

Retiring? More Akin to ReWilding!

Chris Adkins, Environmental Education Program Coordinator

Greetings Friends. This will be my last DCCB newsletter article as I will be retiring in January 2024. It is not so much an article, but more like a thank you, or love letter.

I would like to thank the Dallas County Conservation Board for the privilege of being a Naturalist here for the past 27 years. My tenure here has never been a vocation, but instead my avocation. Thank you for the opportunity to teach in the wilds of Dallas County.

I would also like to pause here to recognize, and thank, my Elders. It is my humble hope that I was a respectful and attentive student. Thank you, Big Trees, for holding my sky up!

In gratitude, I recognize the many students-learners, fellow educators, volunteers, fellow Naturalists and most encompassing—friends. I was blessed to have the lessons of the Wilds to share with you all.

Early in my teaching career, I came upon this Latin phrase that summarized for me why I loved this avocation: *docendo discimus* (“by teaching, we learn”). You see, every wild story, lesson, or trail I shared with you as DCCB’s Naturalist was also a lesson for me. I can only hope that you learned a small measure from me compared to the lessons I learned from you in the wilds. Thank you!

Educate. What is in a word? As a scientist and science teacher, I recognized that the vocabulary of ecology often got in the way of understanding. I realized that I would need to become a student of *etymology*—the study of the origin of a word and historical development of words and their meaning. Here is an example of how this study brings understanding. The oldest word for the Earth that linguists can find, in the ancient proto-Indo-European language, is *dhghem*. This origin word then evolved to a term we may be more familiar with—*humus*, the rich organic component of soil. From “humus,” the development continued to produce our given name, humans. This historical record shows that in the evolution of our name is an understanding that we are of the Earth.

Turning an etymological eye on the title for my avocation—educate—proved to be one of the most insightful lessons hidden in our words. “Educate” comes from the Latin root *educere*, meaning “to Lead OUT.” I am sure to most etymologists this root meaning was symbolical or metaphorical; an educator would lead you “out,” beyond the boundaries of your present knowing. To me, a very simple and literal man, I took “out” to be just that: OUT! My shared DCCB classrooms with you these past decades have been the wild OUTs of our place. I am convinced that there is no better place to learn. I will no longer be leading you to the wild OUTs of DCCB, but I encourage you to remember our favorite classrooms, OUT there. I am sure our trails will continue to cross, OUT in the wilds of Dallas County, as I continue to wander and learn. See you OUT there my friends.

I have a lesson I would like you to remember. This lesson is from an Elder, Orville Little Owl, who was an educator and friend, amongst the many forged in the lessons of DCCB’s Prairie Awakening-Prairie Awoke Celebration. After observing my teachings for several years as he

visited us for the Celebration, he shared the following lesson: “You need to remember in your teaching, you are not teaching your learners anything. You are only helping them to remember something they have forgotten.” Orville’s wisdom has guided my teachings ever since. As seen above in the etymology lesson, we Humans remember in our words that we are of the dhghem, the Earth. Stay OUT! Listen! The stories are here in the wilds, waiting for you to step inside them, and to remember. Thank you for sharing the wilds with me and helping me to remember.

My next farewell nod returns me to an axiom I have adhered to in our shared times in the Dallas County Wilds. It comes from Rachel Carson, scientist and author of the book *Silent Spring*.



Chris with a Trumpeter Swan at a swan release

Rachel stated, “I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.” This idea can most clearly be understood by reviewing one of my favorite shared lessons with you, monarch tagging. As we learned these wild stories together, I did not seek to simply share with you the science of monarch natural history and migration. To allow you to remember, I encouraged you to kiss that tagged monarch as you released it on its miraculous migratory journey. With your wish for its safe travels, you were not releasing a scientific specimen into its habitat, but instead bidding a friend, a relative, your heartfelt wish. Mitakuye Oyasin.

Thank you for not just knowing, but also feeling. In another shared lesson, I watched you feel as your eyes widened with the ignition of your bow drill’s ember setting fire to your tinder and igniting your spirit. Again, I watched you feel as you learned under the dark night skies of Kuehn to see by *not* looking directly at an object, but by diverting your focus. You saw with your feelings, not your eyes. For the first time you “looked” at the star Mizar in the handle of the Big Dipper, and with your deflected vision, saw the tiny rider star Alcor gleaming next door. This wild lesson was not one for your brain, but for your heart. If we are blind to this Wildness, what else are we missing? Our shared sustainable future will be built not on our knowledge, but on our spirits. Remember to learn, and teach, with your hearts.

Finally, I would like to share with you the most important lesson I learned in the wilds of Dallas County. This lesson came on the banks of the Middle Raccoon River at Hanging Rock. It was during an educators’ workshop that was part of our early Prairie Awakening Celebration. A classroom teacher in attendance asked one of the woman elders of the Anishinaabe nation, “What is the most important lesson you share today? What are the most important take-aways?” This woman’s answer to this question has been my educational rudder ever since. The Elder did not pause or hesitate with her response. She answered, “Our traditional teachings tell us that the most important lesson you must share with your learners is that you love them. If this is taught

first, everything else that you hope to share will fall into place.” It is my sincere hope that I was able to share this lesson first with you in our time together in the Wilds of Dallas County. I began this trail as an educator in the fall of 1980 at Central College. A coach and mentor there challenged me to not give into the gloom and doom mantra, to not give up on this planet that I loved, but to instead fight for the future. For the last 44 years, each morning as I greeted the rising sun, I was blessed with knowing what the work of my life was, and who I was. My future ReWilding sunrises of 2024 will challenge these certainties for me. No longer will I pull on my green pants and tan shirt, the uniform of DCCB’s Naturalists, and go to “work”. However, I recognize that my true employer will not be changing. It has always been Grandmother Earth, Unci Maka, and will continue to be. I will strive to continue to learn, going OUT, remembering, directed by love, with my heart, reaching out to yours.

In farewell, I will lean on a story from Mike Havlik, fellow Naturalist and friend here at DCCB. Mike encourages teachers and learners to find a nature name that expresses their personal connections to the wilds. Directed by Mike, I chose “Chris Chrysalis”. This moniker bears witness to my recognition of the miracles that surround us in the wilds. We can all change, metamorphosize, not only ourselves, but the world around us. That is the hope, promise, and change of the chrysalis. At this trail junction in my life, I face the change of coming days, not with fear or remorse, but with the joy of change born with each new sunrise.

What awaits in my ReWilding? I will see you down a Wild trail to answer this question.

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Your ReWilding Friend,
Chris Chrysalis



Chris on a ridgeline in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Northern Idaho