

Three Minute Speech

by Bill Whitney for Conservation Jam, Center for Great Plains Studies, 1 Feb. 2013

In the spirit of Nebraska visionary, Emiel Christensen, I offer you *Ribbons of Prairie*, a vision for the agricultural cornucopia of the eastern Great Plains and Midwest. It embraces natural, agricultural and human diversity, celebrates Creation, and elevates to a higher plane our role as restorers and stewards of all life.

Ribbons of Prairie, hatched by the Prairie Plains crew on a hot summer seed collecting day, is a metaphor suggesting a romantic regional vision. As if inhabiting a 19th century Plains landscape painting we see a “Ribbon” – a strip of nature along every stream, the water reflecting blue sky, the varied green meandering veins of riparian woodlands, savannas and prairie grasses contrasting amidst the deep green vastness of farmland rolling in every direction in the heart of America.

- ³⁵₁₇ *Ribbons of Prairie* is a grand 100-year restoration plan for stream corridors;
- ³⁵₁₇ It is about seeing a unified landscape and its many parts;
- ³⁵₁₇ about restoring dynamic hydrological and ecological functionality to whole watersheds within both an agricultural and natural context; and
- ³⁵₁₇ restoring native biodiversity across the landscape;
- ³⁵₁₇ *Ribbons of Prairie* is about people. An idea or technical capacity is not enough. Effective vision must evoke cultural aspiration - motivating, offering enjoyable benefit, understandable; everyone figuratively needs to own it;
- ³⁵₁₇ Citizens will have a voice, seeing themselves in this painting as creative participants. Beginning with conversation and education, they will decide what is vital for sustaining life and culture, and act on what is possible in their own watershed;
- ³⁵₁₇ Leaders drawn from all corners of society, from every institution and from all walks of life will emerge to guide the collaborative creation and continuing husbandry of what will be considered an enormous community asset;
- ³⁵₁₇ *Ribbons of Prairie* is about forming a great commons, connecting people and communities together physically through a linear watery wilderness and its network of trails; drawing themselves closer in celebration of their places through festivals, recreation, growing food, commerce, art, music and stories.

Ribbons of Prairie is pragmatic. Water is necessary for all life; in order to protect it we must think creatively about it. Likewise for diverse nature – the Mother Book of Life. Through deliberate action we can intervene to heal watersheds. Restoring nature and maintaining the River of Life offers us a vehicle to reclaim rural community and in the end a bit of ourselves - re-making the prairieland to give us spiritual as well as material sustenance. A vision that encompasses fun, whimsy, beauty and, joy, while also doing the business of keeping the real world intact on the blue planet is not a luxury but a necessity. I think it's up to the artists and educators to lead the way.

And the good news is . . . the embryo of this vision already exists now in small scattered pieces. We have witnessed and been a part of it and will continue to nurture it.