

Faith

By Linda Poole

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“Faith, hope and love collectively are the source of creativity in the world. Reality comes from imagination. We create a new reality each time we transcend an imaginary old boundary. . . . We can transcend boundaries we create only through love, and in learning to love those we consider our enemies, we re-create the world as a better place for all peoples.”
-- Fred Provenza

Are people a part of the natural world, or apart from it? What is the best use of the sparsely-peopled prairies, and who decides that question?

The prairies of Phillips County, Montana have been little changed by the Industrial Age. Species of plants and animals here today are nearly the same as those catalogued by Lewis and Clark 200 years ago. This immensity of grass and sky is a stronghold for pronghorn, mule deer, prairie dogs, burrowing owls, mountain plovers and a dozen more grassland bird species that are disappearing elsewhere.

For over a hundred years, ranching has been the foundation of local economy, culture and conservation here. Today, third and fourth generation ranchers care for the prairies with a land ethic that would delight Aldo Leopold. Rancher Kevin Koss says, “Of course we take care of the land, because the land takes care of us.”

Testimony to the health of this land, two of the world’s largest environmental groups, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and World Wildlife Fund, pinpointed this as the region most crucial for the future of northern prairie wildlife. Land is changing ownership: TNC bought the 60,000 acre Matador Ranch as the anchor for community-based conservation, while the American Prairie Foundation is working toward a sweeping vision of thousands of wild bison roaming across millions of acres of uninterrupted prairie. National media have portrayed the situation as ranchers versus environmentalists, a war over the future of the plains. What is more important, culture or conservation?

For six years, I have worked for TNC in Phillips County. I see this community, and others, making far-reaching choices about how to relate to one another and the land. Ahead of us loom the end of oil, climate change, burgeoning human populations. Behind lie our roots, traditions, and history that can instruct. And between is the here and now, with all the makings of tragedy or triumph, either one likely, depending upon the wisdom and compassion of choices made and relationships built.

Phillips County is blessed with key components of lasting success: a committed workforce of site-savvy land stewards, abundant wildlife, an economic base of ranching that sustains biodiversity and a rich heritage, and the attention of environmental groups who could invest deeply into the area. But if we act from fear, such passion could easily turn dark, and degenerate into bitter attacks and desperate holding actions against one another which surely would fracture both land and community.

And so we make wise use of the pivot point where we stand now. Encouraged by mentors such as Fred Provenza, Courtney White and Bob Chadwick, our community is pioneering unlikely alliances to maintain our ranching heritage while building synergistic solutions for prairie conservation. We seek ways to turn the table so that conservation becomes an economic engine for the area, and we imagine future generations wondering, “Did ranchers save the prairie birds, or did birds save the ranchers?”

While we have yet to craft lasting solutions, I thrill with certainty that wisdom will arise as together we live the questions with integrity and attentiveness. With clear minds, compassionate hearts and the highest of principles, this community is setting out on a path toward a vibrant future we previously only hoped could be true.

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