

The Purposeful Prairie

I live on a restored prairie in Minnesota. Because I want to deepen my understanding of purpose, I began to wonder if the prairie had some lessons for me. So notebook in hand, I walked into the prairie to look for what it had to teach me.

It all begins with a seed. 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. 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.

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. Refusing to grow will simply result in death, with potential unfulfilled and lost forever.

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

The Higher Power must be discovered before purpose can be uncovered. Everyone has a calling, which is the small, unsettling voice deep within us, an inner urge, which requires us to live out our purpose in a certain way. A calling is a concern of the spirit. For me, the Higher Power is God. There are many ways to discover the Higher Power, which may include prayer, meditation, spiritual direction and nature, or whatever it is that calms us and opens our senses. Hearing the Higher Power isn't easy because it requires silence. We must quiet our minds to listen with our hearts. And then we need to act.

We are borne to make unique contributions to the world that cannot be made by anyone else. A plant is rarely aware of its full impact in the world. It sends off its seeds without knowing the final destination or result. 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. Everyday, people take action in 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 seed of purpose resides deep within each of us. It's the code that once uncovered will guide us on our life journey. 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. It's not the specific work that matters; it's the way the work is done. What makes the difference is character and passion. When we are passionate about something, we have enthusiasm that comes from the inside out. Passion drives us to live out our purpose.

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. 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 also have a shared purpose for helping each other. We can use our gifts to improve the living for those around us. It all matters, whether we are helping one person or millions. Either way, we are impacting the world.

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 the season. With the onset of winter, the prairie finds rest and renewal begins. Winter is long and renewal takes time. Renewal restores the energy necessary to fuel further growth and maturation.

The prairie occasionally uses extreme measures to renew. It burns to the ground and it is necessary. Burning removes old growth that has outlived its purpose and destroys invaders. Fire purifies. All that is left after a burn are the plants that are core to the definition of the prairie.

Spring marks a new beginning 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 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 all move through a renewal cycle throughout our lives. As our lives evolve, purpose evolves. While we want to maximize the season when we're at our peak, the time comes when our actions and activities begin to drift out of alignment with who we really are. As the gap widens, the trouble begins. We lose energy and feel out of order. Cynicism or apathy eventually set in. These are signs that it's time to renew, to reconnect with our inner essence.

The clearer we are about purpose and core values, the easier it is to build a plan for our next life chapter, since we now have a framework to guide our choices. Aligning with our purpose and values will move us toward a life of fulfillment. According to philosopher James 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 calling. Nurture it. Place it in the warm sunshine. Give it time to grow strong roots. Before you know it, you'll come bursting out, claiming your very own, unique place in the world.