

# THE 11TH COMMANDMENT

## "THOU SHALT FARM"

By Meg Moynihan Stuedemann

On a family farm, everyone's a farmer. Some of us spend most of our days doing farm work, especially those of us who have livestock. Others go off to work in town, contributing their salary and, more importantly, health insurance, to the farming enterprise. They come home at night to do evening chores or sit up late keeping the farm accounts. The shorter family members go off to school, doing chores before or after, helping more on weekends or during summers and school breaks. Still others may be wrinkly enough to *look* retired, but still farm through a truck windshield, sharing opinions on which hayfield should be first, or phoning in from a new house in town with weather reports, or to take a sandwich order for the harvest crew. Farming is both life and livelihood. But there are fewer and fewer of us on the land these days, and that is taking a toll on our identity and on our spirit.

My farm family is a comparatively tiny one—my husband and I own 170 acres with 70 organic dairy cows, 10 or 20 steers, five sows and a boar (plus their rotating offspring) and some chickens. We rent 25 acres here and there from other landowners so that our young animals and the pregnant or "dry" cows getting a break before they have their next calf, can go to what we call camp. We rent another 100 acres about 15 miles away, where we mostly grow corn and hay. We start work about 5:30 each morning. On good days, we end at 9:00 p.m.

It wasn't too long ago that every farm in our area looked pretty much like ours, with a variety of interdependent enterprises. Now Kevin and I are a little odd, compared to our neighbors, who took the experts' advice in the 1970s, 80s and 90s about expanding, specializing and scaling up to maximize efficiency. But what's not at all odd about us is the tenacity and persistence that we share with every other farmer I have ever met.

I was at a talk about farm stress the other day and heard a guy from North Dakota State University Extension describe the 11th Commandment: "Thou Shalt Farm." It is so true. So very true. Right now, the farm economy is disastrous. Prices for the crops and livestock that most of us raise—corn, soybeans, wheat, milk, beef—have been at or below the cost of production for three years or more, which means farmers have eaten any savings they had, taken every loan they could, and may now be selling land or assets just to stay afloat, hoping that we're just about to turn the corner. On top of myriad day-to-day farm stresses—weather, pests, disease, low prices, unpredictable markets, tariffs, school consolidation, health insurance costs, consolidation of seed and machinery dealers—the farm financial crisis is pushing farm families to the edge.

I think the 11th Commandment is so compelling, in fact, that it can create profound crisis of spirit. Farming isn't just what you

do. For most farmers, it's *who* you are, how you have always perceived yourself, and how you fit into the world. The thought of losing what your forebears created and handed down to you, of losing what you were determined to pass on to your own offspring, feels unbearable. The thought of not being a farmer is unbearable. The idea of quitting is unbearable.

From the couch, where he's drinking coffee and warming up after morning chores, my husband just said, "Well, April 1st is only 70 days away." This is the other core truth about so many farmers. Much as they may grumble and complain about weather and politicians, most of them are optimists and all of them are ingenious. Some will replace their dairy herds with beef—because they can't bear not to have livestock on the place. Some will be able to rent out land to other farmers as they wait for better times. Some will be able to switch to raising higher value crops or livestock on less acreage. Some will get a paying job in town and feel amazement at the fact that a paycheck arrives every two weeks.

No, it shouldn't be this way. It isn't fair. It's nearly impossible not to feel bitter when you have sunk every bit of energy, money and will into making a go of your family farm. It's hard to accept that it's not your fault. The stresses can destroy families, psyches and sometimes even lives.

But April is only 70 days away.