

## **BEING SHEPHERDS**

I was a shepherd once. My husband, Gary, and I (Susan Legault) were on a tour of Britain many years ago, and were spending 2 days on the Isle of Skye. For those of you who aren't familiar with the weather on the Isle of Skye, apparently it rains 360 days of the year, without fail, and can be a pretty miserable place. As luck would have it, we were there during 2 of the 5 non-rainy days the island experiences. My memory of that place is that it is as close to perfection as any place can be. The weather was wonderful, and the scenery spectacular. On our first evening there, we were walking on a hillside, overlooking the coastline, with incredible views everywhere we turned. The rolling hills were spotted with sheep, peacefully grazing.

As we walked, Gary and I could hear a lamb bleating, and as we looked to locate him or her, we finally spotted it and could see that it was a baby lamb, off alone – and away from the general direction of the other sheep. On observing the other sheep we noticed one, separating him or herself from the flock, and crying out, obviously searching for something. To us, it appeared that it was a mother searching for her baby – and since WE could see them both, we left our group of friends to try to reunite the lost lamb and its mother. Gary headed off towards the baby and I headed off towards the other. Somehow, between the 2 of us, we managed to herd them close enough to each other, that the mother finally spotted her baby, and ran towards the lamb. The 2 of them nuzzled for a few minutes and then slowly turned around to return to the flock.

The sense of joy Gary and I experienced as “shepherds” was very real. As time has gone on, this memory – of shepherding and reuniting 2 lost sheep – has remained as one of the strongest images of that trip.

Why was this experience so powerful? One of the many gifts of memory is that we are given the opportunity to meditate on events and to consider its meaning. I have returned to this scene in my mind many times over the years, and continue to experience a sense of fulfillment in this event. What made this so meaningful? Is it that in searching for – and finding – lost things – we also find pieces of ourselves? Are we, as human beings, truly and deeply driven to help and to care for, those around us? Is it

that we search for wholeness, and in helping to bring wholeness around us, we also bring some sense of wholeness for ourselves?

I have another memory – and I'm keeping to animals to be consistent with my theme of shepherds. Memory, as I have already mentioned, is a wonderful gift – it allows us to store something, and then to take out one of its many gems, re-examining it throughout the life journey. Often the memory becomes more powerful with time – allowing us to see what is important to us. And so let me examine one of MY gems of memory.

Some of you may remember the real-life drama of October 1988, when 3 California grey whales were sighted in the Arctic, trapped in the polar ice near Barrow Point – the northernmost part of Alaska, on the Arctic Ocean, with navigation only open for 2-3 months a year. With the media watching, hundreds of volunteers from all over the world worked feverishly to save the lives of these California Gray Whales. Two National Guard helicopters were dropping 5 ton concrete pillars repeatedly onto the ice in an effort to break it up. And in an era of US-Soviet conflict – AND in what must be a first, a Soviet icebreaker arrived. Flying both the U.S. and Soviet flags off her stern, the icebreaker helped in cutting a path out to open seas where the whales could escape.

This was truly an international effort, and it is amazing how much energy was expended, in brutal conditions, to rescue these whales. AND how much it captured the attention of the world – all for the sake of 3 whales, two of whom made it to safety. I love the image of an “icebreaker” – being both an actual ship AND a metaphor for starting dialogue.

There are, of course, 2 ways of looking at this event – one being that all this effort could have been spent more productively (however that is defined) – and the second way, which is more positive. I choose the second way. For me, it is a demonstration that humans have a great capacity to care for the world, and do so regularly, despite news stories to the contrary.

I looked out my car window the other day while driving on Eglinton Avenue, and saw a family of shepherds. A young couple, with 2 children in hand, stopped in their walk to

check on an elderly woman, who, while heading towards them, had stopped and was leaning against her walker.. From my vantage point, the family paused and spoke to her, apparently checking to make sure she was ok, and then resumed their walk.

There are many, many examples of “shepherding” that occur regularly, but the interesting thing about these memories for me, is that time has not diminished their impact, and in fact, has grown more powerful over the years. Events such as these show me the power and majesty of our capacity to care for ALL life and points to the wonder of what it really means to be human.

The image of the shepherd is, for me, a very strong one. It is rooted in a pastoral setting, but yet when I look at the world around me, I see shepherds everywhere. As human beings, we have a great capacity to be shepherds – to set aside our differences and to go out from where we live, leaving the comfort of the familiar, to search and to find.

It seems to me that our society is structured around shepherds. Think of firefighters, nurses, doctors, social workers, emergency workers, ministers, counsellors, teachers – and anyone who has rushed to the aid of a friend or colleague. This is a calling – a calling that compels us to look out for each other. Stories of leaving behind family and friends to come to the aid of others are all around us. When a call goes out for aid, there were so many people who drop everything to help.

The really interesting thing is that shepherding is so natural – people do it regularly and VERY often without even thinking about it. This is what gives me such hope. In amongst everything we can point to that is wrong with the world, and indeed wrong with ourselves, it is this very real, NATURAL desire to help, to care for, to heal, to mend, to find the lost and to bring them home which is part of who we are.

In our conscious – and unconscious – quest for wholeness, we find pieces of ourselves in the search. I believe we all have the capacity to be great shepherds. And I believe we will continue to be shepherds until all are found, and all are made whole.