WHY STAFFORD? WHY CHILDREN? WHY POEMS?

Laura Apol

Hanna and Peter are in the back seat of my maroon Toyota. It is August, and I am driving us to family camp. Hanna is my daughter; she is six and will begin first grade in the fall. Her friend Peter is seven and ready to start second grade. They each have a tablet of paper, and the box of markers between them is spilling onto the seat. As they write, they talk: pets, swimming, Hanna's summer with her father in Texas. After a few miles of silence, Hanna announces, "I have a poem," and without any prompting, she begins:

Mama Mama I can't behave.
Please help me behave, I asked my friend Dave.

"I'm going to write that down," she says.

Peter stops drawing. "That poem's okay," he says, "but I think you should try to write a *real* poem sometime, Hanna. I once wrote a poem about fireflies." Briefly, Peter recites his poem about fireflies on a Michigan night.

Not to be outdone, Hanna replies, "Well, I wrote a real poem too this summer—about the wind." And Hanna recites her poem—a poem that I had seen earlier and that, since I am a woman who collects words, I had saved:

Mericl uv LiF	[Miracle of life
By Hanna	By Hanna
Gustuv Wid Blos	Gust of wind blows
Throw yr Iss	Through your eyes
U Blingk U still	You blink. You still
Fel The Wid	Feel the wind
It Blos Trow	It blows through
Ry Har! Y Lick It	Your hair! You like it!

Peter seems satisfied that this does indeed count as a "real" poem, and they both turn back to their notebooks.

Poet, professor, and parent, I consider the exchange, then can't resist interrupting them to ask, "So what makes a poem real?"

"Well," says Peter, "a *real* poem doesn't have to rhyme."

"And it can be about anything in the world," Hanna adds.

"Yeah," Peter agrees, "it can be about anything."

As usual, I am amazed by how much these children—how much all children— know. In fewer than ten words they've covered poetry (both form and content) with greater understanding than I see in some of my university students in an entire semester. Peter and Hanna "get it." To them, a silly rhymed couplet is not a poem; the dailiness of fireflies in Michigan or summer wind in Texas, however, is.

What Peter and Hanna know is exactly what the poet William Stafford expressed about poets and poems when he wrote, ". . . poetry, like breathing, happens all the time, but—like breathing—at its best it should get a little attention. In the classroom, any time anyone says anything or jots down anything, some of what is said or written is luckier than the rest—and poetry is language with a little luck in it" (Stafford, 1986, p. 97).

In my back seat, Peter and Hanna know about breathing, and poetry, and luck. All children do. Stafford understood that, and in an often-quoted response to the interview question, *When did you first realize that you wanted to become a poet?* he responded, "I've thought about that, and sort of reversed it. My question is 'when did other people give up the idea of being a poet?' You know, when we are kids we make up things, we write, and for me the puzzle is not that some people are still writing, the real question is why did the other people stop?" (Stafford, 1978, p. 86).

Peter and Hanna's conversation, and the echo of Stafford's words, have lead me to explore this intersection: *Stafford, children, poems.* In my own life, the connection between the three has become the story of birth: the birth of children, the birth of a collection of Stafford's poetry for young readers, and the birth of my own poet self. But it is a wider story as well—a story that acknowledges the poet in each child, and the ways that as a writer, thinker, and teacher, William Stafford facilitated the birth of the poet-self in others, regardless of age.

It began for me soon after I arrived at The University of Iowa as a graduate student in English. It was fall of 1985; I was pregnant with my first child and taking a full load of classes—including a course called "In Print, In Person," in which we read the work of contemporary writers, then had those writers come and talk to us in class. The visiting writers consisted of faculty in The University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, as well as alumni and other writers on book tours through Iowa City. About half our class visitors were poets; the other half, fiction writers. Our job as students was to create interesting questions for the visiting writers to explore in the hour and a half we spent together.

As a new graduate student, having recently left for the first time the small rural Iowa town where I'd attended school from kindergarten through college, I was deliciously terrified each time a new writer came to class. As an undergraduate, I'd been well educated in the "canon" of British and American literature, but I'd not encountered much contemporary writing. I could have counted on one hand the number of times I'd met or heard a "real" author of a "real" book. Yet here they were, sitting in the front of my class: Gerald Stern, Marvin Bell, Rosellen Brown, Jorie Graham, James Galvin . . . William Stafford.

It was November, near the end of the course, when Stafford came to speak. The winter day began with rain, which froze into an icy glaze as the morning wore on. Some people stayed home on account of the weather, but not our professors. Not William Stafford. And not me. I wanted to be there, to meet this poet, to hear his voice.

And it was worth it. For while many of the writers who visited our class spent the time focused on the particulars of their own processes and the private epiphanies that could be found in their work (that was, after all, the nature of our graduate student inquiry), Stafford deftly deflected the questions that seemed to him to be little more than esoteric graduate-school-ese. And he asked us questions in return: What do *you* think? What is *your* process? What have *you* found? No subtle approval for name dropping, for classroom competition, for questions designed to up the ante. I saw gentleness, simplicity (I thought), passion, and above all—respect. After class, I waited until the crowd around his desk had cleared before I did something I'd never done before: I asked him to sign my copy of his poems, *Glass Face in the Rain*.

I thought about that meeting often in the weeks and months that followed—not about *who* he was, but about *how* he was. And about what I'd heard him say: that writers were simply people who wrote, who had found a process by which to discover what they had to say, who were ready and willing to follow words. They didn't need to have lived wildly extravagant lives; they could grow up in small midwestern towns, marry, have children, shovel sidewalks, vacuum rugs. They could see tension in the inhale/exhale of life, "where at any minute the experience of living can alternate from security to the most intense and dangerous of deprivations based on nothing more unusual than breathing. Viewed in this way, the artist is not so much a person endowed with the luck of vivid, eventful days, as a person for whom any immediate encounter leads by little degrees to the implications always present for anyone anywhere" (Stafford, 1978, p. 39). The details of a very ordinary life, Stafford seemed to be saying, could somehow be the subject of poems.

Two months later my first child was born. A few months after that I wrote my first "real" poem, "Two a.m."—a poem based (quite literally) on the ordinary inhale/exhale of my life.

Two a.m.

Strange to me: motherhood,
this way of women,
my way now.
Dreams no longer whole,
shaped by stirrings in the night,
interrupted by the rush of milk.
Even as the baby sleeps, I wake,
tense, waiting for the cry
as did my mother, and her mother.

Those still moments:
thoughts, a small bird, trapped midflight;
bent wings throb against clear glass,
stain bright blood.
In the dark-caught breath of silence,
startling— a wakened cry.

(Apol-Obbink, 1991, p. 24)

My process of writing was indeed like breathing, and it had a little luck in it. It was a poem, and it linked for me in a real and personal way: Stafford, children, poems.

Several years later, I was back at the University, finishing course work for a Ph.D. in children's literature. It was 1991, and I was lamenting with my adviser, Jerry Watson, about the hesitancy, fear, and outright opposition I saw on the faces of so many of my university students when I mentioned the word "poetry" in class.

"*Why haven't they found the words that have the power to change lives, the poems with vision to help make sense of their world?*" I wondered aloud. Jerry and I agreed that most children only encountered "serious" poetry in anthologies—a poem by Lucille Clifton, two by Naomi Shihab Nye, some Carl Sandberg, and a few by William Stafford. And many teachers, themselves unfamiliar with the world of poetry, didn't have the time, the energy, or the resources to "discover" from among the reams of poetry written and published each year the poems that would speak most loudly and most resonantly in their own lives or the lives of their students.

It was a small step from that conversation to the conception of a collection of Stafford's poems that Jerry and I started to put together that fall. Stafford's work seemed a natural starting place: we believed he had something to say to young readers, and we knew of his serious commitment to the teaching of English and to the writing lives of young people.

We began by contacting Stafford to "test the waters"—was this a project he could be interested in? The description we gave was vague—a collection for young people was all we really had in mind—but Stafford responded with enthusiasm, including with his letter a number of ways that the work he was currently involved with might impact or intersect (and would definitely support) the kind of project we proposed, and concluding with the words:

> *I guess I'm trying to convey to you my interest in what you are doing and my involvement in activities that may lead to our chances to confer. As for the idea of a collection of my poems for children, I can't help feeling interested, and hopeful. Maybe my many writings might yield a worthy collection. . . . so I'll end by saying I am grateful for your attention to my work, and my main concern is that you . . . may be expending energy on unworthy material. But I'll just continue to turn out the product as well as I can.* (April 30, 1992)

Within days, Jerry and I received a second letter, this from a children's book editor with whom Stafford had recently worked. Stafford had passed our letter on to his publisher, and they were interested in the possibility of putting out a collection as soon as we had a proposal and a selection of poems ready to send. So we went to work, gathering volumes of Stafford's poetry, identifying poems that seemed to speak in a voice that could be heard and recognized by younger readers, copying, sorting, shuffling, rereading. Although it was tempting to create an arrangement and then "organize" the poems to fit the various sections, we opted instead to let the poems tell *us* what the collection wanted to be. It seemed important to let the poems rub together and create their own sparks, and to let the broad section themes and titles come from lines of the poems themselves.

Stafford's work was so rich, the individual phrases so eloquent, that at first *everything* wanted to be a section theme, but eventually there were lines that proved to echo loudly throughout the poems, and soon we had a title for the collection, *Learning to Live in the World*, and five sections that revolved around "living in the world" themes: connectedness, distances, wildness, brokenness, and healing and hope.
Gradually we worked our way toward a draft to send to Harcourt, along with a proposal describing *why Stafford, why children, why these poems*. Why Stafford? Because his work, until then published almost exclusively for adult readers, was (we believed) relevant, accessible, and a necessary kind of sanity for modern readers and listeners of all ages. Why children? Because children as well as adults deserved to see the world through the lens Stafford provided, and because at that time there were in our experience precious few opportunities for children to encounter the words and insights of honest and respectful poets on a sustained basis. Why these poems? Because these poems took as their centre Stafford's vision of how to *be* in the world—a message of earth loving and earth keeping; a message that did not pretend that the world is or should be safe or tamed; a message that was at once troubled and troubling, delightful and delighted; a message that was complex and (to use a favourite Stafford term) *deep*. And so was born the collection, *Learning to Live in the World: Earth Poems by William Stafford.*

Harcourt sent us out at once to get permissions; Stafford was enthusiastic, too, assuring us of his cooperation and cheering us on with statements like: "*I'll work easily with you on bringing the book into being if you continue to see it as a good project. And of course I'm elated at the regard you show for my poems and the potential of the book*" (August 21, 1992).

We kept shuffling and honing, and in February 1993 Stafford came to Iowa to do a reading at the University. We met at Jerry's house for breakfast; for this, my second meeting with Stafford, the weather was even worse than for the first (a blizzard during the night, and about eight inches of new snow), but the meeting at Jerry's house was good—lively and warm. And spending time in Stafford's presence made me bold enough to finish a poem I'd begun years before—and after finishing, to send it to him. It was a poem about that first day he'd come to class when I was a new graduate student, expecting my first child.

Umbilical

—for William Stafford

Eight dollars was too much for
a book of poems—yours or any other—
in graduate school, a baby on the way.
Lifelines are seldom free.
In the end I used the week's
bus fare, remembering
my grandfather stringing ropes
in Midwest blizzards—
intricate webs, house
to barn to shed and
back—like stars to a sailor, a child's
trail of white pebbles in moonlight.
And all week I walked, even the day you
came to class and read aloud lines

I'd marked: lines about maps,
bells, the whine that links
puppy to wolf—a banner of woe, you
called that cry. It was a winter
Wednesday, rain
freezing like glass, smooth as
the pen you used to
sign my book. Edging home
that night, I was shell brittle,
glazed with ice;
but your words were the cord that
pulled me, howling, through the storm,
and, wet and slippery,
delivered me.

(Apol, 1998, p. 608)

True to form, Stafford was gracious about receiving my piece, writing back to me, "Dear Laura, that breakfast meeting of ours in Iowa City brightened the whole trip for me, and your letter of March 3, along with your poem (which I intend to try to deserve), made me hark back and remember how much fun it was to get together. Let's celebrate again, any time we get a chance" (March 14, 1993).

We didn't get a chance. *Learning to Live in the World* was well under way at Harcourt when I moved from Iowa to Oklahoma to teach creative writing. It was the summer of 1993, and I was still unpacking when I came home to a message on the answering machine telling me of William Stafford's sudden death. Like all lovers of contemporary poetry and writing, and like all those lucky enough to have spent even a little time in Stafford's presence, I was shaken by the news.

One Saturday morning a few weeks later I walked into a tiny restaurant in a small town west of Oklahoma City. In the entry to the diner was a poster-size ad for an annual writing festival held in Southwest Oklahoma. The poster displayed the photographs of the six individuals who would be leading the Fall 1993 workshops, but one photograph caught my eye: William Stafford, Poetry. I left the restaurant in tears.

The book languished after Stafford's death; the senior editor at Harcourt reassigned the project, the publication date was pushed back, and no one seemed sure whether Stafford's passing should make this publication larger or smaller. Harcourt initially opted for larger, talked of having an afterword (which was originally going to have been written by Stafford himself) done by Robert Bly, or Garrison Keillor, or Stafford's son, Kim. *More* illustrations—full color; no, black and white; no, fewer illustrations; well do we really need illustrations . . . we seemed to be spinning our wheels, losing momentum. Finally,

we decided to go back to our original plan: I would write the Introduction, the book would be simple—no illustrations—and we'd forego an afterword, letting the poems stand on their own as a representation of Stafford's voice throughout.

And so, a year after Stafford's death I found myself writing an Introduction to *Learning to Live*. I sought all the resources I could find that talked about Stafford's life and his work. I read his essays on writing; I read *Down in my Heart* (Stafford's book about his stance as a conscientious objector in World War II); I read books and articles by reviewers and critics as well as those by Stafford family members, acquaintances, and friends. My bedroom floor was covered with texts, photocopies, journals and notes, and day after day I sat in the middle of the rising tide of paper, took out my notebook, and rifled through the sheets strewn about the floor. I was completely blocked. What could I say about William Stafford that hadn't already been said, or said better? What could I write that would properly introduce the book the way it had been envisioned? What could I say that could be ready by children and adults; friends of Stafford and strangers; teachers, scholars and parents alike? How could I make it meaningful for everyone? How could I make it meaningful for *anyone*? What would Stafford himself want me to and write? That, I realized at last, was the question. What would Stafford want?

Looking over the books and papers on the floor, I tried to hear his voice in them, and I smiled. Because more than anyone I'd ever met or read, Stafford advocated a relaxed stance toward writing. I came to his words: "*Writing blocks*? I don't believe in them . . . I've never experienced anything like that. I believe that the so-called 'writing block' is a product of some kind of disproportion between your standards and your performance. I can imagine a person beginning to feel that he's not able to write up to that standard he imagines the world has set for him. But to me that's surrealistic. The only standard I can rationally have is the standard I'm meeting right now. Of course I can write. *Anybody* can write. People think that their product is not worthy of the person they assume the are. but it is" (Stafford, 1978, p. 116-117). His often-repeated solution came back to me: "The cure for writer's block? Lower your standards!"

I began to relax, and I found that the words weren't so hard after al. The introduction didn't need to be grand – it just needed to set the stage for what came after: Stafford's voice through poems that spoke to each other and to the reader.

Here, then, is part of that introduction:

> *William Stafford (1914 - 1993) was a poet exquisitely in tune with the world around him and deeply committed to exploring the place he occupied in that world. As a writer and teacher of writing, Stafford was above all a listener—a listener to the voices around and within him, a listener to the interplay of words and silences, and especially a listener to the earth itself. At the same time, he was blessed with a profound gift for putting what he heard and learned into words that we all can share.*
>
> *Anyone who met Stafford recognized at once his openness and his gentle spirit. When talking about his writing, he often said that his stance toward the ideas that came to him during his early morning writing time (usually beginning at four a.m.) was to greet those ideas at the door and to say, "Come in, Come in!" And, indeed, that was very much the way Stafford treated his readers and his listeners—with a warm and welcoming smile, and with a willingness to take their questions, their conversations, and even their admiration quite seriously. Yet Stafford was not all gentleness; he could be quite fierce in his convictions and his commitments—not fierce in forcing them on others, but fierce in articulating and adhering to them himself.*
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> *Stafford's writing can likewise be described as both gentle and fierce, both deceptively simple and highly complex. One of his stated ambitions was to help reduce the sense of distance people often feel between themselves and "literature." And while his poems most certainly are "literature," they are also poems that connect, poems that bridge the chasm between writer and reader, between the poet and the world. . . .*
>
> *William Stafford was committed to living in harmony with others and with the world; his voice and his vision are thus of increasing relevance to modern society. When this project originated, Stafford planned to write an afterword*

sharing his perspective on learning to live in the world. Although Stafford's death prevented him from writing that afterword, perhaps it was never really necessary, for the poet speaks eloquently and persuasively through his poems. His love for the earth, for its inhabitants, and for life itself resonates on every page. (Watson & Apol-Obbink, 1994, p. vii-ix)

The book was nearly finished. As I finalized the Introduction, I kept thinking about that unwritten afterword. We'd claimed it was unnecessary—that Stafford's voice came through without him having a "final word" in the book; still, I wondered what he would have said to finish a collection about living in the world. As the project drew to a close, I came across a poem of Stafford's that I'd not seen before. It contained the kind of closure we'd felt was missing, and it did indeed seem like an appropriate ending to a collection about living in the world. The poem, called "Reminders," became the epilogue to the book.

Reminders

Before dawn, across the whole road
as I pass I feel spiderwebs.

Within people's voices, under their words or
woven into the pauses, I hear a hidden sound.

One thin green light flashes over a smooth sea
just as the sun goes down.

What roses lie on the altar of evening
I inhale carefully, to keep more of.

Tasting all these and letting them have
their ways to waken me, I shiver and resolve:

In my life, I will more than live.
(Stafford, 1991, p. 16)

And so, I return to the questions that motivated the collection in the first place: *Why Stafford? Why children? Why poems*? My personal answer, of course, is that from the first moment I met William Stafford all three of these—Stafford, children, poems—have been inextricably linked in my mind and in my life. As to the wider relevance of the question: I am convinced that William Stafford left behind more than simply a wealth of poems, essays, and writings for adults. He left behind a vision of the world, a way of thinking about the process of writing, and a respect for the writer that is each child as well, and his words are powerful and resonant for young and old alike. His is a necessary voice for children of all ages to encounter and engage.

If William Stafford had been in the back seat of my maroon Toyota with Hanna and Peter on the way to camp, he would undoubtedly have listened with delight to their discussion of poetry. He would probably even have chimed in a time or two, though he would relish listening more than leading. He might agree with Peter that poems don't have to rhyme, although he would likely point out that they *can* rhyme, and that even when they don't, there are still echoes, music, and words that push and pull one another around. Undoubtedly he would nod when Hanna asserted that poems can be about anything, adding perhaps that poetry is about the particulars, about daily details that lead like a "golden string" to other particulars until the writer has found his or her way to a poem—whether that poem is about fireflies, the wind in your eyes, an infant's cry, or a reminder about ways to live one's life.

Stafford? Children? Poems? Those of us who have had the good fortune of knowing all three, together, know that there is between them a relationship that remains living and breathing, and full of words.

And some of those words are luckier than the rest.

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