

The Purposeful Prairie

By Dave Wondra

Purpose is intriguing. My curiosity about purpose led to a decision to write about it. The idea seemed straightforward, so I scheduled a writing weekend when my family would be out of town. Finally, my weekend on purpose arrived. I found a comfortable spot to sit and began writing on Friday night. The words that did come, came slowly. As my struggling continued into Saturday, I knew I was in trouble. Half of my time was gone and I had barely written half a page. So much for my straightforward project. Eventually, I found myself spending more time looking out the window at the prairie growing on our property than writing.

Then I began to wonder if the prairie had some lessons for me about purpose. So notebook in hand, I walked into the prairie to look for what it had to teach me. As I began my search, I realized that our prairie had grown in meaning as compared to when we planted it several years ago. At the time we were trying to decide how to landscape our property. Our solution was to restore the land back into the prairie that likely grew there decades ago. I now know that a prairie is more than a replacement for a lawn. It's a community of plants that hold within it lessons for the human community. What follows is my point of view about purpose, explained from the perspective of the prairie.

It all begins with a seed. Every time I sow prairie flowers I examine the tiny seeds in my hand, wondering how they could possibly grow. Many of these seeds are smaller than flecks of pepper. Yet I know that each seed contains deep within it the code that describes what it is meant to become, its ultimate purpose. This code is the key to transforming the seed from ordinary to extraordinary, from nondescript seed to beautiful, unique flower.

Once the seeds are sown, patience is required to see the result of the work. The seeds can't be told to grow - they must decide to grow. Each seed must be willing to risk breaking out of the safety of its protective shell. Some seeds lie dormant for years, waiting for the right moment to begin their journey. Others break free and become established plants in their first growing season. They can't wait forever. Refusing to grow will result in death, with potential unfulfilled and lost forever.

Once growth begins, the seedling may not emerge from the weeds for several years. While it seems that little is happening in terms of what is visible above ground, the developing plant is busy doing deep work, growing strong roots that will anchor it during the storms that are sure to come. Some prairie plants have roots that travel as deep as fifteen feet. After developing a strong anchor, the new plant comes bursting out to claim its place as a thriving member of the prairie community.

The seed of purpose resides deep within each of us. Purpose is the unique reason we are on this planet. It's the code that once uncovered, will guide us on our life journey. James Hillman in *The Soul's Code - In Search of Character and Calling* talks about the Acorn Theory, which holds that each of us bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and

this uniqueness is contained within the acorn, or seed, that already exists within each of us.

A seedling thrives in the sun. It relies on the radiant sun to warm the soil and guide its growth and development. In a sense the seedling is called by the sun. It answers the call by following the sun. This is the only way for the seedling to reach its full potential. Some seedlings never find the sun and their growth is severely hampered. Others bask in the sunlight and move toward the fulfillment of their purpose.

God must be discovered before purpose can be uncovered. I can't find my purpose or understand what I am called to do without the Son, without God. Everyone has a calling. A calling is the small, unsettling voice from deep within our souls, an inner urge, which hounds us to live out our purpose in a certain way. A calling is a concern of the spirit. Since a calling implies that someone calls, my belief is that the caller is God. I believe that God created our souls and has already identified the purpose that best fits our gifts, which are the talents we most enjoy doing. I must find God and ask Him to shine His light on the seed so that it will grow and reach its full potential.

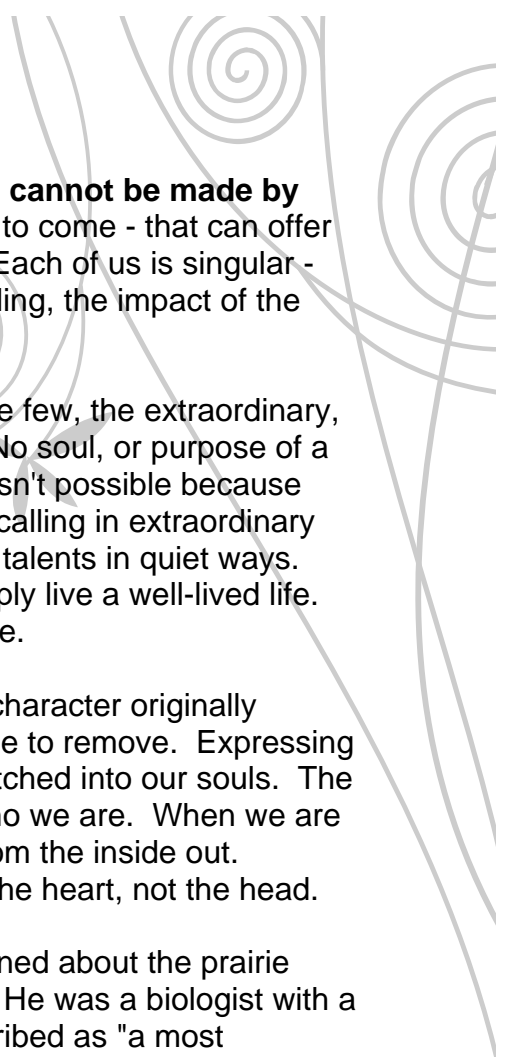
There are many ways to discover God-through prayer, church, the Bible, a spiritual director, song or nature. After discovering God, we need to listen. Hearing God isn't easy because it requires silence. We must quiet our minds to listen with our hearts.

Plants within a prairie community support the growth and survival of each other.

The flowers and grasses together form the prairie. Alone, they are individual plants fending for themselves. I once attempted to grow a prairie specimen garden by separating the plants from each other. It was a disaster that required constant weeding. I didn't realize the extent to which these plants help each other when they grow as a community. Woven together, they join in a way that leaves little room for invading weeds. They form a bond greater than the sum of their individual parts that ensures survival and prosperity.

As citizens of the human community, we have a shared purpose for helping each other make the world a better place. Through a "we" instead of "me" attitude, we can use our gifts to make a difference for those around us. This is also part of God's plan. While we each have an individual purpose exclusive to ourselves, we also have a shared purpose, or responsibility, with all other human beings to share ourselves with the world. God's intention is that we use our gifts to improve our community and world.

Each prairie plant has a unique purpose. Butterfly Weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) is showy and stands out as the only brilliant orange flower in the prairie. Bedstraw (*Galium*) has a wonderful fragrance and was used by early settlers as stuffing for their pillows and mattresses. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) has been used for over a thousand years to treat wounds. Even an ordinary plant has a unique purpose. Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*) is an important food source and metamorphous host for the caterpillar that becomes the Monarch butterfly. And the list goes on.



We are borne to make unique contributions to the world that cannot be made by anyone else. There was no one before us - nor is there anyone to come - that can offer to the world what we can do, done in the way that we can do it. Each of us is singular - and singled out for a specific purpose. If we don't pursue our calling, the impact of the combination of our purpose and talents is lost forever.

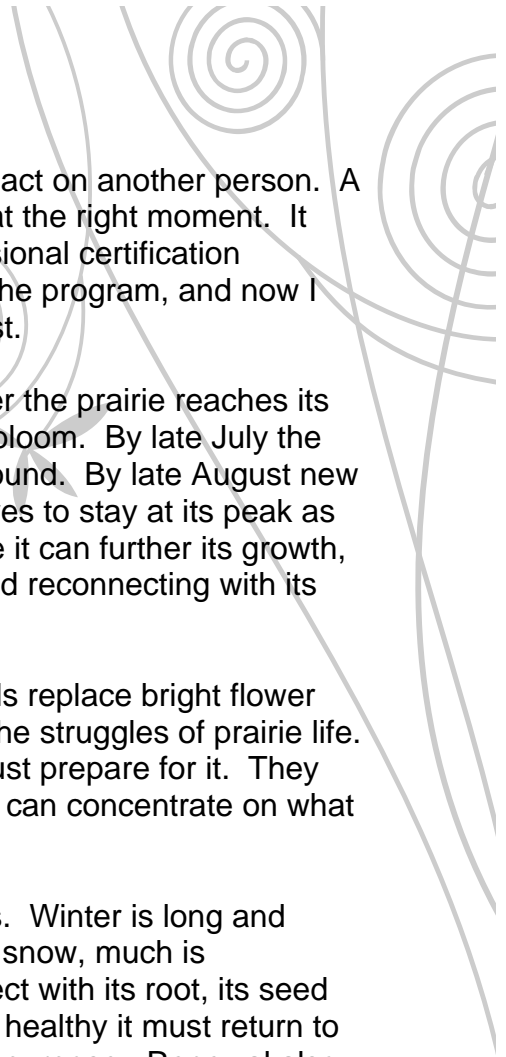
Some don't pursue their calling because they believe that only the few, the extraordinary, are called. They believe they're doomed to a life of mediocrity. No soul, or purpose of a soul, is mediocre! The term mediocre implies sameness, which isn't possible because every soul is custom created by God. While some express their calling in extraordinary and visible ways, others are called to combine their purpose and talents in quiet ways. One may express a calling through gardening. Another may simply live a well-lived life. It's not the specific work that matters, it's the way the work is done.

What makes the difference is character and passion. The word character originally described a marking instrument that cut lines that were impossible to remove. Expressing our character in daily life means that our actions match what is etched into our souls. The form of our external activities matches the internal essence of who we are. When we are passionate about something, we have enthusiasm that comes from the inside out. Passion is a strong source of motivation because it comes from the heart, not the head.

Passion drives us to live out our purpose. Much of what I've learned about the prairie comes from John Weaver, a person who lived a life on purpose. He was a biologist with a passion for prairie research. He devoted his life to what he described as "a most interesting and fascinating task." At the age of 82 he finished the manuscript that became *Prairie Plants and Their Environment - A Fifty-year Study in the Midwest*. This book is the foundation of our knowledge about the ecology of prairies, and serves as an inspiration for many who are living their purpose through prairie restoration work.

A plant is rarely aware of its full impact in the world. It sends off its seeds without knowing the final destination, or result. During Midwest winters, seeds fall from dormant plants and blow about the surface of the snow. A Black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) seed blew into our perennial garden one winter and began to grow the following spring. This plant became a great addition. It was a wonderful result created by an unsuspecting flower that lives somewhere in the prairie.

We may not see the result of our interactions with others in the near term, or in our lifetime. For some of us, the result of our work is thunderous and immediate. For others it may seem that a visible outcome may never come. We sometimes think that only the achievements of those on the cover of magazines matter. The work of all people is important, not just the work of world leaders or successful entrepreneurs. Everyday, people take action in less visible ways that make a real difference in the lives of others. It may be something as straightforward as a kind deed, or the example set by refusing to be anybody but our real selves.



The simplest of actions can have a meaningful, life-changing impact on another person. A friend gave me the nudge to pursue becoming a renewal coach at the right moment. It was just enough to encourage me to investigate joining a professional certification program for coaching. It changed my life. I have since finished the program, and now I express my purpose in ways I have never been able to in the past.

The prairie moves through a cycle of renewal. During summer the prairie reaches its peak. In June it's sprinkled with color as most flowers are in full bloom. By late July the flowers give way to the grasses that begin to tower above the ground. By late August new growth slows as the prairie reaches its potential - for now. It strives to stay at its peak as long as possible, though it can't stay at this place forever. Before it can further its growth, it must renew - it must spend time below the surface of the ground reconnecting with its essence at the root level.

The beginning of fall signals the end of growth. Brown seedheads replace bright flower petals, and leaves look weathered after a long season of facing the struggles of prairie life. Before the plants can move into dormancy, and renewal, they must prepare for it. They quiet the above ground, the visible part of their lives, so that they can concentrate on what is below ground.

With the onset of winter, the prairie finds rest and renewal begins. Winter is long and renewal takes time. While the ground is sealed with a blanket of snow, much is happening below the surface. Each plant has paused to reconnect with its root, its seed of purpose, before moving ahead. Each plant knows that to stay healthy it must return to its core on a regular basis to ensure that its life is aligned with its purpose. Renewal also restores the energy necessary to fuel further growth and maturation.

The prairie occasionally uses extreme measures to renew. It burns to the ground. Fire is necessary for the long-term health of the prairie. Burning removes old growth that has outlived its purpose and destroys invaders such as woody plants that would eventually overtake the prairie. Fire purifies. All that is left after a burn are the plants that are core to the definition of the prairie. To my wife Roselee's relief, the local fire marshal won't let me burn the prairie. Under protest, I've been forced to leave this important task to professionals.

Spring marks a new beginning, a new chapter, in the life of the prairie. From the ashes emerge new growth free of the qualities that are not part of the prairie's character. It's a period of rapid, exciting growth. The plants are refreshed and full of energy. They have a clear sense of purpose and can't wait to show the world what they can be. If they could whistle and shout for joy, they probably would.

We move through a renewal cycle throughout our lives. While we want to maximize the season when we're at our peak, the time comes when our activities begin to drift out of alignment with our core identity. As the gap widens, the trouble begins. We lose energy and feel out of order. Cynicism eventually sets in. These are signs that it's time to renew,

to reconnect our doings with our being, to adjust our activities so that they match our real core.

Finding our real selves means dealing with the fundamental questions of life that ultimately point to purpose. Questions such as, "Why am I here? What am I meant to do?" It's important to regularly revisit these questions because as our lives evolve, purpose evolves. For example, our life priorities at age 30 are different than at 40. In our thirties, a primary focus might be achievement - building a career, relationships, a family or investments. During our forties we often mark a shift from the outside to the inside-from external achievement to internal achievement, from expectations set by others to expectations set by ourselves. Along with these shifts come a deepening of purpose and a reordering of values that we must explore to understand and act upon.

After considering these questions, we can move to planning the next chapter of our lives. The clearer we are about purpose and core values, the easier it is to build a plan since we now have criteria to guide our decisions. As we decide what to add to our lives, it is just as important to decide what we are going to remove. We must make room for what really matters. This means burning away the relationships, places, possessions and activities that are counter to our purpose and in conflict with our values. It's not easy, but it's necessary.

The soul resists compromise and creates a longing deep within for completion. To reach completion we must remain vigilant. Aligning our living to our purpose and values will result in a life of fulfillment. According to Hillman, "What determines eminence is less about a call to greatness than a call to character, that inability to be other than what you are at the core, following it faithfully or being desperately driven by its dream."

Uncover your own seed of destiny. Nurture it. Place it in the warm sunshine. Give it time to grow strong roots. Before you know it, you'll come bursting out to claim your unique place in the world.

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