

What I'm up to. With a little bit of why.

I was born in Texas in the town of Liberty almost on the Fourth of July. My mom was an English teacher and my dad was a geologist in the oil business. When I was four, we moved up north to Posey County, Indiana. For a while in the 1980s, in addition to finding oil, Dad also wrote jokes for the Tonight Show.

My sister was (and still is) an accomplished birder. My interest in observing nature came from having a sibling five years older than me who was all about that.

After graduating from high school, I moved yet another three hundred miles even farther to the north. I attended Northwestern University in the suburb of Evanston, Illinois, and while I liked it there, I assumed after I graduated I wouldn't stay long. Thinking I might someday be nostalgic about that period of time in my life, I collected Chicago souvenirs: museum posters, bumper stickers, stolen ashtrays. But I ended up remaining in Cook County. I met my husband, Tim Brown, and landed a series of jobs in Chicago—at The Nature Conservancy, Openlands, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, the School of the Art Institute. Chicago is where I grew into the roles of a mother, a civic participant, a friend, a voter, a writer, a chicken farmer and the caretaker of an ant farm.

After I came to know a bunch of Chicagoans, it turned out that the people were quite amazing, with wise minds and kind hearts. Plus, they had that Midwestern form of dry wit, the kind that verges on the existential. After a while, Chicago's ecosystems started making sense to me, too. This was a city where on weekends, great slews of volunteers rode public buses out to the forest preserves to try and wrestle old fields back into vibrant, kickass, biodiverse prairies. Eighty years ago, backbreaking work transformed Illinois prairies into farmland and now similar sweaty labor turned the exact same farmland back into prairie. The volunteers reminded me of my ant farm, where a cluster of three or four ants would industriously dig a new tunnel in one area, and a couple of hours later, another group of ants would work to close it down.

Oh, well.

Still, I liked living in a town where people volunteered thousands of hours to help mend landscapes. It moved me. They didn't care if others laughed or judged their labor as Sisyphean. The volunteers just kept doing the thing they thought was right, weekend after weekend.



Sometimes I would join them, pitch in on the cutting of brush or planting seeds. That's when it struck me that when a person learns to care for unfamiliar plants and animals, it's easier to learn how to be gentle with other people, too.



Who I am today is someone who spends a lot of time downtown Chicago. I teach creative writing part-time at the college associated with the city's art museum, the Art Institute. Our offices and classrooms are in a building one block south of Millennium Park, which is Chicago's version of the Spanish Steps in Rome, a spot where people go to meet up with their dates, a place where they rest, or talk, or goof around. The company where I work another part-of-my-time is the fabulous Office of Modern Composition, which has its world headquarters on the twentieth floor of a building directly across the street from Millennium Park. Out the window, on any given day, I can watch hundreds of people playing in the splash pool of Crown Fountain and admiring their reflections in a giant silver bean. Beyond that is a vast freshwater sea spotted with cloud shadows. Plus, there's this: on a ledge on the fortieth floor of the building, every year two peregrine falcons throw down a few sticks, lay eggs, and raise baby falconettes.

That's why the subject of my podcast and a lot of what I think about is cities and nature and art and people. Those are the elements my life consists of, the atoms that make up my molecule.



In my home life, I live with Tim and one of our two daughters in a neighborhood south of downtown. Though currently we have no ant farm or chickens, we do currently live with one dog and one hive of honeybees. Our other daughter, the elder, has fledged and lives in Minnesota while she attends college.

For a living, Tim destroys greenhouse gasses. He and his colleagues at Tradewater locate nasty old refrigerants that they buy and destroy so the gasses won't leak out and warm the planet. Every time Tim leaves to go to work, the climate breathes a sigh of huge relief.



I like exploring the meaning of life and particulars of nature. I live in the midst of the loveliness—and the perilous pitfalls—of being a human being. Some of it I write about. Some I just live.