Peaceable poet: William Stafford's witness

by Jeff Gundy in the April 6, 2004 issue

When William Stafford died in 1993, he was not the most famous or most critically acclaimed poet around, but he was certainly among the most beloved. To the many who knew him personally or through his work, he was not only an innovative poet, but one who managed to bring his life and his writing together into a seamless, striking witness to nonviolence and poetic freedom.

Stafford's poems range widely, taking readers on undogmatic, even playful, yet deeply engaged adventures in language. In person Stafford cut a modest, wry and appealing figure, unfailingly cordial but with a firm set of core commitments. He displayed a kind of fearlessness not usually associated with American men, rooted not in the determination to compete for alpha status or to prevail at whatever cost but in his twin commitments to active nonviolence and to adventurous exploration of and in language—the commitments that defined his life.

Throughout his long career, Stafford explored a central question: What is to be done when a person cannot reconcile his conscience with the demands of the state? "I belong to a small fanatical sect," he wrote in 1955. "We believe that current ways of carrying on world affairs are malignant. We believe that armies, and the kind of international dealings based on armed might, will be self-perpetuating to a certain point—and that point may bring annihilation. Armies are a result of obsolete ways—just as gibbets are, and as thumbscrews are, and leper windows."

The other side of Stafford's rigorous critique of militarism, however, was a deep sense of human connection and larger purpose, which emerged over and over again in his poems:

> You will never be alone, you hear so deep
> a sound when autumn comes. Yellow
> pulls across the hills and thrums,
> or the silence after lightning before it says
> its names—and then the clouds' wide-mouthed
> apologies. You were aimed from birth:

you will never be alone. (from “Autumn”)

Since Stafford’s death his son and literary executor, Kim Stafford, has striven to keep his father’s work in public view. Three books came out in 1998 alone: an edition about new and selected poems, a volume of mostly prose pieces on writing, and a new edition of *Down in My Heart*, Stafford’s memoir of his time in Civilian Public Service (CPS) camps during World War II. In the past year two more books have drawn wide notice. *Early Morning*, Kim Stafford’s memoir of his father, offers the most complete and intimate portrait of the poet yet available. Written with admirable balance and eloquence, it is at once a biography, a tribute, a rich gathering of quotations from Stafford’s poetry, prose and journals, and an exploration of a character far more complex than his poems seemed to reveal to his less sympathetic critics. *Every War Has Two Losers* offers passages from Stafford’s 40 years of daily writings, over 40 poems, and selections from interviews and other prose writings.

Especially when read alongside *Early Morning*, *Every War* makes clear just how capacious and wide-ranging Stafford’s thinking on the challenges of peacemaking actually was—and how essential, in a time when calls to perpetual war ring from the most powerful voices in the land. In his introduction to *Every War*, Kim Stafford suggests that “all his life William Stafford was witness for a comprehensive view. He believed in the fragile but essential community of the world, and he wrote on behalf of what he called ‘the unknown good in our enemies.’ In his view, such a life of witness was both compassionate and profoundly practical—in the long term, wars simply don’t work as well as reconciliation.”

While Stafford considered himself a conscientious objector from his early days on, both of these texts make clear that his time in CPS camps was traumatic, generative and crucial. On the one hand, he found himself separated even from his neighbors and friends by his refusal to fight in a popular war. Stafford reflected years later on the distance his choice forced upon him: “My friends were . . . more antagonistic to my position [as a conscientious objector] than the general populace was. . . . They knew me, and I had done this, and it was kind of an affront.”

Yet as Kim Stafford notes, CPS also put Stafford in the company of like-minded (though quite diverse) young men, some but not all of them from Quaker, Brethren, Mennonite or Amish backgrounds. “Separated from the militaristic fervor of their contemporaries in uniform, but isolated also from domestic life on the home front,

they were free to think bold thoughts, and they schooled one another in new ways to see history and practice human behavior."

Stafford's sense of his vocation as a poet grew directly from this experience. He learned to rise before the sun, a lifelong habit that yielded both a remarkable number of fine poems and that strangely blended sense of independence and engagement so characteristic of his work. The awareness of being at best a partial, marginal citizen, one responsible to something wider than a mere nation, is everywhere in Stafford's work. "We live in an occupied country," he writes in "Thinking for Berky," a poem in memory of a high school outsider. "Justice will take us millions of intricate moves./ Sirens will hunt down Berky, you survivors in your beds/ listening through the night, so far and good."

Yet as the "we" of this poem suggests, Stafford was no lonely romantic individualist. He persistently sought out alliances with the like-minded—artists and writers, as well as members of peace groups like the Fellowship of Reconciliation, to which he and his wife, Dorothy, belonged for over half a century. Like Gandhi—one of his prime sources—Stafford found his closest allies among those as attentive to means as to ends. While he participated in the resistance to the Vietnam War, he noted skeptically that many who had turned against the war were "motivated and marked by much that still separates us: 1) aggression is a means of attaining the ends; 2) the machinations of certain evil persons must be stopped; 3) distrust, punishment, stern behavior is essential."

Stafford's pacifism was only one aspect of his effort to life peaceably in the world—an effort that Kim Stafford notes was not always triumphant. *Early Morning* describes his father's loving but sometimes reticent and even distant relations with his family. Father and son share the belief, finally, that no creed or code can solve all problems or smooth all the tensions from complicated human lives. Kim describes the close and enduring bond between Stafford and his wife yet also recognizes the strains and tensions in their relationship, which Stafford put this way: "Dorothy and I have had a good life. . . . But sometimes I feel sorry for her. She had the bad luck—just the plain tough luck to marry Crazy Horse."

"Is all long love like this," Kim Stafford speculates, "a combination of attraction and resistance? They had ways to stay close. . . . I remember, often, my father wrapping his arms around my mother and bringing his face against hers, saying, 'Dorothy, us mammals have got to stick together.' She would laugh like a girl." Even more

poignant is his account of the suicide of Stafford's oldest son, Bret, and the family's struggle to grieve rightly for him.

Not many of the aspiring poets who admire Stafford have managed to follow his habit of rising at four to write. But his advice about writing has been extremely influential, especially his insistence that in the early phases of composition too much concern about quality is merely inhibiting. Writers should "lower the standards" and simply accept what comes, he argued in books like *Writing the Australian Crawl* and *You Must Revise Your Life*. As many teachers and writers would testify, this approach is invaluable in overcoming writer's block and anxiety and in encouraging beginning writers.

The push in education these days may be toward raising the standard, toward more rigorous assessment and efforts to quantify all learning. But as a friend of Kim Stafford pointed out, "lowering the standard" is also traditionally the signal for a truce: "My father would have been delighted by this. To declare a truce as a writer is to be utterly ready for what comes. To raise one's standard in order to force a poem into being was not his way."

Similarly, Stafford resisted the usual professorial strategies of praise or criticism, seeking instead less judgmental responses: "He believed as a teacher and as a parent that approval can hurt as much as a put-down," Kim writes. "Approval, praise or any kind of superior conferring of status implied a power structure foreign to his understanding of art and life. . . . The point was not to be the kind of master who directs the beginner toward successful ends. The point was to be a companion in a world haunted by distracting fame and despair, to be good company instead of a directive force. . . . In his thousands of early mornings, my father was the pacifist with a lowered flag, the receiver in a quiet field, alert witness to the whispered word."

And what about religion? Though he wrote often on religious themes, Stafford's theology is much harder to define than is his pacifism—partly because he resisted addressing such matters directly. In one interview he said that Christian values were "homogenized all through the lines" of his poems, yet he also insisted that "straightforward asserting" of "values in direct use" was counterproductive, because "a worthy reader . . . needs not just your random speaking out, but an experience of sharing the source of values, the adventures inherent in the finding and maintaining of values."

Kim Stafford's own assessment: "I believe my father felt so close to things of the spirit, he didn't talk about them." Dorothy Stafford was the daughter of a Brethren minister, and after teaching for a year at the Brethren's Manchester College in Indiana, Stafford remarked that "I outflanked all of Dorothy's relatives by joining the Brethren Church." Back in Oregon, the family attended a Presbyterian church, but also drove past the Lutheran church featured in his poem "On a Church Lawn," where the dandelions say, "God is not big; He is right." How to balance claim and modesty, assertion and indirection? Stafford refuses either to cater to orthodoxy or to keep silent. If he were ever to have another experience like his time at the CPS camp, he writes, "I'd still study the gospel and play the accordion."

As poet Donald Hall once noted, chronologically Stafford was part of the troubled generation of American poets that included Weldon Kees, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz and Robert Lowell. But Stafford somehow stayed clear of the tangle of personal traumas, mental illness, alcoholism and general disorder that cut the lives and careers of the others tragically short. Hall writes, "How wonderfully [Stafford] the survivor contrasts. What makes him so different? Like Lowell, Stafford was a C.O. [conscientious objector] during the Second War. Like Berryman and Kees he came from the Midwest. But Stafford is a low-church Christian far from the rhetorical Catholicism that Lowell and Berryman entertained. I suspect that his survival is related not merely to his Christianity but to his membership in a small, embattled pacifist sect."

Perhaps because of his relatively late emergence as a poet (he was 46 when his first book, *West of Your City*, appeared in 1960), Stafford seems to fit better with a slightly younger and quite different set of poets, many of whom came into public prominence in the '60s. When I came of age in the early '70s and looked around for poetic mentors, there were plenty of possibilities—poets whose antiwar politics as well as their poems appealed to me—Robert Bly, W. S. Merwin, Denise Levertov, Galway Kinnell, Adrienne Rich, Gary Snyder, James Wright.

I still love much in all these poets' work, but somehow it was Stafford whose work and example held me the most closely. This is not to claim that he was the "greatest" or the "best" poet of his day—a claim he would certainly have resisted on principle. It is partly his refusal of such ambitions, in fact, that has kept me coming back to his work for the past 30 years. He has been a model and inspiration for my own fumbling efforts toward some hybrid of ancient Anabaptist values and literary aspirations. I turn back again and again to poems like "Allegiances," which insists "it

is time for all the heroes to go home / if they have any. . . . Suppose an insane wind holds all the hills/ while strange beliefs whine at the traveler's ears,/ we ordinary beings can cling to the earth and love/ where we are, sturdy for common things."

What of such a stance in the current moment, facing a level of fear that has fluctuated but never dissipated since September 11? Given the polarization and harsh rhetoric on all sides, surely we could do worse than pay attention to voices like Stafford's which insist on patience, care and tact in whatever we do.

One of his last published essays was a restrained review of Carolyn Forché's anthology *Against Forgetting*, a wrenching gathering of "poems of witness" from the wars, genocides and disasters of the 20th century. Many would expect a pacifist to offer automatic solidarity with such a project, but Stafford is hesitant: "A poet, a person, a fallible human being, has to step carefully through a puzzling world. We have to remember our own surges of anger, how we sometimes choose a country or a people and load our hatred on them, how we go to war—and then how later we come to our senses and perceive that ills are not to be so simply projected on an alien group. . . . This is what I don't want to forget."

Those who resist choosing sides may find themselves at odds with many of their compatriots. Yet Stafford offers the hope that we may find allies and friends in a much wider circle. In "For the Unknown Enemy" Stafford insists on seeing even those distant figures as fully human beings, offering his own clear answer to the question of where our neighbors are to be found:

> This monument is for the unknown
> good in our enemies. Like a picture
> their life began to appear: they
> gathered at home in the evening
> and sang. Above their fields they saw
> a new sky. A holiday came
> and they carried the baby to the park
> for a party. Sunlight surrounded them.
> Here we glimpse what our minds long turned
> away from. The great mutual
> blindness darkened that sunlight in the park,
> and the sky that was new, and the holidays.
> This monument says that one afternoon

we stood here letting a part of our minds
escape. They came back, but different.
Enemy: one day we glimpsed your life.
This monument is for you.

As son Kim said: “What will a writer be without patriotism (except allegiance to all people), without materialism (except a love for objects resonant with story), without ambition (except to be utterly honest)? What my father did not have turned out to be his source of greatest power.”