



# Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, professor of animal science, Colorado State University

## A lesson on the mountain

*The day had dawned clear and cool as we trailed 700 pairs to a high-country pasture. But the clouds had moved in, the rain had gradually increased its intensity to the point that water coursed off the brim of my hat, cascading across my upturned collar and down my neck with the efficiency of a co-op funnel.*

### Hardships and challenges

A mile of muddy trail lay before us, and the awareness of more than an hour's worth of pairing water-logged calves and their mothers upon arrival at the upper meadow served only to dampen my spirits. I grumbled as I rode behind the calves, the perfect picture of hardships on the trail. At 13 years of age, all of the romance of the cattle business had washed away.

Dave Howard, a rancher in his late 60s, rode up beside me. "You don't seem to appreciate your circumstances young man," he noted.

"No, sir," I replied. "It sure is miserable weather!"

Mr. Howard rode in silence for a few seconds before he responded in a quiet, even voice. "Partner, this is the best weather we're going to get today."

His statement was ripe with wisdom, centered in the truth that attitude, not circumstance, determines human happiness. Some would call it a teachable moment, but his words have been a consistent reminder about dealing with hardship and challenge.

No doubt these are challenging times filled with seemingly random chaotic events that conspire to unsettle our minds while disrupting our plans and the convenience we have come to expect of our existence. Be it the weather, rising energy prices, an increasingly competitive global marketplace, or a political landscape where activism reigns over reason, there is plenty to distract us from our professional and personal vision.

There is no question that these pressures are real and that taken in total they are inflicting worry and discomfort on most of us. However, the long-term effect of our current circumstances will be determined

by the force of our conviction, our ability to innovate and adapt, and the level of our commitment to partnerships.

### Optimism

My nominee for the single word that could be used to describe the American experience would be *optimism*. We are a nation founded upon the principle that a life of entitlement is a millstone that burdens the independence, freedom and, ultimately, the opportunity of all people, whether aristocrat or pauper. Thomas Jefferson understood that the fate of democracy rested in the common citizen who, by their own accord, would choose character over cynicism, self-reliance instead of the governmental dole, and solutions instead of excuses.

Jefferson would write,

"Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which He keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth."

His belief in the people was founded on his experience that by virtue of faith, curiosity and self-reliance, strong families and communities would emerge. Monticello, more than Washington, Paris or Philadelphia centered his logic, as would the Badlands of the Dakotas for a young New Yorker named Theodore Roosevelt more than a century later.

A sickly youth, Roosevelt hardened himself against the steel of hardships on western ranches as he strove to attain the resolve, durability and fortitude of the cowboys he encountered. These experiences

shaped the core values upon which he made the statement, "The things that will destroy America are prosperity-at-any-price, peace-at-any-price, safety first instead of duty first, the love of soft living, and the get-rich-quick theory of life."

Roosevelt's enduring optimism restored his health and provided the foundation upon which his robust legacy was built. In a talk to schoolchildren in Oyster Bay during Christmas of 1898 he encouraged them saying, "There are two things that I want you to make up your minds to do: first, that you are going to have a good time as long as you live — I have no use for the sour-faced man — and next, that you are going to do something worthwhile, that you are going to work hard and do the things you set out to do."

We must not fear adversity, for it is a useful tool that reintroduces us to the core values that we hold most dearly. Without struggle, our heroic and courageous potential often lies dormant, buried under the cover of convenience, entitlement and the path of least resistance. As we confront the uncertainties and challenges of our times, relentless faith supported by creativity, a commitment to solutions and dedicated effort will see us through.

But when I doubt, my mind drifts back to a mountain on a rainy day when an old cowboy took the time to give the gift of truth to a young boy, and I remember that we are still the people who, despite the obstacles, declared themselves to be free and accountable for that freedom.

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**Editor's Note:** Tom Field is a professor at the Colorado State University (CSU) Department of Animal Sciences, where he is responsible for the seedstock cattle breeding program of the university teaching herd. He directs the Seedstock Merchandising Team and teaches Food Animal Sciences, Beef Production and Family Ranching. He is a contributor to the research efforts of the CSU Beef-Tec program. A frequent speaker at beef cattle events in the United States and internationally, Field is also a partner in his family's commercial cow-calf enterprise, which uses Angus as an important genetic component.