

THE DALAI LAMA, MIKHAIL GORBACHEV, MARIO VARGAS LLOSA,
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DESMOND TUTU, JEAN S. BOLEN, SOGYAL RINPOCHE, MICHAEL DOUGLAS,
SIR RICHARD BRANSON, JOHN BERGER & OTHERS

THE ART OF LIVING

A Practical Guide to Being Alive

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I live in Madison County, Iowa, home of the covered bridges for which a book and movie were named. *The Bridges of Madison County* spoke of unrequited love, heartbreak, and longing, all the emotions in Clint Eastwood's face at the end of the movie as he stood in the rain and watched his love drive away.

But I can tell you that love lives on in Madison County. In fact, my husband and I married here five years ago, creating an altar between a small pine and Russian olive tree in our back yard. We set up hay bales as seats for our guests and decorated the yard with potted mums and prayer flags that swayed from branches and fenceposts. Our neighbor's cows came to pasture at the back of our yard that day, and just before sunset, the last rays of the sun streamed across the hills and through the trees, casting a golden light over everyone at the ceremony.

Now, five years later, I am reminded daily of the connection between romance and the land. It's true romance - the love of a higher power, of ourselves and one another.

When we moved to this house, I stretched out on the ground one day with my arms spread out to my sides, soaking up the earth energy. In my mind, I saw an entire tribal nation of Indians, as though my elders were teaching me respect for these rolling hills. Since that day, they have shown me the change in the sky as thunderstorms roll in. I've paid attention when the grasshoppers come, and the butterflies, and the bluebirds. I've learned when the land will be cool and when it will be warm. I've watched plants find renewal in rain, marked the growing cycles of corn, and stood in wonder at a field of soybeans waving in the wind like a length of velvet.

There are hills in this landscape, yes. And also flat places and low places and water and weeds and brilliant flowers that you plant and wildflowers that plant themselves. It is sacred ground, a land of enchantment, an answer to prayer.

Romance isn't only in the covered bridges, in Clint Eastwood's haggard face in the rain. It is in us, in the art of loving the earth on which we stand.