



This book is dedicated to the people
of Dakota Sisu Farm—past, present, and future.

Cover photo: Sofia Losure, age 7, looks out at the
October evening sky near Frederick, S.D.
Photo by Heidi Marttila-Losure

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FOREWORD

by Joe Bartmann

Over the years of working in the rural community development field, I've often thought it would be great to be able to hand a little guide to rural community leaders when they ask for help, and say, "Start here." Now, you and I have that guide in our hands. Spoiler alert: The secret is to "nurture the spaces between us," as the author implores us in the final line of this book.

Heidi Marttila-Losure is as real-deal rural as anyone comes. Who could possess a clearer, broader lens through which to peer into rural life than a farm girl journalist who chose to come home and dedicate her energy and savings to the family farm and the small-town communities she loves? She poured her idealist-but-self-aware approach into *Dakotafire* magazine and, by doing so, lifted questions and conversations around important and often tough-to-talk-about issues for rural communities here in the Dakotas. And it hasn't been just talk—she continues to

back up her calls to action in the way she lives on Dakota Sisu Farm (in a refurbished granary) and in the way she leads change in the little rural area around Frederick, South Dakota.

Sky Theater is an insightful collection that beautifully connects the steppingstones that formed a groundbreaking path the *Dakotafire* project blazed over nearly five years. Those years were an up-and-down mix of success and struggle—much like the rural life featured in its pages and blog posts. Heidi has a beautiful way of pushing the edge of almost taboo subjects in the agriculture-and-conservative-dominated rural Dakotas in a genuine way that doesn't threaten people—even while asking them to look in the mirror when searching for the leader they need. And she is bold enough to call herself out when she sees some way she might be living or speaking hypocritically or blindly. I've always appreciated her quest for truth beneath the noise. She's never let me get away with making some sweeping statement without a thoughtful explanation of why I see

things that way, and I think those important values shine through in *Sky Theater*.

I had the privilege of serving as an adviser to the effort for most of those five years on the “Dakotafire Brain Trust,” a group that Heidi and her staff bounced ideas off of and turned to for inspiration from time to time. Dakotafire also occasionally asked me to help facilitate provocative conversations in rural communities, including as part of the Prairie Idea Exchange project. I'm happy to say that I learned much more than I was able to offer. Heidi drew me into her foray toward cause-based journalism by her outright declaration that *Dakotafire* is not unbiased—that it stands for something. That something, I thought, was a fair and hopeful chance at rural community life. What I learned along the way is that it stands for anyone wanting to live in community—it just happened that the setting and audience for *Dakotafire* included a lot of rural folks. Like me.

Enjoy.

Joe Bartmann works at a non-profit in South Dakota that helps rural leaders empower their communities, runs a small process design and facilitation shop, and hikes South Dakota's prairies and Black Hills as often as he can. He and his wife, Jaimie, are raising four daughters in Montrose, South Dakota, population 490.





Erik Losure, jumping in hay bales, October 2017

INTRODUCTION

This book presents the viewpoint of a person who is rural by choice.

By that I mean that I am not living rural by default—I didn’t “get stuck” here, and my husband and I had opportunities available to us in other places. But we were drawn to make a life in this place—on my family’s farm, seven miles from the nearest town, population 200. And that gives me a perspective that’s increasingly uncommon in America today.

And yet, even though I’ve chosen a rural life and I love many things about it, I know rural living in this country is far from idyllic. Many systems, including in agricultural policy and education, are set up in ways that tend to make the nation more urban, and to make urban places stronger than rural places. I point out the pro-urban tendency of those systems when I see it and suggest ways those systems could be made fairer for the benefit of everyone.

Directing our energy outward toward those big systems is important—and in a democracy, we have a responsibility to do so. But we have much more power when we

direct our energy toward our own smaller systems, changing how we relate to our communities, our families, and ourselves. The challenge is that we tend to fight against that kind of change at first. It's a self-preservation mechanism—even if making the change would mean we are better off in the end.

I write about how we can change ourselves, too, even though I know this voice isn't always popular, because I know rural could be much better. We could do much better. I believe in and care about rural places and people enough to think that we should try to live up to our potential.

* * *

This book is a collection of the majority of the opinion writing I did from 2012-17 that was part of the *Dakotafire* project, and so it will make more sense to you if you have a bit of an understanding of what that project was about.

* *Dakotafire* Media, LLC, started as a partnership between Troy McQuillen, owner of McQuillen Creative Group of Aberdeen, S.D., and me. He left the business in 2014 to pursue other opportunities. Many others also helped along the way, including Wendy Royston, who became managing editor; the *Dakotafire* Brain Trust (Joe Bartmann, Paula Jensen, Sarah Gackle, Laura Ptacek, Beth Davis, Jamie Horter, Wendy Royston, Dee Sleep, and Mike Knutson); Bob Sutton and Noel Hamiel at the South Dakota Community Foundation; other staff members; our newspaper partners; freelancers; and volunteers. I deeply appreciate all those who supported this work.

Dakotafire was a project of *Dakotafire* Media, LLC, and its tagline was “sparking rural revival, one story at a time.” We* started with a grant from the Knight Foundation as part of its Knight Community Information Challenge, which encouraged community foundations to get involved with news projects. The South Dakota Community Foundation applied for the grant and then hired us to do the work.

As we described it initially on our website, “*Dakotafire*’s alliance of reporters and editors works together to produce in-depth, regionwide coverage of issues vital to the sustainability of the area’s rural communities. This alliance, which connects these journalists online, allows them to cover topics they could not address as successfully alone.”

We were awarded a three-year grant in 2011 that funded all of our work.

In 2014, we partnered with Grow South Dakota to receive a Community Innovation Grant from

the Bush Foundation. This funded an 18-month project called the Prairie Idea Exchange, which brought together economic and community development professionals to talk about what was happening in their rural communities. We created magazine issues around those conversations, then held public events to discuss what we’d learned. Some of those magazine issues went out to more than 50,000 households in the Dakotas.

Along the way, our mission evolved beyond the tagline to become “sparking a rural revival in the Dakotas and beyond by encouraging conversations that help rural residents rethink what’s happening and reimagine what’s possible.”

Were we successful? Well, it depends how we define success. We fulfilled the requirements of both of the grants we received. We did some interesting reporting that would not have happened otherwise. I’d like to think we succeeded in ways that are harder to measure—changing mindsets in ways that really encouraged people to reimagine what’s possible in their communities. But evidence of that is harder to come by.

My attempts at creating a sustainable magazine business model without grant funding were definitely not successful, though this is par for the course in journalism these days. The real nail in the coffin was the November 2016 election—and not because of the final result, which, however history might look at it, was a foregone conclusion in the Dakotas. What made me decide this was time to let this project go was the conversation that preceded the election: I could tell that voters were not using journalism as a helpful guide to their voting decisions.

I had used this phrasing in the first grant application: “*Dakotafire* will serve as a common voice and connective thread for the people of the region, so that despite the vast distances between them, they can see one another as allies in facing their common challenges and opportunities, and so that with the spark that *Dakotafire* provides *they can ultimately make better decisions about the issues that affect their lives.*” But I wasn’t seeing information—including the information that *Dakotafire* provided—helping people make better

decisions. Politics had become a team sport instead of the contest of ideas that it needs to be for democracy to work—and almost everything had become politics.

That might sound like an insult to my rural audience, but it's not. It's a description of a structural problem. Journalism was no longer working as I'd believed it was supposed to work, at least among this audience, in this place. It was time to look for a new strategy.

At this moment, I don't know exactly what that strategy is, though my gut tells me it includes civic and news literacy education at the K-12 level. This book is not part of that solution. But perhaps this book is part of an answer to a different problem.

For months after the November 2016 election, and to some extent still now, as this book is being published in the second half of 2017, the national conversation seemed perplexed about what motivated rural voters. *What the heck are rural people thinking?* was the unspoken question—with perhaps a stronger word for “heck.”

This writing is not a direct answer that question—it was written for a rural audience,

not about one. It most clearly shows my view of the world, but most people probably wouldn't consider me a typical representative of my community. (That's a nice way of saying I'm kind of an odd duck.) But maybe, because I've lived in some other places and understand the thinking of people from elsewhere a bit too (though I'm still more rube than city slicker), this writing can serve as a bridge to understanding rural more generally.

Some other notes may help you make sense of the writing in this book:

- The articles were intended for a specific rural audience, but I've provided a few words of introduction for each that give a little context for general readers.
- The writing has been lightly edited to fit this format—for example, long blog post titles have been shortened to work better as chapter titles, and references to *Dakotafire* magazine articles have been removed.
- Some of the articles were editorials that ran in the magazine; two were columns that ran in the magazine; and the rest were blog entries at dakotafire.net. It's probably

unlikely that any one person has seen all of this writing, since the audiences for the magazine and the website didn't overlap that much.

- This book includes only opinion writing, not straight reporting. If you are interested in the topics covered in the magazine issues, back issues for most issues of *Dakotafire* are available at www.dakotafire.net/product-category/back-issues/.
- These articles were intended to be invitations to conversation. If you have something to add, you can find me most easily on Twitter: @DakotafireMedia.

I want to add one final note about this book. This is the writing that happened along the *Dakotafire* journey, and as with all journeys, it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. But in another sense, I feel as if I am still in the middle of a much larger story about rural places and community building. My part in it isn't finished, but more importantly, it's not my story alone. I am not writing the book about that larger story, however, so I'm not sure how it ends.

In the meantime, I'll be here on the prairie: doing the work I know how to do, walking along a gravel road in the evening, and taking in the show in the sky.

—hml



Evening walk shadows, April 2015



Gravel road panorama, September 2015

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Winter walk, February 2015

MARCH 2012

In the inaugural issue of *Dakotafire* magazine, I shared my story of homecoming.

Belonging

When I was growing up on this farm in Savo Township, rural Frederick, South Dakota, I was quite certain I was going off to college and not coming back.

I knew, at least, that I didn't want to come back here to farm life. Farming seemed stressful—money was often tight, and it seemed like we were always “making do” in ways some of my friends didn't have to. I have clear memories of choice words drifting across the farmyard when the combine that should have been in the field was instead parked and in pieces. I wanted a life that was easier than all that.

Then I actually left. I loved college—the new friends, and the ideas and the wide world it opened up to me. But I also remember how good and somehow right it felt to be home for weekends. When I searched for topics to write about in my English classes, stories about my family's connection to this piece of land came to mind most easily.

“ There are, then, two great themes in rural writing: the theme of departure and the theme of return. ”

— David R. Pichaske, introduction to *Late Harvest: Rural American Writing*

But I made plans that led in other directions—when I graduated, I followed my future husband to North Carolina, where he was getting his undergraduate degree, and then to Iowa, where he was born and where he pursued his master’s degree. I was validated in my choice of a career in those years, as I found I loved journalism. But, as much as I loved aspects of both North Carolina and Iowa, I did not plant my roots very deep in either place. When I started thinking about serving in my community, I had a feeling that though there were a number of things that would be good for me to do, none of them were the *right* things for me to do. The actions were right, but the setting was not.

My husband (a country kid at heart) and I discussed the possibility of moving to my

homeplace many times and always seemed to get stuck on the same issues: How would we make a living? How would we afford health insurance? From the security of two incomes with benefits, moving to the country seemed very risky. It also seemed like giving up on success for ourselves—we would no longer be climbing the career ladder.

Then the scales tipped in South Dakota’s favor: My husband got a job in his field, right down the road in Ellendale, North Dakota. Two months later, we packed up and hit the road, about 11 and a half years after I’d first left.

We were happy, though also more than a little nervous. We were trying to sell a house in Iowa, converting a granary into a house in South Dakota, and living with my parents in the meantime, and I was expecting our second child—all stressful

events for us personally. And as we got involved with the community (in a way that I hadn’t as a high school student), I saw that the community was under stress as well. The local grocery store was balancing on a knife’s edge between black and red. The gas station and restaurant were both closed for a while. All volunteer organizations struggled to find enough people to fill their boards and committees. My home church voted to drop the number of council members from seven to five, and then to four. The closest farms in any direction are either abandoned or lived in only seasonally.

One day when I went to a bigger town, I was suddenly envious of these people who just lived their lives and drove home, participating in community life if they cared to, or not if they didn’t. Community responsibilities didn’t seem to sit as heavily on them as they do on those in our struggling small towns and countryside.

And yet, there is a rightness in my being here that is very satisfying, despite the challenges of rural life. I remember going to hear Wendell Berry (one of my

favorite authors) speak in Iowa the year before we moved, and one quote from him stayed with me. He was discussing the “unadapted people” that resulted when so many people moved from farms to cities and the problems that caused for society. “Not only don’t they belong where they are, they don’t *belong* anywhere,” he said. “That’s not a snide remark. I take the term ‘belong’ very seriously.”

It occurred to me then that **where I belonged was back in rural South Dakota. That’s where my fight, my purpose, my meaning lay.** *Dakotafire* is for me an extension of that sense of fighting the right fight—the worlds of both journalism and rural America are being shaken now, but I am pleased to be able to do work that might in some way help them both.

As I look out the window from our new granary home, I see lots of work to be done, both in our farmyard (where we are, despite my earlier sentiments, doing some farming) and far beyond it. An “easier life” it isn’t. But I also feel a great sense of peace that I am right where I belong.



Impending storm, July 4, 2016

MARCH 2012

If you're wondering about the appeal of rural places, start by looking up.

Kennebec Farmer Presents Sky Theater

I have frequently had conversations with people who don't see exactly what's so great about living in South Dakota—while other places can claim mountains, beaches or wilderness, South Dakota has ... well, it has some attributes, but it's hard to explain that one of its greatest features is the fact that there's not much blocking the view of the sky.

"South Dakota has sky theater," I say in way of explanation, trying to capture the dramatic sunsets, churning storms and brilliant Northern Lights in one phrase. For the most part, I think my message does not get through.

Randy Halverson, a Kennebec farmer, has created images and videos via time-lapse photography that do far more to show how dramatic and beautiful "sky theater" can be. A YouTube video called "Temporal Distortion" has received national attention. The Associated Press wrote a story that was picked up by many news organizations, including *The Washington Post*.

There are many more videos on his website, and you can purchase images there also: <http://dakotalapse.com>.

They may be just the thing to show long-distance friends or relatives when they wonder

about why you think South Dakota is beautiful. Or even just to remind yourself of the beauty on a gloomy day in late winter.

“The plain was there, under one’s feet, but what one saw when one looked about was that brilliant blue world of stinging air and moving cloud. ... Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!”

— **Willa Cather**, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,
quoted in *Home Ground: Language for an American Landscape*



A small storm blows up in central South Dakota. By Randy Halverson, Dakotalapse.com*

* This is not the image used with the original blog post, which was a video still and wouldn't have printed well.