

While perusing the New York Times Opinion section, I couldn't help but drag the computer cursor to the video story entitled *Calving Season: Coming of Age on a Montana Cattle Ranch*. (See Nathan Reich's beautifully filmed piece [here](#).) Calving season raises a complex of memories. Wonderful memories of new life, young calves kicking up their hind legs as they test out their new bodies, and the instinctual maternal care of cows toward their young. Calving season also means cold and wet late-winter weather, troubled births, weakened calves, and the lengths that farmers go to keep young life alive. Reich's video captures all of this and more in a subtle and sobering way. His lens does not turn from the truth. Rather, the images he captures give you a window into what every farmer knows: Life is precious.

I won't give away the video, but suffice it to say that the bittersweetness of calving season finds artful expression through Reich's camera. For our part in northern Minnesota, calving season mirrored what this short film evokes. It's all there: the darkness of early mornings with flashlight offering herky-jerky vision of a cow calving, to the snow squalls that stir up amidst the season, to the clinking of chain links while pulling a calf to birth, to the manual labor needed to keep animals alive and further the symbiotic relationship between species, to the seemingly endless gray of clouded sky, dirtied snow, and drizzly horizon. The coming of age that the subtitle references refers mainly to a young girl in the family. She witnesses the beauty of the new life that emerges. She also testifies to the vulnerability that exists as well.

Indeed, in a number of scenes, she feeds a weakened newborn with a bottle of milk and works to coax the compromised calf to its feet. Clearly, this is not, excuse the expression, her first rodeo. For she possesses a seriousness of purpose, recognizing the vital importance for the calf to stand and move as quickly as possible. Each minute, literally, counts. For our part, there were cases that were so severe that we brought the calf into our home. Heat lamps, bottles, and massages were a part of the regime to nurse the calf to strength. Invariably, the long reach of death was inevitable. Yet, there never was a letdown in purpose and activity to help the calf. To be sure, the financial gain each animal represented was impetus to work as hard as possible to further life. However, this type of work was close quarters combat with the harshness of reality. When you welcome a calf into your home, they become more than chattel.

Thus, the education of the young girl repercussions with each image. Oftentimes, no words are spoken at all, and you wonder what the young girl thinks. How does she feel? How does she construct meaning from these contrasting experiences? Is she inured to life? Or enamored of life? Regardless, there can be no denying that she resides front and center *in* it. Which, it seems to me, remains one of the key lessons of farmlife: to be *in* life. Not on the periphery. Not admiring from the sidelines. Not insulated from the vicissitudes that haunt or harm. Not thinking about acting. Rather, acting. In the arena. All in, whether you like it or not. And saying this does not make it better or more real than other ways of being. Again, it just *is*. And

the *isness* of things tends to be the very reality that you can't escape. Wedding vows hint at such a thing. For better or worse is the language they employ.

With the passage of time (and, I know for me, the creature comforts of a professional existence) it becomes easier to stand a step or two removed from the *isness* that is life. Certain experiences can be managed. Other variables tamed. And the illusion of control begins to seem like almost a possibility. The compelling nature of films like *Calving Season* seems, in part, that they draw us back in, a little closer to what is real and true and authentic. We certainly should respond in wonder to the beauty we see. Also, we should not recoil in horror from the harshness. Indeed, the young girl from *Calving Season* can be a reminder to us if we have lost our way. Be *in* life. Indeed, I cannot help but reflect on the irony that, from our tradition, being *in life* is the very thing that Jesus models. May we.