Barbara David—Sheep is Life

In junior high school my English teacher told us the value of a metaphor lies in its unique ability to reveal truth that cannot be understood and fully appreciated otherwise. Because with metaphor we work to discover meaning, instead of hearing lessons directly, something registers in our consciousness that hits us and ripples out through our minds. But unlike the pebble in a pool, the impact of the metaphor is deep and permanent.

My husband and I belong to the category of ISBONA shepherds who are retired professionals with originally zero practical experience in farming and animal husbandry beyond backyard gardening and keeping a cat. Where does a road begin that leads from a corner lot in a small town to acreage on the edge of wilderness? In fourth grade, wanting to have soakers for my dollie led me to knitting. Once, in high school, to humor our paperboy who was in 4 H, I drove outside of town to see his brand new lamb, so small, so very white.

Much later, as a treat for our two little boys, my husband and I dragged off to the hot, loud, crowded State Fair. While the three of them rode dizzying heights, I wandered into the sheep barn and killed time trying to decide which breed had the sweetest face, the prettiest fur. The homeward conversation bounced between elephant ears and sheep and pirate ships rides and sheep and ferris wheels and sheep, a clear clue that something had happened.

Later that year one of the boys came home from school crashing through the back door with an armload of some white fluffy stuff and a shiny red apple pierced by a bright yellow pencil. He was blithering about Mrs. Somebody who had real live sheep at her place and who had brought wool and “spindles” to class and who had spun actual yarn right before their eyes and who had let each child try for himself and who had sent all the leftover stuff home with him because he was the one who had spun the most yarn and on and on and on.

He was about to turn ten and begged, begged, begged for a spinning wheel. So that November an Ashford Traveler entered our lives. I tracked down something called rovings by the bags full (dreaming of all the yarn he’d produce), and for a brief time there was a frenzy of spinning, and some yarn did emerge, and we wrapped it around something called a niddy noddy. But then model airplanes entered our lives, and the Traveler went idle and gathered dust, and the bags of rovings, finally full of winged beings, had to be pitched.

But the little bit of yarn I peeled off the niddy noddy changed my life. It was so lively, perky on the needles, and the finished fabric had a bounce to it so very new to me. However, no cajoling could drag my boy back to the treadle, so I began a literal years-long struggle to learn to spin the stuff myself. I listened to seasoned spinners wax rhapsodic about their lowered blood pressure as I flirted with hysteria after a zillion jabs through the orifice, chasing the illusive dream. Finally, a laid back lady I ran across said simply, “Dear, it’s just pinch, pull, release.” Eureka. The years rolled on.

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Then one weekend I happened on a small group of fiber people having a show at a nearby school. As I browsed among the bags of raw fleece enticingly arranged, the fatal moment came. I remember it was a huge bag of Lincoln Longwool. Unable to resist, I plunged my hand down among the soft locks, white, gray, browns, caramel and taffy colors, all tumbled together in one offering. And the most exciting sensation of all was the smell of it. It was
sunshine and green earth and all about animals raised in flocks and sometimes kept in barns. I was transported. That bag of fleece lasted forever. I scoured and carded, both badly, not satisfied with any which way I tried it. One night, totally frustrated that it would take at least a week before I could get back to spinning the ratty rolags I was producing because scouring and drying and carding lay ahead first, I just reached into the bag and plucked out a fist full of fleece. I spread it a bit and pointed it at the wheel. It spun itself in a lovely, tough yarn before my very eyes. A new excitement gripped me.

Now every moment with the wool was the cherished experience of sunshine and green earth and animals raised in flocks and sometimes kept in barns. And I spun away at yarn that had a new, raw, fierce essence to it, so closer to the bone. And so my first grandbaby had a sweater pulled over his head not only hand knitted and handspun, but with a new, palpable energy to it. And that very day I suddenly realized that next was raising the critter itself.

But still to come lay finding land, settling infrastructure, a house and fences and sheds and barns. And choosing a northern sheep for a northern climate but especially with a killer fleece that spins itself into tough, soft, rich-colored yarn. What better breed than Icelandics for a place the Vikings explored a hundred years before Columbus sailed? But all this long road had led not to the end of a journey, but truly only to a beginning.

My husband and I learned a new rhythm of the day attuned to animals. The cycle of the seasons now moved according to breeding and birth and growth. To the effort of learning everything we could about husbandry was added the exhaustion of realizing that with feedstuffs and mineral supplements and soil tests and fecal testing and haying and harvests and weather and pregnancies and guard dogs and lactations and trimmings and shearings and all things agricultural, mysteries abound. Ten thousand lifetimes cannot reveal them. But the most difficult moments came, of course, with the pain of predation and sickness, never to forget the favorite ewe lost, the most promising lamb gone, the newborn dying in your arms.

Every loss, Marty Favre once told me consolingly, teaches us something that prepares us and helps us next time to save a life. And inside that advice it seems to me resides another kind of knowing. That we are bound to the process, bound to keep trying; in spite of never being absolutely sure, we are bound always to reach closer to the bone. Because Sheep is Life. No matter the agony of our last loss, the miracle again presents itself, nose and toes, and gushes into the world, wet and breathing and up and nursing and vaulting with its twin across the springing green.

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Was it the Navajo who said Sheep is Life? Certainly, the land feeds the sheep, and they in turn feed the land which again feeds the sheep and so and so on. But in that circle of creation are included the people too, the shepherds who monitor the process, who tend the flock. The sheep feed them also. Body and soul. Because Sheep is Life.

How often it occurs to me lately that I might have missed it all; how grateful I am that I did not, and how dear is the deep and permanent impact on my heart.

Barbara David
Sundborn Farm
Herman, Michigan!
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