

STORY #4

The Impossible Dream...?

Ages of children / youth in story: age 1, 3, and up through teens

p. 9 in the book

Chicken Soup for the Soul: Stories for a Better World

Canfield, Hansen, Carter, Palomares, Williams, and Winch

Songs:

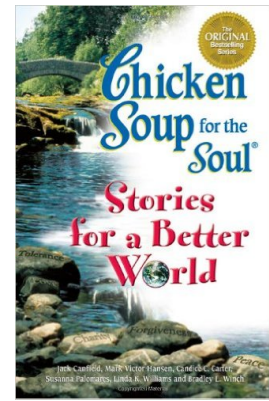
[One Person at a Time](#) (2:56) written at the request of Heifer Project

[Ripples and Starfish: a Song of Hope and Empowerment](#) (3:52)

[Who I Am Makes a Difference](#) (1:46)

[Handle with Care](#) (4:09)

COWBOY DAN song/ PROVIDE LINKS TO LYRICS AND ANDY'S RECORDING
(YOUTUBE OR AUDIO LINK? BANDCAMP, PERHAPS?)



It was happening again! Only a little milk swirled in the bottom of the pitcher, and several tiny, hollow-eyed children were still waiting patiently, cups eagerly outstretched to be filled. If only he didn't have to promise the Red Cross—for which he worked—that he would drink a quart of milk each day for his own health! What was wrong with this picture? Swallowing hard, Dan had to accept the fact that at least one more of those children would starve to death this day.

He slept fitfully that night, as he did most nights since coming to Spain during the Civil War of 1937–38. He kept thinking of the children lying in bed hungry. And the next day wasn't any better. Too little milk, too many empty cups. The cows had been killed by rebels to eat or simply as an act of violence. There were no jobs, little food, inadequate clothing, empty schools—and always fear. Even many of the houses had been destroyed. It was the suffering of mothers, children and old people that made his heart ache. What caused people to do these terrible things to each other? Dan knew who most needed his help—the “little people”: the poor, the hungry, the cold, the powerless, the uneducated, the young, the old. It warmed his heart and inspired him to know that his father, Landon West, had helped slaves to escape the terror and abuse of their bondage during the Civil War in the United States. Would those people in such desperate need have been able to change their life situation without help from Landon and the Underground Railroad?

Dan's mother had done her part, too, by baking extra loaves of bread, which she left in the shed for the escapees. Now Dan himself was giving handouts. But the milk was gone too soon. Spanish families would never know peace if the food was always running out. They needed milk today, and tomorrow, and the next day—and the day after that, and on and on. . . . Wouldn't it be better to give the Spanish people cows, rather than cups of milk? Not a cup, but a cow! Folks able to help themselves in a sustainable way seemed to be peace-loving. Could giving cows help bring peace, maybe even help end war?

Dan West had grown up in Ohio farm country, where fat cows munched in the meadows and fresh cool milk was served at every meal. These were common elements in the daily life of every child there. As he sat under an almond tree after another day of observing the frustration of so many desperate people, he became aware of the bubbling stream and the soft grass under his hands. These people had been farmers. If they had cows, they would be able to supply milk for their children. Could cows possibly be sent here, to Spain, from Ohio?

Returning to the States, Dan was greeted by his children, Janet and Joel, one and three years old, rosy-cheeked and healthy, as farm children usually are. As his little ones drank their milk, in his mind's eye were images of the skinny, sad-eyed children in Spain. Surely something could be done to share the rich bounty of American farm country. But what could one man do?

He talked about it to anyone who would listen. And Dan was easy to listen to, dynamic, eager, passionate. Even the kids playing around the buildings where the grown-ups were talking listened to Dan. His vision was exciting: green pastures with healthy cows delivering calves and giving wholesome milk to healthy children; parents proud to be able to clothe their children and send them to school. The way Dan described the terrible conditions in Spain, the questions he asked, the way he listened with appreciation to the creative new ideas people offered—all this helped make people feel that it was their own vision. Would his family and friends, and his neighbors and fellow church members, help?

His wife Lucy said, “Dan, maybe this is an impossible dream.” But she was willing to help him anyway, because she loved him, and she knew he was trying to help people who couldn’t help themselves. The news got around that Dan needed help with his vision, and a plan began to emerge. One day, Virgil Mock, a farmer from Indiana, said, “I’ll donate a cow.” Then his neighbors, O. W. Stine and his son Claire, said, “We’ll feed and care for it until it can be sent to Spain.” Another farmer said he could spare a cow; then another and another. . . . And some said they would be willing to care for animals until they were ready for shipment. But how to get them to Spain?

Soon, there were questions flying everywhere. Where would they get a ship to take the animals? How long would the journey take? Wouldn’t the cows have to be milked? What to do with all that milk out in the middle of the ocean? And what about the manure?! (The children listening at the door that day held their noses and gave a huge “Yuck!”) It could be thrown overboard, but who would shovel it? There would be a great deal of work and expense involved. Was this really an impossible dream?

There were three main problems with shipping the cows: They needed money to pay for the costs, people to care for the animals and a plan for how to save all that milk. Isn’t that what this whole thing was about: milk?

John drawled, “Well, there wouldn’t be any milk if we send heifers.”

Duh! To experienced farmers, this was a no-brainer. A heifer is a pregnant young cow that has never before produced a calf, and therefore, cannot give milk yet. And when the calf was born, there would be another animal! In fact, someone suggested, each person receiving a pregnant heifer could promise to give the calf to another family. People receiving would become givers. They would be passing on the gift! Could that be a motto?

“Well, if farmers donate the animals, maybe city folks would donate money for the other expenses,” someone ventured. Excitedly, people began to think of uncles, brothers and friends in the city, and the churches could take up collections, too! Now, how about the caretakers on the long sea voyage?

“I’ll go!” came eager shouts from the doorway. “I’m good with cows!”

“I’ll be a cowboy! I’ll go! I’ll go!”

Seeing the excited children, the adults realized that some of the older teenagers, indeed, might be able to do that job. Some of the men volunteered, and so did some women. Willing workers seemed plentiful enough. What could stop them now?

It took six years to make the dream happen, but by that time the war in Europe prevented sending cows to Spain. An urgent plea in June 1944, however, resulted in the first three donated cows—Faith, Hope and Charity—along with thirteen of their “girlfriends” and one calf being sent to Puerto Rico. After the end of World War II, shipments were sent to Europe, Asia and South America, and a project was also started in Arkansas.

In the sixty years since, more than 7 million families have been helped in 125 countries around the world. From alligators and alpacas to camels and cows, from donkeys and ducks to geese and goats, from llamas and yaks to even bees and trees, the list now includes twenty-nine living things that are donated by Heifer International. Great care is taken to send the species best suited to the environment and needs of a particular people. Camels are not sent to swampy areas, nor are fish sent to the desert.

Dan West’s dream might have seemed an impossibility at one time, but now, cows are exchanged for guns in Kosovo and Albania. And warring tribes in Africa and Armenia—and former rival gang members in the United States—have learned that cooperation in farming ventures can help both sides; they’ve learned to work side by side, building lasting relationships, mutual respect and trust.

When the hungry can feed themselves, peace happens.

Florence Crago, Ph.D.