When I moved my parents into our home, my 86-year-old father insisted on bringing his saddlebags. He said, “You can’t get a horseshoe hammer like mine anymore. And you never know when you might need stuff in that bag.” Dad died 18 years ago, but his values live with me. His hammer hangs in my basement as I wrestle daily with mingling the old with the new.

Getting rid of old stuff is really hard. Last summer I celebrated my weight loss by going from closet to closet filling containers with oversize coats and pants. Then I found a Pendleton Woolen Mills shirt—dark blue with red threads woven to make checks ranging from red to purple to blue. It’s 100% virgin wool. Like Dad’s horseshoe hammer, you just can’t get things like that anymore. I bought the shirt in Logan in 1970. Then I gained so much weight I couldn’t wear it. For 43 years it has been hanging in closets as we moved from place to place. I tried it on. It fit.

Soon after rescuing the shirt, I wore it to a meeting where public lands and maintaining a sustainable environment were discussed. I went because I was expected to be there. People are so polarized I feared little would come from the meeting. Dysfunctional politicians draw party lines and vow never to give an inch. My state legislature wants to take control of public lands. This “my way or no way” attitude often turns once reasonable groups into radical camps backing preservation or exploitation. Letters to the editor are filled with personal attacks. The art of compromise, needed in almost all land use decisions, is missing in action.

My Pendleton shirt is not a red shirt. It’s not a blue shirt. It’s an American shirt. Its wool came from sheep that grazed the public lands. Those same lands provide water, recreation, and other ecological services for our luxurious life. The wool was washed with water from public rivers. It was woven into fabric and manufactured in “green” Oregon by proud workers. I bought it in a local store, where the owner was an active member of the community. A product of our beloved United States, my old shirt is a result of compromise on many conflicting issues.

My shirt’s story is not unique. In every step of its journey, there were major problems to be solved. Every dispute required give and take. Hundreds of successful businesses provided goods and services that allowed our people to prosper. Each success required compromises. No one got everything he wanted, but by working together we ended up with families making a living, educating their children, and pursuing the American dream.

Through seeking middle ground, our country became the envy of the world. Our US Constitution is a product of negotiation. Adding the first ten amendments as a Bill of Rights required compromise. So did freeing of slaves and allowing women to vote. Abandoning polygamy so Utah could become a state was a trade-off. Most every product of humankind that has lasting value came about by finding a balance between individual freedom, human rights, and community health.

The journey toward community viability was not short or easy. For the first 300 years after Europeans invaded North America, liberty and individual freedom were driving forces. Human populations were low. Abundant land was available for the taking. New communities formed as native occupants were killed or displaced. Liberty and personal rights were guaran-