

I suppose watching my dad die is what made me recognize that we needed to change.

It was a steady decline that started in the summertime and ended unceremoniously on a miserable, cold, Wisconsin January afternoon. The kind of day that chills you to the bone and gets dark way too early. The thing is, I wasn't even surprised. The first emotion I felt was relief. **I was relieved it was over.**

This is not to disrespect the man to whom I owe so much. The thing is, he did everything right. The foundation of what my wife and I are now building on our multigenerational family farm was laid out by him. My dad was a renaissance man, and totally devoted to production agriculture. **He was a farmer in the most traditional sense**, in that he was creative, inquisitive, nurturing, and most of all - individualistic.

He did not fail as a farmer—farming failed him.

Traditionally, the business of farming has been a localized, agrarian pursuit where individual farms support local markets and contribute directly to the prosperity, health, and well-being of local communities. Our farm was no exception.

By the time my dad became ill in 2013, the trajectory of farming was that of commodity-driven industrialization. As farmers, we are institutionally conditioned, brainwashed, into unquestionable loyalty to the concept

that salvation lies with expansion. **We just need to milk a few more cows**; harvest a few more acres; expand the feedlot; and so goes the cycle that crosses into dystopian territory before we take a moment—just a moment—to raise our head to question the absurdity of it all.

"I've got to get the beans in." Meaning, soybeans. Meaning, I don't have time. The pressure was on. Crushing, relentless pressure. Economic pressure. The kind of pressure that kills people. There are beans to be harvested. Contracts to fulfill, so that balances can be paid. Balances that have been accumulating interest for months. Seed, fertilizer, chemical bills in the tens of thousands of dollars. If my dad were alive today, **they'd be in the hundreds of thousands of dollars** even for our small farm, but hey—bigger is better.

I blinked a few times, as though coming out of a trance. My dad breathed those words and I felt a twinge of emotion I'd never felt before; one that I dared not repeat. So, I helped him in the way he asked. I helped him into the combine and let him catch his breath. He could barely climb the ladder into the cab. By the time we switched from soybeans to corn, he couldn't even eat. **Still came the words, breathless as ever, "I've got to get the corn in."**



Dad hid his decline, and I quietly enlisted help to complete the harvest. The last conversation I ever had with my dad was a one-sided “There’s not enough hay for the cows.” There it was, that emotion that I was ashamed to admit.

Pathetic.

Even now it’s painful to admit, but not nearly as painful as the realization of the futility of it all. My dad died for soybeans and corn. Nameless, faceless commodities in an industrialized game where **he who produces it the cheapest gets the prize.**



My dad did everything right. He expanded the farm from 250 to 450 acres. At the time of his death he was farming 750 acres, which included rental ground. We had talked about quadrupling our dairy herd size from 60 to 250 cows. He stuck his neck out and financed bigger machinery. Bigger bills, more responsibility, more complexity—for what?

The thing is, it’s never enough. My dad died in 2014 and left a generational pile of debt, through no fault of his own—remember, he did everything right. When the agricultural crisis hit in 2017, I fought tooth and nail to stave off bankruptcy. No-one will ever realize how close we came to losing the family farm. **Anyone who has faced bankruptcy understands the crushing stress of generational debt.**

And that is when I recognized, with absolute clarity, that a change needs to happen. In agriculture, a fundamental, foundational change needs to occur how we, as farmers demand value for the fruits of our labor, hardships, and stress.

The first change: **Bigger is NOT better.** Current farm bankruptcy and farm exit rates, and the quantifiable decline in rural mental health is proof positive that bigger is not better. In this vicious and unforgiving cycle it is the **individual farmer who suffers the most**, with the land we care for, the livestock we love, the environment we nurture—not to mention overall societal health—all a close second.

For my own part, our farm is being transitioned away from commodity production. We now focus on **outreach, education, and direct-to-consumer relations.** Our farm will thrive into the next generation because we chose to break away from the toxic and unsustainable trajectory and pursue something different. And that’s the thing—there is always something different to pursue.

I can say with absolute certainty, Dad would be proud. 🍃