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HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT IN PRACTICE (ISSN: 1098-8157) is published six times a year by The Allan Savory Center for Holistic Management, 1010 Tijeras NW, Albuquerque, NM 87102, 505/842-5252, fax: 505/843-7900; email: savorycenter@holisticmanagement.org; website: www.holisticmanagement.org
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Testing the Tool of Marriage

by Tony Malmberg

I came to my first Holistic Management course because I heard you could double your stocking rate. The instructors threw me off balance right from the get-go when they started talking about “quality of life.” In my culture one earned the right to live on the land by hard work and suffering.

But I tolerated the gibberish until we got to the ecosystem processes and time and management guidelines, which made a lot of sense to me. I particularly noted the advice not to go home and build fences until I had a plan, but to focus on setting a holistic goal.

A New Perspective

Defining the whole under management, including the community, stuck in my craw.

I could see the wisdom behind the principle, but my current community consisted of my neighbor ranchers.

However, the nearest town, Lander, Wyoming,

was home to many other kinds of people, including environmentalists. We usually ignored that type and their values, while we planned for a cowboy world. Over many years of inner turmoil, I recognized that the whole community means acknowledging the values of business people, schoolteachers, stockbrokers, artists, rock climbers, bird watchers, and environmentalists, in addition to cowboys.

Once I acknowledged that their values are just as legitimate as mine and got to know them, I began to see that we had much in common. We wanted good schools for our children, a warm and comfortable home for our family, and opportunity for a secure future. At first this paradox caused confusion, like change does. My need to

express the person I was becoming in a more diverse community pulled against my past. Until I could reconcile my new realizations of community, I would be in a state of flux.

Capturing An Audience

But, over time my behavior, actions and talk aligned with my subconscious and my changing community more and more. And as I evolved, I began to accept speaking invitations about my new perspective. One speaking engagement was in Bozeman, Montana on the changing West, where I was drawn to an attractive woman in the audience, but I did not get a chance to meet her.

A couple of months later, a woman wrote me a letter after hearing me on the

Yellowstone Public Radio program, “Home Ground.” On the program I talked about how I had changed the management of our ranch, but, more importantly, how I now defined my larger community. I explained why I thought ranchers and environmentalists

had much in common.

This woman worked for the Montana Consensus Council, which worked at solving conflict. Many of the conflicts she worked on involved agriculture and environmentalists. In her letter she said she liked what I had to say and encouraged me to keep up the good work. I thought little of the letter, but forwarded it to my friend Brian Kahn, the host of the radio program.

I met Brian a couple of years before when he was evaluating different programs for The Nature Conservancy. We connected in our mutual understanding of the environmentalist-rancher debate. As soon as Brian received the copy of Andrea’s letter he called me. “Tony. Tony. You need to pay attention. Andrea is really a great woman. She has the ability to make a living and

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Holistic Management gave me a wife!

her dad is a cattle buyer.”

I trusted Brian and his judgment on this matter, so I wrote a casual letter to Andrea. The letters accelerated until we were writing one per day. In April I called Andrea and told her I was about to begin my grazing season, and I wanted to come meet her face-to-face before then. She invited me to dinner at her home in Helena, Montana. After an eight-hour drive, I found her house and knocked on the door. When she answered the door I said, “You’re the woman I was unabashedly flirting with during the Bozeman talk!” Despite, or perhaps because of, that introductory comment, our relationship continued to flourish from there.

Passing the Test

I was still mulling over the decision to marry Andrea, when we took a trip to visit Andrea’s friends in Washington. During the trip, our conversation turned to an intimate nature and I learned one more critical piece of information about Andrea that sealed my fate. At that point I let slip the comment, “Well, I guess you passed all of the testing questions.” Andrea replied, “What do you mean?”

I explained that my friend and fellow holistic manager Todd Graham and I had already tested the action of me marrying Andrea toward my holistic goal. Andrea was appalled. “Did you test me or the institution of marriage?” she asked. I hesitated, but then explained. (I know this might be slightly different from the way the testing questions are usually used, but this is really what I did).

1. Sustainability—We determined that Andrea’s skills, knowledge, and values would enrich my future resource base and that she would flourish within a combined future resource base. Passed.

2. Weak Link—How will the marriage address the weak link? The ranch had addressed the energy conversion weak link. After increasing our yield by 80%, marketing was our weak link. Andrea would add to our ability to market the unrealized assets of the whole under management. Passed.

3. Gross Profit Analysis—This one was easy. Not only would Andrea bring the ability to market latent assets but she also brought an income with her conflict resolution consulting business. Passed.

4. Cause and Effect—One factor that was adversely affecting the ranch revolved around how I meshed with my changing community. I needed to avoid advocate



Andrea and Tony Malmberg—a match fully tested.

organizations that focused on outsiders being the problem and embrace collaboration with different interests in my changing community. What better way to do this than marry a consensus navigator? Passed.

5. Marginal Reaction—Andrea shared my values from land management to community. By being one with her, she would constantly test my actions against our values. Passed.

6. Energy and Money Source and Use—What form of energy is more renewable than the power of love? Passed.

7. Society and Culture—This guideline tests all actions for how they will lead to the quality of life we desire. Todd and I struggled on

this one, and my conversation with Andrea on our trip addressed this concern. My mindset, at this point in my life, was of the foot-loose and fancy-free bachelor. My goal may have been best described as a wannabe-playboy, which was better in my imagination than in reality. Getting married would limit the possibilities for achieving this goal. Failed.

My conversation with Todd around this test brought much laughter and “guy” talk, but Todd and I knew that even when a tool or action fails one test it can still pass overall. Andrea’s comments on the trip suggested to me that perhaps I had looked too narrowly at this test and that, in fact, marriage to Andrea passed this test as well.

I knew that marriage to Andrea would develop who I was and strengthen my community dynamics. By that I mean that commitment to this relationship would increase my diversity and complexity as a person, while pursuit of a playboy fantasy (staying single) would result in a lower successional human being. Our marriage has allowed us to manage holistically in a way we would not have been able to if we were apart. We further challenge each other to more clearly define and articulate our values. This leads us to see our community and ourselves in

a new light. I am a more diverse and complex person as a result of Andrea being my wife.

Holistic Management gave me an awareness of quality of life that has given my efforts more direction. I have more purpose. My convictions and actions are less influenced by “peer pressure.” In fact ignoring the peer pressure allowed me to differentiate my “self” enough for my wife to notice me in the first place. In essence, Holistic Management gave me a wife!

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