

Tribute to John Kinsman, Son of the Soil (1926-2014)

By: John E. Peck



One of the great voices for peace and justice passed away on Jan. 20th, 2014. John Kinsman spent his last days at his family farm outside Lime Ridge, surrounded by relatives and friends, gazing out the window at a forest he had planted half a century before. Author/activist, Wendell Berry, in his “manifesto” for the Mad Farmer Liberation Front talks about growing trees that one will never harvest and counting mulched leaves as profit. By this calculus, John Kinsman was among the wisest and wealthiest

people I’ve ever met. Who knows many seeds he planted, both physically and figuratively, over the course of his 86 long years?

I first met John when I arrived in Wisconsin to do graduate school back in 1992. He was picketing outside Memorial Union, warning students about the experimental rBGH induced ice cream served by Babcock Hall without FDA approval. In this respect, John was among the first to raise the alarm about the insidious dangers of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and his foresight continued in his opposition to global free trade, the military industrial complex, factory farming, carbon trading, land grabbing – name the issue, and John was probably involved in one manner or another. Being so deeply self educated, John was often mistaken for a college professor and he would then invariably laugh about his hard won “B.S.” degree.

As a PhD candidate myself in UW’s College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), I learned from John just how far the once proud land grant college had strayed from its original mission. I then joined Family Farm Defenders, the grassroots organization which John had founded. In turn I heard from John about La Via Campesina, the largest umbrella organization for farmers, fishers, hunters, gatherers, foresters, herders, and indigenous people in the world. John Kinsman knew La Via Campesina’s seven principles of food sovereignty almost by heart and these guided his activism. By 1999 we were marching together with peasants from all over the world at the famous “Battle in Seattle.” John loved to call himself a peasant since it was a label he figured corporate agribusiness would never want to co-opt. French activist farmer, Jose Bove, was also at the WTO protest, and we joined him and others in front of a shuttered McDonalds for a memorable slow food potluck – the Rocquefort cheese smuggled through U.S. customs was especially tasty. My subsequent travels with John to such places as Portugal, Mali, Oaxaca, and Mozambique

were always an adventure since he had an amazing knack for find common ground with kindred spirits, often on a farm tour or over a good meal.

Multicultural organizing was another hallmark of John's social change work, going way back to the 1960s civil rights movement. Through Project Self Help and Awareness, John helped bring African American children from the violent turmoil of the South to enjoy a respite with Midwest host families and he then arranged return trips for rural Wisconsin kids to witness the realities of racial injustice for themselves. This solidarity and reciprocity were nurtured by John for decades and sprang back to life after Hurricane Katrina when Family Farm Defenders dispatched a busload of volunteers with food, medicine, and other relief supplies to the Gulf, followed by a shipment of nine tractors and other implements donated by Wisconsin farmers to their Mississippi counterparts. A similarly inspired FFD "hay lift" brought truckloads of surplus fodder to desperate ranchers in OK and TX. John's indefatigable "do it yourself" attitude spoke volumes about his belief in the power of the human spirit to overcome adversity. He often told me that cooperation – not competition – was the key to living the good life, a refreshing reminder for someone like me with way too much formal academic economic training.

John won many awards over the years for his inspirational work, building bridges between often divided communities. Being so humble, he was also quick to praise all the other people behind the success. John won the WNPJ Lifetime Peacemaker award back in 2008 and received the World Food Sovereignty Prize on behalf of FFD at the Food, Culture, and Justice Conference held in New Orleans in 2010. He often shared the stage with the likes of Winona La Duke, Willie Nelson, Frances Moore Lappe, Jim Hightower, and Vandana Shiva. Towards the later part of his life he devoted much time and energy to bringing the concept of food sovereignty home through the Fair Trade Neighborhood project that brought together family farmers and urban consumers from different faith communities to the same dinner table. Being a WWII veteran himself, he also realized that one of the best ways to bring about peace is to recognize the amazing therapeutic and regenerative capacity of farming for those who have suffered and survived conflict.

I'm proud to have known John both as a friend and a mentor. He touched thousands of people's lives as a far sighted pioneer of sustainable agriculture and a globe trotting advocate of food sovereignty. He taught me how to put the culture back into agri-culture and to see the intrinsic value in the earth and the immense dignity of those who steward nature. For these gifts I will always be grateful.