



Outside the Box

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

Neighbors

“Can you believe the choices of virtual experience that are available?” This was the question that filled my mind as I stood mesmerized in front of the massive wall of new high-definition screens surrounded by iPods, computers, DVD players, MP3 players and speakers of every imaginable configuration. As I walked away from the store’s electronic bombardment of imaginary experiences that asked nothing of me other than to become passive to the point of allowing a machine to provide all of my stimuli, my attention was drawn to a field of cattle not far from the parking lot.

Connections through contrast

The contrast was stunning — two worlds, side by side, one virtual, the other visceral. Perhaps these contrasting experiences help explain the challenge of being a good neighbor in communities that have lost touch with the smells of life, the sensations of wind on their faces, the sounds of weaned calves, and the countless stimuli available when life is spent engulfed by the environment as opposed to on its periphery.

If the connection is left unmade, let there be no doubt that a virtual society will turn its back on those members of its community whose reality is rooted in the visceral world of soil, forage, livestock, crops and climate. As an agriculturalist it is easy to feel isolated, even disenfranchised, given the way our industry is depicted by the popular media,

the entertainment gurus of Hollywood and the other merchants of virtual experience.

Yet, our rural lifestyles represent a primal need held by human beings — the desire to experience life rather than to simply observe it. Our challenge is to connect our visceral world to the virtual experience of our urban neighbors. In that process we must first deal with two key questions: What are we? What are we not?

Our lives

We aren’t quaint, as our lives are filled with imperfections and disappointments such as the death of calves, the lack of rain, working in the cold and mud, and the cyclical nature of markets. Neither are we perfect nor changeless. Our lives are not tourist attractions, and oftentimes we would like to simply be left alone.

We live in a world where dirt, dust, wind, heat, cold and pain swirl amidst joy and hope. Farming and ranching require resilience, accountability, common sense and the ability to find beauty in the most unlikely of experiences. We do not need the vicarious experience of a reality show; instead, we simply walk out the back door to find a sense of adventure and challenge.

It is not enough for the agricultural community to understand its heritage, vision and challenges. We cannot allow our story to be told by others or to be ignored by the larger society. We must connect with our neighbors.

In his book, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, David Whyte reminds us, “All of our artistic and religious traditions take equally great pains to inform us that we must never mistake a good career for good work. Life is a creative, intimate, unpredictable conversation if it is nothing else — and our life and our work are both



ILLUSTRATION BY CRAIG SIMMONS

the result of the way we hold that passionate conversation.”

Conversations

The engagement of our neighbors into a connection with the visceral nature of agriculture is an important, if not a critical, task. The future of agriculture and of rural communities depends on these conversations held one at a time in every county of every state. There is something better on the other side of those conversations that can best be described in the words of former President Ronald Reagan, who said, “At the heart of our message should be five simple, familiar words. No big economic theories. No sermons on political philosophy. Just five short words — family, work, neighborhood, freedom and peace.”

So where do we find the place to hold these conversations? I suspect that we need

to host more barn dances, potlucks and horseshoe tournaments. We used to take time to celebrate our community and we invited everybody — neighbors, merchants, schoolteachers — even our relatives.

When we make time and room for community gatherings we recapture our neighborhoods, our families and our humanity. Our grandparents and their parents understood this truth. We have to invite people outside of our comfort zone to the table. If we want the future to be something we value, then we have to rebuild community spirit.

I reckon it will take a lot of coffee, hours spent leaning on fences and the hoods of trucks, a fair bit of listening, the courage to engage our neighbors, and the faith of Daniel to enter the lion’s den. But in the end we will be better for inviting people to step into our world. Perhaps then we can build communities where people depend on each

other instead of technology to create life experiences.



E-MAIL: tom.field@colostate.edu

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.*