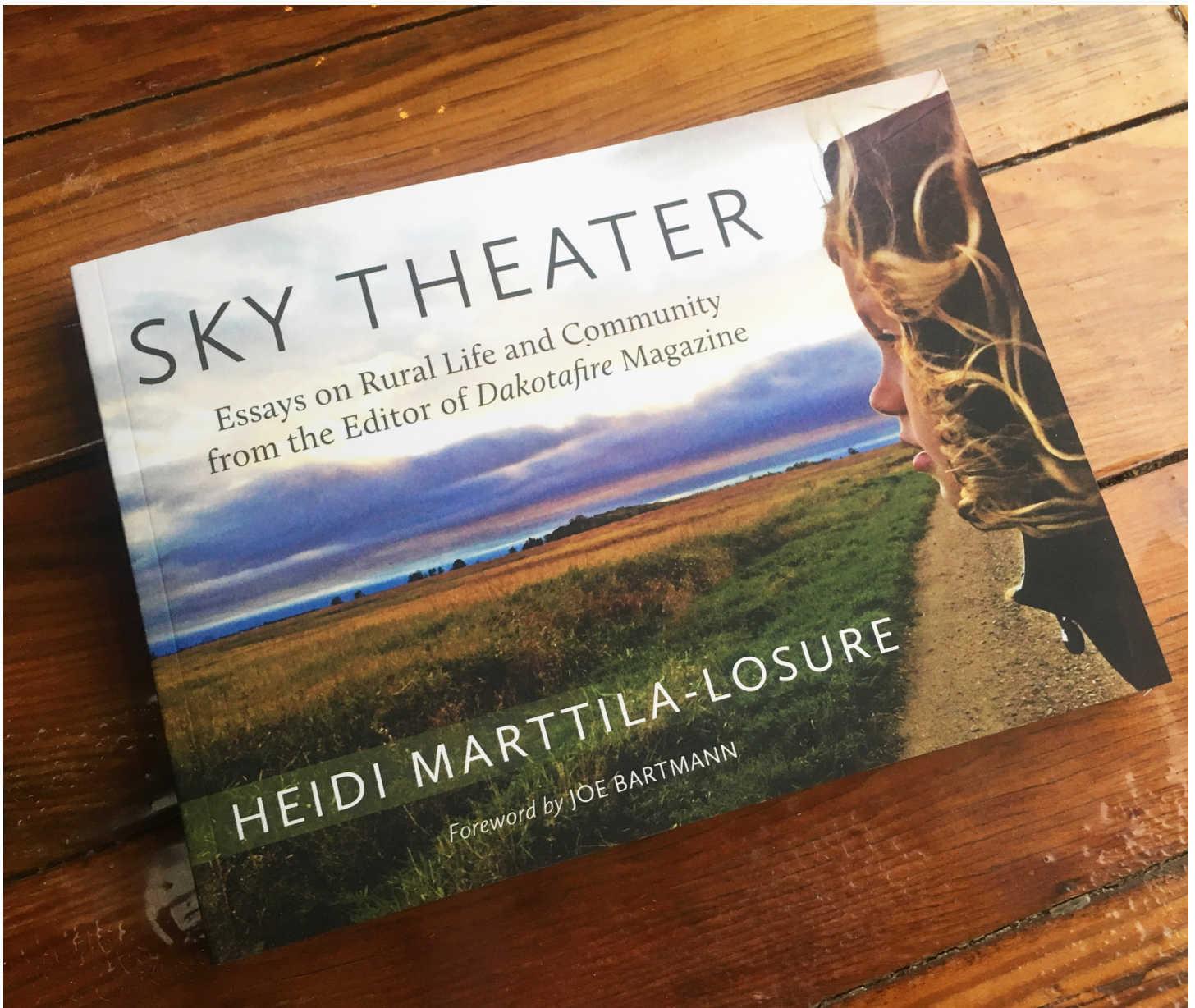


WRITING & DESIGN

From *Sky Theater*



On the following pages are excerpts from my book, *Sky Theater*, which is a compilation of opinion writing from my time as editor of *Dakotafire* magazine. The photos are my work as well and support the title: One of the assets of rural places is the entertainment of the ever-changing sky. I designed and laid out the book.

I've included the introduction, which explains the *Dakotafire* project, as well as two pieces that are relevant to the work of democracy.

I've added a short explanation for why that piece relevant at the beginning of each article. Each selection also includes the date it was published and a short explanation intended to help readers of the book.

The introduction to *Sky Theater* explains my viewpoint as a rural journalist, and touches on why I think news literacy education is important.



Erik Losure, jumping on 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.

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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 was a project of Dakotafire Media, LLC, and its tagline was “sparking rural revival, one story at a time.” We¹ 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

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¹ 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.

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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 some 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

Valuing neighborliness means many Dakotans avoid conflict. We gave readers tools to think about and discuss hard topics, such as asking “What if ...?”.



MAY 2014

Water flows downhill. Whether you are uphill or downhill from your neighbor has typically affected how interested you are in discussing water management. This article argues that we all need to be involved in this conversation, difficult as it may be.

Getting Uncomfortable

“**W**hat if ...?”

Those two words convey a powerful idea: The willingness to consider another way of looking at the world, which is how innovation happens.

That’s the kind of shift in perspective that’s happened in the last decade or so in the Netherlands as citizens reconsider their approach to managing water.

The Dutch have battled back the sea throughout the country’s existence. Historically, they approached the task with massive infrastructure, including the dikes, dams and windmills for which the country is famous.

But lately, as described in an April 9 article in *The New York Times*, they are approaching the problem differently: They are letting the water in.

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The impetus for their change in thinking is the rise in sea levels that climate change is likely to cause. There's not a whole lot of room for denial when much of your country is at or even below sea level.

"With the increasing threat caused by climate change, Dutch engineers have developed strategies that go beyond trying to keep water out. They city of Rotterdam, for instance, is building floating houses and office buildings and digging craters in downtown plazas that will be basketball courts most of the year but will fill up with water during high-water periods, taking the strain off surrounding streets."

— Russell Shorto, "How to Think Like the Dutch in a Post-Sandy World," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 9, 2014

The Dutch are also looking beyond planning at the city level; they are planning in regions, because water does not respect political boundaries. The goal, Dutch planners say, is "the dawn of a 21st-century approach to living with nature," building in ways "that take ecology, economy, infrastructure and weather uncertainty into account."

I invite you to read the entire article, which gives a really interesting perspective on how a nation's citizens realized that they were all affected by the problem, and they could all be part of the solution.

If we used those criteria of those Dutch planners to measure our approach to managing water in the Prairie Pothole Region—considering ecology, economy, infrastructure and weather uncertainty—how would we rate?

We probably would do fairly well on economy. Our local economies are in large part based on the farm economy, and that does much better with the water management practices that are common now.

How about ecology? Are we considering what works for the natural system?

Are we considering infrastructure that is affected, or additional infrastructure that is needed, because of our water management decisions?

Are we planning for increasing weather uncertainty—both downpours and droughts?

What if we added "community" to the list: Are we managing water in ways that respect and enhance

the communities we are part of, or the communities downstream that are affected by our actions?

I am not going to answer these questions for you. But in researching for this issue, what I learned left me a little bit uncomfortable. I don't think we'd get a stellar report card if this is what we are tested on.

I hope that small feeling of discomfort finds you also. Not because it's pleasant—it isn't—but because without that little bit of dissatisfaction, we aren't going to move forward. If we think we've already achieved the best we can achieve, there's no point in thinking differently or trying something new.

Our world doesn't stand still. Yesterday's ideas don't always work with the information we learn today, and today's solutions may not work in the world of tomorrow.

One idea I'd like to challenge is the idea of the inevitability of trade-offs: That if one side wins, another has to lose. John Mackey, the CEO of Whole Foods, argues that doesn't have to be the case. He's built his business model on the idea, working to ensure that all the stakeholders in his business benefit—from its investors to its newest employees, as well as its suppliers (including the farmers who grow or raise the food they sell).

"If you look for trade-offs, you will always find them—that is guaranteed," Mackey said. "But if you look for win-win synergies, more often than not you will find those too. Human creativity is essentially unlimited, especially when it is motivated by a deeper purpose than just self-interest."

Are there ways to manage water on our land in which wildlife, water quality, and downstream neighbors (both near and far) all benefit—and farmers get an adequate income?

The purpose of this issue is not to call out any one stakeholder as wrong or right. The purpose is getting us all to edge into that uncomfortable space where we think a little harder about creating a system that is better for all of us.

Read. Consider. Ponder past the point where it's comfortable. Then give those powerful words a try:

"What if ...?"