

## **SAVING THE WORLD WITH BEHAVIORAL COMUNITARIANISM: LOS HORCONES**

Richard W. Malott  
*Western Michigan University*

### **RV Travelin' Blues**

Me and my sister, Peggy Jo,  
Started out for Kokomo.  
But driving the Brute<sup>1</sup> is mighty quirky,  
And we ended up in Albuquerque.

### **RV Blues**

The Brute went fast  
And the Brute went slow  
Oh, my god,  
We're in Mexico.  
Hermosillo, that is.

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### **Clueless in Hermosillo**

Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico, four hours south of the border. Population 600,000. And they're all Mexican. And not one of them Mexicans has the decency to speak English.

Six p.m. and dark's coming fast. Strangers in a strange land. An RV park's supposed to be around here somewhere. But so's Los Horcones.

Peggy's concerned. What is Los Horcones?

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<sup>1</sup> My little, 93-year-old aunt said my humble, 28-foot motor home was quite a brute, hence the name, though it is dwarfed by the standard 40 footers the Brute often hangs out with.

It's a behavioristic commune a handful of 20-year-old Mexican hippies started 5 or 6 years ago, somewhere out there in the dessert.

Peggy's even more concerned. Do you know them?

Well, sort of; they're familiar strangers from our Association for Behavior Analysis conferences. (About 80% of the ABA members are familiar strangers; every year, you say hi, as you're passing in the lobby, and you promise to hear each other's presentations, and you never do.) And, yes, they said they'd love for us to visit; and, no, they don't know exactly when we're coming.

Now Peggy's ready to go back to Tucson, but I'm driving.

And from their WWW site, I've gotten detailed directions on how to get to Los Horcones. But, though the Brute is only 28 feet long, I can't find them.

The Pemex gasoline-station phone directory has the number and address of one of the members. I call and get an answering machine. The gasoline attendant explains that the address is just a few blocks away. Well, that's not right because Los Horcones is out in the middle of the dessert. Los Horcones? *Sí*. The place where they teach the little children? Yes. Oh, *sí*, it's out highway 16. You mean, some illiterate Mexican gas-pump jockey in this huge city has heard of this funky, little hippie commune? No way.

We can't trust him. There's a Green Angel, a Mexican government employee whose job it is to drive a green and white pickup truck around the countryside, rescuing stranded gringos. Really. Los Horcones, *sí*, it's out highway 16 about 60 kilometers (36 miles).

At the taco stand near the start of highway 16. Los Horcones, *sí*, straight ahead.

At the pool hall, in Colorado, 15 kilometers out on 16. Los Horcones, *sí*, straight ahead.

I don't think you'd hit four for four, if you asked the average Kalamazooian on the street where the WMU Psych. Department is.

All guide books stress traveler's #1 rule: Never drive at night on Mexican highways. Potholes, rocks, stray cattle, people on bicycles, and a *bandito* lurking behind every cactus.

At last, there's the sign: Los Horcones. Whew. We open the gate, drive a half-mile back a dirt road, open another gate, and lights ahead. Civilization. Safety.

## **The People**

We homed in on the light, which was coming from the community dining room where 20 people were enjoying a snack of crackers and cheese that 16-year-

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old Carolina had brought back from France. They all jumped up and greeted us, with handshakes, cheek kisses, and hugs. (Los Horcones is so full of warm fuzzies that it's almost hazardous to walk through a group of Horconites, because of all the hugs and shoulder pats. This can be disconcerting if you're from Converse, Indiana, where husband and wife won't even kiss each other on the cheek unless it's in the privacy of their own bedroom and the lights are off. But having spent my formative years around Don Whaley, I've developed a fondness for warm fuzzies, so I had no problem. My sister could fend for herself.)

It turns out that the handful of 20-year-old hippies are two, middle-age, middle-class married couples; and Los Horcones has celebrated its 26th anniversary. (Well, it seemed like it was only 5 or 6 years ago when we first passed each other in an ABA lobby.) Now, I don't know anyone of my generation or younger who has managed to stay married for 26 years, at least not to the same person, and especially no behavior analysts. Furthermore, communes are hell on marriage. So the longevity of the two marriages was impressive. But what really impressed me was that their commune had survived for 26 years; those things go out of business faster than mom and pop video-tape-rentals stores. Twenty-six years makes Los Horcones one of the oldest intentional communities in the Western hemisphere (really).<sup>2</sup>

### The Gapless Generations

Although the four founders are no longer in their 20's, many of the members of Los Horcones are. I asked one of them how long he'd lived in the commune, and he looked at me with a puzzled expression, like didn't I understand? Then he said, "All my life." All my life! Like we've got someone who's been reared all his life in a completely behavior-analytic environment. "There are seven of us; four of Mireya and Juan's children and three of Linda and Ramon's children." A whole first generation reared with behavior analysis. "There's also a second generation; my sister's two children."

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<sup>2</sup> Since these original observations, I've talked with my old buddy, hippy communitard Peter Rabbit. He agreed that most communes have a half-life of about 5 minutes but also pointed out that several communes from the '60s are still doing well. For example: Libre, which he founded, had its 30th anniversary party with several thousand celebrants. Babba Ram Dass's Lama Foundation is alive though now struggling to recover from the forest fire that destroyed 15 of its 20 buildings. Several different communes all called The Farm are still doing well, including the Tennessee farm founded by Steve Gaskin, the current presidential candidate on the marijuana ticket and also the Hog Farm associated with Wavy, the crowd-flow directing clown at the original Woodstock. And I visited Synergia Ranch, the creative source behind Biosphere II; the ranch continues to thrive and grow in a quasi-communal manner.

Now it's been my observation that behavior analysts aren't any better at rearing their own kids than they are at keeping their spouses happy and keeping themselves happy with their spouses. (It's not that we don't know how to do it, especially the child-rearing part. It's just that preachin' ain't practicin'. It's just that raising our children ain't our job; telling other people how to is our job. And giving them demonstrations, and feedback, and gold stars, and so forth. But when we come home, our job's done. And, besides, we can always implement that household token economy tomorrow. Right now, we're tired, we've got a headache, and the NFL playoffs are on the tube; give us a beer and shut those kids up.)

However, rearing the first generation of behavior-analytic children was the job of Los Horcones. The first generation was the great demonstration project. It was a 24 x 7 job.

How many of you are still living at Los Horcones? "We all are." But don't you want to get away? "Not permanently. We travel. But Los Horcones is our home." Travel? "Yes, Mexico, the United States, Europe. For example, last year Carolina wanted to go France, so we sent her over, and she lived with a family there and went to high school for a semester. That was her first experience with a traditional family and traditional classroom education. She liked it, but she prefers Los Horcones."

## **Education**

Didn't you guys go to school? "No, we think we learn more and better here at Los Horcones."

No high-school diploma? "Oh, yes, we take the exams and get the diplomas."

No university? "We often go up to the University of Tucson and sit in on their classes, but not for credit. We have a house in Tucson."

One wall of the work manager's office is covered with weekly hour-by-hour schedules for each Los Horcones member. And those schedules include not only work, but also study and writing. For the kids, this includes studying Spanish, English, math, behavior analysis, etc. And yes, everyone speaks excellent English, much better than my Spanish.

And when I'm talking to 16-year-old Carolina, she doesn't ask, "What's your sign?" (Barf, gag.) She asks, "Who's your favorite philosopher?" And I promptly reply, "Ah, ah, . . . who's yours?" "I've been reading Kierkegaard lately and I like him. I really like to read philosophy, but I don't think I always understand it; so then I ask one of my brothers to explain it." (By the way, Carolina may be the

only 16-year-old girl, on either side of the boarder, who will reliably get up for a 5:00 A.M. 10K sunrise run every morning, well, almost every morning.)

### **Searching the Pudding for the Proof**

So what about these brothers? These guys who've spent all their lives in the Los Horcones educational system. After dinner, I sit around the dinner table, with them, some of the other young people, and the village elders. I use opening gambit #23 just getting the lay of the land. "For example, most behavior analysts couldn't even tell you how to extinguish an escape response, you know, Rudolph the rat's lever-pressing that turns off the shock in the Skinner box." And Juan Jr. immediately says, you mean, like you leave the shock on even when Rudolph presses the lever." Bingo. The guy's really bright. And having one out of four boys turn out bright is better than average.

A major premise running through Los Horcones is this Skinner-Sidmanian, flower-child nonsense that we should build a world free of aversive control and its radioactive fallout. It's almost a behavior-analytic religious credo. So whenever the village elders aren't looking, I take it as my moral responsibility to corrupt their youth, to point to the dark, aversive-control underbelly that supports their sweetly innocent practice of what they, so often, erroneously call positive reinforcement, for example, to point to the necessity of deadlines, both natural and man-made. To argue that the existence of a deadline sets the stage for paradise lost. To argue that the existence of a deadline means our behavior is under the control of avoidance contingencies, avoidance of the loss of the opportunity to get a smile, or a "Well done," if not avoidance of a sharp tongue that stings more than the overseer's whip. To argue that these aversive deadlines loom over all of our productive behavior.

And all four of these brave brothers defend the indefensible with courage, well-honed logic, and fluent mastery of the behavioral basics. But all four brave brothers are so intellectually and behavior-analytically skilled, and more impressively, so intellectually honest, that they eventually acknowledge the necessity of aversive control in the smooth flow of life at Los Horcones. It's rare that I see even a Ph.D. college professor who can so objectively evaluate challenges to his or her own credos. But when I do see anyone whose analyses are so controlled by logical integrity, be it student, professor, or Horconite, so logically controlled that they are willing to abandon life-long assumptions; then I'm impressed. So it turns out that Los Horcones scored four out of four, not one out of four as I had originally assessed.

## **Left Unwritten**

This is the first chapter in a monograph that, knowing me, will probably only have one chapter, though I have hardly begun to make a dent in the list of important Los Horcones topics I want to cover. But the children of Los Horcones are the pudding of proof. However, I've only written about the children as intellectuals, not as athletes, artists, world travelers, hard-workers, communitarians, entrepreneurs, expert professional behavior modifiers, and sociable, charming young people, the fruit of the past, the seeds of the future.

I haven't written about the 20 beautiful, stucco buildings, painted in earth colors, and covered with artful artifacts of Mexico. Nor the 240-acre ranch with 20-foot cactuses. The wonderful, nutritious meals that have caused me to gain 5 pounds in 8 days (as a gluttonous degenerate, with no satiation mechanism, this is my only problem with Los Horcones). Nor the two ostriches running outside the window of el Bruto as I write this, nor the peacocks, parrots, parakeets, and more traditional farm animals.

I haven't written about the four founding members. About turnover, about problems, about the many positive and financially profitable interactions with the Hermosillo community, about plans to start a Los Horcones Dos in Spain. And most importantly, I haven't written about their world-class, behavior-analytic autism program, one of the oldest such programs in the world, nor about the great wisdom and the great behavioral procedures that have arisen as a result of running this program for 25+ years.

Had the reinforcers of gonzo journalism not gotten control of my keyboard, I might have made a slightly larger dent in the list of topics. But if you want to be sure to find out more grab me at ABA or WMU and I'll bend your ear interminably. Better yet, check out their web page at <http://www.LosHorcones.org.mx>, and go to Los Horcones to pay them a face to face visit (if they can accommodate 40 grade-school kids and 20 college kids over night, without a mishap, they can certainly take care of you for a week, or a month, or a summer, or a sabbatical).

Hasta la vista, amigos.