

Both Ends of the Leash

Lessons from Sheepdogs

The source of a lifetime of learning

Patricia B. McConnell

As I write this, I have just come back from a day at the 2011 World Herding Dog Trials in northern England. I was in the UK once many years ago, watching the International Sheepdog Trials. I was just getting started with sheepdogs and had not yet begun to work as a behaviorist. Over the years, I've learned a lot, and I hope to learn a lot more in the future. But the lessons I've been taught by herding dogs are as timeless as they are valuable, and are a fitting subject for my last regular column for The Bark.

Rewind the video to 1981, and imagine a dog and a sheep, nose to nose. Kate, a tiny, all-black Border Collie, and Number 437, a fluffy, white Cheviot sheep, are having a discussion about where the ewe should go next. This is where it all started for me: watching a Border Collie face-off with a sheep who had no intention of backing up.

Still in school, searching for a topic for a senior honors thesis at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I tumbled into the world of shepherding much like Alice fell down the rabbit hole. Dr. Jeffrey Baylis, the professor who later became my dissertation advisor, suggested that I investigate a "natural form" of communication between humans and other animals rather than communication with dolphins as I had initially suggested.

Days later, I stood in a field a few miles north of Madison and watched Kate streak away from trainer/handler Jack Knox toward a flock of sheep on a far hill. As is so often true for each of us, I didn't know that this one brief moment would change my life. All I was aware of at the time was the way my heart swelled as I watched the little dog run in a wide, sweeping circle up an emerald-green hill, stopping behind a cloud of woolly white sheep. I thought I'd



never seen anything so beautiful in my life. Thirty years later, I haven't changed my mind.

It was sheepdogs who got me started in dog training and behavior, and sheepdogs who continue to inspire and instruct me. Herding may be a relatively rare activity--it's hard to raise a flock of sheep in downtown Chicago--but its lessons are relevant to anyone who loves dogs. I offer them here in the hope that, in some way, they will mean as much to you as they have to me.

First, and perhaps too obvious to mention, dogs need clarity. Since we don't share a common language, that's not always easy. Heaven knows, it's hard enough for two humans to communicate clearly, much less individuals of different species. Here's an example from the world of sheepdogs of the challenges we face. Years ago, I had nothing but trouble when I was learning to work with a dog to split off (or "shed") some sheep from the main group. It's hard enough to develop the finesse required to separate a couple of sheep from the flock, but you also have to let your dog know which group he is required to move away. Time after time, I'd "tell" Luke to drive away one group and like clockwork, he would focus on the other. I'd be left standing open-mouthed, thinking *No, no! Not THAT one, the other one!* How could he get it wrong? I'd use a crystal-clear sweeping arm movement, look directly at the group I wanted him to move and say "That one." And Luke would make a 180-degree turn and drive away the other group.

It took someone who knew dogs far better than I to sort it out. "Where are your feet pointing?" he asked, after watching me unsuccessfully attempt to shed off

some sheep at a clinic. "My feet? Do I have feet? I'm too busy with my eyes, my head and my arm to think about my feet." Agility handlers around the world are smiling here, having learned, as I finally did, that dogs will most reliably go in the direction your feet are pointing, not where your arm or face directs. Sure enough, although I'd been pointing and looking toward the chosen group, my feet had been pointing the other way. To Luke, it was obvious which group I wanted; I can only imagine his frustration when he followed my instructions and then learned that, somehow, he hadn't done what I wanted in spite of my "clear communication."

Examples of inadvertent miscommunication between a person and a dog are endless. I have a litany of my own, which prevents any smugness I might be tempted to feel as I watch clients confuse their dogs. This issue of clarity of communication is surely the most basic and critical aspect of a good and respectful relationship. It is not a simple one, involving as it does as many aspects of behavior -- from understanding canine ethology, being able to "read" dogs, knowing how to use operant and classical conditioning and teaching dogs how to behave in an alien society.

The second lesson is best illustrated by yet another mistake I made, albeit a more amusing one. At least, it's amusing now--not so much then. Picture a blue-sky autumn day and a festival of all things Scottish outside of Milwaukee. My friend, Nancy Rafetto, and I had been asked to do a herding/retrieving demonstration for the Milwaukee Highland Games. It was great fun for everyone: people enjoyed watching the dogs and Nancy and I got to teach under-the-radar science by illustrating the genetic predispositions of different breeds. Her Gold Retriever returned any objects that she threw but play-bowed to the sheep, while my Border Collie, ignoring the balls, collected the sheep and returned them to me. First, we'd work each dog separately; then we'd throw a ball into the middle of the flock, send out both dogs simultaneously, and watch the retriever barrel through the sheep to retrieve the object and the herding dog gather the flock together again. At least, that was the plan. We'd done it before in a variety of environments and it was always a crowd-pleaser.

However, this time, I violated a basic rule of working with animals: be prepared. I had forgotten my whistle, which allows us to communicate with dogs when they are a good distance away and is far better than using vocal commands in a noisy environment. I remembered my whistle on our way to the festival, but thought, *Oh, it'll be fine*. Famous last words in behavior and training, hey? It probably would have been fine, since Luke was well trained to verbal signals, but just before I sent him to gather the flock, a marching band struck up right behind us. I couldn't hear myself think, much less communicate with Luke. The sheep were about 100 yards away, and I paused; they were enclosed by a tall, dense hedge, and I thought they would stay on the field until the band took a breath and Luke could hear my signals.

To my abject horror and the obvious amusement of the crowd, the sheep melted into and through the hedge like cartoon animals moving through a solid wall into another dimension. Nancy was left to entertain the crowd while I ran across the field, pushed through the hedge with Luke and looked desperately for my sheep in what was now a suburban neighborhood complete with sidewalks; multicolored, one-story houses; and two-car garages. We finally found the sheep on the porch of a blue ranch-style house. We pursued them into and out of the garage (I swear I heard someone say "Marge, I think there are sheep in our driveway") and eventually drove them back through the hedge. The crowd had given up by then, and Nancy and I tucked our tails and drove home. We were not asked back the next year.

Not everyone has been as foolish as I, but it is universally true that one of the most important differences between professionals and the general public is the level of preparation. People experienced in the world of dogs think ahead: They think about where the new dog will sleep at night and are ready with X-pens or crates. They have treats by the door for dogs who are fearful of strangers. If they have a puppy, they have a toy in their pocket so they are always ready to divert the pup's attention from the slippers to something more appropriate. They close the door to the guest room to prevent accidents, and are ready to neutralize urine smells if they find a puddle. It becomes second nature to always have something available to reinforce good behavior and,

if possible, to prevent problems from happening in the first place.

The third lesson from sheepdogs comes from a friend, who was on the U.S. National Team for the 2011 World Sheepdog Trials. Peg Anderson had taken her two dogs, Silk and Spot, to England early enough to be able to practice for several days on the hills with local sheep. Although she lives on what I consider to be the perfect farm, with a large, open field ideal for competition practice, she and her dogs needed time to adjust to the new conditions of an unfamiliar country. For the first time in their lives, Peg's dogs were doing exactly what they had been bred for. Not just herding sheep any which way, but gathering a large flock of sheep scattered like polka dots on a green hill that rose up so high it hurt your neck to look at the top. The dog streams up and up like water in reverse, coalescing the sheep into a unified group at the top. Then the entire flock flows down the hill like a woolly white ribbon.

There's something about the scope of it all that takes your breath away, and apparently it had a profound effect on one of her dogs as well. Peg reported that Spot gained confidence and enthusiasm every day he was there. Like my Willie, Spot didn't like the pressure that Midwestern sheep and tight spaces often put on a dog, but the flighty sheep on the big, open hills of northern England brought out the best in him. He came home with more confidence than ever, and has retained it ever since.

The lesson here is not that we should feel guilty if we can't go to England to work our Border Collies, or arrange for our Chesapeake Bay Retrievers to break ice to retrieve ducks. It is, however, a cautionary note with two parts: One, dog breeds were created not for looks but for behavior, and we need to do a better job of matching a dog's needs with the environment in which he or she will ultimately live. Two, all dogs, no matter how pure or eclectic their breeding, are individuals. Spot blossomed on the big hills of northern England, but Peg's other dog, Silk, changed little. She may have enjoyed her time across the pond, but it didn't affect her like it did Spot. Two Border Collies, two individuals.

Understanding both aspects of canine behavior--breed-related predispositions and unique individual natures--should perhaps be common sense, but in my experience, common sense isn't actually very, well,

common. "No," I'd say to far too many clients, "please don't get a German Shorthaired Pointer for your elderly parents who live in downtown San Francisco," and "Yes, I know that Labradors are generally friendly, social dogs, but *your* Labrador is a bit shy and sound-sensitive and will not enjoy flyball, no matter how hard you try."

The final lesson is perhaps the most important of all.

Sometimes a sheep will face off with a dog: head to head, eye to eye, just inches between them. She will put her head down so far that her nose is almost touching the dog's muzzle, and then feint forward. Insecure dogs panic and charge, causing the sheep to scatter like deer or, worse, to fight the dog in a nasty contest between sharp teeth and an anvil-like skull. In sheepherding circles, we call that a "wreck," because rarely does any good come of it. But the best dogs, the great dogs, stand motionless, never flicking an ear or withdrawing an inch. It may take one second or it may take 20, but eventually, the ewe will sense the dog's commitment, and turn her nose, twitch her ears and back away.

These dogs are models for those of us enmeshed in the controversies surrounding how best to raise and train our four-legged best friends. Those who believe that dogs deserve to be treated with respect and understanding need to stand firm, quiet and confident in our commitment. If I were queen and could change one thing right now in the dog world, it would be to give people the confidence they need to be open-minded and not over-reactive to challenges, while standing strong for what they believe is right.

Like great sheepdogs, those of us who believe in knowledge and respect need to be calm but confident, patient but resolute. One by one, day by day, the naysayers of the training world will turn their heads and find their way into the fold.

With gratitude and thanks to the editors and readers of Bark magazine, I say, "That'll do, friends, that'll do."

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