

Jeff Around Town – February 18th, 2025

Jeff: Time now for another edition of Jeff Around Town. Joining me this morning, very special guest, Jack Phillips. He has a teaching career that's taken him from Alaska to North Africa, teaches in the MFA program through UNO. He's a poet, nature writer, founder of the Naturalist School. Good morning, Jack Phillips.

Jack: Good morning, Jeff.

Jeff: We could maybe call this Jack Around Town.

Jack: Sure, why not?

Jeff: So, you're a creative, you've lived all over and yet you're here in Omaha.

Jack: Yeah, Omaha is my home and growing up in Omaha, it was really a quite, quite a different place. It was laced with woodlands and creeks, a lot of surface water. And I grew up in the west part of town when it was still very rural and went to Burke High when it was a brand new school. But nature was just right outside the door. We weren't really allowed to play in the house, so we just went out the back door and there was a creek nearby and great big trees right along the backyard. That slowly disappeared growing up and that was a traumatic thing for me and it still is. But there's lots of ways to connect with nature and that's what I've devoted the last 20 years of my life to doing, a little more than 20 years.

Jeff: Is that through the Naturalist School?

Jack: Through the Naturalist School. So, we're a little over 20 years old, but as you mentioned, I also teach workshops in the UNO MFA program. And recently I joined the faculty at Creighton University School of Medicine where I teach a fourth year medical student rotation in the woods.

Jeff: Oh! Sort of thinking outside of the box?

Jack: I'm not sure there is a box, but connecting with nature is good for everyone and it makes a better doctor and it's good for patients. So that's something I'm really devoted to doing as well.

Jeff: So, we're going to have a prompt for our listeners in just a moment, but you mentioned before we went on that you carry around emergency, did you call them emergency poems?

Jack: Oh, you have to have those with you at all times.

Jeff: What is an emergency poem?

Jack: Well, sometimes you just need to have a poem, you know.

Jeff: Yeah, of course.

Jack: I used to carry around a lot of Rilke. Lately I've been carrying around Natalie Diaz. And there's a local poet that is really amazingly wonderful and that's Angelica Perez, teaches

with Nebraska Writers Collective. And she's one of our teaching faculty as well in the Naturalist School.

Jeff: Do you have a short poem you could read before I get to that prompt?

Jack: I do.

Jeff: Is this one of yours?

Jack: Yes, this is a series called Little Moon Poems. And so, I try to write a poem with each moon phase. And, you know, there's one here that's, yes, so here's one that goes with the hunger moon, which is the moon that we're in the hunger moon right now. This is called To the Moon. And I wrote this in the woods down at Waubonsie State Park very recently.

To the Moon

Tonight, you taste like honey and yogurt.
Something fermented, something raw, slick and gibbous to the lips.
Your bodacious body of undulating lumens,
a fire so ancient somehow new,
a love so pure and heavy born of vanquished fear and burning shadow
of crescent thins and fats.
Oh, lover of the wet and the pearly,
you lay the tides that soak the sands.
Soak my soul with slippery lust and light.

Jeff: Lovely. Jack, we've got just a brief moment. Do you have a moment to give that that prompt? And then we'll direct folks to your website to get the full prompt. You're recommending folks go out into nature and just connect with nature and to write about it.

Jack: Right. But you see, it's not about the writing. It's about the quality of attention that we bring to our creativity, because the fabric of the cosmos is creativity. Everything is becoming all the time. So, when we bring our creativity to the woods or to the side of the pond or to a prairie, we're connecting with that generative tissue of the cosmos. So, it's not about the poem itself. It's about that process. And that's what this prompt is about.

Jeff: Okay.

Jack: And you can get the full thing on the Naturalist School website, as I mentioned. So, here's what you do. And you can do it actually right out here on campus if you want. Find a bird. Just walk and find a bird that presents itself to you. You're not worried about the name of that bird. You don't have to identify the bird. Don't use binoculars. If you have eyeglasses, even if you can take those off, that would be better, because we're looking for an unmediated experience of that bird. And as we begin to enter that sacred space between ourself and that bird, then something new is created in that space. And that's what you can write about. That's what you can draw about. But the whole prompt is on the website.

Jeff: And what's that website again, Jack?

Jack: thenaturalistschool.org.

Jeff: Wonderful. Thanks so much, Jack Phillips. Appreciate it.

