

# Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front

“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.”

From *The Country of Marriage Poems* by Wendell Berry

This is the beginning of a poem that I first heard read at Covenant sometime in the late 1960's by Phil Summerlin, Pat Martin's brother. At that time, we had a worship order that included "Words Coming From the People". The worship leaders would read something that was meaningful to them (e.g. poem, selected text). On one particular Sunday, Phil read the entire poem, Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front. Since then, it has been read on a number of occasions from the pulpit, including by me. On that first hearing I immediately fell in love with the writings of Wendell Berry.

Over the years, I have collected many of his books, especially poetry. I even went to the farm where he lives and works, and, with a prearranged agreement, met him while he was plowing a field. I was speechless and simply uttered something like, "I have read all your works I can find and really do love them" as I shook his hand. I later regretted that I did not say something that reflected the profundity I felt.

In these current times as the national debate begins to focus on when America should "return to work", the lines, "When they want you to die for profit they will let you know" have been ringing in my ear! In the 1960's, when I first heard and read them, I thought of them as a metaphor. Today, I hear them differently.

Today, when I ponder the national debate about healthcare for all, I see a reticence of many to dedicate some of the resources of the wealthiest nation in the world to help save the poor, the disenfranchised, the disabled, the uninsured from premature death due to inadequate healthcare. And even more recently I have heard the rawness of the debates about when to “restart America” beginning to rage. I hear the concerns of the urgency of returning to profitable ways of the BCE, “Before Coronavirus Era”, a decision that could put at risk significant numbers of our population. “When they want you to die for profit they will let you know.”

Daily, I contemplate what my role is in all of this is. At the moment, I am living as a part of an elderly population who could potentially be more at risk if it were not for the good fortune of being protected by our caregivers who provide greater care than that for the average citizen. I also live with the comfort of being retired. I don't have to face loss of employment, loss of income. I would be foolish to respond to the crisis by putting myself on the front lines, dealing directly with people infected. That would most certainly increase my risk of infection and death. So what should I do? By my reckoning, this is a moral crisis, a challenge to my faith.

This past week, the Bible study at Covenant included in Mark 14:7 Jesus is purported to have said, “The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me.” This involved a lot of discussion by those of us sharing the Zoom link regarding what it means, from a social perspective. After all, the “poor” could involve those without a job, those without healthcare, those without a place to live, those without . . .

And so here I sit, dear souls, with an inability to provide a resounding conclusion, but here I also sit, in the midst of a beloved church where I will continue to listen, continue to engage in dialogue, continue to be open to change, continue to look for ways to respond. You are my community, my sangha.

- Jim Avera