*, recipient of the Truly Moving Picture Award, an honored distinction given to films that unlock the vast potential of the human spirit and enable us to view stories that display courage, integrity and hope, taking entertainment to a higher level.

www.TrulyMovingPictures.org

www.HorseBoyMovie.com



The Horse Boy



One Film Can

Heartland Truly Moving Pictures, a non-profit organization, recognizes and honors films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life. We believe that one film can move us to laughter, to tears, or to make a difference. *The Horse Boy* is a movie that demonstrates that **One Film Can**.

Synopsis

How far would you travel to heal someone you love? An intensely personal yet epic spiritual journey, *The Horse Boy* follows one Texas couple and their autistic son as they trek on horseback through Outer Mongolia in an attempt to find healing for their son. When two-year-old Rowan was diagnosed with autism, Rupert Isaacson, a writer and former horse trainer, and his wife Kristin Neff, a psychology professor, sought the best possible medical care for their son—but traditional therapies had little effect. Then they discovered that Rowan has a profound affinity for animals— particularly horses—and the family set off on a quest that would change their lives forever.

Directed by Michel Orion Scott, *The Horse Boy* is part travel adventure, part insight into shamanic healing and part intimate look at the autistic mind. In telling one family's extraordinary story, the film gives voice to the thousands who display amazing courage and creativity everyday in the battle against this mysterious and heartbreaking epidemic. The filmic companion to Isaacson's best-selling book of the same name, and a festival favorite, this ravishing documentary odyssey gives insight into how, in life's darkest moments, one can find the gateway to joy and wonder.



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The Horse Boy is a movie that sheds light upon the remarkable lengths a family goes to help their autistic son. This guide prompts discussion about the lengths parents and families go to for those they love.

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Following are some facts about autism and shamanism from Zeitgeist Films. Use them to learn more about Rowan, Rupert, Kristin and their struggles to find the answers Rowan needed.

For more information and resources, visit: www.HorseBoyMovie.com



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Setting up the Story

The Horse Boy is a story that most likely opened your eyes to a different place and alternative ideas about healing. Use what you learned in the film, along with the information provided on the next four pages, to better understand the setting of the story. The following sections contain more information on Mongolia, Shamanic healing and autism.

In addition to the film and the information provided in this guide, reading *The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son* by Rupert Isaacson can help you gather further insights into Rupert Isaacson and Kristin Neff's journey to Mongolia to heal their son.

Use the questions below to share some initial thoughts about the film before further exploring some facts that can help you better understand the setting of the story.

Discussion Questions

- What about *The Horse Boy* stood out most to you? How did the story of Rupert, Kristin and Rowan's journey impact you?
- Prior to watching this film, did you know much about alternative forms of healing? Did watching another family's story unfold allow you to expand your understanding of the multiple options that exist for treating a variety of conditions?
- Have you explored alternative therapies at any point in your life?
- If you saw the movie and read the book *The Horse Boy*, how did each impact you. Did you gain separate insights from them? What were they?

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Mongolia

* Information on Mongolia adapted from *The World Factbook*, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/mg.html

Geography of Mongolia

Location: Located in Northern Asia between China and Russia.

Land size: Slightly smaller than the state of Alaska.

Climate: Desert; continental climate, which is extreme. There are large daily and seasonal temperature ranges.

Terrain: Mountains in the west and the southwest with the Gobi Desert in the south-central part of the country. The rest of the region is vast semidesert, desert plains and grassy steppe.

The People of Mongolia

Population: A little more than 3,000,000

Ethnic Groups: Mongols make up 94.9% with Turkic, Chinese, Russian and others making up the additional 5.1%

Religions: Buddhist Lamaist 50%, Shamanist and Christian 6%, Muslim 4% and none 40% (2004)

Languages: Kalkah Mongol 90%, Turkic and Russian (1999)

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Autism

** Information on autism is adapted from The Autism Society of America, www.autism-society.org*

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a "spectrum disorder" that affects individuals differently and to varying degrees. There is no known single cause for autism.

- Autism is treatable. Children do not "outgrow" autism, but studies show that early diagnosis and intervention lead to significantly improved outcomes.
- Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies, autism is growing at a startling rate of 10-17 percent per year.
- Autism knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries; family income levels; lifestyle choices; or educational levels, and can affect any family and any child.
- Overall incidence of autism is consistent around the globe, it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.



Shamanic Healing

Shamanic healing works to reinstate a patient's health by restoring the harmonious balance between the patient's physical, soul and spirit components. Unlike western medicine, which focuses solely on curing a patient's symptoms or manifestations of illness the Shamanic healing method is an all encompassing system.

The four elements are used to awaken and activate all of the patient's senses: touch, smell, hearing, sight and taste. The goal is to infuse the patient with feelings of emotional and physical well-being and balance, to allow the process of the healing to start.

Adapted from ItzhakBeery.com <www.itzhakbeery.com/sh_healing_what_is.php>

Core Shamanism

Shamanism is the oldest form of healing, practiced since the beginning of human kind. Shamans connect with compassionate spirits and elicit their help to heal people. Core shamanism is a distillation of shamanic practices which are common to many diverse cultures. The methods of core shamanism are practiced by modern shamanic healers throughout the world. In core shamanism, the shaman enters a shamanic state of consciousness through listening to rhythmic percussion. He or she then journeys to the world of spirits and connects with spirit allies for healing work. The shaman's role is often to reconnect individuals with their helping spirits, restoring their personal power.

Some frequently used shamanic healing methods are soul retrieval, power animal retrieval, extraction, spiritual healing, and psychopomp (escorting "dead" spirits to the other world).

Adapted from SpiritHealer.com <www.spirithealer.com/Pages/works/shamanicheal.htm>

Soul Retrieval

Shamans believe that when a person suffers from a physical or psychological trauma a part(s) of the soul splits off and no longer contributes to the person's whole being. Instead it stays fixed in the event, but in non-ordinary reality. This dissociation is called soul loss, and it often results in loss of memory, or a feeling of incompleteness.

Once the traumatic event is over complete healing can occur when the soul part(s) that is missing is returned. A shaman facilitates this event by journeying into non-ordinary reality and, with the help of spirit allies, finding the missing soul parts and bringing them back home.

Adapted from SpiritHealer.com <www.spirithealer.com/Pages/works/shamanicheal.htm>



Shamanic Healing

Power Animal Retrieval

All people and animals can enjoy the power, strength and comfort of an alliance with a spiritual power animal. The spirits of wild animals work with shamans, guiding them through their journeys, giving advice and performing healings. Often the first thing a modern shamanic healer does for a person is retrieve a power animal for them. The person then bonds with the animal by honoring it in ordinary reality, visiting it during quiet meditation and dancing in a way that lets the animal move through his or her limbs.

Adapted from SpiritHealer.com <www.spirithealer.com/Pages/works/shamanicheal.htm>

Shamanic Healing Techniques

Illness Extraction: Often illness has a spiritual component as well as a physical component. When people and animals are vulnerable and disempowered it is possible for entities that don't belong to enter our bodies. These misplaced entities can cause persistent sickness, soreness and other undesirable things. Shamans work with spirits to extract these misplaced entities and deliver them to a neutral place, where they can contribute to the overall good of things (instead of causing harm). This process is called extraction.

Adapted from SpiritHealer.com <www.spirithealer.com/Pages/works/shamanicheal.htm>



Hippotherapy

The following information is excerpted from the American Hippotherapy Association's website, www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org and can be found in the article, "An Introduction to Hippotherapy" by Joann Benjamin, published in *PT Advance*, Summer 2000.

Hippotherapy literally means treatment with the help of a horse, from the Greek word hippos meaning horse. The American Hippotherapy Association (AHA) has defined hippotherapy as "a term that refers to the use of the movement of the horse as a strategy by Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, and Speech-Language Pathologists to address impairments, functional limitations, and disabilities in patients with neuromusculoskeletal dysfunction. This strategy is used as part of an integrated treatment program to achieve functional outcomes." (AHA, 2000)

The movement of the horse is the strategy that a therapist uses to improve a patient's neuromotor function. ... Often, the primary focus of a PT treatment is the patient's postural and motor responses. Positive effects from the movement of the horse can be seen in motor coordination, muscle tone, postural alignment, stiffness/flexibility and strength. Other effects on body systems can and do occur as well. Changes are often seen in the respiratory, cognitive, sensory processing, balance, affective, arousal and speech/language production functions. These changes may be a consequence of the postural and motor changes. For instance, the patient's respiration and speech will improve as a result of improvements in trunk alignment and motor coordination. Many times, however, the system changes are a direct result of the horse's movement. The focus of PT may not be to achieve changes in speech production, but it can often occur. That is the beauty of using the horse's movement as a treatment strategy and also why the varied disciplines of PT, OT and Speech can use hippotherapy so successfully as a part of their treatment programs.

The therapist will use activities on the horse that are meaningful to the patient and will specifically address the particular functional goals of that patient. Goals are function oriented, and would not include specific skills associated with being on a horse, such as riding. The movement of the horse provides a foundation of improved neuromotor function and sensory processing that can be generalized to a wide variety of activities outside the treatment setting. In other words, the patient's adaptive responses to the horse's movement ultimately bring about improvements in function. Because the environment is a natural one, often the challenges associated with being in a non-clinical setting add additional opportunities to make the hippotherapy portion of treatment beneficial for the patient's community integration.

Joann Benjamin, PT, HPCS

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Exploring the Story

After watching the film and exploring some of the facts in this guide, use the following section to further explore Rupert and Kristin's journey to heal their son Rowan.

Discussion Questions

- Did *The Horse Boy* change your perspective about what autism is and how it impacts people? In what way?
- In the film, Dr. Simon Baron Cohen makes a point to say that we don't want to live without autism, but that we need to accept it and learn to live with it to a certain extent. Dr. Temple Grandin, an autist, who was also interviewed in the film, says that she would not have wanted to live without her autism because of the focus it has brought to her life and career. What are some other conditions that people live with that, like autism, have benefits that some people might overlook?
- Rupert and Kristin had questions about whether this journey was the right one for their family, but even with their lingering questions they still embraced the experience. Do you think their openness to this alternative treatment was part of the reason for its success? How do you believe one's perspective on a certain situation might impact its outcome?
- Did the film shed light on a different culture and a different way of healing for you? What did you learn about a new culture? Did this make you consider the rich cultures of the world and what each has to offer? How?
- Rupert and Kristin explore many potential therapies for Rowan after his diagnosis and the therapy they find that works for them is a route that few others have taken. In addition to this alternative form of healing, they have worked more conventional therapies into Rowan's healing. When faced with so many options to treat a sick child, how can one make the right choice? What is your philosophy in parenting and decision-making? How difficult is it to take leaps of faith and to trust your gut instinct?
- Have you ever struggled with something that impacted your family in a way similar to how Rowan's diagnosis impacted his parents? How did you deal with it and what was the outcome?

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Family and Parenting

Rupert Isaacson and Kristin Neff readjusted their entire life after their son Rowan was diagnosed with autism. Autism, like any illness, impacts the entire family and not just the person who suffers from it.

Use the following section to explore the dynamics of different families and the way one family dealt with changing circumstances and family roles.

Discussion Questions:

- All children change their parent's lives, but children with a special need or illness can sometimes impact a family in an even more noticeable way.

If you are a parent, think about and discuss the way having a child changed your life -- from everyday routine to largescale decisions.

If you are a child, consider the impact you have had on your parents' lives. If you can't think of examples, take this chance to talk with your parents and learn more about their lives, then and now.

- Isaacson struggles with finding the right treatment for Rowan's condition. At one point in the film he says, "I couldn't help wondering, did I really have his best interests at heart here? Was I being a terrible father? I didn't know."

As a parent, how do you feel confident in the decisions you make for your children? What decisions do you struggle with most? Why?

As a child, can you identify with some of the struggles that your parents have made or need to make for you? How might the decisions your parents make be different from the decisions you make each day?

- *The Horse Boy* is a testament to the devotion Rowan's parents have for him. Isaacson says in the film "I'm a better father because his autism forced me to listen to what interested him above all else." Have you ever encountered a situation, whether it be with family or with friends, that has forced you to be a better person. How?
- Think of the connection you have with different people in your family. Consider what Rupert and Kristin were dealing with when Rowan was diagnosed. They were dealing with a child they could not connect with and whose thoughts and emotions they were virtually shut out of. How would you deal with a situation such as this?

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Get Involved

Rupert and Kristin traveled with their son Rowan on an amazing journey, but not everyone has the same ability to be so flexible. However, there are many opportunities that exist across the nation to use Hippotherapy as a treatment for autism and multiple other illnesses or conditions.

Through The Horse Boy Foundation, Isaacson and Neff run a small learning and equestrian center --The New Trails Center -- in Elgin, Texas. They do not charge for their services and ask people only to pay what they can.

“We bring special needs (mainly kids on the autism spectrum) children and ‘neuro-typical’ (ie ‘normal’) children together, using the horse as a social nexus. We have no specific program – each child is catered to according to their own needs. Our horses are highly adaptable. We believe strongly that special needs kids, and kids on the autism spectrum, can go way beyond mere equine therapy. We believe they can truly ride, and should have the opportunity to do so. Our mission is to bring horses and the children that need them together. Pure and simple.”

Learn More: www.HorseBoyFoundation.org

In addition to The New Trails Center, The Horse Boy Foundation supports the Help Center of Austin and The Totem Peoples Project.

HELP (Handicapped Equestrian Learning Program) Center of Austin:
www.helpcenterofaustin.org

The Totem Peoples Project is a special project of Cultural Survival, dedicated to the rights, voices and visions of native peoples worldwide: totempeople.hypermart.net

For additional resources to help you learn more about autism as well as equestrian therapy programs, and how you can become involved, visit:

Autism Society of America: www.autism-society.org

National Autism Association: www.nationalautismassociation.org

Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA): eagala.org

North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA):
www.narha.org

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Moving Moments

The Horse Boy has been honored as a Heartland Truly Moving Picture Award-winning film. This award was created to honor films released theatrically that align with Heartland's mission to recognize and honor films and filmmakers whose work explores the human journey by artistically expressing hope and respect for the positive values of life.

These award-winning films are made up of moving and inspiring moments – those moments that cause you to think, see something in your life differently, and be inspired to take action. They are what make the film and its message remain with you well after you've left the theater.

Think about *The Horse Boy*. What were the moments that stood out to you? How did they make you feel? How will they cause you to think about things differently in the future? Share these moments with others at www.TrulyMovingPictures.org. Simply create a membership or login, if you already have one, and then search the movie list for *The Horse Boy*. You can leave your review of the movie or thoughts about this film in the "Thoughts and Reviews" section.



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