

Quotes from Lorrie Otto (1919-2010)

“One of the experiences I’ll never forget occurred in first grade during winter. I came down with the measles, then encephalitis. I lost consciousness. When I awoke, I was lying on my side in a crib, with railings, and I was downstairs in this big kitchen. As I opened my eyes I could see that the rhubarb and asparagus were up. I let out this scream. I said, ‘It’s spring?! The rhubarb is up!’ My parents were overjoyed!”

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“I had an attraction toward everything in nature, so I couldn’t get enough of the outdoor life. My curiosity, too, proved interminable. I wanted to know, for instance, what kind of nests all the meadowlarks had. I’d go to bed at night and could hardly wait to get up in the morning; every day was different. I loved putting in prairie plants while my father spaded the ground. My father had this International milk truck; so my sister and I delivered the milk in these glass bottles on the west side of Madison, all over Shorewood Hills. I learned to drive a tractor, an old Dodge truck, and that milk truck before I learned to drive a car!”

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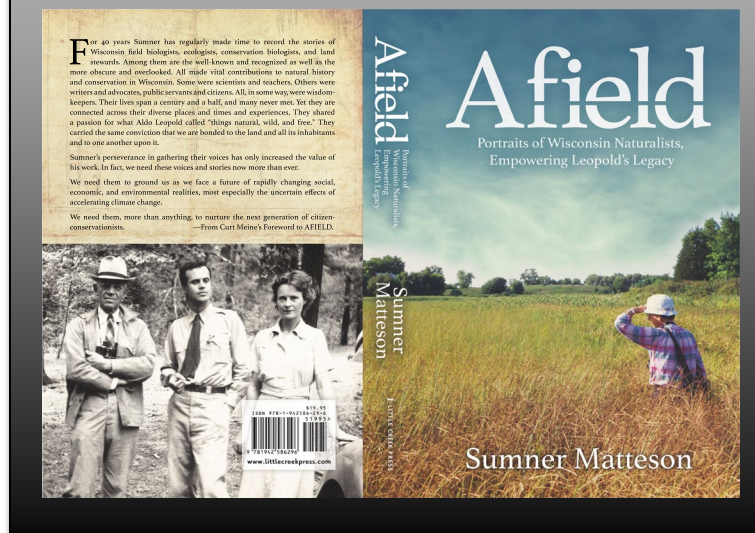
“The first step toward working with native plants is to decide to change your yard and get rid of the lawnmower.... The best approach for establishing native plants on your former lawn is to find out what grows in your kind of soil. Barring that, what I tell people is if you’re going to go out and get something, go to a native plant nursery and buy a native plant because then you’re safe. Once it’s established, it will be there for centuries....

“I think the greatest effect of all of how we have cared for lawns is the loss of food for migrating and resident birds. For centuries, birds have been flying north and south, with immature birds flying south for the first time. Imagine them moving over the countryside, where once abundant wildflowers grew. You would see that they had this big cupboard with all of these shrubs that had fruits, seeds, and berries for them—a smorgasbord of wonderful things from Solomon’s seals and false Solomon’s seals, baneberries, blue cohosh, and jack-in-the-pulpits. What a feast! Now they’ve got a bare cupboard.”

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“My biggest and longest fight involved the effort to ban DDT in Wisconsin. When the Wisconsin chapter of The Nature Conservancy formed in 1960, UW botanist Hugh Iltis insisted that I serve on the board, for which UW Professor of Wildlife Ecology Joe Hickey acted as treasurer. Soon, we and many other birders noticed something terribly wrong: American robins were dying in convulsions all over the place after spraying for mosquitoes occurred. And then they sprayed for the Dutch elm beetle from the ground and by helicopters. Joe Hickey would send me papers and articles that his graduate students had unearthed, such as one on brown pelicans becoming wiped out in New Orleans. Meanwhile, my village was spraying by helicopter over everything. Well, there weren’t any elm trees in the ravines, and there weren’t any elm

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trees on the banks of Lake Michigan, and yet they were spraying over there. I went to the village meeting with all this information, which was a big mistake.

“None of these village guys would read through the stack of information I had compiled. They’ll read half a page, no more. They would say, ‘We’re following the directions of the Ag Department. What do you want, Mrs. Otto? Birds or trees? It’s so cheap, and everybody’s using DDT, so why shouldn’t we do it too?’ It was cheap. One of the books that influenced me during this period was *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson. I was overjoyed because she had got the word out about DDT and other poisons. Before her book, the opposition called us ‘bird lovers in tennis shoes.’ “Meanwhile, the state Ag Department had formed a committee to decide each year whether they should spray with DDT. Before they voted, Joe Hickey presented them with a report on the DDT in the fish in Lake Michigan and the birds. Then the committee voted. The guy from the DNR declined to vote, but all the rest voted to continue to spray with DDT. This just crushed Hickey. I saw him a half an hour after that because I came into town. I walked up to his office. He was near tears. He could hardly talk. He said, ‘Lorrie, it’s hopeless. Nobody cares.’

“I said, ‘Joe, I care! And we’ll go through with this! We’ll bring in the scientists for a hearing, and I’ll put them in homes in the Madison area. We’ll go to people who are members of The Nature Conservancy and ask them to take in a scientist. We’ll go to the CNRA (Citizens Natural Resources Association), and we’ll ask them.’ Joe agreed. When the hearing began on December 2, 1968, we arrived as did Ag Chemical—all men. They sat on one side, and all of us sat on the other side. Then this blonde with long hair came in, skirt too short, and a little on the heavy side, and she sat with the men. I thought, ‘Who is that woman? Who wouldn’t be on the side of birds and fish?’ I wanted to know who the devil she was, so I went over and sat down beside her. She was a reporter for *The Capital Times* named Whitney Gould. She was barely a reporter. She had wanted to be a music and art writer because she had an art history major, but to get a job at *The Capital Times* she became a regular reporter.

“Whitney covered the issue thoroughly and wrote so well that the editor turned the front page over to her; it was always the big headline.... She educated the legislators in Madison. Everybody read *The Capital Times*. In 1970, we became the first state in the Union to ban DDT. And then, two years later, the same group of men involved in the state DDT fight all met here in my house. I had men sleeping in the attic, in the basement, all over. They didn’t want to separate. They would talk almost all night, and they’d read each other’s research. I’d come down in the morning to get breakfast for them and step over bodies all over the living room. That same group of men went to Washington and convinced EPA head Ruckelshaus to ban DDT in our country. The year was 1972. I can take pride in knowing that I played a role as a catalyst at a critical moment in the campaign. When I tell this story from the stage, I just say, ‘You think one person can’t make a difference, you remember me!’”