

## Scattergood School Farm Manager Mark Quee, gave the closing speech at the Practical Farmers of Iowa 26th Annual Cooperators' Meeting Friday, February 8, 2013.

### Here is the text of his speech!

One of the great joys of farming is that it allows a fallow time for careful consideration and contemplation. For the past few weeks, I have been using my fallow time to work on this little speech I'm giving right now. I wanted it to be a good one. I made a couple rules for myself: keep it short and no Wendell Berry. This forced me to stretch a little and look deeply for what wasn't obvious.

I had the seed of an idea: combining the exploits and achievements of two important non-farmers who gained fame in the 1970s and could help us frame things as we enter another farming season. These figures were Paulo Freire, the Brazilian [educational](#) theorist and Evel Knievel, the...well, I assume you know what Evel Knievel was. It was shaping up to be a really good speech: calling us to be risk takers and teachers, working for knowledge and justice, and redefining what's possible.

But then, the Super Bowl happened. Not what happened on the field, of course, but, the commercials. I'm sure you know what I'm talking about.

So, on Sunday evening when I scrapped my previous ideas and went in this new direction, I thought I was being current and edgy; now, because of Helen and the listserv, I feel like I'm arriving late to a really good party.

But anyway, there was Paul Harvey, a voice I grew up with, hearing him three times a day: the headlines in the morning, the newsy mid-day program, and The Rest of the Story in the evening. I fell still as the commercial began with Harvey speaking for god, practically as god, celebrating the work and worry of farmers...and implicitly convincing us we're worthy of a bigger, faster, stronger truck.

I have the text of the commercial here, should I read it? Or have we heard it enough? I at least want to read the first stanza:

"And on the eighth day, God looked down on his planned paradise and said, I need a caretaker. So God made a farmer.

NOW PAUL HARVEY COULD HAVE STOPPED RIGHT THERE. THERE IS NO MORE BEAUTIFUL SENTIMENT THAN THAT. THAT BOTH DESCRIBES WHAT I WANT TO BE AND HOPEFULLY ENCOURAGES ME TO FULLY ACHIEVE IT. GENERAL MOTORS COULD HAVE SAVED A LOT OF MONEY STOPPING RIGHT THERE. BUT THE COMMERCIAL CONTINUED:

God said, I need somebody willing to get up before dawn, milk cows, work all day in the field, milk cows again, eat supper, then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board." So God made a farmer.

God said, I need somebody willing to sit up all night with a newborn colt and watch it die, then dry his eyes and say, 'Maybe next year,' I need somebody who can shape an ax handle from an ash tree, shoe a horse with hunk of [car tire](#), who can make a harness out hay wire, [feed sacks](#) and shoe scraps. Who, during planting time and harvest season will finish his 40-hour week by Tuesday noon and then, paining from tractor back, put in another 72 hours." So God made the farmer.

God said, I need somebody strong enough to clear trees and heave bales, yet gentle enough to yean lambs and wean pigs and tend the pink-comb pullets...who will stop his mower for an hour to splint the leg of a meadowlark.

It had to be somebody who'd plow deep and straight and not cut corners. Somebody to seed, weed, feed, breed, and brake, and disk, and plow, and plant, and tie the fleece and strain the milk, . Somebody who'd bale a family together with the soft, strong bonds of sharing, who would laugh, and then sigh and then reply with smiling eyes when his son says that he wants to spend his life doing what Dad does. So God made a farmer."

Wow...that was certainly heartfelt and inspirational. As I watched that commercial and then later read those words, I couldn't help envisioning the mythic farmer, perfect soul, American hero and realized that I fell short. Now, I think I'm a pretty good farmer and hopefully getting better, but I score pretty low on the Harvey Scale. Somehow the old iconography doesn't work anymore. I just feel that the assumptions in that commercial, instead of making me feel accomplished and proud, or encouraging me to be better, mostly made me wonder how farming could mean so many different things. Perhaps that's okay.

Since the commercial wasn't descriptive of what I do, perhaps it could be aspirational. But, no. I'm not that farmer and I don't think I want to be. So, where does a farmer like me go for inspiration and aspiration? Remember what I said earlier about keeping it short and without Wendell Berry? I'm breaking both rules.

I needed a little Mad Farmer....more specifically...

### **Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front** By Wendell Berry 1973

In this poem, Berry eventually ends up shining a light, pointing the way, commanding us on what we should do, think, feel and believe, though he starts with perhaps where we might now be:

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,  
vacation with pay. Want more  
of everything ready-made. Be afraid  
to know your neighbors and to die.  
And you will have a window in your head.  
Not even your future will be a mystery  
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card  
and shut away in a little drawer.  
When they want you to buy something  
they will call you. When they want you  
to die for profit they will let you know.*

*So, friends, every day do something  
that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing.  
Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.  
Denounce the government and embrace  
the flag. Hope to live in that free  
republic for which it stands.  
Give your approval to all you cannot  
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man  
has not encountered he has not destroyed.*

*Ask the questions that have no answers.  
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.  
Say that your main crop is the forest  
that you did not plant,  
that you will not live to harvest.  
Say that the leaves are harvested  
when they have rotted into the mold.  
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.*

*Put your faith in the two inches of humus  
that will build under the trees  
every thousand years.  
Listen to carrion – put your ear  
close, and hear the faint chattering  
of the songs that are to come.  
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.  
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts.  
So long as women do not go cheap  
for power, please women more than men.  
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy  
a woman satisfied to bear a child?  
Will this disturb the sleep  
of a woman near to giving birth?*

*Go with your love to the fields.  
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head  
in her lap. Swear allegiance  
to what is nighest your thoughts.  
As soon as the generals and the politicians  
can predict the motions of your mind,  
lose it. Leave it as a sign  
to mark the false trail, the way  
you didn't go. Be like the fox  
who makes more tracks than necessary,  
some in the wrong direction.  
Practice resurrection.*

And just as Paul Harvey could have used an editor and kept only his first stanza, Wendell Berry's poem could also be shortened to simply that last line: Practice resurrection. This is, I hope, descriptive and aspirational—it's what we try to do in the fields and on our farms. We're now in winter, fast approaching spring; things will grow. Practice Resurrection. We're trying to make it better; we're "practicing" in all that word's wonderful meanings. And I think that this best captures the spirit of the Cooperators Program of Practical Farmers of Iowa. Practice resurrection. That is what our Master Researchers did in transitioning from continuous corn to five and seven year rotations. This is what we have been called here to do. This is who we are.

As Paulo Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other." Practice Resurrection. Practical Farming.

This is a far better goal than jumping 20 round bales with your new Dodge Ram, wearing sequined Carhartt coveralls.