

On Learning to Understand Sheep

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It is indeed a great honor to speak to you today and I offer many congratulations to you for the scholarly achievements that have led to your induction into Phi Beta Kappa. I also want to congratulate and thank your family and friends for the varied yet critical roles they have played in helping you get here.

25 years ago, I sat in a ceremony much like this one in which the motto of the society into which you are being inducted was also the focus of a talk.

A love of learning as a guide to life.

Like you, I also heard about the illustrious history of Phi Beta Kappa and who the luminaries and eminent Phi Beta Kappans are.

Our speaker that day was a diplomat in the foreign service.

She talked to us about the great cities she'd visited, the languages she'd mastered and the diplomatic tensions she'd seen resolved. It was couched very much in terms of the frenzy of a changing world, a world globalizing and shifting in its complexities in ways that were hard to grasp even as they unfolded before her, and our, eyes. It was exciting and invigorating and showed in the most transparent ways possible how the drive to keep learning leads to some fascinating paths if we are open to taking them.

Rather than bring you the buzz of that still changing world, I'm going to talk today about something centuries old and fundamentally quiet; something not generally associated with the kind of learning and knowledge that we think of when we think of Phi Beta Kappa's motto.

I'm going to talk to you about sheep.

You might be wondering what about sheep could possibly be interesting enough to talk about for 2 minutes, much less 15. But, did you know that a group of ewes with lambs often designate a baby sitter ewe to hang out with the lambs while the others go to graze. And that it looks quite a lot like a lamb kindergarten? Or that sheep can recognize over 100 individual faces, ovine and human; remember them for years and form mental images of them in the absence of the individuals to whom they belong?

Did you know that sheep have social dramas that can rival those of any high school clique, that they react to bully sheep much like humans react to human bullies and that

they work these dramas out while they lay around chewing their cud? And did you know that sheep have few defenses with which to face the world save their instinct to flock, their sensitivity to pressure and their own cunning. Yes, their cunning. Because despite what you may have heard about sheep, they turn out to be surprisingly complex creatures.

Let me back up a little bit to give you some context for these remarks. After being inducted into PBK and going on to receive my PhD in linguistics, I became a professor. Like all professors, I spend much of my time sitting inside, reading, writing and trying to understand relatively obscure phenomena--in my case phenomena about human language.

I grew up in the middle class suburbs of the Dallas Fort Worth area, the daughter of a chemist and an artist. My experience of a pastoral life was limited to helping my grandparents in their garden during summer vacation. And I have to report that I was not a very good or willing gardener.

About 7 years ago, though, I landed on the most unlikely of paths. Upon adopting a young border collie and promising the woman who had fostered her out of a challenging situation to take the dog to sheep, I found myself in the world of competitive sheep herding. This is a world I knew only from the movie, *Babe* and my own romanticized ideas about shepherds on hills, watching as their sheep grazed, good dogs by their side. Little did I know the intellectual puzzles, the intensity and humility involved with mastery and the sheer poetry that was encapsulated in that hillside image I had.

As you may know, Border Collies are the world's premiere sheep dogs, having been bred for at least the last couple of centuries, about as long as Phi Beta Kappa's been around, to aid human shepherds with the management of flocks of sheep. They are fascinating dogs to work with and I know of little that is more breathtaking than watching a shepherd and her dog deftly move sheep around a field.

It is a dance; coordinated by whistles and defined by a willingness to defer to your partner's strengths that bespeaks great trust and commitment on the part of both human and dog.

For the first few years of my journey on this path, I understood sheep herding to be an activity I did with my dog; that it was, in fact, fundamentally about my dog. The sheep, as I understood them, were primarily a means to an end. An undifferentiated ovine mass that presented the challenges that my dog and I were charged with overcoming.

To be sure, I understood that the sheep were living beings who were to be treated with great care and that part of the obstacle they presented was in fact their very aliveness. What I didn't understand, though, was how inherently they govern the dance itself.

That, in fact, the dog and the shepherd are but supporting players in that dance and the sheep its undisputed principals.

Competitive shepherding is, at its most basic, about moving sheep from here to there.

As distinct species, humans, dogs and sheep come to the task of communicating about moving from here to there in fundamentally different ways. Humans, of course, have language, which is indeed a very useful tool of communication. As convenient as it would be to simply tell sheep where to go; however, language is, unfortunately, a completely ineffective tool for moving sheep.

Instead, the human communicates primarily to the dog partly through language and partly through other aspects of general presence while the dog in a sense translates the human's desires to the sheep. The sheep, in turn, communicate to the dog and the human what they think about the whole production.

The complexity emerges from the nature of this communicative triangle since each species is simultaneously translating what the other two are trying to convey.

The central drama, though, emerges because sheep have many ways of avoiding moving anywhere they don't wish to go. And they learn new ways on the fly, through trial and error.

Sheep determine how seriously they need to take a human/dog team and if they decide that the team is weak, little can be done to convince them to move where you want them to move, and they will balk, confident that they can beat you at every step.

So, the job of the shepherd and dog is to exert pressure in such a way that the sheep move to a designated place as if it were their idea all along.

The key to this pressure is the "bubble," which is the distance you need to be from the sheep to make them move but not kick in their flight response. Any individual group of sheep will have a different bubble and the bubble changes as the sheep move across a terrain.

Sheep are drawn to places they know and to places where there are other sheep and they will run to those places with great determination. They are much easier to move uphill than down. They know that they are safer in a copse of trees than they are in an open field. They like being with other sheep they know and like more than with those they don't. They seek comfortable places and become crabby in the heat. Young sheep need an older sheep to show them how to act. All of these factors affect the nature of the bubble.

These factors also mean that it is the sheep who determine the contours of the dance but it is the shepherd and dog team who have to make sure they follow the right steps, since the sheep can turn a waltz into a jitterbug and back again in what seems like the blink of an eye.

One of the greatest competitive shepherds in the world was once asked how he knew where to send his dog on a particularly difficult course in which the sheep were over 400 yards away and there were many tricky aspects of the terrain. He said that he'd watched how they were twitching their ears.

While this shepherd is phenomenal with his dogs; what truly distinguishes him is his ability to read the sheep, to know, seemingly before they do, exactly what the sheep will do and then to respond accordingly, often preemptively.

I once asked one of my own mentors, another great competitive shepherd, what distinguished the good shepherds from the great shepherds and he told me that it was control on the dog and the ability to read the sheep.

I am pretty good at many things. I'm a good teacher and a good scholar. I can bake a crusty loaf of bread and, despite my inauspicious beginnings as a gardener; I can raise a pretty tasty tomato. But, I am not a very good reader of sheep.

In fact, I would not be exaggerating to say that reading sheep is without question the hardest thing I've ever tried to do.

So often we are advised that it's important to work to enhance our strengths rather than trying to overcome our weaknesses and, while that is often good advice, trying to understand sheep has shown me that real learning, fundamental learning, can often only come via our weaknesses.

In particular, while I am not very good at reading sheep, trying to learn to do it has provided me with ways to quench my soul and bring a mesmerizing awareness of the world into my life.

I spend much of my free time standing out in open fields, sometimes in the driving snow, sometimes in the blazing sun, and being in Michigan, often in the pouring rain. Every time I'm there, I am intensely focused on the task I have not yet mastered but that I remain committed to trying to master.

For me, learning to understand sheep provides a calm challenge to the demands and noise of a busy world. It is about being connected to the natural world; about persevering and about maintaining an intensity of focus that silences all the jingles and jangles that otherwise vie for my attention.

Learning to understand sheep has brought me into contact with people I would have otherwise never had the chance to meet. And while that contact has had the clichéd effect of making me question the assumptions I had about people who read sheep; the most important part of that contact is that it has shown me, in a most unanticipated way, the power of culture and the transcendence of community.

At the end of the day at a sheep trial, shepherds generally gather together for a potluck, to joke with each other and tell stories of other trials, other sheep and other dogs. Seasoned shepherds explain to newcomers some of the finer points of reading sheep. In the background, sheep graze in the dim light of the setting sun, occasionally raising their heads at unfamiliar sounds in the coming night.

It is hard for me to articulate how profoundly the people I have met have affected me or how our shared love of dogs and a centuries' old craft has improved my life. But it is simple for me to explain that it has all been made possible by trying to learn to understand sheep.

Learning to understand sheep has led me to experiences I could have never dreamed of, to ideas that don't come from books or the Internet and to a deep and abiding appreciation for a skill and craft I do not, and may never, possess but that I call mine nonetheless.

I never pictured myself studying sheep in such an intense way, but life really does take you to unexpected places. And it's being open to how these unlikely, unfamiliar places can enrich both your soul and your mind that captures the spirit of Phi Beta Kappa.

So, as you take the next steps of your own paths, I hope very much for you that you find your own sheep to read and that you let your love of learning guide you along the way.