

Just Another Old, Mean Dog

Writing about the past is tricky business.

“Fact” and “speculation” are not enemies, and neither one is the foe of “truth.” Some facts we will never know. Some speculations will be correct, others false. Ultimate TRUTH can never be found post facto.

That does not mean we should not seek it.

What follows is a simple story, really—an everyday, all-too-common series of events that occurred between 1990 and June 2007.

Much of it, particularly at the beginning, is pure speculation, though based in careful examination of the few facts at hand and on observation of what was to follow.

It is a cautionary tale, one that might teach some larger lessons.

The time: sometime during the first five years of the 1990s.

The place: somewhere in the United States, maybe in Indiana, maybe in Ohio, or Pennsylvania, or New Jersey—the records are lost.

The event: a simple yet wonderful occurrence, the birth of a litter of Cardigan Welsh Corgi puppies.

Those puppies were like all Cardigan puppies. Cute. Vulnerable. Born with the chromosomes that make them eager to live with, work with, and love humans.

They couldn't know that they were *not* descendants of generations of careful breeding to an ideal Cardigan type, or that they had so many potential faults that they could never be shown.

They were puppies. They were alive. They needed their mother and their humans. That's all they had to know.

Just as it's impossible to know specifically where and when this miraculous event occurred, it is impossible to know how these puppies came to be. Here the negative side of facts can provide insight.

Certainly they were not bred to exemplify their breed, because, judging from a sample of one, they were far from falling within breed standards. That one was too long, too tall. She was too large. She had a swayed back. Perhaps worst of all, her tail flew proudly curled over her back.

She didn't know this, of course. How could she? She was a puppy, and she was the only self she would ever know. She didn't even know that she was black and white, with brindle points. She just *was*, with all the infinite potential that implies.

No, her breeders probably bred that litter for financial gain and little else. Were they backyard breeders? A Lancaster County, Pennsylvania puppy mill? Who knows? That's not the point. Whoever they were, they were *not* out to breed better Cardigans.

She was probably separated from her mother and littermates weeks too early. Lack of socialization was just the beginning of bad times.

Over the course of the next five or six years, she tried. She really did. She entered enthusiastically, I would guess, into each of four or five successive homes, expecting the best. In each home she probably went from being “that cute puppy” or “that cute doggy,” to “the dog,” to “that damned dog.”

It's also likely that she lived with people who had no clue that Corgis (a) are among the most clever of all dog breeds; (b) need firm, loving guidance from an Alpha human; and (c) MUST have household jobs to perform—or they might go mad.

“That damned dog.”

At some point, and in one of those “homes,” there is virtually no question that an adult human male cornered her, and delighted in torturing her physically and mentally.

Every place she lived, however briefly, eventually rejected her.

But things were about to change, and for the better.

A lovely professional woman in New Jersey adopted her, and, perhaps for the first time in her life, the dog began to think it had all been a bad dream. Her name was now Heidi. No more torture. No more being ignored. No more “I don’t have *time* for you!” No more lack of focus.

It would not last.

Within perhaps a year, the professional woman from New Jersey returned to her childhood home in Iowa, near death from cancer. She lasted a few months. Then she, too, left Heidi alone.

The next months were not malign. They were simply filled with neglect. Oh, Heidi had enough food, enough water. She had the perfunctory walk. But the rest of the time there was simply...nothing.

The nice lady’s brother, who “inherited” Heidi, had dogs of his own. While he wished his sister’s dog no ill, he certainly didn’t want her either.

Something inside Heidi snapped. Abandoned again. Alone again. Unwanted by anyone. No human to care for. No job to do. Nothing to guard, nothing to herd, nothing to drive, nothing she could call her very own. The blackest despair took over her life, accompanied by fear and distrust of all around her. The life that had begun with promise so many years before was no longer even a distant memory. And she was no longer a youngster.

Her eyes grew vacant with disinterest. Her coat became dull. She withdrew to the inmost part of her spirit, and that center became smaller and smaller as the weeks moved on. To look at her, she seemed much the same. Inside she shriveled closer and closer to nothing.

For all her potential as a puppy, Heidi had had more years of contempt and neglect than ones of acceptance and love, more hours of torture than hours of cuddling, more days of meaninglessness than days of fruitful and directed labor or involvement in normal household activities.

And now even the tiny kernel that remained of her potential was shrinking into oblivion.

Heidi’s latest owner, the brother, at least had the presence of mind to contact Iowa Cardigan Corgi Rescue to let them know that there was an available dog. It was a tiny thread indeed from which to suspend an aging dog’s very life and soul.

Wheels turn. All was not lost.

December 2000. A phone call. It’s from Pat Pearce in Oklahoma, my dog-guru-in-chief (and breeder of two of my Pembroke Corgis). There was this elderly Cardigan girl, see? She’d had a tough life and three or four—maybe five—homes. Was there room in the inn for another one at least to visit?

Well, of course there was.

I’d had some experience with lost dogs. There were five dogs in my household when that call came through. Four were rescues, and three of those had arrived with more than a few problems.

I called the brother.

“She’s a little—umm—‘spooky’ right now, I guess you’d call it. She misses my sister. I just don’t have room for her, and we’ve made plans to put her down next week if we can’t

find her a home. But don't you worry. Give her a little time, and she'll come around and make you a good dog."

We planned to meet at a MacDonald's next to Interstate 80, about a 70-mile drive for each of us.

I met up with the brother a few days later. His description of Heidi had not been particularly flattering, but I was still not prepared for the snarling, snapping, LARGE dog that threatened me from behind the barred door of a Vari-Kennel. Her eyes were vacant, her coat dull, her teeth in terrible condition but still very sharp. I came within a heartbeat of saying, "No, thanks," and walking away. How could I *ever* deal with THAT disturbed creature?

But still...there was the slightest hint of something still alive inside there...

I certainly was NOT going to release this creature from her crate, even on a lead—presuming, of course, that I could have attached one to her collar without risking serious injury.

So, into the back of my van she went, crate and all, including snapping jaws and outraged voice. It took both of us to load the crate, lifting it carefully at points those teeth couldn't reach.

All the way home she was ceaseless in proving how vicious she was. That I was an adult male human did nothing whatsoever to ease her mind.

When I got home, my son helped carry Heidi's crate into my front hallway, where we set it down and left her there in the dark for a time-out. After more than an hour, I walked the other dogs, one-by-one, past the crate. Each arrival created new paroxysms of outrage.

Finally, almost giving up all hope, I put on a pair of leather work gloves, and, over them, my thick leather fireplace mitts. I sat on the floor in the dark next to and just ahead of Heidi's crate. I talked gently to her, explaining that she was in no danger. She replied with snarls. I said we all liked her (stretching the truth only a little). She tried to force her muzzle through the crate door to bite me.

With little more to risk than injury, and with no little apprehension, I opened the crate. Out boiled a large, muscular dog, jaws still snapping, and growling at the top of her lungs.

And ran directly into my arms, desperately seeking comfort! So forceful was the embrace that she nearly knocked me over backward.

What a revelation! She was simply TERRIFIED. I was witnessing fear aggression "up close and personal."

Of course, that one terrified plea for love didn't solve the problem, but it gave me hope. Maybe...just maybe...with lots of work...

Over the next year-and-a-half or so, I was bitten often. Certainly I was bitten more often than I received any affection in return for my efforts.

But there were signs, albeit only occasional and small, that there was progress. Her eyes were no longer so vacant; her coat gained luster with good food and lots of fresh air and personal attention. There were, however, many more instances of snapping and snarling.

Since "Heidi" is my ex-wife's name and we are on excellent terms, Heidi needed a new name. I got on-line and searched for a similar name in Welsh. There it was! "HEDYDD!" ("*Heddith*.") Skylark. This fearsome creature would become my own skylark as her spirit gained wings and learned to soar on its own.

Damn it! She WOULD learn to soar again!

Still, the fear aggression continued.

Finally I was fed up with this nonsense. In despair, I called Pat Pearce in Oklahoma. Her calm voice, tinged with accents of the Oklahoma prairie, reassured me, as she is almost always able to do.

I explained the situation, and what I had done to combat the problem. No, I had NEVER shown any aggression toward Hedydd—quite the contrary. No, I could not predict when she would snap at me.

“Well, John,” said that calm voice at the other end of the phone line, “have you tried *telling* her in plain language what you expect from her? Have you *explained* to her how she should behave, and why?”

Now, this was from a woman learned in mathematics and the sciences. The ultimate empiricist. And she was telling me I needed a heart-to-heart *chat* with a potentially vicious dog? This was *entirely* too “New Age” for me! Talk with this Hedydd creature as if I were Dr. Doolittle chatting cosily with Gub Gub the pig?

Well, yeah...all of that... But what did I have to lose other than my own self-important propriety? And was the potential gain worth the risk?

That night, when she joined me and several other doggies on the bed, Hedydd began all over again with the snapping jaws and baleful eyes.

“ENOUGH!” I shouted, as I grabbed the back of her neck and put her over onto her back (with no little exertion).

“Now, LOOK, you! You are at HOME! You are SAFE! Nobody is EVER going to hurt you again, if I have anything to say about it—and I DO!”

On and on.

Astonishingly she looked up at me with a puzzled expression on her face, and actually seemed to understand what I said.

After a lecture of perhaps six or seven minutes, I let her up, ignored her, got ready for bed, and crawled in. She harrumphed off to a far corner of the bed.

Until I turned off the light.

Suddenly she was at my side, curled up tightly against me. She heaved a HUGE sigh, adjusted her posture slightly, laid her soft muzzle on my wrist, and went soundly to sleep. So far as I know, she did not even twitch that entire night, because she was in the exact same position when I awakened the next morning. She had, after more than eighteen months, slept her first night of blessed innocence and trust in this household.

From then on it was easy. She did all the heavy lifting, of course. I was simply a facilitator.

Over the years she learned to play—by herself, with humans, and with other dogs. Often, coming in from a romp outside just before bedtime, she galumphed from the back door to the kitchen sink, some 30 feet, in complete abandon, her weight shaking the dishes in the cupboards, and with a crazed gleam of joyous abandon in her dimming eyes, her tongue lolling from a face covered with a silly Cardi grin. She did that as recently as two weeks before she left me, even though she was clearly declining physically. Oh, she loved that game!

Even though she was nearly blind, she could still catch a tennis ball in the air 199 times out of 200.

No one who met her in those latter days could believe she had ever been ugly or aggressive—until I showed them the scars. Nor, in those days, did she meet anyone she didn’t like.

She adored me. She never strayed from my left side if she had any chance.

Once, while I was conversing with a friend in my living room, Hedydd under a nearby end table, my friend interrupted the conversation: “John, do you know how much that dog loves you? She hasn’t taken her eyes off you for the last hour.”

And, of course, I adored her.

Often, of an evening, sitting at my computer, I would feel that strong Cardi nose poking my left elbow. It was Hedydd. She needed a hug. I turned my chair toward her, and she placed her soft front paws on the front edge of the seat, grinning and leaning toward me. And then I hugged her close to my breast, my sweet, affectionate girl, as she sighed with a deeply contented groan of pleasure. Then, satisfied, she lay back down beside my chair for a pre-bedtime nap.

I think I shall miss those hugs most of all.

Her spirit was free again, wafting aloft effortlessly like a skylark, rapturous in its release from a prison of despair. There’s a reason that the collective plural terminology for skylarks is “an exultation of skylarks.” My heart sang to behold such wonders, and my eyes filled with tears of joy. My Hedydd. My skylark. Soaring across the skies on wings of sheer joy, but always rooted to my side.

However, after too many years of neglect and abuse, her body was shutting down. Her gait became stiff and more unstable. Glucosamine helped, but did not cure. Her eyes were gray with cataracts. She was less interested in dining voraciously. She lost some of her teeth.

And sometimes she was confused. She knew her house as well as I know the backs of my hands—yet, nearly completely blind, she sometimes forgot where the outside door was. In the midst of getting a drink, she would doze off with her chin in the water dish. Her appetite became even more finicky. Sometimes she got lost in the back yard. Climbing stairs became a slow and laborious undertaking.

Nonetheless, when I entered the hospital for emergency abdominal surgery on that June day in 2007, I didn’t expect the end to come so soon.

It did.

My children were taking care of the pack while I was gone—they and the dogs love being together. Two days after my surgery, my ex-wife and her husband arrived in my hospital room: “John, we have to talk. It’s Hedydd. Both kids are in tears. She can’t move. She’s going fast.”

Barely able to move in my own post-operative pain, I had to make the inevitable decision. There is no question I made the right one.

So...she is gone, this miracle child of mine, my Welsh skylark. Her untethered spirit soars now like her namesake, and her presence visits me on the warm breezes of summertime.

Ah, Hedydd, my sweet, sweet skylark... Romp with your brothers and sisters at the Bridge. I’ll join you in the fullness of time.

And here, finally, is the point. I KNEW I was gathering an elderly and not physically attractive creature to my bosom. I did it with joy. I knew she brought trunks and trunks of baggage with her. I have a strong back. I could help her to bear the weight.

Where some others saw a vicious creature that should be put down, I saw, in potential at least, a creature begging for a chance.

We had nearly seven years together, my skylark and I. We loved each other with a love unlike any other I have ever experienced.

I have witnessed redemption.

I have seen resurrection first-hand.

Once again I have known the precious treasure of living with an elderly, loving dog. And there is something preternaturally sweet about that experience. They know so much, those elders. They are so wise.

Was it worth the scars and the occasional heartbreak?

I'll let YOU make that call!

But my Hedydd and I know, and will always know, what the right choice was.

And that is why I do what I do.

I am not a breeder, a show person, a judge, a connoisseur. No, mine is the place where dogs come, some of them elderly, when nobody else wants them. This is often their *only* remaining chance. *Good* dogs. *Intelligent* dogs. Dogs filled with love and gratitude, and wanting nothing more than to *give* of themselves. It's not the dogs that win in such an equation. I'm the lucky one.

Hedydd, as closely as her veterinarian and I can estimate, was between 13 and 15 years old.

I kept my promise. No one hurt her, ever again. And she repaid me with all of her huge heart.

Rest in peace, my sweet skylark. May perpetual light shine upon you. You have more than earned it.

You will always be there, snuggled up against my side, when I am weary and most vulnerable.

And I will be there for you.

I promise you this now:

We WILL cross the Bridge into heaven together—you and I, and Shadow, and Samantha, and Foxworth, and Duchess the soft gray kitty, and all the others.

Sleep gently and in peace

Hedydd Louise Klaus

(????-June 27, 2007)

You, my little skylark, are the best there ever was.

John Klaus

Mount Vernon, Iowa, July 2007