

Divine Hours Spent Hiking with God

BY CINDY CROSBY

As she began to pay attention—to truly look, listen, and see what was in front of her on her hikes—Cindy Crosby began learning the language of tallgrass prairie, the language of her new home. And she found, as Belden Lane puts it, “The wildest, most dangerous trails are always the ones within.”

If you want to know where you are going, it helps to know where you are. I moved to Chicago’s suburbs eighteen years ago, kicking and screaming. I am a child of the natural world. So many beautiful landscapes! What irony that the job my husband needed plunked us squarely in a place mostly comprised (so I thought) of corn?

I moped around the first few months, regretting the move, feeling suffocated by the suburbs. At least the city has some glamour to it. Living off the land in some off-the-grid location has allure. But *the suburbs*? I began to walk, and walk, and walk—hoping to perhaps keep walking right out of the place I had found myself. Then I discovered, just down the road, a one-hundred-acre restored tallgrass prairie.

LAUDS

What I registered in my mind as “old field” gradually came into focus. These were not the Midwestern weeds and grasses of my Indiana youth, but a signature of something different, something new. A landscape I had not seen before. As I began to pay attention—to truly look, listen, and see what was in front of me on my hikes—I began learning the language of tallgrass prairie, the language of my new home. And I found, as writer Belden Lane

puts it, “The wildest, most dangerous trails are always the ones within.”¹

What’s so special about prairie? The tallgrass prairie is one of the most threatened ecosystems on earth. Twenty-two million or more acres of Illinois were once covered by tallgrass, almost two-thirds of the state. The invention of the John Deere plow, ironically, created just ninety miles west of my new home, quickly rang the death knell for tallgrass. The rich earth was turned over and planted in the corn and soybeans that stretch today from horizon to horizon.

The ghost of the prairie lingers on in the imaginations of those who drive Interstate 88 west of DeKalb, Illinois. The monotony of monoculture reigns. In winter, when the fields are bare, it is not difficult to look in any direction and see only a farmhouse or single tree punctuate the landscape. Use your imagination, and you’ll find that you can feel the isolation of a pioneer shuddering through the lonely winter in a small cabin moored in the tallgrass.

All that is left of the original Illinois prairies, about three thousand remnant acres, are mostly bits and pieces tucked into old, unmowed cemeteries, railroad right-of-ways, or the corners of fields where farmers turned their plows and couldn’t cultivate.

Today, eighteen years after I began those first tentative hikes, I and thousands of other volunteers work to restore the tallgrass prairie of Illinois, adding to those original preserved remnants. Why do we bother? The reasons are as varied as the volunteers themselves. Some enjoy socializing outdoors. Some care about environmental issues. Others come out for a day to pull tall, sweet white clover (*Melilotus alba*) or clear brush because they love the exercise outdoors. Some fall in love with the prairie.

I come to the prairie for all those reasons, plus another. The prairie is where I hike and feel closest to God. I find my most meaningful times of listening for that still small voice which is so often drowned out at my desk at work (where I hear about Jesus loudly and often, but not in the way you would hear it at church), or at home, with the clamor of cell phone and television. Even at Sunday morning services, I am often tuned in to the plight of the refugee and the homeless, distracted by the child drumming on the back of the pew, or chatting with a friend as we pass the peace—but not attending to the quiet in my soul. Not really *listening*.

I have belonged to enough churches, evangelical and mainline, and attended enough others, Catholic or Orthodox, to realize my personal struggle is not the fault of any particular congregation or denomination. I am wired for the outdoors, the cathedral of sky, the carpet of grasses and wildflowers, the hymns of birds and insects. While the weekly liturgical service helps me build a sturdy framework for each week ahead, it is not where I am going to commune much with the divine.

This is why I go to the prairie: to pay attention. As I do, I recalibrate my relationship with God. I find the journal of the prairie replete with messages

that I can listen to, attempt to decode, or ignore. The writer Annie Dillard notes that “beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”² Sometimes I show up. Other times I get hooked on the energy of the tyranny of the urgent and days pass where I don’t. The astonishing things that happen in sky, grass, and stream go on. Whether I show up for them or not is my choice.

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What I miss when I don’t go is another chapter in the story of the prairie. Each season, it unfolds something new for me to contemplate and consider. As I hike these days, I am mostly quiet. For years, I went to the prairie to journal. Now, I rarely pick up my pen. Rather than scribe and record, I put my paper and pen away, and walk, and walk, and walk. And in the walking, comes conversation. I am listener and sometimes petitioner,

beggar, gratitude-giver, and angry child. The prairie absorbs it. I may stay away for a day or a week, but I am drawn back to it, again and again.

God is invisible, often silent. But the tallgrass is always there, waiting, evidence that I am not forgotten. Willoway Brook runs fast with snowmelt in the spring, with clouds of ebony jewelwing damselflies in the summer, and ladies tresses orchids in the fall.

I try to be there to be astonished. To bear witness. And to listen...just in case.

MATINS

It is early March. Waves of sandhill cranes are scribbling their way across the sky. It is a choreography of sorts, an aerial ballet. Weirdly prehistoric. These ungainly birds, standing up to four feet high at the top of their feathered heads, with wingspans that may reach more than seven feet across, look gawky on the ground. Yet, in the air, they take on energy and grace that stops my breath.

They are not holding their breath, however. The vocal cords of the sandhill cranes were said by John J. Audubon to stretch to five feet long, and he noted that their calls may reverberate for three miles. No wonder their eerie cries echo through my house, even with the windows closed! In the mashed down tallgrass of the late winter prairie, the wide open sky seems full of their racket.

Every spring, the sandhill cranes make their way north across my town in the Chicago suburbs. The cranes are moved by some inner compulsion, some signal that tells them go, GO, GO!!!! Unlike the Canada geese, which now short-stop in our area all winter, these cranes do not fly in a straight V. Rather, they move determinedly in that V for a bit, then pause in midair. Suddenly, they swirl and turn, like the writing of a calligrapher who has had too much caffeine and lost control of her pen. To some on the ground, it may look like confusion, or chaos. But to me, it is all a joyful dance.

Today, I hike the Schulenberg Prairie at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois, the first prairie I ever understood as such when I moved to the Chicago suburbs. At one hundred acres, it is a middling sort of prairie, not as large as some (Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie to the south will be more than twenty thousand acres), but bigger than the prairie patch I have cultivated in my small backyard. The sweep of blue over the Schulenberg offers virtual paper for the sky writing of the cranes.

The first wave of about thirty cranes has passed. There is a pause. The others are not far behind. Waves and waves—hundreds, then thousands—of sandhill cranes.

How do you describe the sandhill crane's song to someone who has never heard it? When I was jolted by it for the first time one fall, I only knew it was something different, something unknown in the sky. The sound of the sandhill cranes is something like a purring cat. It is a thrumming of blood; sporadic, a vibration. If I can hear it from far below them on the ground, what must that racket sound like up in the swirling tornado of birds?

As I hike, looking up, a sun halo rainbows the sky, creating a backdrop of unending promise. Change, like the migration of the cranes, has its own predictable rhythms: joy, loss, happiness, grief. There is comfort in this. The cranes will return in November, on their way south.

I watch for the next wave, shielding my eyes against the sun.

PRIME

The cranes have barely passed through Illinois when it is time to burn the prairie. This prescribed fire mimics the natural cycle that people have forever changed; the lightning fires that once torched the tallgrass prairies and kept the trees from encroaching upon them and turning them to woodland are now suppressed by us. Native Americans, who also fired the prairies to drive wild game and entice it to feed upon the new growth, are no longer here to spark the tallgrass. So instead, I and about twenty-five others suit up in yellow slickers, pull on leather gloves and safety glasses, and with the team of prescribed burn members, go out to lay siege to the prairie.

The tallgrass goes up in a blink. Fire roars across the acres, consuming dried grasses, wildflower husks, and everything in its path. The flashes of light, the sound of the flames are intense, dramatic. And then it is over. How quickly what has taken months to grow is destroyed! Erased. Seemingly

lost. To the uninitiated, it is devastation of the worst sort. Those of us who help manage restoration know that the fires are necessary. Without them, the prairies would eventually vanish in Illinois.

This year, I burn my backyard prairie patch the day before Easter. Jesus is in the grave. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. I believe in resurrection, but today: not much. How can you, when everything is reduced to charred earth? What can a ground zero promise us about tomorrow?

Hiking the smoking landscape of the bigger Schulenberg Prairie after the burn, I feel the crunch of tiny mammal bones under my boots. Not everyone is quick enough to escape the flames. I see the detritus of items lost the previous year: a charred cell phone, a weeding tool left by a prairie volunteer, a bottle tossed out from a car on the road running adjacent.

The landscape is reduced to nothing but ashes and litter.

So it seems.

N O N E

A warm front moves through, and overnight, my backyard garden is pushing up plants and blooms. Rain steadily pours down. The peonies, rhubarb-red and fringy, appear one morning. Lady's mantle glistens with diamonds, showcasing each raindrop in its scalloped leaves. It is a transitional day.

I drive to the prairie. As I turn the corner to park, a sleight of hand has occurred. The charred, soupy mud is now a fuzz of emerald with ponds of rainwater standing in pools reflecting the now-blue sky. The black ash has warmed the ground. Hundreds of thousands of grass blades needle their way up from the ruins. Prairie dropseed hummocks, round bumps on the surface of the prairie, are furred with green. The tiny lime yucca-like leaves of rattlesnake master push up in tiny patches along the trails.

I walk, and I look, and I wonder. I gently touch the new leaves in their kaleidoscope of shapes, sizes, and colors. Welcome back. Welcome back. Welcome back.

During the fire, the growing points of the prairie perennials were safely tucked underground. The fires nipped a few emergents. But as the sun heats the charred ground, the warmth coaxes the prairie plants to grow again.

Each season in the tallgrass brings repetition, building on what was there the season before. Yet each season is a new beginning.

Along a craggy outcrop of gravel, I carefully hunt for what I know I have seen before. There! Tucked into the scorched rocks I find them: one, two, three early-blooming pasque flowers blossoming in one clump. Their pale, pale lavender petal-like sepals are almost invisible against the stones.

I fall to my knees in the mud. Somehow this trio of blooms has escaped the flames of a late spring burn. The pasque flower's scientific name, *Pulsatilla patens*, refers to the open blooms' pulsating in the wind.

Its common name, from Latin, means "Easter."

VESPERS

A young black woman—a refugee from Sudan—reads the Sunday morning scriptures. I listen to her wrestle with the unfamiliar English, the odd rhythms of scriptural language. Yet her voice is confident. Reading Scripture in a second language may be difficult. But it is nothing compared to what she's endured.

In an odd way, hearing the words through her reading refreshes the biblical narrative for me. Most of my childhood was spent listening to the Bible read by middle-aged white men. I have nothing against middle-aged white men—my husband of thirty-three years is one of them. But hearing the words from this teenager, who has journeyed so far to stand in front of us this morning and who has experienced suffering and loss that are beyond my imagining, helps me listen and pay attention again.

It reminds me of the power of these words. Her reading is a restoration of what is familiar, yet takes on new meaning. It is the juxtaposition of the old with something new, the past with the future.

"What are we made of? How did the universe begin?" At Fermilab, the nation's "premier particle physics laboratory," advanced particle accelerators help its seventeen hundred scientists and researchers "dig down to the smallest building blocks of matter" and "probe the farthest reaches of the universe."³ The lab is just a few miles from my house. As an outpost of the Department of Energy, it is heavily protected by guards during times of national crisis, such as 9/11.

Today, however the gates are open and I am free to hike their hundreds of acres of restored prairie, complete with some farm-like bison. I show the gate guard my driver's license, and I am free to investigate the prairie trails.

The past and the future collide here, much like the particles in the accelerator ring once collided not far from my path. "Our vision is to solve the mysteries of matter, energy, space and time for the benefit of all," reads their creed of faith.⁴ I admire the work these scientists do; I understand their drive to *know*. The greater drive I feel, however, is to make my peace with the unsolved mysteries, even while reaching for understanding.

The only sounds as I hike are the occasional burst of sandhill crane chatter overhead. Spring migration continues. A car whizzes by, and the

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tentative sounds of a newly-emerged western chorus frog pierce the woods that limn the prairie.

The trails stretch to the horizon line, unbroken except by the occasional scrubby tree. And a large pile of...something.

I hike that way. The pile looks like the aftermath of a tornado that has swept through a wood. Tree after tree after tree, stacked like pixie sticks,

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taller than my head. Cut and piled – to be burned? Chipped for wood paths? I wonder. Why would anyone advocate this wholesale destruction?

I look closer. Ah! This particular mystery is solved.

Ash trees.

In the past three years in northern Illinois, the ash trees have been decimated by a tiny pest: the emerald ash borer. The trees are weakened, and then die as the ash borer moves

from street to street, from woodland to woodland, from state to state. At the arboretum where I work, more than two thousand trees on seven-hundred acres have been destroyed by the borer. Our Ash Collection? A memory. Only stumps remain of what once were beautiful, stately trees, valued for their utility, their shade, and their beauty.

Ash is the wood of choice for professional baseball bats. Black ash trees were valued by the Ojibwe for baskets, providing material for works of beauty and utility. Along my street in a Chicago subdivision, where 1960s landscapers chose ash for their low cost and pretty shape, ash trees formed a leafy border shade. Almost eighty percent of our street trees have been removed in the past year.

A way of life as we know it is passing. Imagine a world without trees? I never could, until this.

Of course, the loss of a tree species is nothing new. A quarter of the Appalachian forests were once covered with American chestnuts in the early 1900s. When chestnut blight hopped, skipped, and jumped over the ocean, we lost more than two billion trees. *Two billion!*

Almost all but a handful of these economically important and beautiful trees were gone in the space of a few decades. No one could believe it was happening. Surely with our scientific know-how and smarts, we could stop the spread of the blight, right? But we were helpless.

We once planted rows of American elm trees in the same way. Every

small town in America still has its “Elm Street” — but where, oh where, are its elms? Gone. Because our main streets were lined with rows and rows of one kind of tree, when they began to fall to Dutch elm disease, we lost much of what made our communities beautiful and rich. Did we learn?

Rather than diversity, we chose a cookie-cutter way of moving forward. Ash trees replaced the elms in much of the Midwest. Ash are, or were, nice-looking, cheap, and fast-growing. Rather than choose the more costly path of diversity and planting many different types of trees, we chose to make every street look the same. It was cheaper and required less energy, work, and thought.

I hike the streets of my subdivision and mourn the result. The stumps along the sidewalk are like tombstones. Squirrels race across the street, looking for a place to put their dreys, the leafy nests where they raise their young. Birds move overhead in migration, confused.

No warblers sing from the two giant ash trees that once framed our driveway, giving us privacy from the neighbors. Our home feels naked, and all in the space of a year.

When we commit to the easy way — planting one kind of tree — we gamble. It is simpler, isn't it, to know and promote only one tree for our landscape. We know what it will look like, its requirements and habits. But when we do, we lose the benefits of a vibrant, healthy landscape, teeming with different trees, plants, and their associated animals, birds, and insects.

As the emerald ash borers moved from tree to tree, they left hieroglyphics under the bark. Peel it back, and you will see the marks. This is known as the “gallery.” And indeed, it is artwork of a certain type. I imagine the message of the ash borer hieroglyphics is this: embrace diversity. Think about how to make life richer, not easier.

I hike, and I think, and I hike our streets some more. My parents never knew a world that had American chestnut trees. I have never known a world with elm-lined streets. My grandchildren will never know a world that has ash trees.

By refusing to acknowledge our need for diversity, what else will we lose?

COMPLINE

I return home from the baptism at my church Sunday morning to a thunderstorm, rattling my windowsills. The gentle trickle of the water sprinkled over an infant's head seems tame compared to the first big crash-bang-wham deluge of the spring season. I open the window and lean against it, inhaling the cool, moist air, and listening to the rain.

But there is something else. *Creak! Creak!* Like the sound of a rusty door hinge. It is a western chorus frog, who has found his way to my tiny hand-dug backyard pond and is calling for a mate. He makes a lonely sound, with no response in the rain. But he doesn't give up. After a while, as much as I

enjoy frogs, I find myself longing for an “off” switch. Even with the window shut, his voice is there — *creakkkkkkk* — over and over in the background.

I have listened to these frogs and their counterparts, the spring peepers, as I hike the wetlands of the Chicago suburbs. But I have never had them in my pond before. My handkerchief of a yard is surrounded on all four sides by modern homes. Privacy is a desired commodity. In the spring, the commercial yard crews pull up outside my neighbors’ houses and spray, aerate, mow, core, and groom the blades of grass that form their tiny yards. Bushes are chopped and then contoured into poodle-like shapes. Ornamental yard trees are limbed to ensure good behavior. Fences surround almost all the yards but my own. KEEP OUT! CONFORM! The message is there, if unspoken.

I have chosen a different way. As I walk around my yard, I look at my small prairie patch, burgeoning with new growth. Common milkweed (*Asclepias syrica*), pulled from the surrounding yards, pops up in unexpected places. I leave it for the monarchs as they wing their way back to our prairies on their migration path from Mexico. Native milkweeds are their caterpillars’ sole source of food, and the only plants on which the monarch butterflies lay their eggs.

In one corner of my yard is a tiny pond. I dug through the clay and turf of my backyard to make it because I had learned that water is invitation to something bigger than me. It invites a loss of control. It speaks of a willingness to embrace mystery. The pond fills and dries, overflows and goes empty with the fickle nature of Illinois weather. In winter it is a small ice rink dusted with snow that shows me the passage of winter animals and birds.

On fine spring mornings, I find muddy footprints all around the pond and across the concrete patio: a raccoon, pausing to wash its supper; a fox, sometimes glimpsed as we are working in the yard, stopping for a drink; two ducks, flying in for a short swim.

In the summer, the flash and play of light on dragonfly wings enlivens my view from my hammock. “Won’t that water draw mosquitoes?” ask my Zika-virus frightened neighbors. Perhaps. But it also will bring the dragonflies that bring those mosquitoes in balance.

Through the ice and snow that covers the pond in winter, the dragonflies live as tiny beetle-like nymphs, ugly and ferocious. In May, they clamber out of the pond and begin to split their bodies into something new. Insect blood, *hemolymph*, pumps into their wings, which gradually unfurl and take on shape. They are inimitably fragile in this moment. Anything — hail, a passing bird, a flower petal falling at wrong moment — will obliterate them. Clinging to the leaves and plants around the pond, in the “teneral” stage, they slowly morph into something new, fragile. A bird could snatch them away in an instant. A wing could be damaged and irretrievably be malformed and broken, unable to be repaired. And yet, they lift off, more than not, in the miracle of flight. My backyard is evidence of this unseen mystery, year after year.

The tiny pond reminds me that if I prepare a place for mystery – a place where I give up control of what I want to see and, instead, see what comes – it will not always be pretty, like the dragonflies. Water is an invitation for change. Some of what emerges with that invitation will be broken. Some of it will become damaged along the way.

And yet.

I feel a hard-beating pulse; the blood moving through my veins. The pulse of spring, the pulse of the dragonfly wings unfurling. Of something ready to happen, of something new, ready to emerge. But I want to be open to what is different than I am; not complacent, comfortable in the company of the expected and the known. Let me risk.

I will be fragile. I will be broken. I will become strong. What will emerge? Come, Holy Spirit. Surprise me.

NOTES

1 Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 117.

2 Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics edition (New York: HarperCollins, 2013 [1974]), 10.

3 “Fermilab is America’s particle physics and accelerator laboratory,” *Fermilab* website, www.fnal.gov/pub/about/ (accessed June 9, 2016).



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