

The Broken Gate: Finding Meaning in Your Ag Legacy

The wind cut right through Ty's heavy coat. It was a Tuesday in late November, the kind of gray day that makes everything on the ranch look old and tired. Ty, eighteen years old and fresh out of high school, was shivering while holding a spool of barbed wire. "Pull it tighter," his grandfather, Pop, grunted from the other side of the brace post. Ty leaned back, mud sucking at his boots. "It's tight enough, Pop. The cows aren't going anywhere in this weather. Let's just wire it shut and get in the truck. I can't feel my fingers."

Pop didn't answer. He just stared at the wire, his jaw set hard. He walked over, cut the wire Ty had just twisted, and threw it on the ground. "If we do it, we do it right. Grab the diggers. This post is rotted at the bottom." Ty threw his hands up. "Seriously? It'll hold for now! Why do you have to make everything so hard?" Pop didn't look up. He just started digging. The silence between them was louder than the wind. Ty stood there, angry and cold, feeling like nothing he did was ever good enough. Pop dug in silence, angry and hurt, feeling like the boy didn't respect the land or the work.



They were quarreling about a fence post. But really, they were fighting because they had lost the meaning behind the work.

Purpose is what holds in a storm

Does that story sound familiar? Maybe it wasn't a fence post. Maybe it was an argument in the combine cab about how fast to run the header. Maybe it was a silent dinner after a long day of sorting cattle.

Many families start transition planning with a wish: "I just want us to be happy." That is understandable. Conflict is exhausting. But happiness is a feeling, and feelings come and go. When the topic is succession, stress is normal. Research comparing happiness and meaning finds that meaning can stay strong even when life feels hard, while happiness is more tied to comfort and good feelings in the moment.

Meaning is different. Meaning is a direction. It answers questions like:

- Why are we doing this work?
- What are we trying to protect?
- What kind of people do we want to be while we do it?



If your family can name shared meaning, you may still disagree, but you are more likely to disagree with respect.

What you really want is meaning.

Meaning is what gets you through the blizzard. Meaning is what keeps you going when the bank account is low. Happiness behaves like any other temporary emotion. Making it your main goal can leave you feeling empty when family disagreements arise or the work gets difficult. If you only expect to feel good, you will likely be disappointed when you face the hard conversations required to successfully pass the ranch to the next generation.

The three fence builders

To understand the difference between a task and a legacy,

consider the story of the three fence builders.

A traveler driving down a dusty county road noticed three people working on a fence line. He asked the first person, "What are you doing?" The woman wiped sweat from her forehead and grumbled, "I'm digging a post hole. And let me tell you, the ground is hard as a rock."

The traveler moved down the line and asked the second person the same question. The man looked up and said, "I'm fixing this fence so the cows don't get out. If I finish this stretch by noon, I get to go into town."

Finally, the traveler asked the third person, who was working just as hard as the others, "What are you doing?" The older woman smiled, looked out over the pasture, and said, "I'm building a boundary that will protect this herd for my grandchildren. I'm making sure this land stays in the family."

All three people were doing exactly the same work. They were all hot and dusty. They were all tired. But only the third person found meaning in the struggle.

Shared meaning must include everyone

A common problem is when only one person owns the meaning of the farm. The senior generation may feel the weight of history. The next generation may feel the weight of proving themselves. Off-farm family may feel the weight of being outside. If the meaning only belongs to one person, the plan can feel like a takeover to everyone else.

Farm transition resources encourage families to clarify values, intentions, and vision early, before legal and financial details lock everyone into a plan that feels wrong.

The why matters more than the what

Research often points out that we should focus on understanding the why behind what we do. In agriculture, we are great at teaching the what and the how. We teach our kids how to drive the tractor, how to mix feed, and how to balance the books.

But we often forget to teach the why. Ag Legacy resources report that a common cause of family business failures is a lack of effective communication. Debt and taxes matter, but many families say relationships and communication breakdowns are what finally break the system. It's the silence in the pickup truck.

When the younger generation doesn't understand the meaning or the why behind the hard work, they feel like hired help. They feel like Ty, wondering "Why am I suffering out here?"

Mapping your meaning: a 6-step process

You do not need fancy language. You need a safe meeting and a way to turn words into actions.





Step 1: Set the stage so people feel safe

Set a few ground rules before you start talking. Set expectations and ground rules to support constructive discussions. Try these:

- No interrupting
- Speak for yourself using “I”
- Ask questions before you argue
- If voices rise, call a time-out and set a restart time

Open with one sentence. “We are here to name what this farm means to each of us, so we can plan the future with less conflict.”

Step 2: Start with stories, not arguments

Stories pull meaning to the surface. Go around the table and have each person answer two questions (about two minutes each)

- "What is an operation moment that made you proud, on-farm or off-farm?"
- "What is a hard season that changed you, even if you were not living here?"

No debating. No correcting. Just listen. Then use a simple reflect back sentence
“I heard you say _____. Is that accurate?”

This keeps people from talking past each other. Keep in mind that these stories don't need to be happy stories. Sometimes the proudest moments are about pulling together to survive a disaster (drought/flood).

Step 3: The Three Buckets Exercise - People, Land, Business

To include both on-farm and off-farm family, draw three columns on paper (or a whiteboard) labeled People, Land, and Business.

Give everyone two quiet minutes to write one hope and one fear in each bucket. This works because on-farm family often start with daily operations, while off-farm family may start with fairness, connection, or long-term security. When you place hopes and fears side by side, you often find overlap, and that overlap is the beginning of shared meaning.

"Fill in each bucket with one hope and one fear. Then we will read them out loud, and circle anything we share."

- People: Hope _____ / Fear _____
- Land: Hope _____ / Fear _____
- Business: Hope _____ / Fear _____

"Before we fix anything, each person will name one thing they heard that they agree matters."

After everyone shares, the circle repeats, then write one meaning statement that reflects the overlap:

“Our farm legacy means _____, so we will _____.”

Step 4: Name values, then look for overlap

Values are what you believe are important. Wisconsin farm succession materials include a core values exercise that helps families name values and connect them to outcomes and behaviors. You can do a simple version.



Have each person write down their top five values (examples: stewardship, respect, honesty, fairness, financial stability, opportunity, learning). Share lists and then the circle repeats. The repeats are your shared foundation.

Step 5: Turn values into behaviors

This is where meaning becomes real. For each shared value, finish this sentence together

“On our farm, this value looks like _____.”

Examples

- Stewardship looks like caring for soil and water, and maintaining facilities
- Respect looks like no yelling and no name-calling
- Fairness looks like clear rules for pay, time off, and decision rights

If you skip this step, values stay vague and keep people guessing.

Step 6: Write one shared meaning statement

Now build one sentence that includes everyone. Keep it short and put it in writing.

Template

“Our farm legacy means _____, so we will _____.”

If someone cannot support the sentence, ask “What would need to change so you could support it?” Keep working until you have a version everyone can live with.

Use the right kind of meeting

Many families only meet when there is a crisis. That makes conflict more likely. The University of Missouri Extension

recommends using different meeting types to build better communication and include more voices: operating meetings, business meetings, and family council meetings.

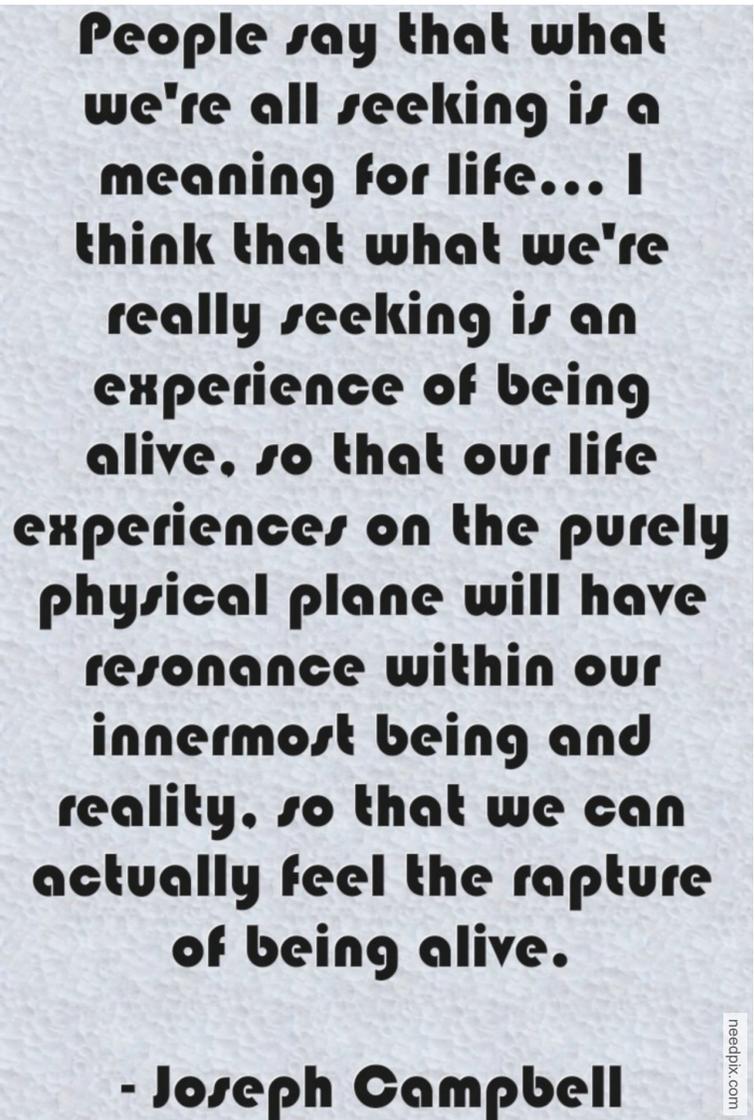
To begin work on meaning, start with a family council meeting

- Include on-farm and off-farm family
- Focus on values and future direction
- Save detailed ownership decisions for later

Keep it short, about 45 minutes. End with next steps and a date for the next meeting.

Closing thought

A successful transition is not only a signed document. It is also a family that can sit at the same table, tell the truth, and keep respect when the topic is tough. Meaning helps you do that.



This week, break the silence. Sit down with your family. Don't talk about the cows or the corn or the broken gate. Talk about why you are doing it all. When you share the meaning, you aren't just digging postholes anymore. You're building a future.

Needing help?

If you are looking for help doing this with your own family, Ag Legacy offers free tools made for farm and ranch transitions. You can find past Ag Legacy newsletters, short How*To guides (like communicating with the next generation), and free online modules with workbooks that walk families through legacy and management transition topics step by step.

Ag Legacy materials and online learning modules are developed to assist farm and ranch families in developing a complete legacy. For more on upcoming modules, past newsletters, and information about Ag Legacy, see [AgLegacy.org](https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy.org).

References

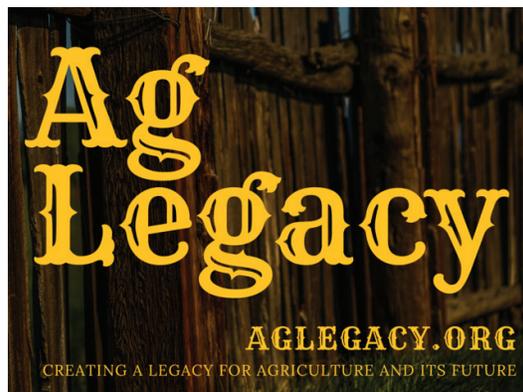
- Ag Legacy. (n.d.). Materials. <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/materials/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Ag Legacy. (n.d.). Modules. <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/modules/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Ag Legacy. (2021, December 8). Why are Interpersonal Issues So Challenging in an Ag Legacy? <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/2021/12/08/why-are-interpersonal-issues-so-challenging-in-an-ag-legacy/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Ag Legacy. (2025, April 10). Difficult Conversations: How Do We Discuss What Really Matters? <https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/2025/04/10/difficult-conversations-how-do-we-discuss-what-really-matters-module/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Ag Legacy. (2024, December 4). Boundaries and Barriers: Do They Belong in an Ag Legacy? https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/2024_12_AgLegacyNewsletter.pdf. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Ag Legacy. (2024, May). Building Family Trust in Your Ag Legacy. Ag Legacy HOW*TO Guide. ALHT-202405.206. https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024_05_ALHowTo_TrustInRelationships.pdf. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Baumeister, R.F., et al. (2013). Some key differences between a happy life and a meaningful life. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 8(6), 505–516.
- Forstadt, L. (n.d.). Bulletin #4806, Maine Farms: Active Listening to Improve On-Farm Communication (Maine Farms: Life and Business in Balance series). University of Maine Cooperative Extension. <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4806e/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Hewlett, J. P., & Carter, C. (2020, October). Communicating with the Next Generation. Ag Legacy HOW*TO Guide. ALHT-20201030.101. Ag Legacy. https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020_11_ALHowTo_Communicate.pdf. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Hewlett, J. P., & Carter, C. (2017, January). How are you Communicating with the Next Generation? (Ag Legacy Newsletter). https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/2017_01_AgLegacyNewsletter.pdf. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Rahe, M., & Tucker, W. (2022, November). Three Types of Farm Meetings to Strengthen the Business and Start a Farm Transition Plan (G515). University of Missouri Extension. <https://extension.missouri.edu/publications/g515>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- Tank, A. (2020, February 28). Stop Chasing Happiness. What You Really Want Is Meaning, and You Can Have It Now. *Entrepreneur*. <https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/stop-chasing-happiness-what-you-really-want-is-meaning/346774>. (Accessed February 28, 2020).
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, Farm Management. (n.d.). Values, Vision, and Intentions for Farm Succession. <https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/articles/values-vision-and-intentions-for-farm-succession/>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).
- University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension, Farm Management. (n.d.). Core Values Clarification Exercise (PDF). <https://farms.extension.wisc.edu/files/2020/11/FarmSuccession-12-4-2019.pdf>. (Accessed December 21, 2025).

Click to see
current posts at:
[AgLegacy.org/news](https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy.org/news)

Click to follow us on:



Online modules, including recorded presentations covering how to establish an AG LEGACY and other helpful information on management succession plans are available at our website. For more on upcoming modules, past newsletters, and for other information about Ag Legacy see [AgLegacy.org](https://www.uwagec.org/aglegacy.org). Requests for additional information may be emailed to Information@AgLegacy.org.



Ag Legacy Newsletter:

Contributing Authors -

John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

Editing/Layout - John P. Hewlett, hewlett@uwyo.edu

 UNIVERSITY
OF WYOMING
EXTENSION

Persons seeking admission, employment, or access to programs of the University of Wyoming shall be considered without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation, or political belief.