

Farm Dad Lessons: Everything in Balance

By Dal Grooms

When I was growing up, being a farm kid wasn't "cool." There were certainly times I wished my dad did something else so I could spend time with my friends rather than spending time doing chores. Lucky for me, my dad wasn't concerned with my definition of cool. He was concerned with taking care of the farm so it would take care of us.

I've given that simple approach to life a lot of thought this month — the month that we celebrate Father's Day. It's because Dad's approach, which is the approach most farmers have to their livelihoods, is nothing more than a system of balance and sustainability. It's a system that applies to nature, to neighborhoods and to economies.

Although it's simplistic, the system can go terribly wrong when it goes out of balance...when one part of it tries to take more out than it's putting in. My dad tried to help us understand that lesson by instilling values like honesty and hard work.

There is no way to cheat the system. For example, trying to hurry along milking chores by rushing the cows through the barn, would eventually lead to health issues in those cows that would cut milk productivity and quality. When those went below par, income went down, too.

If each cow was milked the appropriate time based on the needs of her production cycle, herd health was maintained, and milk production and quality improved. So did the income.

That kind of balance created sustainability. But my dad, like other farmers, also knew he could grow his farm operation by increasing the human inputs...or as he would call it, "hard work."

That hard work might include physical labor or brain power. The result might be improved feed rations, better pasture management or barn improvements that made us more efficient or reduced the stress for the cows. The more we put in, the more the cows gave back, either in increased production or a higher quality of milk, and sometimes both.

For me, many important life lessons were learned in a dairy barn. As I look around at today's broader world and the missteps of companies, communities and countries, I wonder if some recent events would have turned out better if those leaders had grown up on farms. How might things be different if they applied some common farm wisdom about honesty and hard work?

A farmer could tell you that you can't take out more than you put in. This farm kid can tell you that, too. Plus I can give you lots of examples of how I saw that happen on a daily basis as I was growing up on the farm. Farm dads are still passing along those life lessons. And that's kind of cool.

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Dal Grooms, a new contributor to Focus on Agriculture, is a native of the Midwest, where she writes about rural and agricultural issues.