

Dexter's Dream

Once upon a time, after the Armageddon, there were only three people left on earth - and they were preparing to leave on the last spaceship out; they were getting away from it all by emigrating to another planet, just down the Way a bit.

There was a woman, a man, and an agricultural research scientist. The woman's name was Susan, the man was James, and the research scientist was called Dexter.

They had a situation rather like Noah on the ark - they decided to take some animals. Susan said she'd take a cat, which the others weren't too enthusiastic about, but she was going to take it anyway - so she did.

James had to admit to being a bit sentimental about it and said he'd take his faithful friend - his dog. It was a Kelpie/Labrador cross, probably, with a bit of dingo in it, but - it was his dog. [Admittedly, Noah took pairs of animals, but he didn't have today's reproductive technology.]

Dexter, with considerable foresight (as it turned out), decided to take a sheep. Susan had come from the big city (before the Armageddon - the big A) and she objected to this, but James had been a farmer, so he sided with the idea straight away, and what was more, he knew where to find one, which the research scientist didn't.

The first night out on their journey, James' dog killed Susan's cat and Dexter, heroically, killed the dog - strictly following the Humane Practices approved by the Animal Ethics Committee, of course. So they were just left with the sheep.

It was a long voyage and, as time passed, relations became a bit strained, between Susan and James particularly, and the main cause of this was the sheep. They had very different ideas about how to relate to the sheep.

Susan didn't actually look at the sheep very often - hardly ever, in fact (she was a city person after all), but she thought about it a lot. She'd lie in bed and think: I wonder if that poor sheep is alright; does it have a comfortable bed to curl up in; is its fluffy wool clean and dry; does anyone cut its toenails or trim the wool around its eyes if it can't see; and is it lonely?

Perhaps I should go down and give it a cuddle, she thought, that's what the Himalayan shepherds do, I believe, but . . . it remained a thought. In fact, though she did not understand sheep, she understood the importance of compassion better than anyone there.

For James, the sheep was a very different matter. Every day he'd go down and have a look at it. [The sheep was on the lower deck, by the way; humans on the upper deck, of course.] James would walk around the sheep, deep in thought, looking it over - and the sheep knew it was being looked at, but appeared to take no notice, except when James came around near the feeding computer which Dexter had installed, whereupon the sheep would always show the greatest interest.

James would look at the feeding computer and think: Does this thing really know how much the sheep needs to eat? If he touched the keyboard, it would say: syntax error or software failure,

which was not exactly reassuring. If he kicked the mechanism, however, several kilograms of feed would fall down a chute to the sheep waiting below. Although James by now felt a strong proprietary interest in the sheep, he was willing to cooperate with Dexter's computers and things, to a certain extent, anyway.

James just wanted to keep the sheep healthy, growing its wool and so on. Sometimes, he did trim its hooves and things like that, but not too affectionately, mind you - it wasn't a substitute for his unfortunate dog. He just didn't want to lose the sheep, because he understood its real worth - the value that it represented to them all - much better than the others, and if it wasn't there, he knew he couldn't go round to look at it each day. And that, for James, had become unthinkable.

For Dexter, life with the sheep was a flurry of activity. He thought of nothing else, so obsessed was he with the idea of what it meant to have the sheep there. [Remember, it was his idea in the first place, that's why he was so obsessed with it.] He measured all its internal functions and its external ones until he knew everything there was to know about each tiny part of the sheep. He became terribly confused by all this information, and when he tried to explain it to anyone, they became confused also. Dexter understood little about anything.

Susan grew to resent the way James did things to the sheep, treating it as his own property, controlling its life, and at times she thought he was cruel and unfeeling in the way he handled it. His attitude did not tally with her own feelings towards what she recognised in the sheep as helplessness. James ignored her at first, saying what has this sheep to do with her anyway, but he was forced to listen, eventually, and he became worried that she could, in fact, seriously interfere with his relationship with the sheep. Dexter had sympathy for Susan and wished that he could help her too, but the practicality of his association with the sheep meant that he knew he mainly had to help James.

What really brought matters to a head was the news they received shortly before reaching their destination - about the sheep. On this new planet there was an insect, apparently, which infested the skin of sheep's ears and caused terrible suffering to the sheep and, if untreated, would result in a hideous, painful death. James had heard of this problem before, from his father, and he was very concerned for the future of his sheep.

There was a way to combat this, however. You had to remove the skin from the sheep's ears, or, as James suggested (for simplicity) remove the sheep's ears altogether. Dexter was able to reassure him that, it was true, the ears didn't seem to be fulfilling any terribly important function so far as wool growth or meat quality was concerned.

Susan was livid. She so scolded and humiliated the two men that Dexter secretly carried out some experiments on the sheep to show that little bits could be cut off almost anywhere and it didn't seem to worry the sheep. All it was interested in was the feeding computer. Then Susan objected to the experiments, saying they were totally unnecessary, and, to keep the peace, they had to be stopped.

James was very worried about the whole situation. He really didn't relish the thought of the operation on the sheep - even when Dexter explained that it was actually called "bilateral head trimming", which didn't sound too bad. But his concern for the sheep's longer term future was so great he knew in his heart they would have to be a little cruel to be kind. Dexter had calculated that the sheep would survive the operation 99 times out of every 100 times it was

done - speaking hypothetically, of course. He also said that, once they had done the first ear, the second would probably be much easier, because they would be getting more used to it - perhaps.

However, the furious opposition which Susan heaped upon them was such that nothing whatsoever could be done. Dexter wished that there was a solution to the bitter dispute which had developed. Surely, he thought, all his knowledge about the sheep should provide an answer. But he felt only the weight of his confusion and he realised that his professional integrity had reached the point of collapse.

On the last night before they landed, Dexter had a dream. In this dream, he was walking in the hills with a wise shepherd, who said:

I speak to you because you are Knowledge, and therefore can listen when Love and Work may not. You can't solve your dilemma by looking at the sheep. Actually, the sheep can easily cope with any stress that you inflict upon it and its response will be consistent with the Way of Nature which you do not yet fully understand. Ultimately you will come to know how it is that caring for your sheep can be both efficient and humane.

If you would find any peace from your conflict of mind, look not at the sheep. Look first at the woman who represents the spirit of nurturing, the tenderness of feeling that is in all hearts. She sees through the sheep her own inner need to nurture life in every form. Then look at the man who represents the spirit of achievement, the necessary doing that is in all hearts. He sees through the sheep the means of fulfilling the basic needs of life. Finally, look at yourself and your desire to understand and see how your knowledge can help to integrate these different parts. You are all fragments in my great whole world. You are all imperfect, as yet, and need direction in your respective quests, which you must get from one another.

My friend, your hands are resting on the threads by which the fragments are connected, and, what is even more important, you have in your heart a respect for the whole nature of my world. These threads are precious and by understanding them, you will know the way out of your dilemma.

Next morning, Dexter felt possessed of an awesome and mysterious power which enabled him to put his arms around Susan and James and explain to each of them, in some miraculous way, exactly what the other was trying to say. Though the struggle had been long and hard, their understanding of one another was now complete. The most efficient way of producing their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing, with the help of the sheep, had been found all at once. At the same time, the human consciousness had been raised to the point where compassion never needed to be compromised and there was indeed a reverence for life.

Safe in this new land, after such a long voyage, they went their separate ways. The sheep lived happily ever after, more or less, and Susan and James found ways of continuing with their missions in the new place. Dexter, knowing that his task was unfinished, sought out other places where this understanding had not yet been reached - and there were many. This road wasn't easy, because often people didn't want to listen to him, but eventually he found acceptance. He became a Systems Thinker at Hawkesbury Agricultural College.