

*Last fall I went into the bank to deposit checks after we'd sold our calves. The lady at the front desk wasn't familiar with the company who had written the check. I explained to her who they were and that we had sold two loads of calves.*

*She replied "wow. I'm in the wrong business."*

*At the time, it caught me off guard that she would say something like that and all I could do was chuckle a little and say "no. You're not."*

*I've been thinking about her all winter and different moments in particular made me wish I had said something to her other than what I replied in my dimwitted moment. As with all of my best comebacks, they hit my brain later and are told with the story as "what I should have said was..." So here goes. Here's my shoulda, coulda, woulda said...*

Dear Lady at the Bank,

You know, maybe you're right. You are in the wrong business. There's nothing more satisfying in the fall, than sorting, weighing and loading calves onto trucks, knowing that your winter, spring and summer months of taking care of cattle and their calves has paid off. As the trailer door slides down, enclosing the last of the calves to load, there's a certain pride in those because they made it.

In the back of your mind, you can't help but remember the times in the winter during calving, when some calves didn't make it. Maybe they were born dead, or maybe something happened afterward that caused the death, but either way, some of them don't. And then that gets you to thinking about the cows and heifers that had to be sold because they didn't raise a calf. You're awful dang proud of the mamas out there who just waved goodbye to their most recent calf crop, because they had as much to do with their success as you did. Those mamas, they're your girls. Your pride and joy. Your future. Because, you see, now that those calves are gone, it's time to focus on next year's calf crop. Yep. Already. It doesn't end. It's a cycle that is always different and yet, always the same.

The best months of course are spent horseback when the sun is shining, desert flowers are blooming, creeks and springs are running and the grass is growing. The best moments are spent looking between your horse's ears, trailing cattle or in a branding pen. The best sounds are the birds, the breeze through the sage, a baler humming along smoothly, and cows and calves mooing to each other. The best sights are healthy animals, slick coated horses, a dog working cows, grass growing tall in the meadows and full dirt tanks.

That right there, is the stuff dreams are made of. Those moments are why we live this lifestyle. Those occasions are where your mind drifts off to when someone asks why the world you'd want to raise your family in the middle of nowhere and deal with cows. Like everything, these moments have an opposite, evil twin.

You see, the hardest moments are the cold, snowy, 40 below days when you have to plug your tractor in so it will start so you can head out to feed those mama cows you're so dang proud of. They did their job of raising a calf, but now you've got to make sure they survive the winter and grow the next calf. They don't eat unless you feed them. So you bundle up in all the layers; long johns, pants, sweaters, bib overalls, wool socks, snow boots, gloves and a hat, and you head out to face the weather. All weather. Rain, snow, sleet, wind and frigid temperatures. Every day for a minimum of 90 days and possible 120 days. Every day.

Right about at that 90 day mark, when you're starting to wonder if winter will ever end, calving season starts. You've got something to look forward to again because those babies are coming and there is nothing more welcome than a newborn calf, except for rain in the summer. You find your smile again when you see those first calves out there with their mamas. Your heart warms when that mama shows up in the feed line mooing softly and showing off her pride and joy. You watch that first calf heifer group the closest because they are the new mothers. They've never done this and you aren't quite sure how it'll go for them. You picked the right bulls based on their birth numbers. You had the vet come out to confirm their pregnancy. You've fed them right and made sure their minerals were right. But sometimes, in spite of your best efforts and intentions, it just doesn't go right. That first heifer you find standing over a dead calf, breaks your heart. Because no matter what Mother Nature and God had in mind, you did everything right. You're dang lucky if one is all you find. But some years are tougher than others and you start to dread that daily routine of checking heifers because you just don't think you can take another bit of bad news.

Oh, not all of them happen that way. For every bad one there might be 3,4,5 good, spunky, live calves. But, the bad news hurts enough to stick with you.

And just then, about the time you start to wonder when calving will be over and you check your records every day wondering when that last one will calve, it's time for branding season. This is your second favorite part of the year. You gather together with your neighbors and friends to rope and brand calves, visit and BBQ. It's a social event and a sport and an important piece of the success of the cow herd. Calves are inoculated and marked so they stay healthy and they come home in the fall to the right pasture. When your branding is over, you start hoping the neighbors have another. Branding season always ends too soon.

These moments roll into summer when the cows head out to the desert for grazing. Your good years are those when they stay out for the intended time because the grass is adequate and the water keeps flowing. Your bad years are those when the grass dries up too fast, the water stops flowing and summer thunder storms bring the threat of a fire on your range. You're lucky if the lightning is followed by rain. Your luck changes if it doesn't. When that grass burns up, you know this year is over and the next two years are questionable for turnout. You've hit the jackpot if your cattle aren't lost in the fires. You lose most everything if they are. It's a gamble you'll have to take every summer.



While you wait out the summer grazing, there's more to be done. It's also haying season and if that grass grew right, you'll put up enough hay for the winter months and may even have some left over when feeding ends. Yeah, that's right, even though it's July, you have to think about January. If that grass doesn't grow enough, you have to consider buying hay and trucking it in. When that swather header drops and the sickles start cutting, you cross your fingers and say a prayer that the good Lord will keep that equipment running smoothly for the two weeks you need it most. When the baler rolls, you know you've done your best to keep it greased and loaded with twine and all parts working in tandem. That humming noise is the good news. If that patterned "yen, yen, yen" stops before the rows are baled it could mean a few minutes of down time, or it could mean a few days while you call in a mechanic to help you get things rolling. When that last bale hits the stack and the tractors are back in the yard, you call it a success, no matter how long it took or what the tonnage was.

You've nearly come full circle at this point. Cows are due to come in for the fall and you'll know who brings a calf home and who doesn't. You'll have to get those calves marketed and sold because the bills that have accumulated; some expected and planned for, some that have you living off a credit card until the calf check comes. Come sale day, you know what the market price has been, you know what you've marketed your calves for, you know what it cost you to raise them and you hope to God again, that you make a buck or at least break even. Your stomach knots up when the auctioneer calls your name and runs the video. You listen to the rhythmic chatter of his voice as he calls out prices and your heart stops a bit when no one bites. When he yells "sold!" you finally breathe again and do some calculating. You'll either take it, or call for a no sale and try again. It's a gamble. Every time. If you like what the dollar figure shows, your last obligation is to keep those calves at the promised weight, and most importantly, alive. By now you know, just when you think you're safe, anything can happen.

You snap back to the present, when that big diesel motor fires up. You choke back a tear as you watch your pride and joy, your best efforts, your family's promise of the next meal, a warm house and clothes on their back, roll on out of your yard in a cloud of dust and diesel smoke. In those moments you think about your family. Your kids grow up knowing the value of hard work, purpose and passion. They know what success means, but more importantly, they know how to learn from and push through failure. They learn the value and meaning of life, but they also learn the finality of death. They grow to love and appreciate things that most kids never see. You do your best for them, for your family because in the end, that matters most.

So, Dear Lady at the Bank, maybe you were right. Maybe you are in the wrong business, but not because of the money. Our wealth isn't in those checks you saw. That money is already gone. One of those checks paid the mortgage. Yep, the whole thing and part of the second. The other money that was left has to be stretched until November and that's already getting tough...in March. No, our wealth isn't in the numbers you saw. It's in those experiences I shared. Maybe you have it in you to handle all of that as well as we do. Maybe you'd handle it better. For all of the ups and downs, highs and lows and pulling in about \$.75 an hour, we still think it's the best life to live and we wouldn't trade it for anything. Maybe you would feel that way too.



