

A Middle-Age Adventure

By Laura Paine

My 23 year old daughter remarked to me recently that she thought it was pretty gutsy for her parents to embark on “the adventure of farming” in their late 40s, when most of her friends’ parents were well settled in careers and beginning the slide toward retirement.

It was said with admiration, but it begs the question: Why would people our age, with an empty nest and established careers, choose to saddle ourselves with the monumental task of fixing up an old farm and trying to make it a paying business? Did we really know what we were getting ourselves into? No, definitely not. Would we do it again? Yes, but probably differently. Holistic Management has made a big difference in how this farm has developed so far, but it could have made an even bigger difference if we’d had this resource long ago.

Buying The Farm

Bill and I have always wanted to own land. We almost went down that path as young, just-out-of-college idealists back in the 1970s, but events conspired to set us off in a different direction. Looking at ourselves back then, I can see how Holistic Management could have changed our course significantly. Had we had at the time, a holistic goal for ourselves, we might have determined a way to make the farming thing work back then. Instead, our life together has developed step by step, decision by decision, without much of a plan for the long term. It has unfolded in response to a series of relatively random opportunities, the path we’ve traveled determined not so much by conscious choice as by chance.

This sounds like a recipe for disaster, but it hasn’t been. It has turned out well, in retrospect, and the important, life-changing decisions we’ve made have moved us generally in a positive direction. We’ve always been in touch with our values and, for the most part, have made choices based on them. A quarter century later, we’re happy with where we are. Having raised our family and gotten our children safely off to college, the urge to own land has remained. The window of opportunity opened up in front of us again, and this time we climbed through.

We made a plan: when I took my job as a county Extension agent in 1999, Bill and I began

looking for a farm in the county where I work. In 2002, we found an affordable 82-acre (33-ha) property that fit our needs. The plan was for us both to continue working at our jobs while developing a small, pasture-based, direct market beef enterprise on the farm. Once we were sufficiently well established, Bill could quit his job and further expand the farm operation. By the time I’m ready to retire in 10 or 15 years, we hope to have a stable, flexible operation that will provide a reasonable retirement income and allow us to adapt to our changing needs as we get older.



Bill and Laura Paine embarked on a middle-aged adventure of farming. Laura found Holistic Management to be particularly helpful in her development as an extension educator as well as a farmer.

Professional Development

Enter Holistic Management. During my years as a researcher and educator in grazing management, I’d come across the work of Allan Savory and had familiarized myself with the general principles. I’ve had very mixed feelings about Holistic Management. I’ve always felt that agriculture could benefit from a more holistic view of the world, one that includes environmental and quality of life concerns. But, I was skeptical of what I felt was the quasi-scientific treatment of ecological principles and the vaguely cult-like mystique surrounding the organization. Still, I felt that the basics of Holistic Management were very sound and were where I wanted to take my work with farmers. Besides,

I’ve always enjoyed exploring the boundaries of what is considered acceptable science, and I don’t have a problem sifting through new ideas and selecting the pieces that I want to fit together to meet my needs. I work for a ponderous, slow moving bureaucracy. Someone’s got to bring new ideas to it once in awhile.

So, when the opportunity to join The Savory Center’s Certified Educator Training Program came along, I viewed it as a means of gaining skills to use in my work with farmers. I looked at where Bill and I were with our farm and imagined that this was a perfect opportunity to ‘learn by doing’—to gain a better understanding of Holistic Management by actually practicing it as we developed our farm. My primary motivation was to experiment with all of the concepts, decision tests, and planning processes in order to make me a better teacher of other farmers. If it helped our own operation directly, that was a bonus.

With that goal, Bill and I have experimented with most of the Holistic Management practices I’ve learned, but I think the most valuable part of the experience for both of us has been participating in the learning community. What has evolved has been unexpectedly richer and more meaningful to me personally and to us as a couple.

It would have been very different if it had been just me in my role as ‘teacher,’ but Bill’s participation in the group has allowed me to experience the process both as a teacher and a participant, and it has given us an opportunity to more fully understand our values and goals and to develop good decision-making skills for ourselves. It has and will continue to have a positive influence on how we develop our farm.

The Problem with Arnold

Bill and I have used the decision testing guidelines several times with questions directly related to our beef enterprise. Sometimes, the testing questions themselves don’t point to the answer, but going through the process usually leads us to ask the questions that do reveal the best solution for us.

For example, in our first grazing season on the farm, Bill and I bought a group of 14 stocker calves to get our beef operation going. Among them were 3 heavy steers that we planned to butcher in fall; the rest were heifers of various ages, some of which we sold and some we kept to start our cow-calf herd.

As the yearling heifers started coming into heat in June, one of the steers—we’ll call him

Arnold—made it clear that his operation hadn't been completely successful. Arnold quickly became a problem, stirring things up among the girls and setting a bad example for the other two steers, not to mention the possibility that he might actually be successful with these young heifers. What to do? We used the cause and effect to determine what the real problem was.

Our first response was that we had to get him fixed. When we talked to the producer we bought him from, his response was the same—we'll get him taken care of. Problem equals failed castration. The solution was to redo the castration. Simple. But looking at the situation more holistically, we asked ourselves: What is the actual problem? It's not the failed castration; it's the fact that he's in a mixed herd with females. That realization opened up a whole lot of other possible solutions.

We began brainstorming solutions. If the problem was having Arnold in the herd with the girls, we could move him out of there. The options there were: we could segregate Arnold and his cohorts in their own separate pasture system or we could sell him back to Dick or have Dick 'custom raise' him for us (he wouldn't be a problem in a herd of steers).

We weighed those options against the first solution and still weren't entirely happy with any of them. The first option—having his operation repaired would cost money and lost weight gain while he recovered, and he might continue to have a behavior problem. The segregation option would cost money, lost income, and/or additional time and resources to run two groups.

As we stood there watching Arnold mounting one or another of the heifers, I remembered Bill's frequent comment over the past several weeks that he couldn't wait to put him in the freezer. That made me think: why

wait? What if we butchered him now?

It was mid-July. Arnold had started out at 850 pounds (363 kg) and he'd been on pasture for nearly three months. We did some quick calculations. Eighty-some days, a couple of pounds a day, he should be getting up around a thousand pounds (450 kg). He was definitely not 'finished,' but might this be the best option financially and logistically? So we decided to test the decision: Should we butcher Arnold now?



The Holistic Management® planning processes have provided structure for this new farming couple to succeed.

Cause and effect: Action addresses the problem of Arnold's behavior in a mixed herd.

Does this lead us toward our long term goals? (Sustainability) It doesn't lead us away from it

Marginal reaction: Does this option give us the best bang for our buck? Comparing this option to the others, it at least comes out about even.

Society and Culture: Overall, taking Arnold to visit the butcher a little early seemed like the right thing to do. We couldn't really think of any other considerations that we'd missed in making this decision.

After brainstorming all the options we could think of (I'm sure there were others we could have considered), and running our favored option

through the tests, we felt more confident about the choice. So, Arnold went to the butcher, the heifers relaxed, and the steaks were delicious. This isn't necessarily the choice we'd make every time this situation arises, but it was the best choice for this time. For us, this is one of the keys to decision testing: few hard-and-fast rules should be made. Every decision needs to be made fresh, reviewing all the factors in place at that particular time with respect to your holistic goal.

Holistic Management has come along at a perfect time for Bill and me. As we plunge ourselves into this new project, having a shared vision of what we want the farm and our lives to look like has helped guide our progress. Everything is new. The types of decisions needing to be made are different. For us coming from an urban professional background, even working together as business partners is a new experience.

There are two important pieces that have made this a valuable experience for us. One is certainly having the Holistic Management® framework to provide structure to our efforts. The other is our learning community. This project we've embarked on is all about exploring the boundaries of our own capabilities. In most people's holistic goals there is almost always a 'personal challenge' sort of statement. We as human beings thrive on challenging ourselves to go a little farther, accomplish a little more. It can be a scary road to travel, and to fulfill this piece of our holistic goal, having a community of fellow explorers is a necessity. It creates a safe space where you can dream, debate, decide, console, and gather the courage to continue. 🌿

Laura Paine works for Cooperative Extension in Columbia County, Wisconsin. She can be reached at: 608/742-9682 or laura.paine@ces.uwex.edu.