

A POET WITH A JANUARY BIRTHDAY TO CELEBRATE

By Steve Slemenda

William Stafford is not only Oregon's best known poet. He is arguably the one writer within the rich literary heritage of our state who is revered as poet, essayist, teacher and mentor.

Although Stafford wrote prolifically since early adulthood, he didn't publish his first book of poetry until the relatively late age of 46. Ultimately, his publications grew to 67 volumes of poetry and prose.

His 1963 collection of poems *Traveling Through the Dark* won the National Book Award. In 1970 he served as the twentieth Consultant in Poetry (now known as National Poet Laureate) to the Library of Congress. In 1975 Governor Tom McCall appointed him the fourth Oregon Poet Laureate, a position he held until 1990.

In his writing, a simple style conveys the vision of a profound thinker, a man with a deeply compassionate heart and a spirituality that includes but transcends the merely philosophical and intellectual. He speaks to the reader with a voice that is gently authentic, direct, incisive, as in these opening lines from "A Ritual to Read to Each Other":

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

William Stafford was born in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 1914. A lifelong pacifist, he became a World War II conscientious objector. Through the war years, he worked in Civilian Public Service camps and social service agencies in several states. During those years, he developed the habit of rising in the predawn hours to write.

In 1944 Stafford married Dorothy Hope Frantz. The couple moved to Oregon and lived for many years in Lake Oswego, where they raised four children. From 1948 until his retirement in 1978, Stafford taught in the English Program at Lewis & Clark College. He died at his home in 1993.

Stafford practiced and taught writing as a process of contemplation and discovery. He begins his essay “A Way of Writing,” by declaring, “A writer is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them.”

Stafford was also a voice of compassionate yet resolute social consciousness, a poet activist who bore witness to the horrors of war and environmental devastation. His writing quietly celebrates right action struggling against the forces of human folly, as in these lines from “At the Un-National Monument Along the Canadian Border”:

This is the field where the battle did not happen,
where the unknown soldier did not die.
This is the field where the grass joined hands,
where no monument stands,
and the only heroic thing is the sky.

As poet, teacher, and generous mentor to many, Stafford espoused writing as “one of the great, free human activities,” offering “scope for individuality, and elation, and discovery.” Writers, he said, “have more than space and time can offer. They have the whole unexplored realm of human vision.”