

Stanley and friends

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [January 8, 2014](#) issue

Is Stanley Hauerwas really retiring? He has stepped down from his post at Duke Divinity School. But a man of his energy will surely write and speak more in various venues. Happily, we have not seen the last of him.

But there will never be another like him. His piety-free personality guarantees that. Hauerwas is known for his (sometimes salty) humor and his zest for a good argument. He is endlessly epigrammatic and loud and clever. If they were going to make a movie of his life, Hauerwas would have to do his own stunts.

More substantially, Hauerwas has contributed vitally and prolifically to North American theology. He has been a main player in considering the virtues theologically. He was an early interrogator of narrative theology.

He has written significantly about medical ethics and the theology of disability. He has been a seminal thinker in “theological politics.” With Will Willimon, he has written successfully for a broadly popular audience, not just an academic one. And he has single-handedly made John Howard Yoder a theologian that not only Mennonites read.

I first discovered Hauerwas in 1985, when I was working at *Christianity Today*. A nondescript, burnt orange-covered book from the University of Notre Dame Press appeared one day in our stack of books for review. It was *The Peaceable Kingdom*. I had heard mentions of the author’s name and took the book home. I read it over two nights.

As a lover of literature, I appreciated Hauerwas’s emphasis on the gospel as story. As an Episcopalian, I was drawn to his liturgically oriented theology. Most of all, simply as a Christian, I was enthralled by how Hauerwas captured and released the life-or-death drama of the faith. For him, Christianity was clearly something exciting, keenly challenging, never boring. It also didn’t hurt that the last chapter of the book—“Tragedy and Joy: A Spirituality of Peaceableness”—was a masterpiece not only of theological but of spiritual writing. *The Peaceable Kingdom* and *A Community*

of Character remain my favorite of Hauerwas's many books.

Over the next few months, I read the rest of Hauerwas's books then available. I found them all enriching and dynamic. I wrote Stanley a letter of thanks after reading these early books. In less than a week, I received a letter back. "Thank you so much for your kind letter," Stanley wrote. "It's so nice to receive that kind of letter as so oftentimes you feel like you published to the dark. It comes as a pleasant surprise to know that you've written something that has actually informed someone's religious life. I'm deeply appreciative."

Suffice it to say that Hauerwas has long since ceased publishing "to the dark." As I got to know him better, it soon became clear that there were more than a few recipients of Hauerwas's letters. He kept up a voluminous correspondence with an array of students, former students, publishers, theologians, pastors, monks and nuns—and even vaguely religious inquirers. Nor was it unusual for Hauerwas to pick up the phone and check in. He has an enormous capacity for friendship, and, as an Oklahoman speaking of a Texan, I can attest that he is entirely ecumenical in those friendships.

Stanley is especially a friend in his generous and close reading of others' writing. When I was working on my second book, I sent Hauerwas the manuscript. A week later, I came to work one morning and found on my answering machine a 30-minute message from Stanley. In it, he thoroughly critiqued the manuscript, praising it at several points but also pointing out some places where he found it "flat-footed." Since then, he has carefully read four other of my books in development. (Again, I hasten to add that I am not alone in such treatment.)

Stanley has also been a friend to me in my work as a book editor. He has sent many excellent authors my way. More significantly, two years after I cofounded Brazos Press, he was looking for a publisher for his Gifford Lectures, and I pursued the book for Brazos. It was an upstart press, with a backlist of only a couple of dozen books at the time. Stanley asked if publishing the Gifford Lectures with Brazos would really make a difference to Brazos's reputation and growth. I said it would make a huge difference, particularly in our academic cachet. Well, then, he said, I'll do it with you. Just like that, *With the Grain of the Universe* went to the upstart.

As I said at the outset, Stanley Hauerwas is not really retiring. He will continue to speak and write. Most of all, he will continue as a friend to many.