

Selling is not fun

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Livestock farms demand emotional toughness from farmers. You depend on animals, and they depend on you. But eventually you either sell them or bury them.

Selling what is raised is why livestock farmers are in the raising business. It's done to acquire cash on which to live.

But the raising-selling process demands that you maintain an emotional moat between you and what you will be delivering for slaughter. Livestock cannot be pets. You couldn't be in the raising-selling business for long if they were.

This can be hard when animals become familiar individuals rather than just faces in a crowd, or, more commonly, numbered ear tags.

The first year we fed cattle over the winter, we had a set of sweet-faced, 500-pound, Charolais-Angus-cross steers. The chocolate twins were calm, pleasant and good-looking. We talked to them. After a year, we sold them at 1,000 pounds each. Of the 2,000 steers we've pastured over the years, I remember the twins with regret.

I also recall a scroungy black steer with a white stripe along the middle of his back. He seemed to understand what I wanted, so I counted on "Skunk" to lead the herd through gates to fresh grass without the usual inexplicable, balky commotions.

But we sold Skunk and the twins, because that's why we had them. I no longer individualize cattle in the field, except the screwballs.

It's even harder, of course, to eat an animal that you've raised. I've fed out a half-dozen hogs and a couple of steers that ended up on my plate. Tending them each day develops friendship.

I finally realized that I'd rather not know my meal as a creature whose ears I've scratched and with whom I've exchanged opinions about Democrats, Republicans and jihadists.

True locavores should eat what they raise as a matter of ethics.

The shepherd-and-sheep dilemma is familiar. The shepherd's job is to keep his flock fed, watered, healthy and protected until he decides to kill them for his benefit. The sheep learn to trust the shepherd just as Skunk and the twins trusted me. There's an unmistakable element of betrayal in how the shepherd culls old ewes and ends things with his lambs.

The best rationale I've heard for being comfortable with eating what you raise is this: We fed them, now they're feeding us.

Vegetarianism is one way to resolve this. Since we evolved as omnivores rather than as exclusive plant eaters, I don't think it's wrong to eat meat. If I did, I wouldn't.

But meat-eating is messy. There's a good reason why consumers of both legislative politics and hot dogs are advised to follow Otto von Bismarck's suggestion: "Laws are like sausages, it is better not to see them being made." Butchered meat wrapped in supermarket plastic keeps the pre-freezer mess out of sight and out of mind.

There are also occasions when a farm animal is sold for reasons other than material gain. We went through one of them this week.

Red, a Tennessee Walker, has been with my wife, Melissa, for six years, originally as a companion for another horse and then on his own merits.

Our barns and fields are better set up for two rather than three horses. The resident rider reluctantly admits that she does not have time to ride the third in line.

Even though Melissa is a jock -- she runs, she swims, she bikes, she rides, she yogas and she can even do Irish dancing and the Carolina Shag -- she doesn't bounce as high as she once did. She also lands harder.

Five unscheduled flights were enough I thought, even for a domestic U.S. airline. So, summoning the enormous tact for which I am known, I tactfully suggested after the most recent lift off that a reasonable person might possibly consider the theoretical possibility of moving Red on. I am our family's designated bearer of bad news...and often its fountainhead.

I noted with the subtlety that rivals my legendary tact that Melissa's two keepers -- Spirit and Moose (pronounced Mousse) -- follow her directions; Red was more like her husband. I figured the analogy would put Red in the proper context.

Slowly, the conclusion was reached that Red would be better off with a different rider.

Sale of a pet -- "pet" is actually too shallow a term to describe the relationship between horse and woman -- was fraught with self-incrimination. What if he did not end up in a good home, defined as that of a 13-year-old girl who would sleep by his side in a sunny barn filled with thornless roses for the next 10 years on their way to a national blue ribbon?

Melissa had a hard time imagining selling Red to someone who might answer an ad in a horse magazine or online. I did not. She didn't want to have to decide whether a 45-year-old male was actually the ideal 13-year-old

girl in inexplicable disguise. Still, Red was her horse, so it was always her decision.

This was the first horse or pet that Melissa had parted with. Sometimes it felt like we were selling a child. And for all the love and care that Melissa invested in Red, that's not far off.

She decided that having a friend sell Red at a Shenandoah Valley horse auction would be her least traumatic option. If she stayed home, she would not buy him back.

In an auction, the seller has no control over which buyer prevails. Best money wins whether or not that's the best choice for the horse.

The night before the auction Melissa filled a page with Red's virtues. The auctioneer read her words as Red performed flawlessly in the ring.

Red brought the second-highest price at the sale, which suggests that his new owner valued him and would care for him—even though he was neither 13 nor a she. It also reflects the obvious quality of attention that Melissa had given Red during his time with her.

It's been a rough couple of weeks on the farm at the foot of Snowy Mountain. Life out here is more complicated than you might suppose, especially when it involves selling someone you've loved.

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