

VIOLENCE AND REDEMPTION ON AMERICA'S SHATTERED

Great Plains

n my ragged early days as an activist, admittedly not marked by much nuance, I was confronted with this dilemma: How do I Leget America to care about something it has killed? Few words describe how traumatized (and angry) I was after years of seeking any refuge on the American Great Plains, and finding instead a war zone of bloodshed, suffering and sorrow that seemed little changed from the 1870s.

But inside this landscape of pain and loss, I was informed by sudden moments of nearly impossible beauty, tiny pulses that opened my heart. Life was still here, and even animals most under attack celebrated each day, like prairie dogs who worship the Sun.

I decided I would insist upon an ultimate goodness in people. Creating refuge on the Great Plains should be like a living art project, full of life like the Earth herself used to be, and bring people together from all walks of society. Healing the living land-which functions much like the living body—could be used in therapeutic ways to help stricken people heal themselves. In our 13 years, Great Plains Restoration Council has developed the 12 Components of Ecological Health, which is "the interdependent health of people, animals and ecosystems," and the two programs, Plains Youth InterACTION™ and Restoration Not IncarcerationTM.

We have helped protect a crucial 4,600 acres adjacent to Badlands National Park in South Dakota just outside Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, and are still battling for a 2,000-acre tallgrass prairie remnant at the backdoor of 5 million people in Fort Worth, Texas. In Houston, our coastal prairie Restoration Not Incarceration workers have not only worked on this endangered prairie (less than 1% of America's Gulf Coastal Prairie is left) but are helping build a meta-population of several new Gunnison's prairie dog colonies on the 13,000-acre Galisteo Basin Preserve in Santa Fe County, New Mexico, plus cross-cultural interaction between urban Texas and northern New Mexico.

We're not visitors to nature, or our own lives. Even in the hood, we still live on the prairie. We share the same sun, storms, wind and water. Our bodies, lives, relationships and communities are part of nature, too.

I could share crewmember quotes, and a lot more, but it's the quiet changes that are most profound, such as when a young brother, warm to the idea of hanging himself-and no stranger to previous, self-justified violence to others—comes up and talks privately.

Much of this is serious and challenges deeply, but we work well with the most damaged—people who everybody else has given up on, including themselves. Social workers and restoration ecologists help ground any advanced requirements. These days I personally focus most on building Restoration Not Incarceration—young, often-homeless felons in their early 20s barely staying alive, who, with enough tough support, and the dignity of work, can grow again, like our gasping, left-for-dead prairies.

Sometimes I am a little unnerved by the potential power of this work.

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