



riding with the HORSE BOY

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When his son Rowan was diagnosed with autism, Rupert together with his wife Kristin looked for ways to help him - including riding across Mongolia in search of a traditional shaman to heal him

This is their remarkable true story

Photos Justin Jin

I'm sitting across the breakfast table from my son Rowan, seven years old.

"I am Iron Man!" he sings, imitating the Black Sabbath song he heard me listening to this morning (part of what my mother would call my Peter Pan refusal-to-grow-up complex, oi veh).

A red cardinal bird flits past the window. From behind the fence outside, my young horse, just beginning his training, snorts, wanting to catch my attention so I'll come out and grain him. The pygmy goats echo in demanding chorus.

"Better go feed them, Daddy," says Rowan. Then adds: "In the Narnia book the talking animals listen to their God."

I look up, shocked - still taken by surprise by this new, lucid, speech of his. Just 18 months ago I wondered if this kind of conversation would ever be possible. A few months before that, I didn't know if he'd ever be toilet trained, if he'd ever make friends, if he'd ever be free of the terrible, firestorm distress tantrums that used to wrack his brain and body as his over-stimulated nervous system misfired, like bombs going off inside his body.

"The horse and goats are hungry, Daddy," he says. "Let's go feed them." Sighing - half annoyed, half glad - I put my coffee down, get up, and go face the new morning, the animals upping the decibel level as Rowan and I step out onto the sunlit porch.

When my son was diagnosed with autism back in 2004, I never suspected that this thing, this horror which seemed to have descended on our family from nowhere, would lead me here, to this desk, writing a story that transformed my own and my family's life completely and utterly for the better. At the time all I could feel was grief, shame - this weird, irrational shame like I'd somehow cursed this child by giving him my faulty genetics. Watching, horrified, as he seemed to float away from me, as if separated by thick glass, or the see-through barrier of dream.

We tried everything - behavioural therapies, chelation therapy (trying to flush toxins like



Above: Rowan in the full flood of an autistic tantrum

Left: Rupert, Rowan and Kristin ride across the Mongolian steppes

But then something extraordinary happened: the old boss mare - Betsy - came and pushed the other four horses away, then bent her head to sniff at this little two-and-a-half year-old boy, lying on his back, babbling and kicking his legs - totally exposed to her hooves.

She sniffed once, twice, then bent her head further and did something I have never seen a horse spontaneously do to a human being before; she made the equine sign of submission - putting her head as low as she could and licking and chewing with her mouth, which is how a horse says to another horse, "You are the leader and I'm comfortable with that." The equine equivalent of a dog showing its belly.

I'm an ex-professional horse trainer - so I myself have made a horse give me that submission by chasing it around and around a pen until it drops its head and licks and chews - what some people call 'horse whispering'. I had never seen a horse do it spontaneously to a human being before, much less an autistic toddler. But there it was, happening right before my eyes. In all my years as a horse trainer, I'd never seen anything like it.

And then I cried, because I thought - 'Oh, he's got it; he's got the horse gene. But I'll never share it with him, never ride with him, because of his autism'.

It's stunning how wrong a parent can be. In fact, I was standing at the threshold of the greatest adventure of my life.

So I'm standing there, looking at this amazing, unfathomable communication passing between my son and this horse Betsy, and even then it takes a while for the penny

heavy metals from his body), Valtrex (yes, the herpes drug, which supposedly helps calm down a nervous system overwhelmed by post-vaccine overload). Nothing seemed to work - or at least nothing seemed to work in the radical and positive way - ok, the miraculous way - we were craving.

Then came the day that Rowan managed to get away from me while we were walking outside.

We are lucky enough to live in a little house in the country. I found early on that when Rowan was tantrumming badly (autism tantrums aren't like regular tantrums - they come because of pain and neurological assault, rendering the child inconsolable),

if I took him out into the forest, just being out in nature seemed to calm him down.

So there we were, him running ahead of me along the well-worn trail through the underbrush, me letting my thoughts drift away... when suddenly Rowan made an unexpected turn and - faster than I could close the gap - sprinted up the bank of a dry creek bed, over the little stretch of grass beyond, and was through the wire fence on to my neighbour's horse pasture before I could grab him.

Five horses were grazing there. He ran in among their hooves, threw himself down on his back, and lay there, babbling happily, while I froze, thinking he was going to be trampled.



Above: Rupert and Rowan ride on Betsy at their home in Texas

to drop. I assumed he was unsafe around horses - even after years spent as a horse trainer myself. It took me a little while before his repeated visits to the horse pasture resulted in my finally thinking - hmmm - maybe I should put him on.

We were standing there next to Betsy as she grazed, contentedly hanging out next to us, despite having ten green acres to roam on.

"Would you like to get up?" I asked Rowan. "Up!" he said - it was the first lucid, directed speech he'd ever given me. So I put him up. And immediately he began to talk.

At first, this new, astonishing language didnt translate away from Betsy. But after a couple of weeks or so, and by now I was actually riding with Rowan, he began bringing it home to the house. Asking for juice ("Want juice?") instead of just taking mine or my wife Kristin's hand and leading us to the fridge, then melting down

when we didn't immediately intuit what he wanted.

More than this, his tantrums - always close to his mood and ours, like a fist waiting to close at any moment around the heart - would end abruptly if I put him up on Betsy's broad, brown back. A calm would descend on him. He would stroke her soft coat.

One day, completely spontaneously, he said "I wuv you Betsy." He has never said it to either Kristin or I before. I didn't care. He had said it. Our time would surely come.

And indeed he had much cause to say it to Betsy. Unlike Kristin and I, who did sometimes lose our tempers and shout, Betsy never put a foot wrong. If he ran his little red wagon obsessively into her back legs while I was putting the saddle on, she didn't flinch, much less kick. If he yanked on her lip, ran under her and pulled her

mare's udders, in short did all the things absolutely guaranteed to completely piss a horse off, she didn't move. Her eyes half-closed, that same blissful, almost trance-like state descending upon her whenever Rowan was near, she seemed to have accepted the role as his guardian.

We spent hours and hours in the saddle together, playing singing games, word games, spelling games, as we rode across the broad Texas pasturelands, through the wild pecan groves, through the oak and cactus scrub, sometimes surprising deer, coyotes, or snakes - Betsy never shying. I had found my way into his world. At least a little.

That same year - 2004 - another amazing thing happened. I have this second career in human rights. My family is South African and Zimbabwean and very political. As a journalist it had been natural,

Right & below: Mongolian shamans perform a healing on Rowan



over the years, to gravitate down there for my stories. To cut a long story short, I had followed a story - which eventually became a book, 'The Healing Land' - about how I had found that my non-white family (my South African family is a real post colonial mish-mash) was related to the last group of San (Bushman) hunter-gatherers living in South Africa. And this clan, reduced to just 30 people, had been kicked out of a national park back in the 70s and suddenly, post Mandela, had got themselves a human rights lawyer, and were asking for their entire hunting grounds back after some 25 years of living by the side of the road as beggars.

The story led me inevitably into human rights advocacy. I became active in their struggle and saw them win their land claim against the odds. Then another, larger clan, up in the neighbouring country of Botswana, got kicked off their land to make way

for diamond mines (don't buy diamonds, people - way too much suffering involved even from those that come from African countries away from the classic war zones). I said "Uh, OK..." and next thing I knew I was having to escort a delegation of Bushmen across the USA, to speak at the United Nations and on Capitol Hill, to protest their cultural genocide.

Some of these Bushmen - from the Gana and Gwi clans of Botswana's Central Kalahari Game Reserve - were trained healers, or shamans if you like, in their own culture. Rowan came along for part of the trip. They offered, rather casually, to do some work on Rowan. Kristin and I said "Why not? Can't hurt him".

The results were extraordinary. For about five days Rowan began to lose some of his autism symptoms - began stopping his obsessive behaviours, using

complex language, showing his toys to people, pointing. When the Bushmen went back home at the end of the journey, he fell back into his autism again.

But I couldn't help but wonder: what if I was to take Rowan to a place that combined that kind of healing with horses? These, after all, were providing more radical and positive results than the more orthodox therapies we were trying. What if we were to do something crazy like that? Did such a place even exist?

I did some research. It did. Mongolia. The place where the horse as we know it - equus caballus - evolved. the place where humankind first got on a horse 6000 years ago. And the one

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Rowan, Tommo, a lion and a cow, ride together across the open steppes



place on the planet, I found out, where shamanism is actually the state religion, alongside Buddhism. The word shaman is actually a South Siberian-Mongolian word meaning 'he who knows.'

What if we were to take Rowan there, riding from shaman to shaman? What if we were to do that?

No way, said Kristin, when I put the idea to her. Not just no - *bleeping* no! We fought about it for two years. In the end, in the summer of 2007, we found

ourselves boarding a plane to Mongolia, setting out on the adventure of our lives.

So we get to Mongolia. I had to admit that the capital, Ulaanbaataar, wasn't exactly what I'd had in mind - a kind of depressed, post-Soviet slum stretching some twenty miles of broken concrete, smokestacks, and old apartment buildings, down a long narrow valley between high mountains.

But the following morning Tulga, our guide, had organised nine shamans to come heal Rowan at

the foot of a sacred mountain called the Bogd Khan. Some had travelled hundreds of miles to come do the healing. We drove out to meet them - the city stopping abruptly at the mountain wall, and wild nature taking over with no suburban, farming, or transitional zone.

And at first I thought I'd made a huge mistake. The shamans' drumming, whirling, chanting were all too much for Rowan at the beginning. As for Kristin and I - we got whipped with rawhide. Kristin was made to wash her vagina out



with vodka - I thought she was going to divorce me! Vodka and milk were spat in our faces. The day grew hot and humid. Had I grossly misjudged this whole thing? Was I going to have to pack the whole thing up and go home?

Then something shifted. Rowan became suddenly comfortable, happy. Started laughing, giggling, playing with the shamans, trying to grab their feathered headdresses, drum sticks, and round drums, even as they whirled and danced, deep in trance.

And right at the end of the ceremony, Rowan turned to this little Mongolian boy who had been standing with the rest of the crowd, watching, opened his arms and said, "Mongolian brother."

He'd never done anything like that before. The little boy was called Tommo - the six-year-old son of our guide, Tulga. Seeing the boys' interaction, Tulga decided to bring him along on the trip. Rowan - right there in the ceremony - had made his first-ever friend.

So... out into the vast interior we went. At first in 4x4 vans - Rowan laughing delightedly as we were tossed about, hour after hour, as if in a cement mixer, as the van lumbered over rough terrain. We switched to horses, and Rowan at first worried me hugely by rejecting the animals, not wanting to get on, then relenting, enjoying himself again, then rejecting them again as he went through the inevitable mood swings of the first few days.

It was stressful - imagine taking an incontinent kid, who soils his pants three times per day, to a place with no washing machines, and little surface water. But Rowan loved the open steppe, playing with his new friend out there in the great vastness.

There were hazards, alarms, falls from horses, wolves coming round at

night and causing the horses to break their lead ropes and flee, having to be tracked down next morning. Our cameraman, Michel, got sick (not Rowan, luckily - I was very anal about making sure all his water was ultra-violet cleansed before he drank it).

But eventually we found ourselves at the edge of Siberia - into whose mountains we had to climb on horseback in order to try and find a shaman of the reindeer people. A man called Ghoste. A man who, it was said, was the most effective healer in all Mongolia. So, up into the wilderness we climbed, fording rivers, crossing great meadows of white edelweiss and blue mountain lupins, entering and leaving the great stands of Siberian pine, until we crested the high pass, 12,000 feet up, that heralded the start of the summer pastures of the reindeer herders.

Finding a shaman isn't so easy, however. For example, the reindeer people (Dukha) are nomads, moving between fixed points of summer pasture and winter forage. So assuming you're going to find them just like that is, well, an assumption. And assuming you do find them, then you have to hope the shaman feels that he or she can help you. And agrees to.

We were lucky: the Dukha were about to move to another site, but we had hit them before they moved their tipis. If you ever wondered whether it was true that Amerindians moved across the Bering Strait from Siberia, then one quick look at the tipis of the Dukha and other cultures like them and, it all looks pretty familiar.

Ghoste, the shaman, asked us to visit him in his tipi that night. We were all exhausted from two 10-hour days in the saddle (it had

taken that long to make the ascent), but Rowan seemed to love being in Ghoste's tipi.

The shaman was perhaps 70 years old, and still fit and lean, with a face crossed by weather, experience, humour. He took dried herbs, and singed them on the stove that sat in the middle of the tipi. He then began to brush Rowan with them, as if feeling him out. As he did so, Kristin, who held Rowan in her arms, leaned over to me and whispered: "Can you feel it?"

"No" I answered. "What?"

"It's like pins and needles, really strong pins and needles."

I couldn't feel a thing, but then Kristin was the one holding Rowan. Could he feel it too? He did seem strangely calm.

That night, after dismissing us, Ghoste said he had to take a night to commune with the spirits to see what he could do for Rowan. Specifically, he needed to take a spirit journey to talk to Betsy's spirit. He said he felt she was still Rowan's principal protector and guide. OK, we said, not really knowing what else to say, and off we went to our tent to sleep. Rowan slept 14 hours that night - unheard of for him, usually so hyperactive.

The following day was peaceful - Rowan playing with the baby reindeer, riding reindeer, playing with Tomoo. We waited to hear from Ghoste what he thought could be done. Finally, at 9pm, with the sky still light, the latitude being so northern, we were ushered into his tipi once more.

The ceremony was so low key, so gentle, compared to the high

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drama of the ceremony outside Ulanbataar. Rowan loved being in the tipi, crawling around saying "I'm a baby elephant!" and again "There's an eagle, a hawk in the house!" when he looked up at Ghoste, as he stood in the half-light, drumming, the feathered headdress hiding his face as he sent prayers up to the Lords of the Mountain.

And then, quietly, without fuss, it was done. "Go sleep now," said Ghoste, doffing his shaman's coat and sitting down to light a casual cigarette. "There's too much spirit activity here right now. Go back to your side of the river. Tomorrow, before you go, I'll come and say goodbye." Rowan burst into tears at having to leave Ghoste's tipi. Real tears of loss. Heartbreak even.

Next morning, Ghoste came as promised to say goodbye, and worked on Rowan a third time, running his fingers lightly over Rowan's spine and skull, up and

down, as if pulling some thing - or things - out.

Finally, when he was done, Ghoste said something that surprised even me, with all my years of having worked with Bushman healers in Southern Africa. He said that Rowan would get gradually less and less autistic till the age of nine. But he also said that the stuff that really drove us crazy, the incontinence, the tantrums - these would start to leave now, like today. I was guarding my heart. I didn't want to allow myself to be disappointed. But as we rode away and down the mountain, that indeed, just as Ghoste had said, was when everything began to change.

About 25 hours after coming down the mountain from Ghoste's camp, Rowan squatted down on a sandbank in the river Orghon, where we had stopped to swim and pitch tents, and did his first intentional poo. And cleaned himself. On camera. We couldn't believe it.

Three days later, when we reached the nearest town, Rowan, for the first time in his life, pooped in the potty. We drank the ger camp out of beer that night. And as we celebrated, Rowan joined the other kids in their evening games. One of them. No longer the odd kid out.

From then - for about the next three weeks - we had perhaps six tantrums of any note. Before Ghoste that would have been about half a day's worth.

By the time we got back to the US, they had gone completely. Rowan arrived home and immediately started making friends with the kids in the neighbourhood. He started riding Betsy by himself.

That year he had his first birthday party. All the kids in the neighbourhood came.

Now - 18 months or so on from our return - Rowan is doing a first grade curriculum, but reads and does math at 3rd-4th grade.

We have also started an equine therapy center near Austin, Texas, where we live - the Horse Boy Foundation. Every day we have between three to seven kids coming through, some are autistic, some are not, but just want to learn to ride. We make sure they mix, and spend good, long periods of time in nature, playing together.

Rowan did not come back from Mongolia cured, he is still autistic.

But he did get healed of the three terrible dysfunctions that so plagued him and so impaired his quality of life and ours: the incontinence, the tantrums and being cut off from his peers. All those are a memory.

Rowan's autism comes across now as more of a charming quirk. It's who he is. I'm starting to realise that you can be an incredibly effective, productive human being and also be autistic. It's another type of person, rather than necessarily a disorder *per se*.

Ghoste also told us that we should take Rowan for at least one good healing a year, every year until he's nine. What a brilliant excuse for a yearly family adventure.

Last year we took him down to the bushmen in southern Africa's Kalahari. This year, because of the book tour, we'll be in Australia, so I am looking for the right Aboriginal healers. The adventure continues.

One last thing - whenever I have tried to pin one of the healers down about how it all works, this shamanism thing, they all of them - whether Mongolian, bushman or from wherever - give me the same answer. "It's just love" they say. "Pure and simple. Only through training you can learn to direct it. That's what we do."

Rupert Isaacson is an author and journalist. He was born in London to Southern African parents and now lives in Austin, Texas with his American wife Kristin and their son Rowan.

He is the author of several books, including 'The Healing Land: The Bushmen and the Kalahari Desert' and 'The Horse Boy' (see the review in this issue of Sacred Hoop).

The Horse Boy Foundation runs a small learning and equestrian center - The New Trails Center - in Elgin, Texas, just outside of Austin. www.horseboyfoundation.org

There is also a film due for release about his healing trip to Mongolia. www.horseboymovie.com www.myspace.com/horseboymovie

All photos (except photo of Betsy p8 and Ghoste on p12): © Justin Jin

Justin is a former Reuters correspondent, for China, and now works as an independent photojournalist tackling such themes as authoritarianism in Russia, exploitation in China, and illegal immigration in Europe. His work appears in leading magazines and newspapers world wide, as well as in galleries and museums. He lives in Moscow. www.justinjin.com

Sacred Hoop wishes to thank Justin for his permission to use the photos in this article.