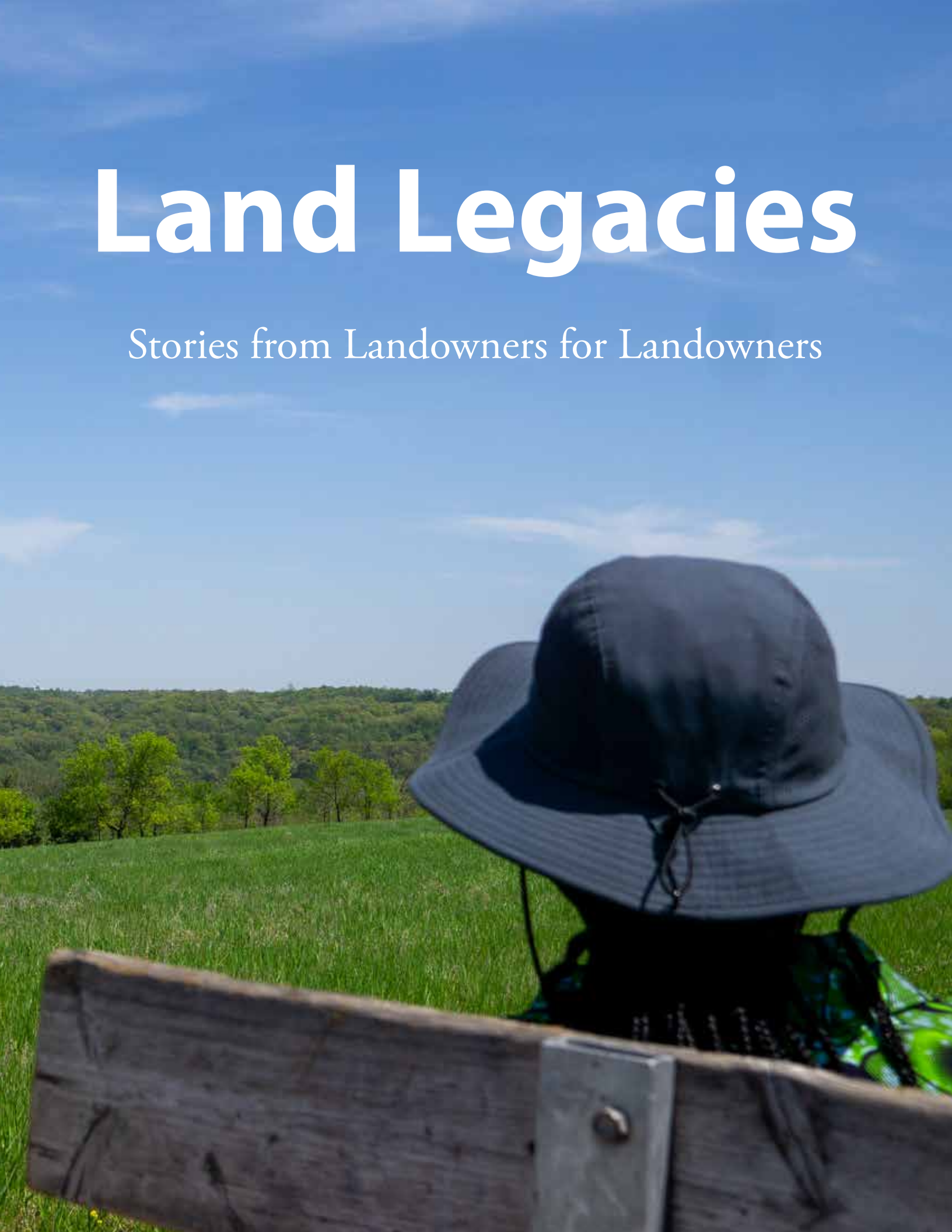
Land Legacies

Stories from Landowners for Landowners



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Renewing the Countryside works to come alongside farmers and land owners in their pursuit of thoughtful and practical land transition strategies.

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Welcome,

This booklet includes the touching, excruciating, and celebratory stories of landowners on the journey toward deciding what to do with their farmland when they are gone. All of the landowners participate in the Climate Land Leaders Initiative, which brings together people working – in a rapidly changing climate – to provide nutrient-dense food, habitat for our "greater than human relatives", financial security for future generations, healthy soils for growing food, and reduced energy use and sequestration of carbon in plants and soils.

None of the participants view their property as a commodity to exploit, but instead see land as "the unique entity that is the combined living spirit of plants, animals, water, humans, histories and events," as Canadian researcher Dr. Max Liboiron* writes. As of early 2025, 190 who steward about 50,000 acres were participating in Climate Land Leaders. They meet up online and in-person to share how they are restoring prairie and wetlands, managing woodlands, and more.

In 2025, the Climate Land Leaders Initiative turned five. This milestone anniversary is a good time to look forward to the years ahead, when the participants and their heirs will be implementing choices that will impact generations to come.

THANK YOU to the following contributors: Carol Bouska, Peg Bouska, Carolyn Brue, Christina Foster, Mary Damm, Leigh Garrett, Helen Gunderson, Vicki Rae Harder-Thorne, Margaret McQuown, Dr. Michelle Montgomery, Dr. Teresa Peterson, Sally McCoy, Ann Novak and Paula Westmoreland.

Thanks also goes to Practical Farmers of Iowa, whose members provided the seed and encouragement for so much of the legacy work in this booklet.

With gratitude for all of the Climate Land Leaders, who are on a journey to become good ancestors.

–Teresa Opheim, Executive Director, Climate Land Leaders

*Liboiron, Max. Pollution is Colonialism. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Carol Bouska lives in Minnesota, Ann Novak in Washington State, Sally McCoy in Wisconsin and Peg Bouska in Iowa. Together they steward Highland Farm in Iowa.

Gifts from Our Ancestors

The Hard – and Rewarding Work – of Farmland Legacy Planning

by Carol Bouska, Peg Bouska, Sally McCoy and Ann Novak

We are the four Bouska sisters, and we inherited this farm in Northeast Iowa from our parents. Although we all grew up on the farm, we live in four different states and none of us lives on the farm today.

We recognize that as white settler descendants we have a lot of privilege to have inherited this land. We also know that we are lucky to have the time and resources to work on our farm legacy together and that it's not feasible for everyone to do so. We share our experience of working on legacy planning as one approach.

Our ancestors bought the first plots of this farm in 1903. They continued to add onto this land, purchasing other property until they acquired the last 40 acres in the 1980s. Highland Farm is now 450 acres, in two different farms and one five-acre woodlot.

When we were growing up, the farm was diverse with corn, oats, alfalfa, beans, cattle, pigs, chickens, horses, dogs, and cats. In the 1980s, our parents retired and rented out the farmland and sold the animals. The farm then became a corn and soybean operation. Mom and Dad were concerned about conservation and their own land legacy and put land in grassed waterways and filter strips. They planted trees, managed the woodlot, and required contour planting with the renter.

They also prepared for their deaths with good estate planning. Our dad was born on this farm and died feet from where he was born. He started talking about being gone when he was in his 60s. He lived to a month shy of 92, so we got used to hearing him talk about death. When we would object to him talking about it, he would say, "Death is a part of life."

Both Mom and Dad were concerned about family harmony and stated specifically that they didn't want the land to divide us after their deaths. This was a clear message from them to us.

Our legacy work

When our parents died, we began our own legacy work. After consulting with legal and farm experts, we formed a legal partnership, where we each owned one share of the entire property. We wanted to make sure that the land was kept together, and not sold off in plots by future inheritors when one of us died. Forming this partnership included many frank and sometimes difficult discussions with scenarios. For example: "How will the grandchildren make farm decisions together?"

The inevitable happened too soon. Our brother, Jack, died unexpectedly in 2014, within a year of forming the legal partnership that stipulated that the surviving partners could purchase the share of the deceased. We were grateful that we had this planning in place to help us move forward, and that we didn't have to figure this out in the midst of grief. We sisters purchased his share from his successor, his wife. She was aware of this possibility, since Jack had discussed this plan with her. We were also grateful for that.

Jack's legacy continues on the farm with "Jack's Field," the pollinator field that he worked on with excitement before he died.

In 2016, we sisters decided that we needed to accelerate our plans for the future of our family farm. It has been helpful for us sisters to attend workshops together, read the same books, and listen to the same podcasts, and then discuss them. Together we read *The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers' Legacy Letter Project*, edited by Teresa Opheim, which helped to move us all to another level of thinking regarding our farm.

In the summer of 2016, we decided to do a half-day meeting focused on beginning this work. We reserved a room at the library in Decorah, Iowa, away from the rest of the family and the farm. We focused on one activity: To define our goals. [See activity on page 7.]

We were pleased to find that we all had similar top goals. They are:

- Increase biodiversity and improve soil, water, and air quality
- Use the farmland to help stem the tide of land consolidation
- Provide safe and healthy food
- Keep family harmony
- Contribute to the health of the local community.

As you can see, our parents' legacy comes through in our goals. After our meeting that day, we met the rest of our

family at the Decorah pool and then had ice cream at the Whippy Dip, a local ice cream shop. This has become a tradition: work followed by fun.

Next, we each spent time writing our legacy letters [see the template on page 8] and then met again for a half-day session to share our legacy letters with each other.

The legacy letters include:

- Farm data and history
- Strong memories and events (the heart and soul)
- Goals for the farm (from the previous goals exercise), and
- Parting gifts (What is important for our farm.)

This session was a very emotional one. We each had different memories (there is a 15-year age difference between us) but, again, there were common desires for the future. There were also differences.

Where to next? We were having difficulty with discussions about land ownership and transition. We felt stuck. We have a commitment to hire professional help when needed. We hired a facilitator, Rena Striegel, to meet with us the day after a conference we were going to together. At the conference, we were very inspired by a regenerative agriculture workshop by Paula Westmoreland and Lindsay Rebhan of Ecological Design. When we met with Rena the next day, she helped us to define our vision to transition to a regenerative farm by 2030. This gave us energy and movement and helped us to focus on healing the land itself, versus just focusing on the ownership and succession plan. With this new energy, we got to work.

In 2020, we hired Lindsay and Paula to put together a holistic, detailed design, and implementation plans for us. We have used these plans many times in the last few years to guide us, and for detailed information during implementation. Our investment in hiring Rena, Paula, and Lindsay really paid off.

By focusing on our goals, we have been able to put almost 100 acres in conservation, and we are now transitioning the cropped acres to regenerative practices. These conservation efforts have made us interact with the land so much more. We now walk out to the wetland, through the newly planted trees, prairie strips, and Jack's pollinator field. Our next generations are doing this too. On a recent walk out to Jack's field, grandchildren saw some wild black raspberries and got so excited. They picked for a couple of hours and were delighted to eat and share their harvest. We continue to witness the diversity of species coming back to the land – frogs, migrating waterfowl, birds, and masses of monarchs.

Working together

We sisters meet every two weeks for our business meeting, via zoom. We document our decisions and votes and keep records online. At these meetings we share maintenance needs, as well as progress and decisions needed on long-term projects. We also regularly play the card game 500 together online, something we picked up during the pandemic. Playing 500 is a way for us to have fun together and a tradition passed down from our ancestors. (And we don't talk about farm work during our games!)

Our meetings only include the sisters, without spouses. This was not without discussion and introspection. But it has led us to a place where we four sisters have a very strong circle, and we feel committed to each other, and have been able to create our vision together.

We are intentional about how we share where we are with our kids, extended family, and those outside the family. We discuss what to share and when. We do this to honor one of our goals: "to maintain family harmony". We want the next generation to hear us with one voice, not as four sisters going in different directions. The consistency of messaging has at times been difficult, but essential for us. It honors our parents and we feel that this is part of our legacy for the next generations as well.

Consensus decision-making takes time. We realize that we are moving at a slower pace with our transition, and this can be frustrating. The decisions range from small maintenance decisions to bigger decisions, like when and how to transition from a long-time renter and who is going to own the land when we are all gone. We have a lot left to figure out.

Working together is heavy lifting at times, but we are very committed to each other and to protecting each other in the future. We have gotten much closer. We feel that we are giving our children a gift by working through this together. This is part of our own legacy to them, and they appreciate this too.

What Matters Most for the Future of Your Land?

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Read through the goals. Change their wording, if needed, so that they all make sense to you.
2. Is there a goal missing? If so, write it down in the "Other" category.
3. Cross out the goals that are not relevant or are very low priorities for the future of your farmland.
4. Look through the remaining goals and circle your top three.
5. Do you have a top goal of the three? Put a star by it.
6. Share with family and your transition team to start the conversation.

Unfortunately, it may not be possible to accomplish all of the goals you would like for the future of your farmland. "You cannot maximize more than one variable," says Dr. Mike Duffy, Professor Emeritus at Iowa State University. "You have to prioritize. Most people aren't going to have the resources. It becomes so important to consider the various goals and decide 'this is my number one goal.'"

This activity is designed to get you started in identifying your top goals.

Possible goals for my land legacy:

- ❑ Keep family harmony/foster positive relationships among family members
- ❑ Protect soil and water quality, biodiversity and help alleviate climate change
- ❑ Provide land for my farming heir(s) to farm
- ❑ Provide land for a family (non-relatives) to grow safe and healthy food
- ❑ Contribute to the health of the local community
- ❑ Provide my heirs with greater financial stability through the sale of, or rental income from, the farm
- ❑ Give the land to charity
- ❑ Use my land to address social injustices in our country (sell and donate the proceeds, return land to Indigenous peoples, etc.)
- ❑ Keep the farmland in my family
- ❑ Other: _____

_____

_____

_____

Write Your Own Farm Legacy Letter

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Here's a template for developing a farm legacy letter that can help start a conversation about the future of your farmland. When you have completed your letter, share with your heirs, if appropriate.

- You will likely need more space than is provided here.

Date: _____

Section 1: (farm basics, the "nuts and bolts")

My farm is _____ acres located: _____

I have owned the farm since: _____

Current enterprises on the farm include: _____

_____

_____

We used to have the following enterprises on the farm: _____

_____

_____

My farm has changed over the years in the following ways: _____

_____

_____

Section 2: (strong memories and events, the "heart and soul")

My strongest memories of the farm are: _____

_____

_____

I remember best these sights/smells/sounds/touches/tastes: _____

_____

_____

These events stand out as particularly important about the farm: _____

_____

_____

Section 3: (from results of goal-setting activity on page 7)

My number one goal for my farmland is: _____

_____

_____

This is my very top goal because: _____

The following goals are also my priorities (although not my top goal): _____

_____

_____

These are important goals for me because: _____

Section 4: (conclusion, the "parting gifts")

It is important that my farm is managed like this: _____

Thirty years from now, I want people to remember this about my farm: _____

_____

_____

Lastly, I want to leave you with this information: _____

_____

_____

Signed _____

A Legacy of Sounds

A Farm Legacy Letter is a good place to document the sights, smells, sounds, touches, and tastes you remember from life on the farm. These details may be the greatest gift you give your future generations. The following aural memories, contributed by Climate Land Leaders, might help you get started.

Meadowlarks in the pasture calling their mate
Mourning doves cooing
Wet clothes flapping in the wind on the clothesline
Roosters crowing, chickens clucking, pigs snorting
The clang of hogs flipping up the feeder
Cows mooing as they come home for evening milking
Cats meowing to get a squirt of milk
Creak of the rope swinging in the haymow
Sound of mucky boots being taken off and dropped on the mud-room floor
Pop pop of the old John Deere tractor
Pickups and cars driving by on the gravel road
Clang of the dinner bell
Banging of the screen door
Creak of the porch swing
Click click of the neighbor listening in on the party phone line
Howling of the wind from inside the house

For All Our Relatives

Filling Their Muck Boots

by Vick Rae Harder-Thorne

My sense of environmental stewardship started with growing up on Mom's family land. Our grandparents lived a very frugal lifestyle, where reduce-reuse-recycle and free-range chickens were part of everyday life, not just marketing terms. I still have hand-stitched quilts and crocheted rugs that Grandma made from old clothing!

Grandpa had a very strong relationship with the land. He called himself a caretaker and understood that his partnership with the soil could help the crops thrive. He tasted the dirt to know what to plant next. He didn't like the corporate influence that promoted chemical solutions, and he was devastated when he needed to harvest seven acres of hardwood to increase his tillable land. When I was about 10 years old, he told me that he believed people took too much land from wildlife, and if he could afford to do it, he'd give it all back.

My parents honored that wish, spending nearly three decades transitioning the farm into a native grassland through the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). As charter members of Black Swamp Bird Observatory, they offered access to birders during Biggest Week in American Birding. Mom was active in passerine migration, hawk watch, and Ohio's 10-year bald eagle restoration program. They maintained a bluebird trail and purple martin rigs. With near-daily diligence, invasive plants such as purple loosestrife and teasel were under control; the land lush with native forbs, grasses, and sedges; and along the creek, acorns from the old oaks grew into new saplings.

About eight years ago, I spent a gorgeous October day working in the fields with Mom, and I felt the connection to my ancestors, heard the call from the land, and knew I'd come back someday to continue her legacy, to honor our grandfather's wish, to help heal the land for generations to come.

A conservation mission

My family founded Earth Heart Farms with a conservation mission to revive and protect our soil, air, and water resources; to help people learn about the natural world and our place in it; to demonstrate how choices affect the health of habitats, and how small steps create big change – a legacy for living that sustains the land in the same loving way it sustained my family for generations, and supported Tribal Nations before us.

Vicki Rae Harder-Thorne lives in Illinois and owns Earth Heart Farms near Lake Erie in Ohio.

We aimed to pursue this mission with community and governmental agency partners, creating open space for education, research, healing, and recreation: K-12 STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, Mathematics) classes; research on soil, air, and water health relating to carbon sequestration and mitigation of harmful algal blooms; eco-activities that include birding, art, habitat stewardship, herbal medicine, tribal history, land restoration, and climate adaptation; and community monitoring of the ecosystem's wildlife and resources.

There is ongoing site restoration, along with monarch tagging, monitoring bluebird trails, reconstruction of the purple martin rigs, and monthly bird counts. We're in discussion with our community partners about projects that include video monitoring of birdhouses, an owl winter habitat, soil legacy, creating documentaries, solar on the barn, peer leadership, implementing biochar, and a bat study. Building on a 30-year

legacy and our grandfather's wish, revitalization of the site began in October 2022, through the Lake Erie Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) and H2Ohio. This included a controlled burn to help remove invasive plants; reseeding of the upland grassland areas to increase pollinators; planting of 2,600 native trees and shrubs in a riparian buffer as well as excavation of emergent wetland areas.

That same year we launched our STEAM-enhancement program and have since welcomed over 400 students and 14 educators from six local schools. Year Three added over 400 students, and eight educators from seven more schools! Field trips provide hands-on outdoor lab experience, where students and teachers can study biodiversity, ecosystems, extreme weather, air-soil-water health, our upstream effect on harmful algal blooms in Lake Erie, and environmental science careers. Returning students see big changes, such as a lush grassland returning after an 80-acre burn, and changes in topography and biodiversity after the wetland excavation.

We envision private lands access continuing through community engagement in partnership with area schools, universities, and conservation groups. Our vision for Earth Heart Farms also includes a Conservation Easement in Perpetuity and a Cultural Use/Respect Easement to offer tribal people access for traditional activities, including ceremony, medicinal foraging, hunting, and fishing.

My estate plan stipulates that should my husband and/or sons survive me before the current CREP subsidy ends in 2038, they can choose to complete the CREP subsidy or apply for the above easements and sell to the Park District of Ottawa County and/or Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge - both organizations are aware of this and are already on board to help with habitat management and growing our STEAM program. Because the title is held in a single-member LLC (me), they can dissolve the LLC and exit the CREP contract early without penalty.

I look forward to watching the habitat change over time and to growing the partnerships and programs with our conservation allies and citizen scientists.

Sometimes the scope of the project feels daunting. Besides the need for infrastructure funding and labor, I live in Illinois. I'm grateful for our dad's willingness to manage daily activities, and to our collaborators for their unwavering support. At times it feels like an exercise in futility – when I read statistics about habitat loss or watch another woodland cut for yet another development, I close my eyes, take a few deep breaths, and remember how fortunate I am to have this opportunity to improve our world. I see the face of my grandson, hear the thrumming of woodpeckers, smell the wet earth, feel the wind on my face, taste the nectar of red clover, and I know exactly why I keep going.

I'm aware every day that I couldn't have done this without my family's commitment to the land, forever grateful for the relationship that both my grandfather and my mother had with the land and all its creatures. While they are hard acts to follow, I'm giving my best effort to fill their muck boots.

Doing good with land proceeds

I inherited 320 acres of Iowa farmland and have sold 120 acres of it that naturally belonged with other family members. I am doing what good I can do with the proceeds from the land. I find that this allows me to do more for others (my children, my husband's children, charities) and more with the 46 acres we live on and are working so hard to restore. I may find that my energies can turn to what I can do with the remaining 200 acres that would be more sustainable than the way my parents farmed.

Carolyn Brue and her husband Pat Collins live in Minnesota.

Mary Damm lives in Indiana and owns land in Iowa.

My Farm Now

by Mary Damm

I am a plant ecologist living in the forested hills of southern Indiana. I also own a pasture farm in the Bloody Run Creek valley in the Driftless region of Northeast Iowa.

My story of farm ownership began 20 years ago at the 2004 North American Prairie Conference in Madison, Wisconsin, where I met Dan Specht. We were on a field trip to a hill prairie above the Wisconsin River, and Dan made the comment, "This looks like my farm in Iowa." I said, "In Iowa?" I was surprised, because I didn't think of Iowa as having steep bluffs with so much natural vegetation.

That evening, Dan introduced me to Laura Jackson, a biology professor at the University of Northern Iowa. After the prairie conference was over, I went to a bookstore in Madison and found a book that Laura had edited, *The Farm As Natural Habitat.* I looked through it, and Dan and his friend Jeff were featured in the book. What a coincidence!

I first visited Dan's farm, which is on a ridge close to the Mississippi River, later that year. I didn't know much about farming at the time. Dan showed me his farm animals, his corn, the birds, and the prairie.

Dan rotationally grazed the cool-season pastures on his farm with a beef cow-calf herd, finishing the cows on grass on his land. He used portable electric fence to create temporary paddocks for the cows and calves to graze. He moved the fence and herd when the grasses still had enough leaves for regrowth of the plants in a month and another rotation of grazing. During dry years, Dan grazed the tallgrass prairie that he had planted. The prairie has warm-season grasses, so complements the cool-season grasses in the pastures. The prairie is green and productive mid-summer when the pasture grasses are dormant.

Dan raised pigs for quite a few years. They were free-range. They came up to the house and the big mulberry tree outside the kitchen window and ate mulberries. If they saw me in the window, they ran away as a group. They were so fun, curious, and skittish. Sometimes in the winter when I visited the farm, Dan received a truckload of outdated milk for the pigs. He and I stabbed the containers of milk, and the pigs ripped them apart and drank the milk. Dan lost money on pigs, so he eventually stopped raising them.

Dan was always learning, like with his sweet corn plots. For ten years he developed an open-pollinated blue and yellow variety. A few people grew it out, including the Meskwaki Community Settlement in Iowa. Dan's brother Phil wrote a wonderful poem, "My Brother's Hands," about Dan's corn and the Meskwaki's and others' interest in it.

Dan was passionate about grassland birds. Grassland birds, such as Bobolinks, are great ecological indicators of the health of an ecosystem. As Dan would say,"If birds are on the farm, It's ALL WORKING." The farm is a functioning, working ecosystem.

Grassland birds are in great decline. They show the greatest population decline - 53% - of any habitat group of birds since 1970 when documentation of bird populations began.

Bobolinks migrate over 6,000 miles from the grasslands of South America to the grasslands of the northern United States and southern Canada to breed, and 90% of the time Bobolinks return to the same nesting sites as the previous year.

Grassland birds are not only in decline due to the loss of native prairie, but also to the loss of pasture and hayfields. Maintaining appropriate habitat for the birds is important, and knowing how to maintain the pastures and hayfields for the birds was a skill Dan learned from trial and error. He learned to manage the pastures so that the cows and birds

could co-exist. He learned to graze the cows so the pasture plants were preferred habitat for nests by different species of grassland birds and so the cows had enough room to walk and not trample the nests as they grazed the pasture. He delayed haying to allow for the young fledgling birds time to mature and fly away from the hay mower. He left sacrifice patches where he didn't mow.

The sweet songs of the Bobolinks still remind me of Dan.

Dan planted a tallgrass prairie in 2008 near the wooded valley that runs along the east side of the farm. The prairie is special because of the species-specific rhizobia (nitrogen-fixing bacteria that live inside the roots) associated with the legumes that Dan acquired from Peter Graham at the University of Minnesota. Dan met Peter at the 2006 North American Prairie Conference in Kearney, Nebraska. Peter studied rhizobia of soybeans from around the world for most of his career, but later studied rhizobia of the tallgrass prairie. Peter especially connected with Dan because Dan was a farmer interested in prairie legumes. Sadly, Peter passed a few years after the conference, so Dan's prairie with the rhizobia has even more ecological significance now.

Because I lived in Indiana and Dan lived in Iowa, we communicated a lot by email and phone. He shared stories about the birds he saw and the plants that were flowering along the roadsides. He always gave a weather report, and if the Milwaukee Brewers had played, he gave me a recap of the game. He read a lot, and followed Aldo Leopold's land ethic. Dan wanted to show by example that farms can feed people and be a place for nature; that conservation and a working farm can go together.

It was an eight-hour drive for me to visit, so I usually arrived at night. I saw the light in the kitchen window and felt myself relax as I drove the final stretch of gravel road. Dan had a meal ready for me, and we had a good conversation at the kitchen table. He had his newsletters out with articles for me to read and discuss.

A farm auction

Very sadly, Dan was killed in a tractor accident moving round bales of hay in the summer of 2013. After I left Dan's memorial service, I went home knowing that Dan's family would eventually do something with his farm. I thought maybe I could buy the house and some land around the house.

The following May - May 16th – Dan's brother Paul, who was the executor of his estate, called and said, "We're going to put the farm up for auction." I couldn't speak. My initial reaction was a gut one: "No, you can't do that!

Dan Specht

What about Dan's good soils?"

I then asked if I could bid on the farm, and Paul said, "Well, anyone can bid on the farm. There will be an auction on May 23rd. There are three parcels of land, two on the main farm and another across the road to the west. We are taking the five highest bidders for each parcel as an initial bid. The highest bidders will come to the local bank, and there will be an auction on each of the parcels. It will be a round robin - each person has an opportunity to increase the bid or pass and drop out."

I had seven days to prepare for the auction - to learn land values and determine what I could pay. This was not a business I understood! Dan's friend Jeff gave me guidelines and a price that was reasonable. "The land will hold that value," he said. At the time of the auction in 2013, land prices had been going up and up and up.

I was one of the five highest bidders. Paul let me bid by phone on the day of the auction instead of driving to the bank near the farm. We completed a round for one of the parcels, and I was the highest bidder. Then we completed a round for the second parcel, and I was the highest bidder on that one too. The third round involved the land west of the road. A neighboring farmer and I kept bidding on that one. I was less interested in that parcel, which had been a hayfield. However, I wanted the land to protect the house from potential crop

herbicides and insecticides used by a different land owner. I went over the price Jeff recommended, and the neighbor bid more. I eventually passed, and the neighbor acquired the land.

But the auction wasn't over yet. Next, there was an opportunity for the neighbor and me to raise the total bid and buy all three parcels. I was sweating. It would have been a real financial stretch for me to buy the two parcels and the third at the neighbor's price. I was really hoping he wouldn't bid more, and he didn't. The auction was over, and I was a farmland owner!

Now I am sad that I didn't bid higher on the third parcel. The neighbor cut down and burned the trees in the valley and later plowed the hayfield and planted corn. "Dan, I'm so sorry," I said when I saw the smoldering tree remains. I don't look to the west anymore; I look to the east when I visit the farm.

When I visited the farm when Dan was alive, I would take my lawn chair out in the pasture and watch the birds. I still do and think, This is my farm now, my responsibility now. I want to manage the 120 acres the way Dan would have. Dan was a farmer, and I am an ecologist - we came from different backgrounds, but had a similar vision for caring for the land.

I have been the owner of Prairie Quest Farm for ten years now. I am no longer a visitor to the farm or new farm owner, but a seasoned overseer of the management of the land.

Originally, I wanted to continue grazing cows and maintaining habitat for grassland birds; I wanted to maintain the integrity of the grasslands and improve biodiversity, just like Dan was trying to do. I wanted to continue participating in the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP). Dan worked for years to help establish a program for farmers to be paid for conservation on working farmland (rather than paid for retiring land from farming, like the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). I wanted to take baseline samples of Dan's "good soils" and see how the soils changed over time. I wanted to include more fencerow and shrub plantings. I wanted to plant more prairie plants. I wanted to have the farm certified organic.

Some of the goals I had as a new farm owner have come to fruition; others have not. I am proud of two goals that I have accomplished, and I think Dan would be too. Beef cows and calves still graze the pastures that Dan planted so many years ago, and some of the cows are individuals that Dan raised and moved around the farm. And the grassland birds - Bobolinks, Dickcissel, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Sedge Wrens - still return to the farm from distant lands every year. That is a legacy that I am very proud of.

This essay is revised from a contribution to The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers' Legacy Letter Project*, edited by Teresa Opheim. Reprinted here with permission of University of Iowa Press, 2016.*

Your Land in 2050

Activity: What do you want your life and your land to be like in 2050? Find a pencil/ pen, paper, and a quiet spot where you can brainstorm.Then sketch your ideas. At right is an illustration based on one landowner's sketch.

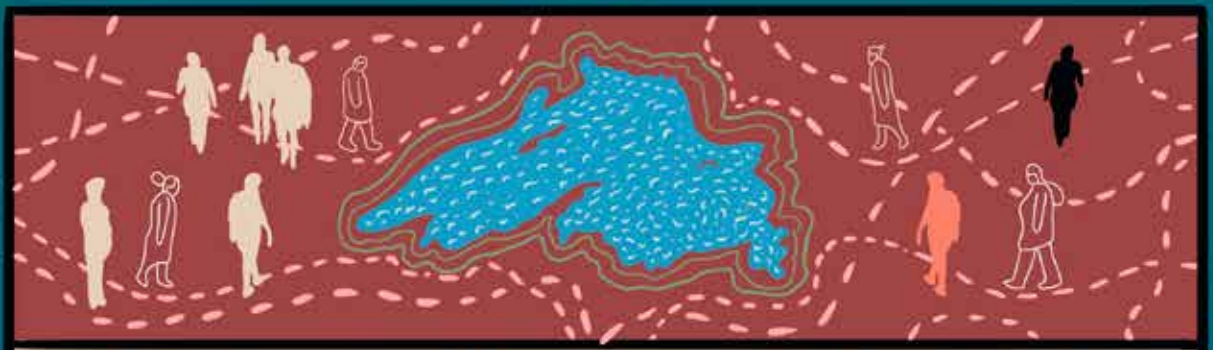
An Indigenous concept, The Seventh Generation Principle asks us to think about the seven generations coming after us as well as remember the seven generations that came before. It's a profound concept, very hard for most of us to contemplate. This activity focuses on a shorter timeframe–roughly 25 years from now. After you do the activity, use it to help you visualize the future with hope and plant the seeds you want to grow. How does your land play into your vision for 2050?

LIFE + MY LAND IN 2050

MY LAND IS USED TO GROW FOOD

MANY USE THE BARTER ECONOMY, AS WELL AS USE THE INDUSTRIAL FOOD SYSTEM

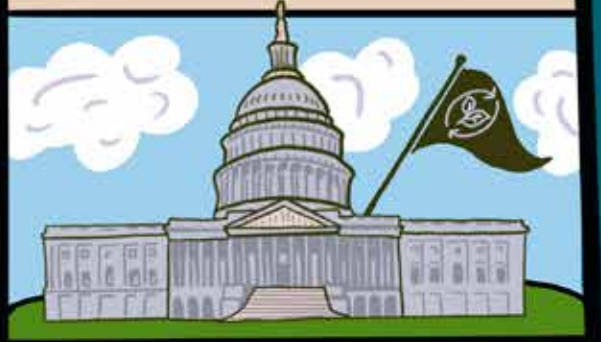
THERE ARE EXTENSIVE WILDLIFE CORRIDORS, BUT STILL A LOT OF ROW CROPS



PEOPLE HAVE MOVED NORTH AND AWAY FROM THE COASTS BECAUSE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

I AM GONE, BUT MY CHILDREN & THEIR CHILDREN HAVE INHERITED MY LOVE, VALUES, AND JOY IN BELONGING ON THIS EARTH.

POLICIES ENCOURAGE LANDSCAPE DIVERSITY AND LAND POLLUTERS ARE PUNISHED



Agrarian Traditions

Continuing the Family Farm

by Christina Foster

I have always known that I wanted to continue our family farming legacy. Life on our diverse, intergenerational farm profoundly shaped who I am, my values, and my understanding of the interconnectedness of life.

When I was ten, the farm changed significantly after a tragic accident. Soon after my dad sold off all the livestock and narrowed the focus to corn and soybeans. I was not encouraged to pursue farming as a career, so I took a different path. I also assumed it would be decades before my Dad would retire. Instead, my parents passed, one after the other, in their early seventies. When my parents passed, I was not prepared.

Our parents had little time to prepare for succession, and as a result left no direction about what to do with the farm. It was tricky because I was the executor and the only one that wanted to retain the farm. I worked feverishly for more than two years to manage the estate and farm, explore my farming options, all while I continued to work and raise a young son. Through all of this I came to realize that I would rather try and fail at farming than not try at all. So, I continued conversations with my siblings to find a fair way to divide up the estate.

Fair was challenging in this situation as the home base farm, now only 34 acres, was surrounded by development, which made the cost per acre extremely high. There was no way I could acquire it at that price. Regardless, I knew that the most important thing was to make sure we made unanimous decisions and to do no harm to our relationships in the process.

We came to an agreement after considering many scenarios. We had another farm nearby that had an excellent productivity index rating. We sold that farm so that I could settle with my siblings. We agreed to value the home farm acreage at the same per acre price that we received from the sale of the other farm.

I am so grateful to my siblings for making it possible for me to stay on the farm. It is home to me – it connects me to my parents, my lineage, and to this place. There really is no place like home. As I continue to transition the farm using regenerative practices, I intend to create a viable farm operation that gives my son, the seventh generation on the farm, the option to become the next land steward someday.

Christina Foster owns Whildin Family Farm in Illinois.

Farm Dynasties

by Helen DeElda Gunderson

I don't believe in farm dynasties. Perhaps there are instances where people of wealth who own land can enable farmers who use sustainable practices and don't have as much wealth to stay on the land. And certainly, in a country that honors freedom and capitalism, anyone who has enough money and desire can buy land, when it is available.

However, what bothers me is the way land ownership by the same family for many decades has been put on a pedestal even

when the heirs have had little or no contact with the land and those who farm it. Iowa's Century Farm and Heritage Farm programs, which recognize families who have owned the same farmland for 100 and 150 years or more, do that. Our culture does, too. I never hear challenges to people living in some distant state talking about feeling connected to their heritage because they own farmland in the Midwest. Even though the economy and culture of my hometown were shaped by farming, I don't recall discussions in the schools, churches, organizations, or community about the issues of land ownership.

With my rural farmland, I don't want to continue the family land dynasty that started with my great-grandfather and his brother. For the most part, my nieces and nephews have no connection to the land; presumably they are all doing well by their respective standards, and are likely to inherit land and/or other assets from their parents and others. Owning land should have something to do with being connected to that land—like knowing about the terrain, the people who farm it, and the ethics involved in managing it

These days, there is talk of great "income inequality" in our country. Trends in landownership and how land is used would seem to fall under that umbrella of issues. We should de-emphasize programs like the Century and Heritage Farm awards, or at least establish additional programs that would honor landowners who rent or transfer their property to farmers or other people who would manage the land in healthy ways. Practical Farmers of Iowa has taken one step in that direction by initiating its annual Farmland Owner Award.

Two of my professors at San Francisco Theological Seminary taught about issues of landownership in their course on the Old Testament and the prophets. They used a big term called "latifundialization," which means the "process whereby land increasingly accrues into the hands of just a few." The "fundi" part of the word refers to the Earth, and "lati" refers to something like "lateral" and "moving off."

We focused a lot on the story about King Ahab and a peasant named Naboth (1 Kings 21). Ahab and other Israeli kings were known to take control of land that had been used for subsistence farming, move the peasants off, and put in an olive orchard or grape vineyard with the idea of marketing the olives and wine to trade for material for war. So indeed, a person could wonder if much has changed since then with powerful governments shifting land away from subsistence purposes and using it for war purposes–or enacting farm policies that favor unsustainable practices for the benefit of corporations.

Helen DeElda Gunderson, who lives in Iowa, is donating her land to various nonprofit organizations. Essay reprinted with permission from The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers' Legacy Letter Project*, edited by Teresa Opheim (University of Iowa Press, 2016).*

Transition to Those Who Value the Heritage

by Margaret McQuown

Steve and I began our journey toward a next generation on the farm shortly after moving to my family's Century Farm in 2012. We looked at the farm and realized it had changed greatly since I grew up there in the 1950s and 1960s. We recognized issues associated with production mono-crop farming systems, which are unsustainable with limits to growth and contributing to the impending climate crisis.

After joining Practical Farmers of Iowa, we started attending conferences, learning about cover crops and doing intensive research and study about soil health, integrated farm management, and regenerative agriculture. We set goals to limit our carbon footprint and transition the farm for carbon impact. We built our passive house and installed solar. Over the next 10 years, we added a produce market garden, prairie

strips, pollinator plots, cover crops, and a riparian buffer to protect the creek that runs through our farm.

By 2022, we had hit age 70, and we started to realize we were really tired! We knew we were running out of time as climate problems were getting worse, and we decided we needed help – younger help. We began to evaluate the long-term viability of options. I knew nothing about raising animals, so initially we looked more toward plants – raising produce for food, prairie for seed, maybe turning the farm into a best-practices learning destination. We also considered perennials for livestock, but knew that if we went that direction we definitely needed help.

We participated in the Practical Farmers of Iowa Legacy Letter Project. Writing our legacy letter made me recognize that the next generation to care for my farmland would not be a fifth-generation Taylor-McQuown family member. We started searching for a young, beginning farm family who shared our vision and values – mimicking nature using regenerative agriculture practices, growing nutritious food sold through local food systems, embracing the small farm lifestyle, and minimizing our carbon footprint on earth.

After lots of networking through Practical Farmers and other channels, it was ultimately a word-of-mouth referral that connected us with Matt and Jocelyn Vermeersch. We had a series of conversations with them and really did our due diligence to make sure our values aligned. We decided to move forward with a collaboration on our farm. This launched us into a major renovation of the old farmhouse and cleaning up the farmstead, so that the Vermeersches could move onto the land.

We set up the business entities and structures needed for the transition – real estate LLC, revised personal estate documents, house and farmland leases, plus a farm operations LLC. We worked together for a one-year trial rental period, after which we'll really start to merge businesses. Steve and I are also in the process of protecting the farm with a Sustainable Iowa Land Trust (SILT) conservation easement. Steve and I continue to maintain and enhance the prairie and other conservation projects on the farm while working with Matt and Jocelyn on their fence, water, infrastructure, and pasture projects. This is totally a joint venture; we meet weekly to share goals, accomplishments, and work plans.

Matt and Jocelyn have done yeoman's work cleaning up the homestead and barn. It makes my heart sing to see someone bringing the old barn back to life.

My goal: At the time that Steve and I have passed away, I will have zero money in my IRA; it will all be invested back into the farm, and the farm will be in the possession of Matt and Jocelyn. This is an unusual farm transition plan and a huge step for Steve and me, but we want this land cared for and in the hands of someone who values the heritage, sees value in an old farmstead, and will really take time to live on the land, smell the roses, play in the creek, love the animals, and provide real food for people.

Margaret McQuown and Steve Turman own Resilient Farms in Iowa. This essay is revised from a contribution to The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers' Legacy Letter Project*, edited by Teresa Opheim. Reprinted here with permission of University of Iowa Press, 2016.*

Good Communication Starters

This activity, adapted from the *Farm Journal* Legacy Project, has a list of statements that you rank to better understand your priorities. Your answers would be good communications starters. Rank the following questions from 5 (agree) to 1 (disagree):

- ☐ Maintaining family ownership of the farm is important.
- ☐ Ownership is a privilege, not an entitlement.
- ☐ Making a profit from the farmland is more important than family harmony.
- ☐ Active family members should receive adequate compensation for their time, commitment, and loyalty to the family operation.
- ☐ Family members should be compensated or receive a greater share of the inheritance for being the main provider of elder care.

Other statements you want to add?

Making Amends

A Land Blessing and Buried Legacy Letter

by Paula Westmoreland

I grew up on a farm in the prairie pothole region of Northwestern Iowa. Dad bought 240 acres in 1955 and by the time I left for college, he had close to 600 acres. The farm had heavier clay soils, two creeks, and railroad tracks running through it. When I was little, we had beef cattle, a dairy cow, pigs, and chickens. The farm had pastures, alfalfa that we baled for hay, corn, soybeans, and small grains. My dad loved wildlife and kept 100-foot buffers along the creek, woodland along the railroad tracks, and avoided chemicals until the 1980s when all the kids left the farm.

My parents were inspirations in my life. They gave me a deep love of the land and a strong sense of social justice. I left the farm in 1971 to explore the world and never lived at the farm again. A farmer all of his life, Dad passed in 2008. My mom, a junior high school teacher, died in 2011, and at that point my two sisters and I inherited 240 acres.

In June 2021, my sisters approached me about wanting to sell the land. They were interested in proceeds from the land sale for their retirement.

I had a month to decide. The land was in a farm corporation, and we could have divided it up, had it surveyed and each of us would have 80 acres. But the financial transactions would have been complicated.

I wasn't planning to move back to the community and the farm was located where it would be difficult for a regenerative farmer to get established. So I decided it would be better for me to sell the land. Part of my decision was based on maintaining family harmony. I didn't want to create issues with my sisters.

I had some requirements though. There are a lot of CAFOs [Confined Animal Feeding Operations] in the area, and I wanted to make sure the land didn't end up in animal confinement. We had a six-acre parcel with a well that would be easy to turn into an animal confinement facility, so we donated that parcel to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation [INHF]. My dad had donated 80 acres to INHF back in the '90s – which is now the Westmoreland Wildlife Area – so we already had some connection with the organization. With that agreement between the three of us, I was comfortable moving ahead with the sale.

Selling the land was an emotional experience for me. Before the auction, I traveled to the farm and did a land blessing at each of the fields. The blessing was a prayer and a thanksgiving, a way to show gratitude to the land for being productive, for all of the gifts it gave to our lives. I acknowledged the Indigenous people whose land was taken and that my family were stewards for just a short time.

I also wrote a land legacy letter, which was a summary of my memories of the farm, what I knew of the history of the land, and my hopes and wishes for the future of the land. I wrote about playing hide and seek in the pasture and about walking the bean fields pulling weeds. We got a penny a row, and some of the rows were super long and others were shorter, so my brother, now deceased, and I would fight over who got the shorter rows. I wrote about taking care of the animals and bailing hay on hot days. And the huge meals Mom and I would make to feed the crew.

In my letter, I also wrote that I wanted the land to become healthier again, with no chemicals used, buffers kept intact along the waterways, and that there be good stewards of the land in the future.

I buried the letter down near the creek.

The land blessing and land legacy letter helped bring some closure for me, an important step in letting go.

And now, I'm on a journey of deciding the best way to move forward with the proceeds from the 80 acres. This has been challenging. I have two primary intentions: to provide ongoing compensation to Indigenous people for the land stolen from them and to liberate land from being treated as a commodity. To address my first intention, I'm donating 20 percent of the proceeds to Indigenous land back initiatives and food sovereignty projects over the next 10 years. The company I co-own, Ecological Design, is also prioritizing food sovereignty work with tribal nations.

My second intention has been more challenging since structures don't currently exist for moving working lands out of private ownership. I have been working with Commons

Land for the last two years as they evolve a process and begin moving land into a Commons for farmers who have traditionally been marginalized from owning their own farms, primarily Black, Indigenous, Latinx/e, Asian, queer, and low-income white farmers. Once this is established, I plan to use a portion of the remaining funds to purchase more land. I have also been organizing regenerative culture retreats to further the evolution of a new paradigm that shifts our relationship with land and the living world we are part of.

And so the journey continues.

Paula Westmoreland divides her time between Wisconsin and Minnesota.

What Does Justice Demand?

by Dr. Michelle Montgomery

Justice may demand fresh water, to keep the family farm going, to have fireflies light up the dark, to keep rising tides from swallowing island peoples. Because human justice is also about environmental justice and climate justice.

When I came into the space with the Climate Land Leaders at a Central Iowa meetup, there was so much healing going on. Some of the female elders that were part of that group are "retired" and feel like they're not really being seen. Women have always been a part of farming history, but they were not allowed to be landowners. They have witnessed and experienced men saying they would try to help you on your land because you're just a woman who doesn't know what you're doing. They may not have been able to marry whom they wanted. They may be from a generation that didn't have the fertility options we have now.

And now these female bodies are major landowners. That's a big statement. That's historical.

Justice demands careful process. We have to be able to take in words and think about them. I'm constantly learning how to just absorb what the other person is saying in conversation and not speak instantly, to process the information that I am visually seeing and hearing and feeling. To do that, you have to come from a place of just love. You cannot have justice without love and compassion.

Justice changes. It's not static, it's not linear. But it requires careful listening, careful processing and seeing people for who they are when they present themselves. And respecting that.

Justice demands allyship. If you see something that is not fair, ask: What capacity do I have to create some sort of change? There isn't a "one size fits all" approach to allyship, like "I must do this, or I must do that, or you know I can't speak unless I've done this." Big changes happen in small steps. They also happen in small spaces.

Allyship* takes time. Allyship is really honoring that everyone can create change. It's just a matter of where you are in life, where you can create change. What tools and resources do you have that you can use?

The first step is to speak your commitment to be an ally and really believe it. Then follow through on what you say. Because there are a lot of people who say "I'm an ally for this, and ally for that." But they don't move to action.

Landowners really do have a lot of power. These Climate Land Leaders are movers and shakers. They are out there doing things, restoring prairies and woodlands, helping beginning farmers and so much more. To be in this space and have all this female energy, I thought, "Okay, I needed that. Thank you."

There's a lot of negativity right now. And urgency as well. Allies, ask yourself: What are your committed action items? What are you going to do? How are you going to do it? Because we don't have much more time. We can't stop and hold our hats and cross our arms. We have to keep the momentum moving forward and not let certain politicians manipulate every space.

Uncle Daniel Wildcat of Haskell Indian Nations University has always said that "We have no more time to decide whose hands can't be at the table. We need all hands on deck."

Allyship is about keeping the fire of hope going.

For Climate Land Leaders, allyship is also about making your wealth more accessible to others. Then working on ways they want to accomplish this, your timeline and next steps. Maybe you can carve out 50 acres for a beginning farmer of color or put 200 acres in a land trust, whatever that may be.

Action that would be beautiful and powerful. It would plant the seeds for others. Part of that seed planting is acknowledging that you may not see the seed come to fruition. But you still plant as many darn seeds as you can.

So, what are your commitments? What actions will you take and on what timeline? When you believe that the most powerful things can happen and you take action, that's allyship.

Dr. Michelle Montgomery, Eastern Cherokee/Saponi, is a professor at the University of Washington Tacoma and a Board member and advisor of Climate Land Leaders.

**active support for the rights of a minority or marginalized group without being a member of it.*

Paying It Forward

by Leigh Garrett

A few years ago, I inherited farmland and – 133 years after my ancestor purchased it – I let it go.

I grew up loving that land and my grandpa and grandma who stewarded it. But, through the years, all of their descendants moved away. The home and barns were destroyed, the shelterbelt around the house chopped down, the flower and vegetable gardens plowed and planted to corn. Today there is no evidence that anyone ever lived there.

All that my ancestors taught me lives in me and not in that particular patch of the Earth.

So I decided to pay forward my farm sale proceeds of $260,000 to those who didn't have the advantages that I have had. My parents grew up poor, but at a time in our nation's history where they were able to accumulate some wealth to pass on. My father was lifted out of poverty by the GI bill, and he and my mother secured teaching degrees because they could afford college. My parents had health insurance that covered their medical needs and pensions as well. They saved, invested well, and taught their children to do the same. Most importantly, they had farmland in the family, and after they inherited it, they received robust rent checks to help them live a comfortable retirement.

Unlike so many people of color, I, in turn, received ownership of land as well as other assets when they passed. I've been reading about the history of land and wealth ownership in the United States, and most of it ended up in White hands because of the genocide of Indigenous peoples and slavery of Black people at worst and deception at best. I'm a prime example of how government decisions made on land ownership in the 1880s continue to allow my White family to accumulate wealth today.

I have gifted the land proceeds largely to individuals: $50,000 to one family, $30,000 to another, and combinations of $20,000 and $10,000 to others. I also donated to the Indian Land Tenure Foundation, as I have so much to learn about the gnarly historical and legal issues surrounding the return of Indigenous lands.

I have $90,000 left to donate. The longer I hold it, the more I feel I'm growing attached to it.

I have given my donations for land purchased but otherwise with no conditions. I don't have any contact with some

Northwest Iowa barn, by Jane Shey. Leigh Garrett lives in Minnesota.

recipients; others have become friends. Most have made financial decisions that are different from those I would make. I cringe to watch them go into debt that I would not even consider, having been raised by fiscally conservative parents. But they have not sought out my advice, nor do I have any to offer on the realities of starting a successful farm.

Recipients of my pay-it-forward do not want others to know that I have supported them. I believe there are several reasons for this: They don't want people harassing them for getting a "handout", especially in our current political climate. They want to be seen as making it on their own. They don't want friends and relatives to inundate me asking for help.

Are the donations enough to help the recipients build wealth to pass on to the next generation? For some, probably. Could I have made a bigger difference making different philanthropic choices? I could certainly have saved a lot more lives donating to international emergency health and food relief efforts.

Why didn't I hold onto the land and rent or sell it to a farmer with my conservation values and my dedication to supporting those who grow fruits and vegetables? Because the land is far from robust markets for local food. The farm infrastructure was gone. Most sadly, the farmers I support would have had to deal with spray drift, water quality concerns, and the stench of an animal factory that now is near my family's land.

Why didn't I give my donations to nonprofit organizations helping farmers or to innovative approaches to sharing land like commons and collectives? I listened to the people I have supported, who say they want to own the land and make the decisions on how it's used and shared with their communities. I am committed to individual family ownership in the U.S. (of land, of home) as "ownership" brings pride, commitment, and independence as well as helps families build financial equity.

Many others who own farmland have drastically different circumstances than I do and don't have the luxury of donating their farmland sale proceeds. They may have a family member who wants to continue the farming tradition. They may be concerned about their offsprings' financial security or paying medical bills for major and chronic illnesses. They may have worked in careers that our society does not value with a living wage.

But there are many who have far more generational wealth than I do. How much is enough for each of us? Will I and others be committed enough to share more of our wealth?

Guiding Questions

What is the history/story of your land? How has it been used, and by whom?

Which Indigenous groups lived there?

Do other Black, Indigenous or People of Color groups have any history or ties to your land?

What are your beliefs about private property and land ownership?

Is social justice a factor in planning for your land?

Excerpted from Toward Land Justice: Actions White Farmland Owners Can Take *(Land For Good and Ohio Ecological Food and Farming Association, 2024). Reprinted with permission.*

The Climate Land Leaders Initiative

Climate Land Leaders are working with compassion and commitment to address the climate crisis on their lands. As farmland and woodland stewards, they are implementing ambitious conservation projects, sharing with and learning from each other, and serving as leaders on climate policy and equity initiatives.

Climate Land Leaders share three goals:

- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions in their agricultural operations.
- Sequester carbon in soils and biomass.
- Ensure that our lands and farms are resilient in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

Achieving these goals will improve soil health, reduce soil erosion, clean and protect waters, increase biodiversity and help farms and communities thrive.

Climate Land Leaders' Guiding Principles are:

- Take urgent climate action through land stewardship practices, advocacy, and collective measures
- Grow food and fiber using practices that heal ecosystems and build farm resiliency
- Invite and welcome people at all stages of their land transformation journey
- Be part of the solution in dismantling inequities that limit access to land tenure
- Respect and learn from the natural world through observation, listening, and engagement
- Be guided by Indigenous knowledge and scientific evidence
- Support each other and kindly hold each other accountable
- Work with nonprofit, government, and business partners for greater impact.

For more information: info@climatelandleaders.org

/ClimateLandLeaders /climatelandleaders /teresaopheim

www.climatelandleaders.org

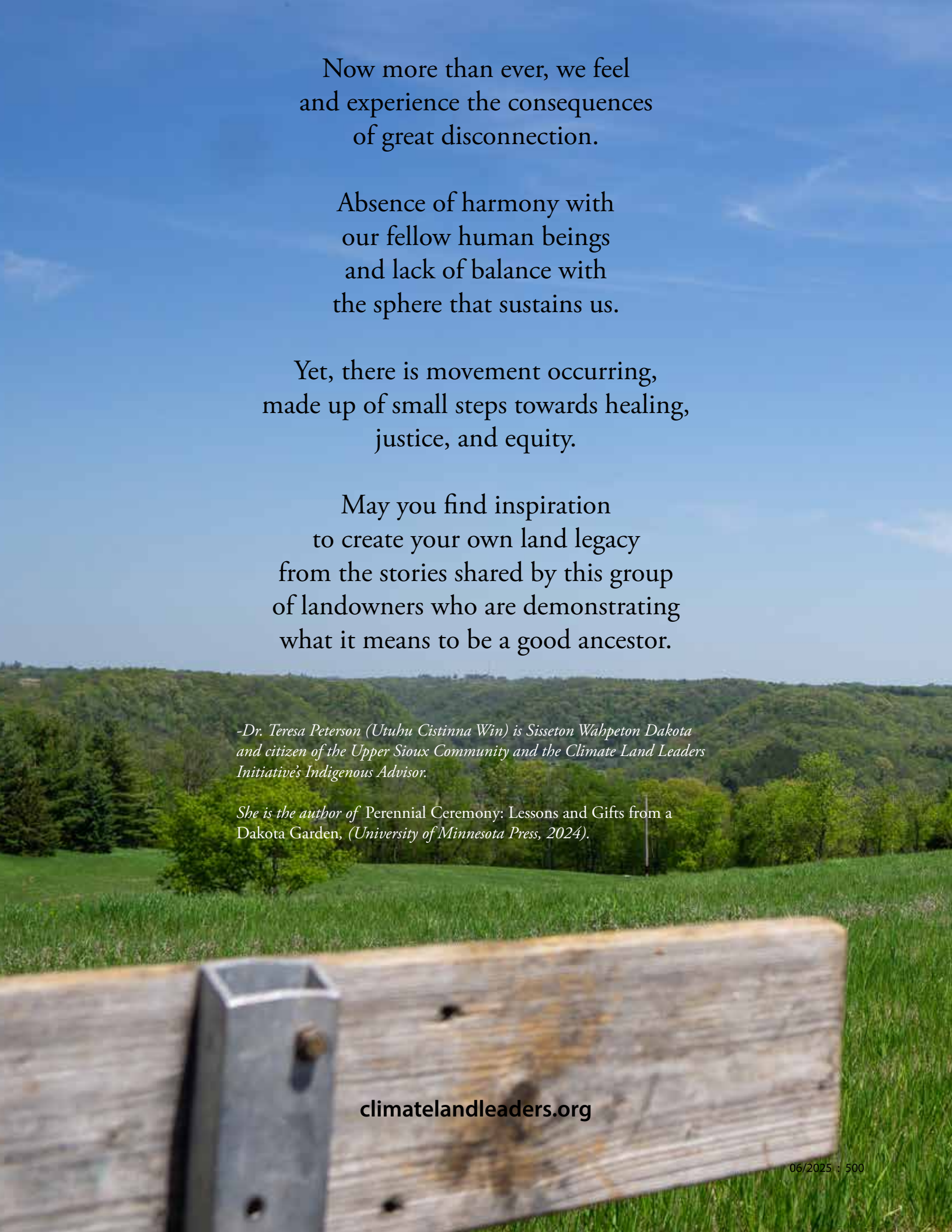
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Farmland Access HUB is a consortium of partners including non-profits, government agencies, local companies, and private citizens dedicated to assisting beginning farmers with their quest for land tenure. farmlandaccesshub.org

The Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association hosts a LandLink website, offers educational resources and events, custom land advertising, and 1:1 consultations for both landowners and farmers seeking land in Ohio and surrounding states. Contact Jerah Pettibone at jerah@oeffa.org for more information.

Practical Farmers of Iowa offers retiring farmers and landowners an opportunity to talk with a PFI staff member about your farmland transition. The organization also has a 1:1 land matching site and offers publications and events focused on farmland legacy. Contact martha.mcfarland@practicalfarmers.org

Land For Good connects, assists, and engages farmers, landowners, service providers, communities, and policy makers to grow equitable farming opportunities and sustainably keep land in agriculture. See landforgood.org



Now more than ever, we feel
and experience the consequences
of great disconnection.

Absence of harmony with
our fellow human beings
and lack of balance with
the sphere that sustains us.

Yet, there is movement occurring,
made up of small steps towards healing,
justice, and equity.

May you find inspiration
to create your own land legacy
from the stories shared by this group
of landowners who are demonstrating
what it means to be a good ancestor.

-Dr. Teresa Peterson (Utuhu Cistinna Win) is Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and citizen of the Upper Sioux Community and the Climate Land Leaders Initiative's Indigenous Advisor.

She is the author of Perennial Ceremony: Lessons and Gifts from a Dakota Garden, *(University of Minnesota Press, 2024).*

climatelandleaders.org

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