

Note: this column is inspired by the theme for the 2022 Symphony in the Flint Hills signature event, "Weather in the Flint Hills." This is the first in a series of stories showcasing the four seasons ahead of the Symphony event June 11 at Irma's Pasture in Chase County. For more information, visit symphonyintheflinthills.org.

I'm constantly a little bit awestruck by nature in springtime.

Anything can make me pause in appreciation – the hue of a cloud as it's highlighted by the setting sun, or the way trees sway in the wind. It doesn't take much to stop me mid-stride and make me stare with wonder at Mother Nature's creation.

I've lived in Kansas for most of my 30 years, and this place still has fresh moments of Zen to offer. In the spring, some of my most favorite moments are accompanied by heavy rain, lightning and hail. My fascination – nah, obsession – with severe weather is well-documented, and I think being a Kansan only enhances that passion.

A decent portion of my brain is taken up by facts about tornadoes and storm chasing. As soon as I got my driver's license and a set of wheels, I started chasing storms around my hometown of Garden City, in the southwest corner of the state. I had no clue what I was doing at the time. All the storm chasing experience I had was virtual, through the eyes of YouTubers who shouted too much, or was based on a fictional movie made in the 90s that featured a computer-generated cow being flung about. I thought of tornadoes as some kind of mythical beast comprised of wind and water vapor. I had no idea how I'd actually react upon seeing my first one.

I was in high school, driving my loud and square 1985 GMC pickup, when I successfully got video of a broad circulation kicking up dust southwest of Garden City. I was also on the phone with a National Weather Service meteorologist at the time, trying to describe what I was seeing.

The first time you observe a tornado, it's not what you expect. I can understand why some folks might not recognize one at initial glance if they aren't fluent in reading the clouds. No two are the same, and most of the time tornadoes manifest into weak and ill-defined messes. Similarities occur regularly, but the tornado you expect to see is never the one you end up witnessing.

Tornadoes appear almost sentient in their brief existences. They can dance and writhe in helical patterns like snakes compelled by a charmer's spell. They morph and shapeshift in ways almost impossible to comprehend. It's hard for our brains to process something so large and in motion, so we stand and gawk. I think it's a natural reaction from inhabitants of "flyover states" to try and get a look at the spooky phenomenon. Plus, our phones are in-hand recording what we're staring at, so all of our friends and family can watch the strange apparition dangling from the sky and offer their thoughts on what they'd do if one came their way.

As we collect more tornado videos and data, scientists are using that information to further their knowledge of how tornadic storms form, therefore aiding efforts to improve warning times and save lives. The need for storm spotters and chasers remains an important function of public safety, and I would encourage anyone with even a passing interest in identifying scary clouds to learn more about it, instead of ignoring it.

A few such clouds were reported on April 29 across portions of the Flint Hills, with a handful of tornadoes documented around Herington and north into the Dwight/Latimer/White City area. They

caused some damage at a few farmsteads, but nobody was hurt. I was in pursuit of some of those storms with my younger sister and another weather-obsessed friend.

It's an opportunity to greet Mother Nature at its most turbulent, and I think that's awesome.