

Smart as An Ox

By

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Strength for The Heart

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“Do you want to give them a kiss goodbye?!” the proud farmer suggested, as if it had been my longtime dream. The cheering fairgoers pressing against the farmyard fence thought my kissing a team of 3,000 lb oxen would be enormously entertaining! The closest I’d ever come to large, farm animals growing up a city girl was a Great Dane dog with a window-rattling bark that lived unhappily in the apartment below us. That’s why, as a child, our annual pilgrimages to the Topsfield Fair, America’s oldest county fair, were so thrilling. Agriculture and farming were touchable, edible, smell-able and even kissable!

On this particular warm fall day at the fair, I was privileged to be more than just a normal fairgoer. The honor of having been judged Mrs. Essex County 2008 was displayed proudly with a sparkling crown and royal sash and included appearances in parades, banquets and finally as the official hostess of the 10-day Topsfield Fair. I had entered the Mrs. Essex County (MEC) pageant just weeks after our 20th wedding anniversary as a message of loving gratitude to my husband. It became clear very quickly, however, that during the once-in-a-lifetime experience, the Lord had a few life-changing messages for me!

The midweek oxen show was being held in the enclosed grassy barnyard at the heart of the fairgrounds. The Connecticut farmer with the microphone interrupted his ox anatomy lesson with a call for the “lady with the crown” to participate in the upcoming ox driving demonstration. So far, my out-of-the-box experiences with agriculture and farming as MEC had included holding baby chicks, riding atop the Hallamore Hitch and petting llamas, all pretty much predictable and safe. Nick and Tanner the gigantic oxen bound by a 150lb yoke had sharp horns and hoofs that, in one stomp, could flatten my crown! Making a calm approach, I prayed the sun’s reflection on my studded tiara did not laser a wild reflection into the brown, tennis-ball sized eyes of the ever-watchful bovine.

Once safely behind the brave farmer, I listened carefully to his instructions on verbally guiding the oxen around the barnyard. My foreign language lesson included commands such as “Gee” (right turn), “Haw” (left turn) and most importantly “Whoa” (stop!). I was also handed a six-foot prod to hit the yoke as a firm reinforcement of my directions. With the ever-growing crowd cheering me on, I asked the oxen to “Get Up” which Nick and Tanner nicely obeyed. As they slowly clopped forward toward the crowd, I wasted no time in issuing my second command of “Gee.” No response. “Gee!” I asked again, this time with a prod smack on the right side of the yoke. It was as if the gentle giants were ignoring my words, just to make me the laughing stock of the barnyard! Lowering my voice and turning on all the “serious mommy tone” I could muster, I practically shouted the command again, watching the apprehensive crowd at the oncoming section of fence pick up their small children and start to back up.

Moments before a collision, the very amused farmer put the microphone to his mouth and calmly said “Gee, Nick. Gee, Tanner.” Immediately, the two tons of ox turned right and promptly returned to where they belonged; beside the farmer. I felt set-up! The farmer knew that his oxen would obey only his voice. He had trained them, fed them, and loved them since their youth. Nick and Tanner were smart. They trusted the farmer to safely lead them to purpose-filled opportunities.

Totally humbled, I heard God’s message from John chapter 10, *“I am the good shepherd; and I know My own and My own know Me. The sheep hear his voice...the sheep follow him because they know his voice...a stranger they simply will not follow.”* I silently prayed that I would have ears to hear and a will to obey my Good Shepherd’s voice, solely trusting him with whatever “Gee’s” and “Haw’s” life would bring. I prayed for the strength to resist listening to distracting voices filled with half-truths and false promises of fulfillment.

Giving Nick and Tanner, my over-sized messengers of God’s loving instruction, a goodbye kiss would be a privilege. To prevent my crown from being skewered by their horns, I made a wide turn to approach my new friends head-on. The sudden movement caused their heads to jerk flinging a hanging nasal substance onto my royal outfit! Who knew oxen could get colds?! Believing God for an instant covering of a providential “Purell,” I dotted Nick and Tanner’s heads with a royal kiss.

Thank you, Lord, for being my Good Shepherd and for doing what it takes to keep me yoked, close to you.

Amen.