

Can't Sleep? Try Counting Cows...

One night recently as I was trying to go to sleep, my mind was racing. I had done some strenuous exercise relatively close to bedtime -- and sometimes this is not a good combination. I got into bed at the regular time, and when I tried to go to sleep I found my mind was racing at 175 mph! My thoughts were jumping from one thing to another... politics... church... prayer... kids... work... current events... sports... on and on. As I lay there trying to rein in my thoughts, for some reason, I started thinking about cows.

No, not the cows on the commercials... I started thinking about all the cows my family had owned in my growing up years. Cows? Really? Yes, cows. I've heard of counting sheep when you can't sleep, but cows? I decided to try and focus my thoughts on cows for a few minutes -- in hopes of getting drowsy and falling asleep.

I remembered some little Holstein calves my dad bought for me and my brother. The idea was to buy them as young calves, bottle feed them a while until they could fend for themselves, and then when they got to a decent size, sell them and make a few dollars. It was our job to get up every morning, mix up the bottles of powdered milk, go out to the barn and feed the calves. Picture a baby bottle -- but this bottle probably would hold a half gallon -- and each bottle had a huge, black, rubber nipple on the end. I remember how the calves would run up to us, lick us, and follow us closely -- eager to get at that milk! Sometimes as they were drinking (and we were half asleep) they would butt us -- hoping to make the milk come out faster! I remember the smells of that powdered milk mixture as it dribbled down the sides of the bottles and onto our hands, the smells of the barn, and the smells of those calves! I remember calf slobber -- lots of it. I remember the loud sucking sounds the calves would make as they emptied those milk bottles. I remember their hard, bony heads and their protruding ears as we would pat them on the head while they were sucking down the milk. I remember cold, muddy mornings as we trudged out to the barn half asleep. I'm sure we didn't really do this for that long -- we didn't raise that many calves -- but for some reason I remembered it.

One of the first cows that I remembered my dad buying was a cow we affectionately referred to as "Cookie." She was very gentle, had a sweet face, and she had a patch of curly fur on her forehead. She had a calf we called "Gatorade." Cookie was a part of our family for several years. Through the years, as we eventually had a larger "herd," I remember my dad would go out and attempt to count them. I would see his little notes laying around where he checked them off, and he had funny names for a lot of them. He could probably remember most of their names to this day. For example, I remember one we called "Crook Neck" -- for obvious reasons. Most of the names described something about their physical appearance -- not usually something so common as "Fred" or "Susie." I tried, and I couldn't remember many of their names, but I do remember a lot of their faces -- I never forget a face (even a cow face)! Sometimes, I see their faces as I try to go to sleep...

I remembered that when you have a cattle farm, you can never really get too far away from them. They are always needing something. They may need feeding, or medicating -- or maybe they are having trouble giving birth. Or maybe they need water. In the cold of winter, icy ponds have to

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be broken so the cows can get water. Or maybe there are some strange dogs chasing your cows in the middle of the night. Or maybe there is a Canadian goose stampeding the cows (yes, this happened)! You continuously have to check the fences to make sure a tree hasn't fallen down somewhere across the fence -- the cows will find it -- they have a gift for this. It's never fun when you find out your cows have gotten out and are now grazing up and down the busy road in front of your house -- or they are now in your neighbor's yard. Cows never get out at a convenient time either. The grass is always greener, I suppose.

I remember going out with my dad at all hours of the day and night to check on cows that had given birth -- and to make sure the cow and calf had gotten properly "connected." Cows are not the brightest of animals... the mother would sometimes hide its newborn calf from potential predators, and sometimes after a short while, the mother would forget where it had left the calf! It is amazing how well a newborn calf blends in with its surroundings -- they can be really hard to find! My dad would at times physically carry the calf to its mother and help it start nursing! Then almost always, nature would take over.

As I remember all these things about cows, I want you to know, I am not a cattle expert -- not even close. My dad did 90% of the work -- and he knew what he was doing. I was just there to lend a hand and do what I could. But it just occurred to me -- as I was trying my best to calm my thoughts and get some much needed sleep -- it seems like most of my growing up years, we had some cows (and a few bulls) around. I remember their sounds... their smells... I almost miss them. Well, almost. Let's not get carried away here.

My racing mind focused on cows as long as it could, but it wasn't long until it jumped to its next topic... and the next... and the next... and I suppose that eventually, I arrived at my original destination -- a place called "sleep."

(Originally written: January 28, 2016)