



# friends of WILLIAM STAFFORD

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## The Way It Is: Stafford and the *Tao Te Ching*

“be the riverbed of the world.”

Ch. 28, *Tao Te Ching* (Ursula Le Guin, tr.)

“What the river says, that is what I say.”

“Ask Me,” William Stafford

By Tim Barnes

Let me be clear: William Stafford was not a Taoist, though there are some intriguing, perhaps essential, congruencies. Once, down in southern Oregon, he was asked by a pillar of the church, “Are you religious?” He replied, “Not in the way you expect.” So it was with Stafford; he was hard to pin down on certain things and down to earth in others, cagey and honest, deflective and sincere—almost Zen. Of Zen he said in one of his aphorisms, “It doesn’t make sense, but I understand it.” Stafford was not a Buddhist, but there is a convergence between Zen and Taoism. It goes back to when Buddhism came to China from India. Taoism had tilled the soil and Buddhism, particularly in its Zen aspect, prospered in seekers. In *The Way of Zen*, Alan Watts, the great interpreter of Zen Buddhism, sources Taoism this way: it is “the original Chinese way of liberation which combined with Indian Mahayana Buddhism to produce Zen. It is a liberation from convention and of the creative power of *te*.” This essay reconnoiters how Stafford intersects with Taoism as found in the *Tao Te Ching* and how Taoism might be understood through Stafford.

The word *Tao* (some prefer to spell it Dao) is indefinable according to the *Tao Te Ching* itself. Its first words are usually translated something like, “The Tao which can be spoken is not the eternal Tao” or “the Tao that can be Tao-ed is not the invariable Tao.” This, however, has not discouraged many. One book I read had twenty synonyms for the Tao but most synonyms come down to three: path, road, way, and they arise from the ideogram which combines the Chinese characters for head and foot. The word *way* has over thirty meanings in one of my dictionaries and just under twenty in another. When it comes to the word *Tao*, we are into the

teaming and treacherous estuaries of definition and translation, and this may be more because of what is found in the translating than what is lost. Way, path, road, direction seem to be where the words *Tao* and *way* merge. So it seems important that Stafford’s new and selected poems is titled *The Way It Is*. This leads to my claim: Stafford’s writing and what is written in the *Tao Te Ching* (any translation; I have depended here on Ursula Le Guin’s) converge in ways that reveal the deep intelligence and ethical discernment Stafford’s poetry offers the reader.

Key support for this claim would be the very title of this collection. Since “it” has no particular reference here in the title, it becomes inclusive, containing everything, the polarities, the world. In *The Way of Zen*, Watts defines the Tao as “the indefinable ‘process’ of the world.” The world *is* the way. To follow the Tao might be to do what Stafford’s father offers in “Vocation,” “find what the world is trying to be.” A vocation is a calling and what Stafford seems to have heard his father say has a Tao-like tenor.

The poem from which the title of his new and selected poems comes is a well-known one and the latest FWS broadside (see p. 12). These lines from that poem are particularly resonant for this discussion: “There’s a thread you follow. It goes among / things that change. But it doesn’t change.” That thread is the Tao, which *The Shambala Guide to Taoism* defines as “the permanent underlying reality...hidden beneath transition and change.” The thread, of course, makes one think of the golden string Stafford writes about in *Writing the Australian Crawl* that “will lead you in at Heaven’s gate / Built in Jerusalem’s wall.” Remember that when Robert Bly asked if he loved one thread over another, Bill responded, “No, every thread.” Every thread leads to heaven’s gate. Taoism is more a philosophy than a religion, especially in the *Tao Te Ching*, but the connection between heaven’s gate, the eternal, and the “permanent underlying reality” are hard to dismiss:

Mysterious power  
goes deep.

It reaches far.

It follows things back,

clear back to the great oneness. (Ch. 65)

Speaking of the “great oneness,” it is interesting to

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note Victor Mair's observation in his translation of the *Tao Te Ching*: "as a religious and philosophical concept, Tao is the all pervading, self-existent, eternal cosmic entity, the source from which all created things emanate and to which they all return. This description could serve equally well for *Brahman*, the central principle of Indian philosophy and religion." There is an intriguing overlap between the concept of the Tao and other beliefs. It would seem, for example, to connect to Deism, that Enlightenment refuge of free thinkers, in the idea of the prime mover, as well as to the "mystical, universal oneness" of the transcendentalists, like Emerson and Whitman.

We find the phrase, "the way it is" in the last stanza of another Stafford poem, "Bi-focal."

So, the world happens twice—  
once what we see it as;  
second it legends itself  
deep, the way it is.

Those of you who read Chinese poetry know about "the ten thousand things." My *Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion* defines this phrase as "a conventional expression descriptive of the totality of phenomena within the universe." Mair translates it as



Chinese character for Te

"the vast variety of creatures and things in the world," what we commonly call the material/physical world. William Blake's famous statement from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time," captures this sense of the "ten thousand things" as time's physical manifestations. The Buddhists call it *maya*, the veil of illusion. It also conveys the relationship between the Tao and the tangible world: "The unnamable is the origin of heaven and earth, / named, it is the mother of the ten thousand things" (Ch. 1, Hamill). The Tao is the "Uncarved Block," what Arthur Waley calls in *The Way and Its Power*, "the primal unity underlying apparent multiplicity." In other places Stafford has called it "This motionless turmoil, this everything dance," and "the stillness" held "exactly before us." In his essay "William Stafford's Wilderness Quest," Peter Stitt observes, "Stafford's goal in all his poems is ultimately to achieve a sense of union with something absolute....with the godhead sought by mystics in more specifically religious texts and traditions."

The *Tao Te Ching* can be seen as both a religious and a philosophical text, and as a suite of eighty-one poems. Like virtually all religions, part of the development of Taoism takes it into proscribed ceremonies and doctrinal dilemmas; alchemy and divination also find their way into later Taoism. In *The Way of Zen*, Watts calls it a "way of liberation" similar as well to Vedanta and Yoga. It also, interestingly enough, has an aphoristic quality found in many wisdom texts, the gospels for example. An aphorism, my *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* tells us, is "A statement of some general principle, expressed memorably by condensing much wisdom into few words." For the purposes of this essay, memorability and wisdom are the crucial qualities to consider. In his book *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching*, Michael Lafargue writes, "Attention to the meaning-structure of aphorisms is the single most important way to a proper understanding of the *Tao Te Ching*."

Legend has it that around 500 B.C.E. Lao Tzu was the Royal Archivist who, after the destruction of the archives, traveled into obscurity but not before leaving the *Tao Te Ching* with a disciple

near the Hanku Pass in central China. He is also said to have met with Confucius, but no hard facts exist of any of this. Lafargue and other scholars believe that Lao Tzu was most likely, as Mair says, "a composite personality." Lafargue places the origins of the writings that became the *Tao Te Ching* during the Warring States period (463-222 B.C.E.) in Chinese history and connect its texts to a group of alienated idealists called the *Shih* who were seeking "norms and sources of meaning superior to those of conventional society," a society in a constant state of conflict and war. The *Shih*, working within an oral tradition, developed sayings, aphorisms, that went among the people as memorable speech for at least a hundred years before being recorded. "All we have," Mair conjectures, "is a

collection of sayings attributed to [Lao Tzu] that seem to have coalesced beginning sometime during the fourth century B.C. and was probably written down during the second half of the third century B.C." This conclusion is partially based on a collection of manuscripts found in 1973 in the city of Changsha in Hunan Province. I say all this not only to connect Stafford and the *Tao Te Ching* in their aphoristic aspects but also to focus on the ethical perspective of the aphorisms.

As the recent publication of *Sound of the Ax: Aphorisms and Poems* so richly affirms, Stafford was an aphoristic poet. He was drawn to the pith and wisdom of them, finding stimulating examples in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, which he discovered at the University of Kansas. He read Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" and Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes*. Aphorisms became part of his daily writing and, according to Vince Wixon and Paul Merchant's introduction to *Sound of the Ax*, Stafford wrote thousands over the years. Some appear in his "list poems" and others in what Wixon and Merchant describe as "the aphoristic line that perfectly encapsulates the thought of a whole poem." They also point out that "Stafford's practice of this art became a lifetime of gradually accumulating 'things to say' that we have come to regard as his authentic voice"—an essential part of his writing process.

One kind of aphorism found often in the *Tao Te Ching* is what Lafargue calls the "polemic aphorism." This kind of aphorism has three parts: "the target; the image; and the attitude and the value orientation motivating it." It is designed to "wake people up" to a perspective on the situation that they are ignoring." An example from chapter twenty-four of the *Tao Te Ching* is "You can't shine by showing off or get ahead by pushing." The target here is boastful domination. The image is of pushy showing off. The attitude is critical, repositioning what one perceives as successful behavior. It is similar to one of Stafford's aphorisms: "Successful people are in a rut." Target: the cult of success; image: rut; value orientation: continual success may not be the best thing in the end—a little failure, perhaps? I think, as well, of the "critical repositioning" in the poem "Learning." A patriotic speaker who has come to tell the assembled in the town square who "our enemy is" becomes the enemy: "I watched my mother's face, / its quiet. 'That's him,' she said." There is a deep *aha* moment in this poem that wakes the reader to a subversive, corrective understanding of who the enemy is and what to be afraid of. This is a good Taoist lesson for these times of fear and xenophobia. Could our own lovable Republican saber rattlers be the enemy? I think, as well, of that line from "A Ritual to

Read to Each Other”: “it is important that awake people be awake.” I get a twinge of Edward Snowden here, traitor *or* truth-teller / traitor *and* truth-teller?

One of the most frequent and profound images in Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* is water:

True goodness  
is like water.

Water’s good  
for everything.

It doesn’t compete. (Ch. 8)

Lao Tzu and the Taoists were fascinated by the fact that water, that most yielding and flowing and elemental of substances, can wear down stone and round out its roughnesses or just go around it. Alan Watts titled his book on Taoism, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*. The power of yielding, of not competing or striving or warring, seemed powerfully instructive to them as a model for society, a moral ethos. Remember, Taoism arose during the Warring States period and Stafford’s character (and his pacifism) was also born during times of war. For the Taoist and for Stafford, it was clear that “water is always ready to learn” a truer, deeper way. Competitiveness, self-assertion, arrogance lead to conflict and then to war:

It is time for all the heroes to go home  
if they have any, time for all of us common ones  
to locate ourselves by the real things  
we live by. (“Allegiances”)

What others teach, I say too:  
violence and aggression  
destroy themselves.

My teaching rests on that. (Ch. 42)

Like Stafford, the Taoists were pacifists and water was an image, a metaphor, and a reality that embodied the import and importance of the natural: “What the river says, that’s what I say.” So, closely connected to this is the key Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, commonly translated as non-action, but it is more complicated and rich than that. Perhaps a good way to understand the energy of the word more fully would be to consider Stafford’s pacifism during World War II. It was not a passive proposition. It took courage and action, strength, to do what he felt was intrinsic to his nature: “Brave caution leads to life” (Ch. 73, Bynner). A poem in *Sound of the Ax*, “Buddha’s Thoughts,” has these lines: “In this world, what I really like / are those things that don’t happen.” To refuse to engage in organized violence, to decline, to put his whole body and soul into “things that don’t happen” was based on his sense of a right way to be. Witter Bynner calls it acting “upon inner accord with the conscience of the universe” in his translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, which was published first in 1944 and available in a cheap paperback that I’m almost sure Stafford read. When I asked Kim about this, he told me that his father was the “widest reader I know.”

A central meaning of *wu-wei* is following the flow in the sense of spontaneity. This connects with Stafford’s poetics and compositional ethic, with the idea of wavering and being “willingly fallible.” His famous advice, “if you can’t write, lower your standards,” seems closely linked to the Tao: “[Water] goes right / to the low loathsome

places, / and so finds a way” (Ch. 8). Like water, Stafford was not afraid of failure because failure is part of writing, part of the polarity, the dark and light, the day and night, of it. In his wonderful essay, “Almost One of the Boys: Marginality, Community, and Nonviolence in William Stafford,” Jeff Gundy writes, “Stafford demands rethinking of the drive toward success.” In *Writing the Australian Crawl*, Stafford says:

the stance to take, reading or writing, is neutral, ready,  
susceptible to now; such a stance is contrary to anything  
tense or determined or “well-trained.” Only the golden  
string knows where it is going, and the role of the writer  
or reader is one of following, not imposing.

Compare that statement with Alan Watts’ definition of *te* in *The Way of Zen*:

*Te* is the unthinking ingenuity and creative power of man’s  
spontaneous and natural functioning—a power which is  
blocked when one tries to master it in terms of formal  
methods and techniques. It is like the centipede’s skill in using a  
hundred legs at once.

Watts’ simile in the last sentence is strikingly reminiscent of Stafford’s swimming analogy: “swimmers know that if they relax on the water it will prove to be miraculously buoyant.” The act of following contains a natural spontaneity connected to discovering, realizing, the depth of now, of following the golden string as it threads through the ten thousand things to the absolute, the unchanging—to the way it is.

In Stafford’s poetry workshops it meant “No praise, no blame.” In his college classes it meant good questions, listening, and no grades. One of the key aspects of Taoism is the rejection of judgment, of categories, of standards: “Everybody on earth knowing / that beauty is beautiful / makes ugliness” (Ch. 2). Stafford applied a version of this idea to thinking about poetry and the teaching of it. All poems are good in a way and the best poems are the ones that awaken our fullest sense of a self and selves in the world. His marvelous poem “Earth Dweller” ends with these words: “The world speaks everything to us. / It is our only friend.” That friend could be understood as the Tao, the world speaking through the ten thousand things: the clods and barns and the cracks in ax handles. The daily writing, the wavering, the acceptance of connection of common things to an original source, the deep well of being, involves a kind of mindfulness that converges with Taoism. Stafford and the *Tao Te Ching* say in a soft way, wake up to what really is.

Another of Taoism’s favorite metaphors involves the usefulness of emptiness for the existence of things:

Hollowed out,  
clay makes a pot.  
Where the pot’s not  
is where it’s useful.

So the profit in what is  
is in the use of what isn’t. (Ch. 11)

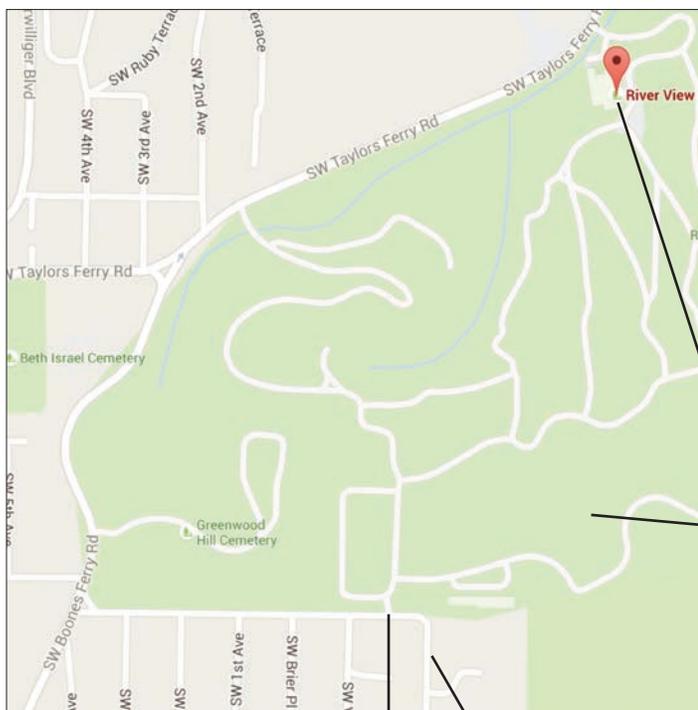
Stafford intuited this, of course, and we might thank the flatness and spacious skies of Kansas for that. He gave this classic Taoist insight a western feel, a spaciousness. One of his books is titled,

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無 爲

Chinese character for *wu-wei*

## Stafford Gravesite

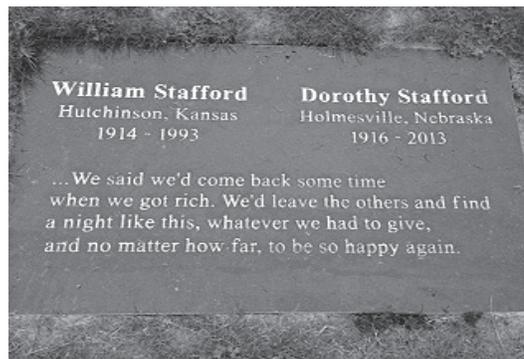


Entrance Gate on SW Palatine Hill Road

Location of Stafford home in 1947

### Gravestone for William & Dorothy Stafford

Riverview Cemetery in SW Portland  
 North from Lewis & Clark College, off SW Palatine Hill Rd.  
 Section 134, Lot 1316, Grave 2 (between stones for Heath & Lake)



Riverview Cemetery office

Stafford gravestone

### The Loyal Hand

for Dorothy & Bill

Mother, as you said once,  
 at a departure like this,  
 "You have so loved the stars,  
 do not be frightened by the dark."

And Daddy, you told us in so  
 many ways, "On that last morning  
 when we all tremble and lose,  
 I will reach toward whatever is  
 there—with this loyal hand."

So, to the darkness and the stars  
 we entrust your dear spirits  
 as we live the story you left us:

"Isn't this the way it should always be?"

KIM STAFFORD

We interred the ashes of Bill and Dorothy Stafford on August 28, 2015—22 years to the day after my father's death. We had just family members, said our words of farewell, and scattered flowers into the grave. Into the urn I had put the faded red-and-white checked tablecloth from our parents' early years, a talisman of good times and far travels, as well as a letter from family friend Naomi Shihab Nye. And into the urn I put a copy of three poems I had written—one for Bill, one for Dorothy, and one for the two of them. There were words, tears, silences, and some laughter.

**Editor's Note:** Kim Stafford sent this note to the editor with this subject line: "Item of possible interest for FOWS." One of the poems Kim read at the gravesite is above; another, "Full Moon 1160 Months & Counting," is in issue 18.2 of this publication; the third, "Do the Hard Things First," might appear in an upcoming issue. The stanza on the gravestone is from the closing of "Once in the 40s."



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Stafford gravestone

## William Stafford vs. Roundup®

By Ingrid Wendt

Tensions were high, that hot July evening, as our Edgewood Townhouse Board of directors and more than twenty residents gathered at the community clubhouse for our HOA's quarterly "open" Board meeting: a Robert's Rules of Order-style session in which residents may voice questions, opinions, and concerns.

On the agenda was a hot, new item: a vote by the Board on the request I'd made the month before, that the herbicide Roundup® be banned from our common, shared grounds: 13 wooded acres between hills at the edge of town, with 89 single and two-level homes artfully and unobtrusively nestled into a mostly-natural landscape on both sides of a natural, year-round creek.

It was the woods and the creek and its winding paths on both sides, replete with wildflowers, deer, birds, and more, that drew us here a few years ago, as well as the lure of no lawn to mow, or leaves to rake, or structural cares, plus a city bus stop just one block away. Philosophically, too, this place suits us. We've chosen to live more simply, these days, as have our neighbors: a conscious community of mostly like-minded people, concerned—as are we—with the multiple and escalating dangers in the world around us. And when I sometimes weary of the ongoing task of downsizing, I see, taped to my freezer door, the Mennonite saying, "I live simply so that others may simply live," and the garage gets a little bit emptier.

But when I first noticed, on one of my peaceful morning strolls late last Spring, that a large swath of low, natural vegetation (aka weeds) between the sidewalk and creek was a uniform shade of brown, and uniformly dead, I became concerned. Massive die-off like that could only be caused by herbicide use, and herbicides of any kind carry risks to the health of those who apply it, to those who live nearby, to their pets, and to the environment, especially when the herbicide is applied near water. Waters from our small creek (which comes from the hills above us and empties into Eugene's Amazon canal, which empties into Fern Ridge Reservoir) ultimately wind up in an ocean already stressed by rising water temperatures, nitrogen pollution from fertilizer runoff from farms, and other ills.

Not often am I roused to anger, but that morning I was livid, suspecting (rightly, as it turned out) that the product applied had been Roundup®. Roundup® was, in fact, being used all over our grounds: on grass sprouting through sidewalk cracks, on weeds alongside the cement, and—to eradicate blackberries and poison oak—on most of the "wilder" places on both sides of the creek, farther down. Even worse, by paying my monthly HOA dues, along with everyone else, I had been paying for this. It's one thing to stand helplessly by, as the natural world around us slowly degrades. It's something else to knowingly contribute to that degradation, to be an enabler. This couldn't go on; I had to do something.

My choices, on reflection, were two: I could stay angry, and whine and complain, and nothing would change; or—believing in the popular slogan "Think globally but act locally"—I could work to engineer that change. I might not succeed, but I couldn't *not* try.

*What would William Stafford do*, I often ask myself, when faced with tough situations, for Stafford was a master of calm and tact. Yes, I could write an angry letter to the Board, complaining loudly that our community was complicit in environmental degradation. I could rant and rail against whomever had allowed this to happen.

And what would be the likely response? *It's just a little bit we're using, what's the big deal?* (The big deal, folks, is that one part per trillion is the equivalent of one drop in 6 miles of railroad tanker cars of water.)

But on that day last Spring, thinking of Bill—my mentor in how to live in this world, as well as in poetry—an alternate course of action came in through the back door. William Stafford would remember "the unknown good in our enemies." William Stafford would, furthermore, *not* take any action that could hurt another human being. And at Edgewood, the person who could get hurt, if I weren't careful, would be Frank, our facilities manager, the guy who directs our landscape maintenance crews and often works alongside them.

*That's it: talk with Frank*, I told myself. *He's good. When he learns the many dangers of Roundup®* (I was doing my research) *he'll have to stop using it.*

And it worked. Sort of. Frank believed me. But what could he do? *Nothing else kills the roots of poison oak*, he said, *it comes back.* (And what about the common weeds?) He had to protect his college student crew, he said. Some of them had already gotten bad cases of poison oak by digging it out by hand. He had, too. And "just letting it go" was not an option with the Board.

*Maybe someone else could do the pulling? Someone immune to the oils in poison oak, or with other removal methods?* I asked. Frank was open to it. So I searched and found, and together Frank and I interviewed, landscape workers willing to dig it out by hand, and for a good price. But they weren't bonded or licensed, nor was any other crew I called, and there was no hiring them without those protections. *Find me some good, effective, environmentally-friendly products, and I'll give them a try*, Frank said.

So I did that, too. Eugene, like Portland, has an ordinance against using toxic chemicals in (some) city parks and playgrounds, so I called the City of Eugene's landscape maintenance supervisors, to learn how they managed invasive species. I also sought help from the Eugene-based environmental group "Beyond Toxics"; from another Eugene-based group, the "Northwest Coalition for Alternatives to Pesticides" (herbicides fall into that category, I learned); and from a third group, "Beyond Pesticides," based in Washington, D.C. Using Google, I found some other "not perfect," experiments worth trying (including hiring goats, which would never fly with the Board!). I found a store in Eugene called "The Constant Gardener," which sells products that work "pretty well." Even one of our more conventional garden stores had products less widely toxic than Roundup®, which do not "migrate" away from the roots of the treated plants into surrounding soil or waterways.

For Frank to experiment with anything new, however, he was going to need the Edgewood Board of Directors to be "on board." Someone still needed to convince them that Roundup® should not be used on our grounds. Would I back him up?

I was moving ever farther from my comfort zone, and writing a letter to the Board demanded even more research. But before the June Board meeting I wrote that letter, citing a number of research studies on Roundup® use and the devastating evidence they produced. I suggested possible alternatives. I sent a copy to every member of the Board. And, since residents are permitted to attend

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regular monthly Board meetings (without speaking), I sat through two boring hours of tedious business, before my letter was brought up and read aloud and dismissed as something that needed “more evaluation.” Boards are like that.

Far from discouraged, I knew it was time to take the next step: to talk to my neighbors, to circulate a petition, and to take this peaceable fight to the next quarterly (open) Board meeting, scheduled for July. So, with the help of friends Marilyn and Bev—a retired lawyer and a retired university mediator—I prepared a petition (which included a summary of my extensive research findings) and had no trouble finding 24 signers among the first 25 neighbors I approached. With more time, I would have found many more.

Enter the lion: the news, delivered by my lawyer neighbor just one hour before the start of the meeting, that two Board members had gotten wind of the petition and were furious with me. How dare I do such a thing? How dare I rally the troops? Divide the community! I would be publicly *torn apart*, Marilyn had been told. *Ripped limb to limb*. Our cause—the health of our small part of the world—didn’t stand a chance.

My pulse began to race. What could I possibly say to head off an ugly, angry confrontation? Was it even possible? *What would Bill Stafford do? If he had to speak at this meeting, what would he say? How would he begin?*

The meeting began, as meetings do, with a reading of the minutes and a treasurer’s report. Discussions of minor structural repairs, of the swimming pool rules, and other such issues followed, until it was time for members of the community to offer comments, suggestions, or requests. Heads of friends turned in my direction. I rose and walked to a spot where I could address the entire room.

*Friends and esteemed members of the Board, I began. My late friend, mentor, and former Poet Laureate of Oregon, William Stafford, used to open sessions of the Oregon State Legislature with a poem. While this is not the Oregon House of Representatives (smiles in the audience), and I won’t be reading the poem I read to that august chamber last year, I will ask your indulgence while I recite from memory another poem, one by William Stafford, titled “A Ritual to Read to Each Other.”*

I took a deep breath and went on:

If you don’t know the kind of person I am  
and I don’t know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant’s tail,  
but if one wanders the circus won’t find the park,  
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk;  
though we could fool each other, we should consider --  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give -- yes or no, or maybe --  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

I paused to gather my thoughts.

*We aren’t exactly elephants, I said, But we are all in this world together, and we all want what’s best for this small community of ours, or we wouldn’t be here tonight. And yes, I said, looking at each Board member in turn, and at the assembled residents, “the darkness around us is deep,” isn’t it? We know this. And I know that none of us wants to add to it. I’m also aware there’s some tension among us tonight about this whole Roundup® thing, but I know that underneath it all, we really do care about working peacefully together, and I trust that, together, tonight, we can reach a friendly accord.*

How can I describe the magic, the change that was coming over the entire room, the somewhat stunned silence, as we took in the beauty and the spirit and the significance of William Stafford’s words.

The rest, as they say, is history. With my courage and left brain functioning again, I briefly shared the results of my research: the dangers of using Roundup®, and possible alternatives to it. I praised Frank for all of his good, hard work, and asked if the Board would support him in trying out various alternative methods. Other residents rose and followed my lead, offering thanks to the Board, support to my proposal, and their own, personal perspectives on the issue. And yes, the Board, after minimal deliberation, reached a consensus (not a “vote,” that would have been too official) that they would give Frank room to experiment. No more Roundup® on our common grounds, though there’s still more than a bit of work ahead.

### “Shall we have that singing...”

Shall we have that singing in the evening?  
For between the stars and our star there is no one.  
And we must sleep again.  
We rest the hands, not dangerous, on the wool.  
And we place pillows under the turning head.

Quietly now, no moving,  
Was there something forgotten?

(The losing one neglects and calls it winning.)  
Help each other.  
Have that singing in the evening.

WILLIAM STAFFORD  
LOS PRIETOS, CALIFORNIA  
JANUARY 19, 1944

Fred Marchant read this poem during his talk at the Nonviolence in the Creative Writing Workshop panel at the 2015 AWP conference.

## Doug Stow and the Art of Being

By Tim Barnes

The friends and Friends of William Stafford are deeply saddened by the passing of Doug Stow (1949-2015) in early December. Doug's Paper Crane Press, as many of you know, published a number of beautiful broadsides of Bill's poetry for the FWS, nineteen in all.

This editor wrote a profile of Doug and Paper Crane in issue 15.2 (winter 2010-11). I refer readers interested in some details about Doug Stow's story to that profile and to Paul Merchant's account in issue 11.2 (fall 2006) of Doug's visit, with his wife Margaret, to the Stafford Archives at Lewis & Clark, "Summer Visitors from Out of Town." In response to my memorial piece of Brian Booth, Doug sent along a memory of how he connected with FWS and did the first Paper Crane/FWS broadside, "A Ritual to Read to Each Other." This appears in 17.2 (fall 2012) in a piece called "Brian Booth Memorial—Addendum." I don't wish to repeat myself too much. What follows is what I would like to say in this sad moment about Doug Stow, a good friend of Bill Stafford's legacy, of FWS, of poetry and the arts, and of mine.

Doug was a true friend of William Stafford and the friends of William Stafford. He and Bill were kindred spirits. Doug felt a deep connection to Bill's way. Some of those threads of connection speak to Doug's quietly exceptional character and to why many of us are drawn to William Stafford's work and witness.

Doug was a CO during the Vietnam War, working with the elderly and infirm. He and Bill shared a belief in pacifism. They believed in art as an essential way of being true. Doug came to fine press printing and the small press world because he wanted to print his wife Margaret's linoleum block of their infant son's footprint. Stafford and Stow both believed in the relationship between art and love, craft and caring. This reminds me of William Morris, the Pre-Raphaelite poet, artist, and artisan who believed in making things that were beautiful, useful, and lasting. It reminds me as well of their shared love for the artisanal, democratic world of small presses and little publishers.

My wife and I visited Doug and Margaret's house in Half Moon Bay and their shop. They lived and worked among and were sustained by an aesthetic sense that is intrinsically connected with justice and fairness. It is easy to see how it was that Paper Crane Press began with a drawing of a beloved baby's foot. Morris' belief in these things, I would note, prompted him to become a socialist, one who believes in community, equality, fairness, and the individual's right to their own potential in life. Bill and Doug believed, I think, together with that old Portland pacifist C.E.S. Wood, that we should try to make a world where children can be "born into joy."

Like Bill, Doug created a life that touched others with grace, conviction, kindness, and warmth. That even after his death (they never knew each other), Bill was able to make such a good friend speaks to Bill's legacy and to the integrity and character of Doug Stow. He will be powerfully missed but will be with us, like Bill, in all the fine and furthering entities and sensitivities he left behind.



*This photo of Doug at his press in the Paper Crane gift shop is from a 1988 article in the Half Moon Bay Review written by Stacy Trevenon.*



*Doug at the 2007 Poetry and Potluck talking about "Hummingbirds," the Paper Crane broadside for that year.*

## Creative Laureate Talks to Strangers

By Tim Barnes



PHOTO BY ILKA KUZNIK

Julie Keefe

In the first days of the new year, 2015, Julie Keefe, Portland's Creative Laureate, was in the parking lot of World Foods. A rebroadcast of the *Think Out Loud* segment devoted to Stafford came on her radio. She heard Kim tell the story of how his parents would tell their kids before they went wandering the neighborhood and local woods, "Don't forget to talk to strangers." She went off to a residency at the Caldera retreat in the Cascades for a month and then decided to do just that—talk to a stranger each day and then, hoping to jumpstart her own writing, write about it each night. She did it every day from January through March of 2015. A glass of wine can help, she noted.

Keefe was appointed Creative Laureate in 2013 in one of Sam Adams last acts as mayor. Her job is to advocate for creativity, the arts, and arts education. Keefe, who calls herself a "community-based" photojournalist, does this by talking art, teaching art, and using art to help strangers become neighbors.

Keefe came to Portland from Iowa in the 1980s with an undergraduate degree in writing from the University of Iowa but found herself doing photojournalism. In the 1990s she freelanced for *The Skanner News*, documenting the trials, triumphs, and life of the African-American community. In 2007 she created the Hello Neighbor project, prompted by a local activist's comment that gentrification wasn't so bad but people didn't say hello anymore. Hello Neighbor, which was initially supported by Caldera, a non-profit promoting art, the environment, and community, and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, involves middle school students photographing and interviewing neighbors they do not know. The photographs are displayed in pairs with a portrait of the students (photographed by Keefe) and a photograph (by the students) of the stranger-become-friend with a sentence (chosen by the students) written on it in his or her hand. The photograph is then enlarged and posted around the neighborhood.

Keefe worked with Kit Stafford's Americana Project middle school students in 2008 to create the Hello Neighbor project in Sisters, Oregon. Hello Neighbor gained national attention and in 2013, Keefe was selected by *Fast Company*, a magazine devoted to business, technology, and design, as one of the country's 100 "Most Creative

People in Business" who are "remaking city living."

One of her "talk to strangers" days involved students from Roosevelt High School interviewing Portland police. Her stranger that day was one of the officers who told her, "I'd like to see more doors open—opening doors would allow officers to interact with each other and with youth—allowing relationships rather than confrontations to develop....Trust is so crucial. I'd like to see the trust return—when you see a door slam close—to try to find a way to get it back open again." Julie Keefe is trying to create a city in which talking to a stranger has the friendly, open sense and trust with which Bill and Dorothy said it to their kids a couple of generations ago. As many of you know, "Only connect," was one of the Stafford's mantras. Through talking, teaching, and the arts, Keefe would seem to be living it and creating a better community for all of us.

### On The McKenzie

For Erik

Wherever you've been  
in the forest, wherever  
you're going, something  
has been there first.

You know this because  
you see things  
out of the corner of your eye  
you can't explain.

Dust jumps off the path  
ahead of you, puddles  
ripple, you notice  
blades of grass ticking.

There is no wind. Something  
has just passed this way.  
Maybe it was the part of you  
that always goes first  
and now is out of sight.

What is left then  
going along in your body  
is at home in the forest  
always lives there  
never needs to leave.

DAVID LAING

David Laing, along with Erik and Ann Muller, came to Oregon after reading Stafford. Laing edited *Fireweed* for ten years along with Muller and ex-FWS board member Ann Staley. Laing passed away in September, two weeks from his 78th birthday. Erik and Ann sent along the above poem through Paulann Petersen.

## Stafford's 101.5 Birthday—Kairos-Milwaukie UCC

On a sunny Sunday in mid July of last year, Don and Betty Balmer, two dear and long-time friends of Bill and Dorothy's came to an event organized by Joannie McClellan, head of the Portland FOR, at this progressive and lovely church. Don, a political science professor, was a colleague of Bill's at Lewis & Clark for many years.

The Balmers told some stories about the Staffords, knowing a few because they spent many New Years together, and the Staffords would stay at their cabin at Sherman Ranch in the summer. Issue 8.4 (Dec. 2003) has a lovely story that touches on their friendship, "Bill Stafford, Friendship, and the Scottish Poet's Library."

They brought along a beautiful copy of *That Other Alone*, a rare and exquisitely crafted book done at the Perishable Press of Walter Hamady, a man who loved handmade paper and letterpress printing. The colophon on this page will tell you a good bit of what you might want to know about this except that in another of the books they did together, *Tuft by Puff*, the paper was made from old bathrobes each of them had worn. *That Other Alone* was printed in 1973 at Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin, in an edition of 120 copies with drawings by Ann Mikolowski. For more information, see Stafford's annotated bibliography, that handsome and invaluable book.

The Balmers each read a favorite Stafford poem, Don read "West of Here" and Betty read "Climbing Along the River." They also brought along a poem Bill wrote for them, "For a Stone at Balmer's Ranch." (see issue 18.2, "The Sherman Ranch Poems," pp. 6-7).

A round table reading of Stafford poems followed and the light of attention followed each reader just as the sunlight fell on the trees in the churchyard.

Editor's note: In the 18.2 issue I called Don Bob; I apologize to any I might have confused and to Don.



Cover of *That Other Alone*.

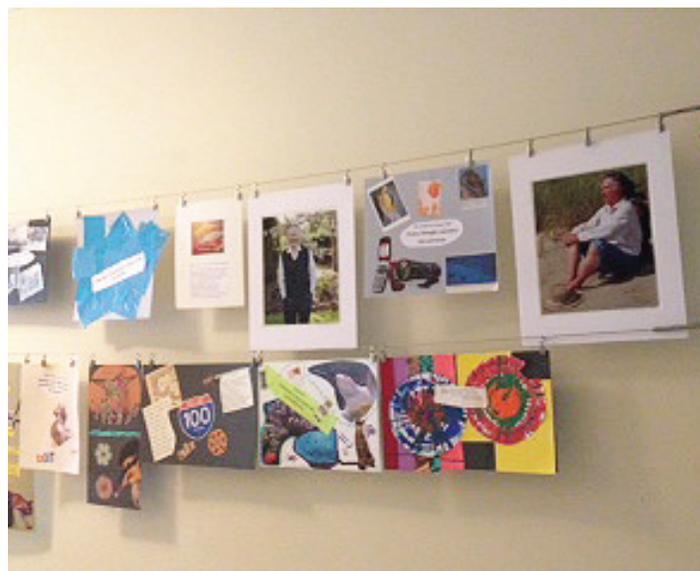


Don and Betty Balmer talking about their friendship with Bill Stafford at the Kairos-Milwaukie UCC.

we first got hold of this funny botanical drying paper on a lark being impressed that it was/is used by many world-famous herbariums, such as Diredawa & Kew. this edition is signed & is one hundred & twenty press numbered copies this is copy 107. the drawings are by Ann Mikolowski of the Alternative Press in Detroit & were seen just in her sketch book at Thomas Jefferson and seemed easily appropriate to this group of poems. the type is handset Sabon Antiqua from D. Stempel AG and the hand-binding is by Mary Ellen Chapdu. Our next Stafford book will be printed on paper made out of his old clothes and especially a love-worn bathrobe.

Colophon for *That Other Alone*.

PHOTOS BY ILKA KUZNIK



Children's art based on Stafford aphorisms.

## Gathering by the River: The FWS Poetry & Potluck, 2015

A good day it was, friends, talk of Bill, baskets of poetry, bebies of broadsides (including the newest one from Paper Crane, “The Way It Is”), lottery winners (and not unhappy losers), great bowls and plates of food, and conversation drifting toward the clarity of summer afternoons and the Stafford Stones by the river.

Peter Sears, Oregon’s Poet Laureate, that champion of poetry and font of insight, took us along in a talk about imagery that sparked through some quite wonderful poems. The pleasure of the journey and Peter’s insight, wit, and enthusiasm carried the day across the afternoon that moved with a sky that joined us all.

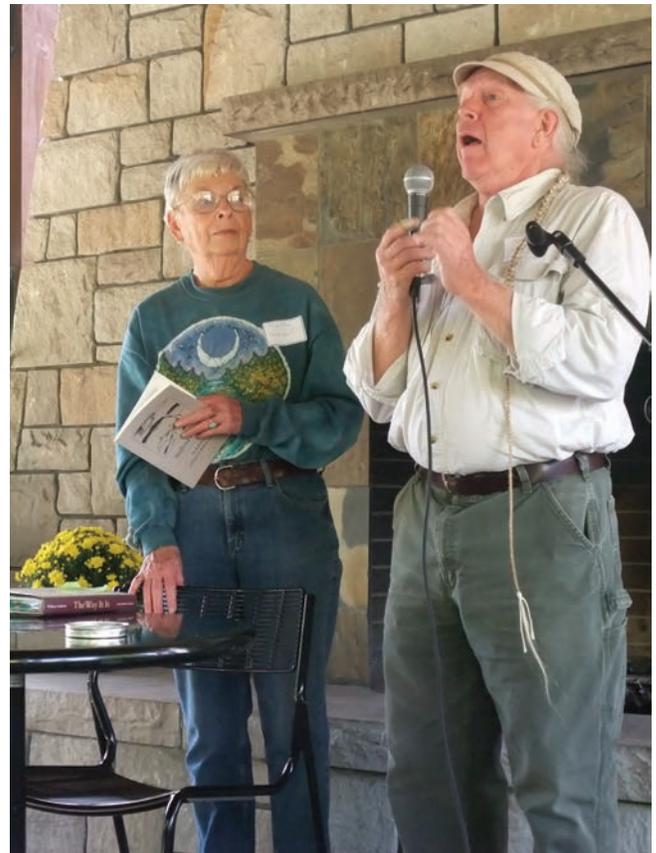
I list the poems Peter read and enriched for the assembled because I, for one, am grateful to have heard them with Peter’s genius for understanding inside them. I commend Peter’s anthology for the day to you all: “Leave Him Alone,” James Wright; “Morning Song,” Sylvia Plath; “What Dying Was Like,” Lynn Emanuel; “Stardust,” Colette Tennant (one of the attendees); “Maypole,” Lucia Perillo; “Of My Father before the War,” Frank Gaspar; Stafford’s “Sky,” and Sears’ own, “What Can I Say?”



*Peter Sears.*



*Leah Stenson, our emcee.*



*Martha and Jerry Gatchell.*



*The raffle table.*



*Joanie McClellan and Jim Scheppke at the broadside table.*



*The pots and luck of the potluck.*



*Peter Sears and Greg Simon during Peter's talk.*

## Sky

I like you with nothing. Are you  
what I was? What I will be?  
I look out there by the hour,  
so clear, so sure. I could  
smile, or frown—still nothing.

Be my father, be my mother,  
great sleep of blue; reach  
far within me; open doors,  
find whatever is hiding; invite it  
for many clear days in the sun.

When I turn away I know  
you are there. We won't forget  
each other: every look is a promise.  
Others can't tell what you say  
when it's the blue voice, when  
you come to the window and look for me.

Your word arches over  
the roof all day. I know it  
within my bowed head, where  
the other sky listens.  
You will bring me  
everything when the time comes.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

## Obelisk in Place

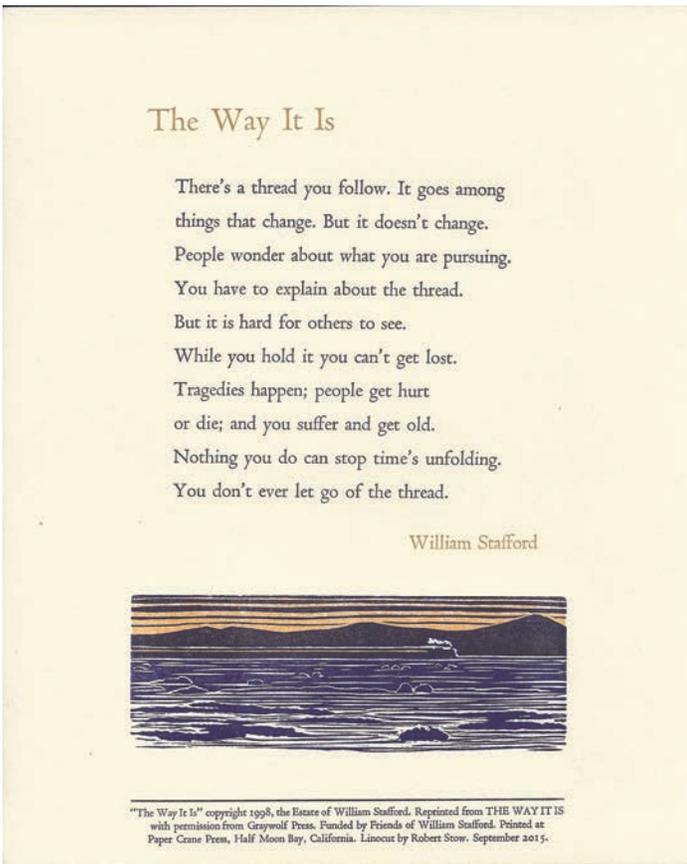


Frank Boyden and friend installing the obelisk in the Stafford Grove.



PHOTOS BY CAROLE OCKERT

## The Latest Paper Crane Broadside



To purchase this broadside (\$10), contact Leah Stenson at [leahstenson@comcast.net](mailto:leahstenson@comcast.net).

## Broadside Thoughts

Robert Stow, Doug Stow's son, who did the illustration on "The Way It Is," the newest Paper Crane/FWS broadside, sent along these thoughts on the making of the linocut on the poem. "When I first got the poem from...I read it a few times to myself, read 'Jerusalem' by William Blake, and then read it with my mom and dad and my wife and bounced ideas off them. Nothing I came up with really stuck—a ball of thread, maybe a spool of thread, stylized threads as borders, hands holding threads. They didn't seem to do justice to the poem. (And I really didn't want to try to tackle hands.) Then I was reading *You Must Revise Your Life* with my dad. I reached the passage where Stafford describes a bike ride he took to the Cimarron River in high school. He described it as resembling an Indian vision-quest, and in the middle of the night, he awoke to watch a lighted train pull across the horizon as the sun was dawning. The passage concludes: "The earth was my home; I would never feel lost while it held me."

That was, to me, the moment when Stafford recognized his own thread, and in that image, I saw the poem. The train, its lights golden like Blake's thread, was a representation of that thread. I'm sure the hills and plains in my illustration bear little resemblance to the countryside Stafford saw in Kansas, but that's what I imagined when picturing that scene. And I found other metaphors and connections to the poem as I completed the linocut, but I'll let others discover those for themselves, however they may."

Kim Stafford wrote this note to Leah Stenson after he saw the latest broadside: "Is it my imagination, or is the illustration and [a] very insightful reference to the passage in my father's writing when he describes seeing a train crossing the horizon at night...as a time of great spiritual inclusion in his youth? If so, bravo. If not, what a sweet coincidence."

## AWP: Nonviolence in the Creative Writing Workshop, Excerpts from the AWP Conference in Minneapolis on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015

[From Fred Marchant's introduction]: What we are talking about here is the danger of emotional and spiritual violence that sometimes arises in workshops and how to resist, oppose or perhaps transform that into something more humane and artistically useful. Nonviolence has, as a word, always that odd limitation of being a negative. But as I think we all know, you wouldn't be here otherwise and the actual living out of the concept, be it in civic life or in the mini-republic of the workshop, is rich in pragmatic possibilities and that set of possibilities is our topic today.

Panelists:

**Fred Marchant** is an emeritus professor of English at Suffolk University in Boston, where he still directs the Poetry Center. He has four books of poetry, including *The Looking House*. Marchant was the editor of *Another World Instead: The Early Poems of William Stafford, 1937-47*. He was one of the first marine officers honorably discharged as a CO during the Vietnam War. **Becca Lachman** teaches writing at Ohio University. She has two books of poems, most recently *Other Acreage*, and edited *A Ritual to Read Together: Poems in Conversation with William Stafford*. **Joshua Folmar** is a poet, teacher, and singer-songwriter who also served in the marine infantry in Iraq in 2007-2008. He is a graduate assistant in the MFA program at the University of New Hampshire. **Kim Stafford** needs no introduction to this audience. I asked for a transcript of his talk because I listened to it and thought it quite wonderful. He also sent me the talk he didn't give, which I hope to share with readers. **Maxine Hong Kingston** is the author of a number of books of fiction and nonfiction, among them *Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, and *I Love a Broad Margin in My Life*. She is an emerita professor of English at UC Berkeley and has led a writing workshop with veterans since 1993.

**Fred Marchant:** [Marchant began by talking about *Another World Instead*. This excerpt begins with a discussion of Simone Weil's 1939 essay, "Iliad, or the Poem of Force."] Her [Weil's] take on *The Iliad* comes out of the fulcrum of the idea that force is the taking of human beings and turning them into things.... At one point she starts to think out loud about how odd it is that in the moment of killing, there is never anyone, practically, who pauses to reflect. This is what she says, at those moments those people never impose on themselves or their actions "a halt, a pause, or an interval of hesitation wherein lies all our considerations for our brothers in humanity."

Ever since reading that remark, I had it tattooed, no I've had it deep inside engraved in my mind. It has been sort of a guide through much of my teaching, let alone my writing. And I've had it sort of gradually take on the role of thinking what is a writing workshop? What is a gathering of writers? And I think of that in general as a kind of pause to reflect upon our consideration of others and that comes out of a sense of art as being a transaction that involves more than just one person.

No matter how solitary the beginning of that work of art, how do you create that pause, that interval of hesitation, in which one's

consideration for other human beings can be present? That is my question for today.

What I do in my own teaching is that I use poems to help establish the ethos of the workshop that I'm teaching. I do it sometimes broadly at the beginning and then we talk about the poem, or sometimes I sprinkle certain poems that have a kind of ethos implied within them. [Reads Seamus Heaney's "Rainstick."] I treat this poem as a manual of listening. It invites us into the imaginative world of the poem just the way any writer in a workshop first reading a poem to his or her audience tacitly and perhaps terrifiedly is asking those people listening to enter into that imaginative world.

I also underline the notion that that can be repeated. The tremendous fear in any given moment in a workshop that that moment is forever. That what happens in that moment is absolute and unequivocally the only chance you have with that moment.

Of course there is a great deal of pleasure, sound pleasure, mouth pleasure, if you will, in that poem. But I think there's an ethos, an ethical dimension to that. It says something like you don't need to think first of the flaws and failures of what you've just heard. In fact, I think that's why there's all that sound music in that poem. As if to say, we'll think about that later after we do it three or four more times. But the sheer pleasure of that is an ethical injunction in a way. I'm reminded by that poem always of how poverty stricken our language, our discourse, is when it comes to praise. How easy it is to criticize negatively.... That sense that the language of negative judgment is so quick to come to our minds.

That poem makes me think, OK, what has just happened here? What a wonderful way to begin the conversation. You read a poem out loud. What happened? What world or experience have we been invited into? What has it invented in our minds? These are questions that perhaps sustain a writer's belief that he or she has actually written something. It also allows a platform upon which you could make suggestions, even complaints.

But I think that the fundamental matter is that there is an imaginative experience laid before you and you're invited into it. [Reads "Shall we have that singing..." (see p. 6). Says about it that it is his favorite poem in *Another World Instead*, contexting it this way:] Imagine that there is a barracks-like camp in the wilderness and World War II is going on in the rest of the world and these are conscientious objectors he's talking about. I do think of that as a really complex pause, an interval, falling asleep in a barracks in the wilderness in the middle of World War II. Layers upon layers of pausing, if you will... I love the parenthetical: "Was there something forgotten? / (The losing one neglects and calls it winning.)"

And I want to say that in my own workshop teaching, the most important question I ask myself and sometimes remember to ask the group, was there something forgotten? It's so amazing how there is momentum inside workshop discussion that is heading toward finality of some sort, and I always remember this poem and say, OK, wait a minute, was there something forgotten? I think a poem like this reminds us that the poem and the writer are not standing before a judge or a jury but actually a set of people who are in roughly similar circumstances and a reminder of that. I don't make these kinds of observations, by the way, all the time. I don't make them with moral fervor as I hope I'm demonstrating now. I try to make them in the course of our doing our business together. [Marchant

(cont. on p. 14)

(cont. from p. 13)

ends with his poem, "A Place at the Table" which can be found in *The Looking House*.]

**Becca Lachman:** Why bring this idea of what I've come to call creative nonviolence into a writing workshop in the first place? I don't know about you but I need to be reminded that nonviolence is not the absence of something. It's bringing something into the world, a deliberate action often in the face of all kinds of injustice and in our incredibly militarized society. Also, you may already know that most of our undergrads come from this generation that has one nickname of the 9/11 generation because the violence of that day in 2011 is their first really important memory of any importance. They cannot remember a time in their lives when the U.S. has not been at war. They helped to elect a president who when winning the Nobel Peace Prize defended just-war theory. And they also, when asked what they want to be when they grow up, one popular answer is famous.

So these students are alive and kicking in our workshops. They have an average debt of over thirty thousand dollars when they graduate from college, and they are used to micromanaged schedules and knowing exactly how to reach whatever goal they've set in front of them. So depending on how you are defining violence, there are many layers here in this group of students that we see in our classrooms.

As workshop leaders, I wonder if we've thought about the young men behind the shootings of 2011 in Arizona or in 2007 at Virginia Tech and how these young men both once sat in creative writing workshops. Or have you also been thinking this week about the young man on trial in Boston and how he is the same age as so many of our students?

\* \* \*

It was Gandhi who said the first step of nonviolent action is non-cooperation with anything that humiliates us. I wonder teaching today and writing today if we can tweak that term, that saying, into the first step of nonviolent action is non-cooperation with anything that numbs us.

\* \* \*

Sometimes I feel like a hypocrite asking my students to dive into these nonviolent tactics not only in their writing lives but when they leave the classroom when I've been adjuncting for eight years, working three jobs, trying to pay my bills, and also having internalized so much toxic critique from three degrees related to creative writing. I say that I'm a recovering creative writing degree collector. I think about teachers, some of whom I'll never get to meet, like William Stafford, who give these amazing examples of bringing nonviolence into your daily life and into your teaching. But quite frankly, I want to say, Bill, I hope I could call him Bill, I want to say, Bill, as a younger female adjunct, I'm not sure I could get away with a lot of what you're proposing here. And so that's a question I live in. But what I can do is share with the students who are really gung ho about going to get the MFA and that PhD and that full-time job teaching poetry. I can share with them what a part-time writing and teaching gig might actually look like, and I literally have them home for dinner to have that discussion so they can see how I live [audience laughter].

\* \* \*

But I truly believe that beyond the fight or flight method when facing a conflict, whether it's in your workshop or outside of it, that there is this thing that we can call a third way. A way that asks us to listen and act assertively and with our whole lives. For me as a writer and teacher, this third way reveals itself through asking students and myself to consider how our trust in force as a nation trickles down into our everyday lives, even into the way we learn and practice our crafts as writers. I usually end a workshop by telling my students who grew up in families or communities where submission meant keeping silent or unseen, we have the power as writers to live out a wider definition of that idea as well. Our submissions can quite

What we  
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literally become the poems and stories, the best parts of our honed selves that we choose to give to a wider community, the best parts of what we want to see in this world that we live in that we are quite literally building in our poems and our writing. So, while we live in this world that defends just war, I wonder what would happen if we introduced our students to the idea of a just peace.

**Kim Stafford:** "Teaching Peacefully in a World of Toxic Judgment." When I first arrived at the biggest writers' conference in America, thinking about the topic I was scheduled to address—"Nonviolence in the Creative Writing Classroom"—I saw in the program an early session called "Thank You for the Surgery," a panel considering the virtues and dangers of tough criticism. The title, the program

explained, was from Emily Dickinson's letter to Thomas Higginson, in response to his critique of her poems: "Thank you for the surgery," she was reported to have written. And thus, on the authority of Emily Dickinson, I gathered, tough criticism might be the way to go—despite my own long habits of teaching by indirection and inquiry.

But this gave me pause. If Emily considered tough criticism ultimately kind, why should I shy away from that in my classroom?

On the map of the convention center's forty meeting rooms, I noticed the Dickinson Quiet Room, a space secluded for silent reading, writing, or rest. And to that refuge I did repair. Unlike the packed rooms throughout the convention center throbbing with writers, opinions, claims, and proclamations, the Dickinson Quiet Room had six people distributed among the fourteen tables—one slumped sleeping, four reading, and one bent in fury scribbling. This felt right for me.

I got out the talk I had written for my session due to begin in an hour, and set it aside. In its place, under the spell of the silent room in Emily's honor, I gathered the following thoughts to replace my speech.

1. Thanks to Wi-Fi, I could go straight to the source, and learn what Emily had said in full. In her letter to Higginson, it turns out, after thanking him for the surgery on her poems his criticism had performed, she said this:

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog as large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano.

Suddenly, as always, I was under the spell of Emily's feral mind. And in that spell, in the quiet of the Dickinson Quiet Room, I also returned to her own poem on surgery:

Surgeons must be very careful  
When they take the knife.  
Underneath their fine incisions  
Stirs the culprit—Life!

This gave me serious pause as a teacher, and as a writer. How can I learn from this witness by Emily Dickinson, and from my own experience as a teacher, how to help writers truly grow?

2. The longer I teach the more I recognize I am more attracted to *writing-in-progress* than to finished writing...for writing-in-progress is alive, volatile, and immersed in the progress of wonder slowly revealed. And I am more attracted to *writers* than to writing...for while writing is a treasure, writers are my family of choice, my kin, my exchange partners in an on-going gift economy of ideas and stories. But ultimately, I am more attracted to *people* than to writers—attracted to individual people who have chosen to join the once-in-a-lifetime community of a class to help one another advance the human project by sharing stories, secrets, questions, enigmas, joys and sorrows. I am not teaching them how to write, but creating conditions where they can begin the life-long process of teaching themselves how to write. In this calling, I often, like Emily's dog, may feel I know—but don't tell.

When I think of Thomas Higginson, the mighty editor from *The Atlantic*, receiving poems from the reticent, hidden, fiercely shy beginner who at first would not give her name, I feel my deepest loyalty to the incandescent secrets my students must find their own best way to tell us all.

3. A year ago we had a gathering in Portland, Oregon, to honor the poetry and peacemaking of my father's work. The symposium was billed by my academic colleagues as "The William Stafford Centennial: A Reappraisal." The program listed witnesses prepared to assess his work. But at the last moment, a blizzard intervened, and the formal conference was cancelled. Waking early to this change, I put chains on my car and crept along empty roads about the city to gather up the symposium attendees who had come the farthest: Wendy from Hanoi, Keiko from Sapporo, Abayo from Nigeria via Wisconsin, Fred from Boston, and Li-Young from Chicago. We convened in a living room in southwest Portland, where fire blazed in the hearth and snow swirled past the windows. In place of the academic symposium, we called our gathering The Snowdrift Dialogues, and one by one each participant read a poem or told a story about the poetry and witness for peace of William Stafford. Within that resonant sequence, this was the witness of Li-Young Lee from Chicago: [Kim asked me not to quote directly from Lee's story for copyright reasons, but I will paraphrase a bit: Lee was thinking he needed some exercise and went to a martial arts teacher. The teacher took him carefully through the five levels of martial arts excellence and then told him that because he is a poet, he is on level five and in tune with the Dao. William Stafford, Lee said, was an easy level five. Go to the AWP website for what is not here.] Since that gathering, I have been thinking of my work as a teacher along these

lines. Through the practice of writing, we begin to become people susceptible to the Dao. We begin to understand patterns in our lives, to turn events into stories, to turn anger into insight, and finally, if we are fortunate and persistent, into blessing. We move slowly toward being people who have achieved a level of understanding that leads to strewing beauty and clarity and courage and kindness where we go, in the form of poems, stories, conversations, and acts of generosity. This is not the practice of excellence in writing, but the practice of cultivating the soul-place from which the best of our writing, and a life of generous action, may be born.

4. As Stephen Dunn said, "There are always the simple events of your life that you might try to convert into legend." This winsome work can be done by the practice of writing in search not of fame, or excellence, but of generosity and truth. I believe the process of transforming one's life into legend by writing is what draws my best students to the craft. What do they hope for in this process? In her letter to Higginson, after thanking him for surgical critique of her poems, Emily says simply, "I would like to learn. Could you tell me how to grow, or is it un conveyed like melody or witchcraft?"

I am drawn to Emily Dickinson speaking to her critic as my example not because I think my students have her particular elevated genius, but because I believe the *dynamic* of student writer as primary authority, and questioning instructor as secondary, is how I think writing class works best. In the end, this is the most practical paradigm for the long-term development of individual writers.

5. When my father signed his application to become a conscientious objector in 1941, as I did in 1968, we both affirmed according to the standard language of the form, "I will not engage in war in any form." I believe that in my father's teaching, and I know in mine, there is a similar commitment at work, a commitment I would articulate as follows: "I will not engage in war on my students, by claiming authority over their writing that is foreign to my own experience in the realm of creation—a place where I am guided by intuition, listening, welcome, and a kind of personal inevitability that is the writer's private gift."

6. Of her own writing process, Emily says in that letter to Higginson—in speaking of the quality of her poems *before* they are written: "While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb."

Undressed thoughts, primary instincts, and untold stories are the treasures a teacher can't know until the student writes them down in something like their native form. My work in writing class is thus not to re-shape, to critique, or to fix the writing in progress that my students are creating, but simply to help them *see* what they have begun, and invite them to continue along the journey of their creation by the light of their own deepening discernment.

As teachers and as writers, we work with writing that is young. And in that work—in what I am writing myself, and in the writing of my students—I would be fiercely reticent and open, offering eager welcome.

(cont. on p. 16)

Through  
the practice  
of writing,  
we begin  
to become  
people  
susceptible to  
the Dao.

(cont. from p. 15)

7. As I departed from the Dickinson Quiet Room to go give my new talk, I paused at the doorway to copy Emily's poem posted there:

There is a solitude of space,  
A solitude of sea,  
A solitude of death, but these  
Society shall be,  
Compared with that profounder site,  
That polar privacy,  
A Soul admitted to itself:  
Finite infinity.

**Maxine Hong Kingston:** I've been teaching veterans writing and Buddhism for twenty-three years. We integrate these two disciplines and writing practice becomes a Buddhist practice. One ceremony we have just before people read their writings is that we evoke Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of compassionate listening. [She rings the bell of Avalokiteshvara three times and recites her prayer] "We invoke your name Avalokiteshvara. We aspire to learn your way of listening in order to relieve the suffering in the world. You know how to listen in order to understand. We invoke your name in order to practice listening with all our attention and openheartedness. We will sit and listen without any prejudice. We will sit and listen without judging or reacting. We will sit and listen in order to understand. We will sit and listen so attentively that we will be able to hear what the other person is saying and also what has been left unsaid. We know that just by listening deeply we already alleviate a great deal of pain and suffering in the other person." [rings bell again three times]

After the readings we go on walking meditation, and this is slow mindful walking usually in a beautiful place in the woods in the country. We walk silently and we walk together. Then now we are hearing the sounds of our footsteps and the sounds of the air and the world. Walking meditation is especially important for veterans because they have walked patrol in which every step is dangerous, and there is learning a new walk in which you can trust the earth that you're are walking on.

After coming back from walking meditation, we give our critique or feedback.... Just before we give the critique, I say that we have now lived with these stories and poems for about an hour; we've carried these stories for an hour. What stays in our memory after an hour? What is it that has touched our hearts? What is it that we can marvel and wonder at? ... What remains with you after listening and going for a walk? This way of giving criticism has changed me. It has changed the way I criticize. I no longer look for the flaws in the writing. I don't just take papers and grade them and find the mistakes. I look for what's good in the writing and help the student recognize what is good—what have you done really well and then expand on it, tell more of it—and teach the writer to recognize what has been well done and why. When the good part of the poem and story are expanded, the rest of the writing will be pulled up to that standard.

There is a hot debate going on in Buddhist circles right now. The Department of Defense has invited Buddhists led by John Cabot Zinn to teach meditation in the military. [for the discussion on "resilience training" in the military, please listen to the audio of this panel on the AWP website.]

**Editor's note:** I have here about half of the session. I tried to keep with the theme of the conference, choosing to leave out some of the more wide-ranging topics, interesting as they are, Kingston's thoughts on Buddhist mediation in the military in particular: "Buddhist nonviolence meets the military," is how she describes it. Joshua Folmar talked of learning to write as a vet with that subject paramount in his mind and learning the peacemaking value of shared stories. I repeat, you can listen to all that has been omitted here on the AWP website.

("The Way It Is" cont. from p. 3)

*Things That Happen Where There Aren't Any People* and another *Even in Quiet Places*. Stafford's poetry looks outward, widens the walls of the world, travels the open places, discovering "glistening facts." In the openness, the emptiness, the unpeopled places, Stafford finds and affirms an attitude, a way of thinking that is liberating and illuminating. "At the Un-national Monument Along the Canadian Border" does this in a very Taoist way. It provides an alternative to the actions of war through an image of emptiness, space, open country:

No people killed—or were killed—on this ground  
hallowed by neglect and an air so tame  
that people celebrate it by forgetting its name.

To hallow is to honor as holy. Tame people are not competitive. The Tao is unnamable. It's all here in this poem where peace, quiet, and natural spontaneity are honored in a way Lao-tzu and his fellow Laoists might have liked a lot. Taoism and pacifism are closely connected, as you may have divined.

Another way Stafford interlaces with Taoism is in his concern for good governance. Works advising governors and rulers and kings, the elite, are part of philosophy and religion. In *Chang Tzu: Basic Writings*, Burton Watson notes: "Most of the philosophies of ancient China are addressed to the political or intellectual elite." It is a tradition shared with Plato, Jeremiah, Machiavelli, Blake, Ezra Pound, and Stafford's good friend Robert Bly. The great translator and interpreter of Chinese, Arthur Waley, describes it this way in *The Way and Its Power*: "For all Chinese philosophy is essentially the study of how man can best be helped to live together in harmony and good order." The *Tao Te Ching* is a difficult book to pin down, categorize, like Bill. Watts tells us in *The Supreme Identity* that it "may be read equivalently as a manual of metaphysic[s], of natural philosophy, of statecraft, or of conduct of personal life." I think Stafford, like most great writers, writes on all these levels. He presents a metaphysic, a sense of an ultimate reality; a natural philosophy in the way he imagines the natural world; and way of conduct, exemplified in his pacifism. But Stafford's work is also notable for its concern with statecraft, the crafting of community.

In his introduction to *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep*, Robert Bly writes this: "Of all the American poets of the last thirty years, I think William Stafford broods most about community—the 'mutual life' we share...." In a way that might recall the Shih, Stafford gives a kind of Taoist advice that awake people be awake to the consequences of action as the first option. The default response of most is to *do* something. Taoism involves an intricate argument about naturalness, nature, *not* doing, justice—and just ways.

Strong evidence for this is, as Bly develops, contained in a single poem, “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” a poem many readers know and is reprinted in Ingrid Wendt’s essay on pp. 5-6. In essence, it is a meditation on the efficacy of honesty, sincerity, and trust, a version of *te*: virtue, integrity and, as Mairs tells us, “sinderesis (conscience as the directive of one’s actions).” I am reminded that the Chinese ideogram for trust is a man standing by his word. On the subject of honesty, integrity and non-action, the *Tao Te Ching* says things like this:

Wealth, status, pride,  
are their own ruin.  
To do good, work well, and lie low  
is a way of the blessing. (Ch. 9)

and Stafford:

Now our trees are safer than the stars,  
and only other people’s neglect  
is our precious and abiding shell... (“An Oregon Message”)

*Tao Te Ching*:

When the government’s dull and confused,  
the people are placid. (Ch. 28)

Stafford:

Inattention or fatigue  
is what we like in our great leaders. (“Austere Hope, Daily Faith”)  
Lao Tzu and the Laoists share Stafford’s belief in letting the river  
answer. In terms of governance, statecraft, creating community, the  
way to be is to follow what is natural. In his introduction to *The Tao  
Te Ching*, Sam Hamill observes:

Lao Tzu’s Tao is more the “way-of-nature,” not something  
earned, but something inherently within all  
beings and to which we must become attuned if we are to live  
wisely and harmoniously for our time in this world.

In his book on Stafford, *The Mark to Turn*, Jonathan Holden writes  
of “Stafford’s use of a natural model for social criticism.” In an essay  
in the second edition of *Kansas Poems* called “On Swerving: The  
Way of William Stafford,” Robert Stewart says, “I am stretching it,  
perhaps, to project Stafford as a Chinese Taoist poet, but the struggle  
of a human being to illustrate our connection to the harmonious  
resonates in that way.” The relationship between social criticism,  
crafting community and nature embodied particularly in water can  
be seen in this passage from the *Tao Te Ching*:

Nature doesn’t make long speeches.  
A whirlwind doesn’t last all morning.  
A cloudburst doesn’t last all day.  
Who makes the wind and rain?  
If heaven and earth don’t go on and on  
certainly people don’t need to. (Ch. 23)

The social criticism of the *Tao Te Ching*, aimed at both the governors  
and governed is based on a natural model. Water wins by not forcing  
things. It listens; it follows; it learns. In “Deerslayer’s Campfire  
Talk,” channeling that symbol of the natural man and kin to the  
transcendentalists, Natty Bumppo, Stafford presents an equivalent  
social criticism embedded in the natural world, one close to what  
grounds the ethic of the Tao:

Wherever I go, they quote people  
who talk too much, the ones who  
do not care, just so they take the center  
and make plans.

When I see these things, a part of my  
mind goes quiet, and by a little turn  
of my eyes I favor what helps, and ordinary  
men, and that dim arch above us we seldom  
regard, and—under us—the silent,  
unnoted clasp of the rock.

The rock returns us to the uncarved block, “the primal unity  
underlying apparent multiplicity.” It is the recognition of this  
as sufficient and essentially unknowable, based on the way of the  
natural world, that marks both the philosophy of the *Tao Te Ching*  
and what Kim Stafford calls his father’s “comprehensive view.”

In his diction (the word *way*), his imagery (water, rivers), his  
aphoristic wisdoms, his sense of spontaneous and natural restraint,  
and his critique of community based on the ethos of nature, Stafford  
shares much with Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching*. It’s part of his  
deep intelligence (in its root meaning of understanding) and his  
discernment, his recognition of fundamental reality. In his essay on  
Stafford’s poem “Knowing,” “‘Knowing’ Glimpses into Something  
Larger,” Tom Andrews quotes the *Tao Te Ching*: “He who knows that  
he doesn’t know, knows.” In “Knowing,” Stafford writes, “Your hand  
can make the sign—but begs for / more than can be told: even the  
world / can’t dive fast enough to know that other world.” Stafford  
converges with the Taoists in recognizing through the empathetic  
exploration of the imagination that the belief that humans are the  
only intelligent, rational beings around and *know* the way is, in the  
best light (or dark), problematical: “About the pessimists: how can  
they know that much?” Stafford wasn’t a Taoist, but he seems to have  
fathomed a chunk of what they knew—and a luminous nugget of  
what they knew they didn’t.

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## News, Notes, and Opportunities

**“On a Tragic Anniversary, Finding Peace and Solace in the Written Word,” Rick Benjamin.** The poet laureate of Rhode Island, Benjamin, wrote an essay for the *Providence Journal* on Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015, about Pearl Harbor. In it he uses “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” and a lovely Yannos Ritsos poem, “Escape” to meditate on that formative moment in American history. The two quotations below come from the essay.

“He [Stafford] deplored any talk about so called ‘enemies.’ He would have been the first to point out that they were us. He said as much in many poems that we would do well, in these times, to read or listen to again. A conscientious objector during World War II, when it was wildly unpopular to be one, Stafford believed that without mutual regard and understanding as human beings, first and foremost, regardless of home countries or cultures, we were doomed.”

“The brutality of willfully failing to notice or not knowing is never benign; our denseness or forgetfulness does not ever serve us. It only works when every trunk takes a tail and holds on for dear life. I have always admired that Stafford never gave up thinking that such compassionate connectivity was possible among humans.” Google: Rick Benjamin Bill Stafford

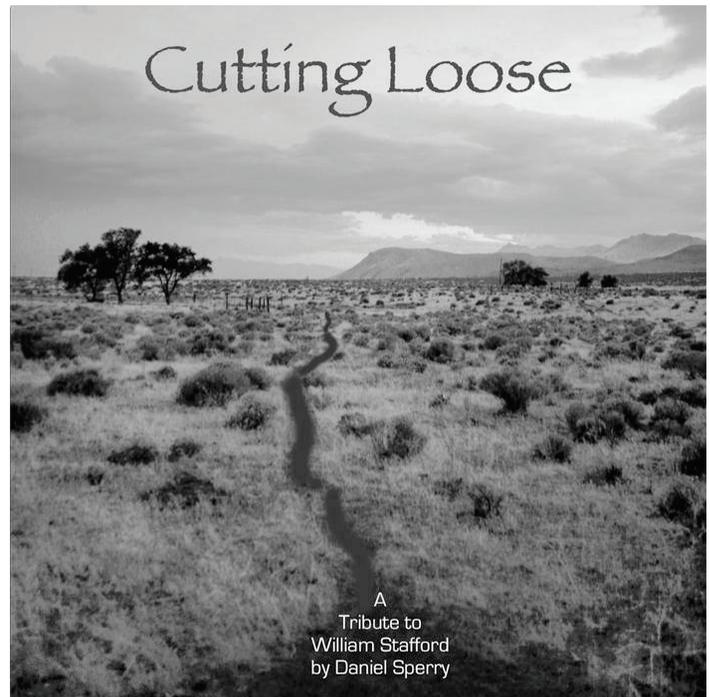
**“Leading in an Unpredictable World, Michael Jones,” Michael Jones.** A leadership educator, author, and improvisational pianist, Jones wrote this essay for a website called Management.Issues. I offer these snippets from his thoughtful piece:

“But Stafford used the word ‘standard’ in a very specific way. You could say he lowered his standard in the same sense that medieval flag bearers lowered their standard to convey their intent of yielding and as a gesture and invitation for a dialogue. In his creative world by lowering his standard he was making peace with—and entering into a dialogue with— his muse.”

“William Stafford always knew he was onto something when the thread began to feel alive in his hand. When we follow the thread we are also connecting with the roots of our own aliveness. When we follow this thread of aliveness we will through the passage of time discover that the thread is leading us to a place we may recognize as home - after we have arrived.” Google essay title

### **Cutting Loose: Daniel Sperry and the Poetry of William Stafford.**

The cellist and composer Daniel Sperry has a new CD of Stafford poems. As those who heard him at a recent FWS potluck know, Sperry composes the music, speaks the poems and creates a deep and resonant atmosphere. This digital album contains twelve poems, including “A Ritual to Read to Each Other,” “The Way It Is,” and “You Reading This, Be Ready.” The CD cover was designed by FWS board president Dennis Schmidling. The CD can be streamed from your computer. Google: Daniel Sperry Cutting Loose



**Stafford Stone in Stafford Grove.** Frank Boyden’s stone obelisk is now installed in the Stafford Grove, kitty corner from the Stafford house on Sunningdale Road. However, in order to have the poem “With Neighbors One Afternoon” inscribed upon it, the project needs \$3000. As readers can see, the grove is a lovely place, within sight of the Stafford house and the school where Dorothy taught. The city of Lake Oswego is also donating a bench for the site. Checks, tax-deductible, and payable to The Friends of William Stafford (memo line: “for the Stafford stone”) can be mailed to

Carole Ockert, chair FANFH  
910 Cumberland Road  
Lake Oswego, OR 97034

Those who donate more than \$500 will receive recognition in a memorial plaque to be located nearby.

**January Stafford Celebrations.** People interested in Stafford birthday events in January can go to [Stafford100.org](http://Stafford100.org) or the Friends of William Stafford website ([williamstafford.org](http://williamstafford.org)). This publication will no longer feature a Stafford birthday calendar of events.

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Thanks to Erik and Ann Muller for David Laing’s poem “On the McKenzie.”

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To join the Friends of William Stafford, renew your friendship, or make a donation, please fill out this form and mail to: FWS, P.O. Box 592, Lake Oswego, OR 97034. Checks payable to "Friends of William Stafford."

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How did you hear of FWS?

Volunteer opportunities  Organize poetry readings in your community;  Event help;  Distribute posters/flyers;  Publicize events;  Other (describe): \_\_\_\_\_

## Welcome New Friends June–December 2015

Bonita L. Neumeier  
 Larry Tyle  
 James W. Armstrong III  
 Greg & Laila Simon &  
 Helle Rode  
 Colette Tennant  
 Alan Contreras  
 Dr. Larry R. Thomas  
 (Honorary)

If you have any questions about your membership status, please contact Helen Schmidling, [helen@dsagroup.net](mailto:helen@dsagroup.net)



FRIENDS OF WILLIAM STAFFORD  
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WEBMASTER: Dennis Schmidling

Special thanks to Ilka Kuznik

Please email comments, letters, news, and information on poetry events, awards, etc. to [news@WilliamStafford.org](mailto:news@WilliamStafford.org)

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The Way It Is: Stafford  
and the *Tao Te Ching*  
By Tim Barnes



William Stafford vs. Roundup®  
By Ingrid Wendt



AWP Conference 2015: Nonviolence  
in the Creative Writing Workshop:  
Marchant, Stafford, Lachman, Kingston

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**At Any Airport**

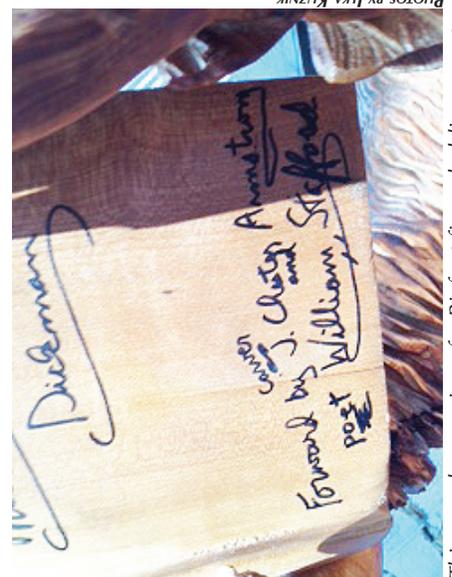
The plane sits above its big shadow.  
The people beside it with little  
shadows all look ahead at the sky.

Here comes the pilot.

the plane opens, the pilot enters,  
the people enter. The sky  
opens, the plane enters.

And back there now no  
plane, no people, no  
shadow—only a little speck  
and the sky's blue shadow.

WILLIAM STAFFORD



PHOTOS BY IKA KUZNIK

This wooden carving of a Bigfoot figure holding a poetry book is part of a 24-foot tall cuckoo clock and can be seen in the south atrium at the Portland International Airport.