

*(This essay, by Jonathan Andelson, was originally published in Letters to a Young Iowan, edited by Zachary Michael Jack and published by Ice Cube Press of North Liberty, Iowa. Thanks to Mr. Jack for permission to reprint it here.)*

Dear Young Iowan,

Don't be afraid to get mud on your boots. Or what I really want to say is: *get* some mud on your boots. If the most fertile soil makes the best mud, then Iowa has some of the finest mud anywhere. That soil took thousands of years to make. Every year the prairie grew in the spring and summer and into the fall, then in winter died back to the roots. The litter decayed and sometimes burned, and the richness was returned to the soil. Every year, for thousands of years. For most of that time there were people here, helping the process. Then, three lifetimes ago, other people came, saw that the land was good, and began making new lives for themselves on it. Sadly, they took out most of the prairie to do it, and we've lost a lot of that rich soil. But you can still get some excellent mud on your boots, and that's a good start in connecting yourself to the land.

There are a lot of ways to do it. Come with me and do a little rambling through the remaining bits of prairie. (Do you know how to ramble? A lot of people these days don't seem to know how, but it isn't hard. Just look down and put one foot in front of the other.) In the prairie different flowers bloom every week during the summer and early fall, and some of the prairie grasses are six or seven feet high. We might see butterflies, beetles, bluebirds, grouse, prairie crayfish, even a coyote or fox if we're lucky. I keep hoping to see a prairie chicken. With some friends and neighbors I am also helping to restore some prairie, to bring a little wildness back to Iowa.

But find your own favorite way to connect with the land. Maybe it's making a garden grow, or crops, or turkey hunting, or hunting for mushrooms in the fall, or closely observing wildlife, or picking wild berries, or caring for horses or other outdoor animals, or hiking or biking or camping. You can connect with the land deeply by going caving. You can connect with the land on the water, too. Try fishing, or canoeing, or kayaking, or sail boating. (There, I've shown you my bias. I think you can connect with the land better when you aren't using a motor.) You can also connect with the land in the winter. Snow on your boots counts just as well as mud in my challenge to you. Make a snow angel or an igloo. Try skiing, especially the cross-country kind.

Connect with the land through *all* of your senses. Taste the tingly leaf of the mountain mint that grows on the prairie; it makes a good tea. Relish the vegetables fresh from a garden. Listen to the crickets at night and reckon the temperature (count the chirps in 14 seconds and add 40). Listen to the snow. (When I walk on hard snow on a cold day it sounds to me like *kyurng-kyurng-kyurng*. What snow sounds can you hear?) Get down on your knees and smell the soil, especially after a rain, and of course take time to smell the flowers -- though not all of them smell. Touch the soil. Is it crumbly loam, hard and chunky clay, or silky silt? Touch feathery moss, the smooth leaves of a corn plant (warning: sharp edges), and the sandpapery leaves of a compass plant or a cup plant on the prairie. Don't touch poison ivy. And of course use your eyes to see the land's beauty: everything from the microscopic beauty of a dragonfly wing, to a geode, to an oat field, to the vast beauty of the night sky.

Life goes on without television, or computer games, or iPods. The thing is, life does not go on without the land. But for the land to go on we must take care of it, and to take care of it we must both know it and value it. Connecting to the land is the beginning of knowing and valuing it. So get out in the land, really *in* it. Get your boots (or your shoes or your bare feet) muddy -- or dusty, or snowy, or wet. But please wipe your boots off before you come back in and tell me about it.