One Cardigan's Adventures in Herding, Part I

Brynnie and I started our adventure by attending a herding clinic. This was a two day event where each dog was herding instinct tested, and then had three actual lessons. The purpose of the herding instinct test is to see if the dog has sustained interest in stock, usually sheep, and desire to move them in a controlled manner. My pup is young, and I was concerned about complete chaos in that small pen with four sheep, as he is a young and enthusiastic Cardigan with a lot of prey drive. He was very interested, but he managed to contain himself and not embarrass me – even a little.

Some time ago I had gone to a herding instructor, whose breed was Border Collies, with the young Sophia, and remember nothing so much as uncontrolled chaos – Sophia circling round and round us at full speed behind four sheep in a huge, open field; sheep crashing into the fence, leaping into the air above my head (never would have thought a sheep could do that!), Sophia chasing them this way and that. It is really lucky that no sheep or my dog were injured. Instructions were yelled at us while we were both running full speed, with no preparation beforehand as to what was expected of us. I didn't know a thing about herding training at that time, but I knew this was not what we should be doing, so we suspended the lessons, and then got involved in other things for a while.

In the clinic, given by Kelly Malone, herding instructor extraordinaire (her breed is German Shepherd dogs) it was a totally different picture. Brynnie was allowed off the long line when he proved to be controlling himself, and then only because he was hesitant about working the sheep. He did show that he would circle around them instead of running at them head on. This is an essential piece of the herding puzzle, because the dog at some point must gather the stock to the handler, and the complete picture should be the handler walking calmly in front of the animals, with the dog behind making sure that they follow the handler by "wearing" back and forth to keep them in line as necessary. The other behavior that he showed was running to get a sheep that split off from the others with no prompting, and bringing her back to the rest of the flock.

What is the difference between these two instructors? Why was one able to help me to work my dog in a controlled fashion, whereas with the other it was complete chaos? Experience may be one reason, but perhaps it is because Kelly works a "loose eyed" breed and the other lady a "strong eyed" breed. Border Collies, Kelpies and perhaps a few others are "strong eyed" stock dogs. These dogs control the stock with their natural "eye" – staring at them to achieve a natural balance (where the sheep are not inclined to break and run, but stay in a group). They have been bred specifically for these behaviors, and are able to control very large groups of sheep, sometimes gathering them from beyond sight of the handler.

"Loose eyed", "upstanding" dogs include every other herding breed. So, the Cardigan is a "loose eyed" dog. The Cardigan was developed originally as a driving dog. The Welsh farms were small plots of land adjacent to public grazing land. So, it was very important to own a Corgi who could push the neighbor's cattle off the land upon which you wished

to graze your cattle. They also were reportedly used to drive cattle on the roads to market, and for general purpose farm work. Because Kelly understands that a "loose eyed" dog is not really designed to gather sheep from a long distance and do it practically from the first exposure to the stock in many cases (as could a Border Collie, for example), she knew that the sheep needed to be penned in a smaller enclosure in which the short legged Corgi would be able to keep up with and control them.

Our other lessons that weekend were all conducted on lead and mainly consisted of using the light rod to teach Brynnie that when we were moving up to the sheep, he must circle around them and stay out of the space directly in front of me. Kelly likes to tell me that I "own" that space, and the dog is not allowed in it. When he would give us that behavior, he was allowed to "walk up" to the sheep. When they would move too quickly, he was asked to stop, with the command "there". The rod is waved or tapped on the ground (if waving elicits no response), starting farther from the dog and moving toward him if he did not respond. If he still was not responding, an insistent tap, tap on a part of his body, such as an ear or his nose, is administered until he gets the idea and moves in the desired direction. Kelly refers to this as the "threshing machine". It sounds a bit mean, but it's really meant to annoy the dog, not hurt him, and he does have the choice to move away from the pressure before the rod actually touches his body.

We now have six additional lessons under our belts (in 3 different days). The size of the enclosure increased, but the exercise had basically been the same until our last lesson. We changed to a very small pen with three sheep and let Brynnie off lead. We used a broom instead of the light rod so he could see the cues better. The rod or broom is used to tell the dog in what direction we want him to move, and also to tell him when we want him to stop. Essentially, its position should tell the dog what space he may not occupy. At this point, the goal was to keep him from circling around in front of me and the sheep. He needs to learn that his position is on the other side of the sheep from me, whether for the purpose of gathering them to me, or moving them along. So, if he would circle in one direction too far, I would turn him by holding the broom out to that side, turning toward him to get him moving in the other direction. The sheep and I were also moving in the same direction, though the eventual goal is to move in a straight line, or wherever I wish them to go. Brynnie worked close in to his sheep, and when one wether (neutered male) decided he wasn't going to go, Brynnie let him have a piece of his mind and got him moving again. He put just enough pressure on the sheep to move him, and then let up. If Brynnie came out in front of me, I was to get him out of my space in any way possible, including running toward him to administer a correction.

I am making this sound easy, but what it actually felt like was: dog flying around the sheep, first in one direction then the other - me in the middle of a group of sheep trying their best to keep away from the dog. I am squished between three sheep trying to move, move, move, as Kelly was urging me to do. The only problem is; how to move when a sheep is pinning your foot to the ground, or tangling your legs in its legs, or squeezing you between them, etc? The possibility of falling and being trampled by three sheep is very real! And then trying to keep track of said dog and administer well timed and proper corrections with the broom was a bit challenging, to say the least. I didn't fall,

and I did manage to once or twice get us all moving as a coordinated group in a facsimile of herding!

It was all worth it when at the end of the lesson Kelly is grinning ear to ear, and says, “now THAT’S a stock dog”.

More adventures to come as we travel through this new world.

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