

Into the daylight

“I can’t be your shadow,” Leigh Rosegren explained to her husband Colin. “It isn’t enough for me.”

FIRST OF TWO EXCLUSIVE ARTICLES

You can have it all, I thought. Ambitious career, great marriage, beautiful family. And don’t forget how wonderful it is to raise kids in the country; all that fresh air to help them grow, chores to mould them into responsible adults, the freedom to dream.

Now let’s be honest. For many women who marry a farmer, and I’m one of them, the utopian future we envisioned when we uttered “I do”, and the present we live in, well... let’s just say the two images don’t exactly line up.

Back in the day, career options for women were basically nursing and teaching, both of which were in demand in small towns. Living rurally, a woman could have a fulfilling off-farm career that also provided opportunity for socializing, albeit while doing most (read “all”) of the domestic work on the farm and raising the kids.

But in a world where women are engineers and doctors, writers and artists, business managers and carpenters, and yes — full-fledged farmers, finding a way for them to pursue their careers while living on farms in sometimes remote areas of the country can be challenging, if not impossible.



If we’re lucky, we adapt. And if that doesn’t work, we adapt again.

It’s not something “the farmer” in our life has to think much about. He isn’t often asked to fit his needs and goals into a structure mostly designed around someone else’s interests and capacities.

The situation leaves so much space for conflict, and not only within the farm marriage.

MARRYING THE FARM

I have self-identified as a farmer from the moment I became one. And 30 years of my own adaptations should be qualification enough for full-fledged membership in the species. I learned to milk, feed and raise Holsteins on a commercial dairy; and after we sold and got into grain, ran all types of equipment. I did books for much of that time too, meanwhile raising four kids.

Yet, other women still suggest my job is mainly bringing meals to the “men working,” and town people assume a massive garden and oodles of free time for volunteering. And despite my name on all our accounts, people in the industry still call and ask for “the farmer.” It all makes my blood boil.

It’s hard not to be cynical. Perhaps this easy dismissal as “the farmer’s wife” is part of the reason educated and ambitious farm women sometimes can’t find the sense of fulfillment they seek. In my case, it was the decision to put my writing career first that provided a truly independent sense of validation.

You see, many of us didn’t choose to be a farmer. We married one. And therein lies the rub. We can love the lifestyle, we can love our man, but we didn’t marry the farm. Or so we thought.

“I don’t think we have a good way of conversing about opportunities and challenges for women in primary agriculture who are doing things beyond the traditional keeping-the-books,” says Leigh Rosengren, a farmer from southeast Saskatchewan. “It seems we really don’t know how to talk about this when women often came to their role through marriage.”

It’s a touchy subject for many couples, be they in a long-term marriage or just starting out, and whether they are successfully running the farm together, or have off-farm careers. But we need to have the conversation

“ I was envious of women who had off-farm jobs,” Leigh says. “But then I’d think of that one day...”

because the number of female farm operators in Canada is growing. In a 2015 report by the National New Farmer Coalition, 58 per cent of new farmers surveyed were women.

Some of that growth is attributed to women engaged in small local operations producing everything from blueberries to honey, goat cheese to free-range eggs. But I spoke with Leigh because I believe women on large, multi-generational farms are a distinct demographic with unique challenges when it comes to career attainment.

One of those challenges is the isolation.

“I don’t think there is a more isolating role than being a farm woman,” Leigh says. “And we can’t seem to talk openly about it without people saying we’re bitchy and whining, but that’s not what it is. We need to be able to talk about our work on the farm honestly, and about how it affects us, if we want to empower women.”

Choosing our roles; is it possible?

In many ways, the 42-year-old seems particularly empowered. Leigh is a veterinarian, has a PhD in epidemiology and is back at school this fall starting an MBA through distance education. She and her husband Colin run cattle and they crop 7,500 acres near Midale, and have three children aged 14, 11 and nine. Leigh is ambitious. And she’s driven. And yet, even she admits she’s building a career despite the farm.

Consider the choices she’s had to make. After becoming a vet, and just prior to her marriage, Leigh found her dream job in a clinic 500 kilometres away. Colin moved with her, but in the spring packed up and headed home. “Well, I have to go home and farm,” he said. Of course he did.

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“How did I expect it to go?” Leigh is incredulous at her naivety. “So I moved home and changed my life.”

That change meant working around the farming schedule to earn a PhD, and establishing a consulting business she could manage from home, all while raising her kids. The couple hired a nanny to help with that, but though Leigh was a successful consultant, and her kids were happy, there came another pivotal moment. Working on her computer most days, she overheard her young daughter’s response to a question about what mommy does. “She pushes buttons.”

“Hearing that, I realized I wanted to do something I could involve the kids in, and to be able to work without pushing them to the sidelines,” Leigh says. So she made another choice, and bought cows, managing 200 head independently from Colin’s grain farm. Structured as two different companies, they share contracted staff and resources, with Leigh doing human resource management and accounting for both. “If

you’re a cow, a dollar or a person, you fall on my side of things,” she laughs.

It’s striking how matter-of-fact Leigh is about all of this. But she’s also intensely honest.

“I left my dream job for my husband, and I didn’t realize I was bitter. But I can see it now... As you get involved in the farm, it’s like a vortex. I was envious of women who had off-farm jobs, but then I’d think of that one day when I’m not there to make the right decision, and the potential consequences of that one decision, and I just couldn’t do it.”

Many farm women would understand this senti-

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“Every time we grow or expand, it seems to take over another part of our lives,” Leigh finds, but she sees hope

ment even if we can’t articulate it as well as Leigh does. And even if we have supportive husbands as Leigh and I both do. To be clear, this isn’t about the men in our lives (okay some farm men are dinosaurs and need to smarten up); this is about making choices for ourselves within the farm setting, a process complicated by the fact we are married to our business partner.

Because of the all-hands-on-deck nature of farming, we are quickly absorbed into the vortex, and become instrumental to the farm operation in ways we didn’t expect, or necessarily want, doing work which is often not fully recognized financially or otherwise. Over time a sense of obligation ties us to those particular jobs even if that’s not what we want, in our hearts, to be doing. Sound familiar?

And so Leigh farms. But as expected, it’s not enough for her. And why should it be? “We are always justifying ourselves and our choices,” she says. “Our husbands don’t have to.”

Her new choice? To do an MBA, starting this fall.

A person might be inclined to ask why. Perhaps her words to her husband provide an answer.

“I can’t be your shadow,” she told him. “It’s not enough for me.”

None of us wants to be a shadow, but for many women on the farm it is not easy to stand in the light. We sometimes don’t allow ourselves to see the alternatives that exist. Too often we don’t look hard enough, or we bind ourselves to family or community expectations that limit our options.

Or perhaps, and more likely, the value of our inherent capabilities and interests is unrecognized. I can quickly name several women in my area who live and work on the farm, and have degrees in commerce, economics, nursing, teaching, English, political science (that’s me), engineering, and fine art. Does their education make them more likely to want more career challenges? I don’t know the answer to this, but the level of education amongst farm women is also growing, so it’s a question that needs asking.

IMPACT OF EDUCATION

According to Ag Canada stats, in 2016 farm women were almost twice as likely as 20 years earlier to have a university level education, and the number of female farm operators with degrees in agriculture-related

studies has soared, from about one in 12, to 20 per cent.

In 2016, 52 per cent of female farm operators had college or university level education. Men were at 33 per cent.

Amongst women farmers, 22 per cent of their degrees are in business, management and marketing, with studies related to agriculture and agricultural operations at almost 10 per cent. The numbers for male farm operators are the direct inverse, with eight per cent having business degrees and 28.3 in agriculture.

With those statistics, it's little wonder that roles still look gender specific on the farm. But is that necessarily a problem?

If women — and men — are directed toward certain types of education because of their gender, or pigeon-holed into certain roles on the farm regardless of their aptitudes and interest, then yes, it's a problem. In my own family, we have a daughter with a degree in animal science, and our only son is in law school. So who is the more likely to farm? And why do people still raise their eyebrows and look skeptical when the answer is our daughter?

Leigh Rosengren agrees gender and interests shouldn't limit anyone, even if those are more traditional. "My oldest son came out a born farmer. My daughter looks a lot more likely to run the business. In agriculture we need to see there's room for both, that there's more to farming than the physical labour. Women are often unpaid on the farm.

"Not getting a paycheque just about killed me," she grimaces. "So how do we value something that is not as tangible but equally valuable?"

Maybe the answer is again found in her own words about what she hopes an MBA will do for both her career and her farm.

"I think — hope — the MBA will enable us to grow the farm in a way that is smart, sustainable and manages risk. That's the easy answer. The harder answer, and maybe the more honest one, is that every time we grow and expand it seems to take over another piece of our lives. I'm hoping that what I learn will enable us to keep taking on new opportunities while figuring out how to oversee/manage them in a sustainable and profitable way that doesn't require 100 per cent hands on. And as for certainty where it will take me... no idea. I just know that I'm on this farm for good

(career-wise) so I need to grow and learn as best I can to make it as successful as possible."

Success for Leigh includes taking time for herself and her interests, doing things she loves for her own mental and physical health. Did I mention she competes in triathlon as well?

"We want to be a whole person," she says, "and we can't do that if we are trying to do everything."

Leigh is a passionate woman, and her passion is contagious. But so too is her very real worry that we aren't honest about the challenges for women on the farm.

Writing this, I wasn't sure if I was viewing the career dilemma too harshly, or from a generational perspective. Maybe I'm out of touch? Leigh is younger, but maybe she is unique in her observations? But long-time family farm coach, Elaine Froese, sees all kinds of couples in all kinds

of farm situations, and she concedes most women are still in traditional roles, and that many of them are not happy about it. Problems crop up, she says, when couples don't communicate, or don't allow each other to grow and change. And her 2017 blog post "How to Prevent Divorce on the Farm" is still one of the most popular, which says something in itself.

Are we glossing things over in agriculture? And at what expense? I could find no stats on how many women have given up promising careers because they can't make them work from the farm.

Despite farm groups and networks doing great advocacy and support work for women in agriculture, it often seems we aren't getting to the heart of the thing. Why does the choice for many continue to be either/or when it could be "and"?

(Next issue, see Anne's story about aptitude and career choices featuring Lesley Kelly.)
