

A Lesson from the Golden Eggs

Remember the story “The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs?” The four-sentence parable by Aesop, a slave in Ancient Greece during the sixth century BC, provides answers to many of life’s questions.

The Goose that Laid the Golden Eggs: *“A man and his wife had the good fortune to possess a goose which laid a golden egg every day. Lucky though they were, they soon began to think they were not getting rich fast enough, and, imagining the bird must be made of gold inside, they decided to kill it in order to secure the whole store of precious metal at once. But when they cut it open they found it was just like any other goose. Thus, they neither got rich all at once, as they had hoped, nor enjoyed any longer the daily addition to their wealth.”*

Aesop used simple expressions to create a tale that cuts to the heart of the succession planning puzzle for family business owners. The first, “...the good fortune to possess a goose which laid a golden egg every day...” may be likened to the family farm. How often do we take the blessings of our agricultural lifestyle for granted? All it takes is a bad harvest, a devastating storm, an increase in fuel prices or a dismal prognosis from an industry expert.

The farm, like the goose, endows our family with numerous blessings and a quality of life that is difficult, if not impossible, to replicate without a tie back to the land. The farm is the foundation upon which we’ve built the family image.

The egg, the immediate reward from our farming efforts, is most obviously money. But, the reward doesn’t stop at dollars and cents. It includes intangibles that money can’t buy, such as the values we embrace—an apprec-

iation for family, independence, security, peace, strength of integrity, opportunities, ambition to grow, pride in our local community and tradition.

The second sentence points a finger at the negative influence of greed. People often think, if some is good, more must be better, and getting it all at once must be best. Aesop writes, “...they were not getting rich fast enough, and, imagining the bird must be made of gold inside, they decided to kill it in order to secure the whole store of precious metal at once...”

Imagine the coffee talk when a farmer from the community gets rich by selling out to a developer. The tendency is to envy the stroke of luck and daydream about what we’d do with all that money. But once it’s gone you can’t get it back. Each farm is a composite of natural resources, geography, commodities, machinery and heritage.

Each sentence in Aesop’s story stands on its own merit, but the whole outweighs the sum of its parts. Focus on the parallels to real life. Imagine the disappointment when one discovers that not all is as it appears. As in, “...when they cut it open they found it was just like any other goose...”

We’re all fascinated by the prospect of a get-rich-quick opportunity. We know all too well the real life outcome. On close examination, we may find that the chance we seek is right under our nose and well within our grasp. After all, “a problem is an opportunity in work clothes.”

The climax is that in this case,



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“...they neither got rich all at once, as they had hoped, nor enjoyed any longer the daily addition to their wealth.” They bet on a single roll of the dice—traded what was for what could have been and lost it all in a turn. So, where do we go from here?

Apply the lessons. Learn that you do possess a goose and that it offers you a golden egg of good fortune, prosperity and an abundance of unquantifiable values. The family may not get rich in monetary equivalents, but not all of life’s riches can be measured in dollars and cents.

Use this parable to:

1. Quantify the tangible and intangible benefits of farm ownership.
2. Evaluate the opportunities to enhance the results from ownership.
3. Develop action plans to improve the operation.
4. Assign responsibilities to active family members for improvement.
5. Continually refine your efforts.

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