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The Whole Wide World Rains Down:

William Stafford, Writing in Community, and Serious Illness

"The whole wide world rains down," William Stafford writes in his poem "Assurance" (*The Way It Is* 153), and there's nothing like living with serious illness to amplify our experience of that rain, and no one like Stafford when it comes to showing us the width of the world and depth of reality.

When I first found Stafford's poetry in the early 1980s, I was elated to discover an underground river that began feeding my own poetry's craft and content. Still in my early 20s, I hadn't yet understood how this poetry would guide me my whole life. For years, I considered Stafford one of my secret (to him) writing teachers, and I'm not alone. Many poets, writers and writing students I've encountered understand implicitly what I mean when I say that Stafford quietly disappears beyond the edge of what we can see, then sends us frequent telegrams in the form of poems. I've often pictured him sitting behind a large rock in an expanse of wind and prairie, occasionally pausing in his writing to fold a new poem into a paper airplane and send it over the horizon

Given that life's hardest transitions often mean falling, jumping, or nervously stepping off the edge of what we can control or know, it's no wonder that Stafford's poetry has been central to my students too, whether in college settings, where I've taught since 1986, or community workshops that I've facilitated regularly since 1992. I've also turned to Stafford's poems as companions to help me write through motherhood, serious illness, losing beloved family members and friends, and feeling out many nuances of how to live. "What can anyone give you greater than now?" (*The Way It Is* 45) I read to students at the University of Kansas and later, at Goddard College in Vermont. "What happened when you met your muse?" I asked workshop participants in small Kansas towns after we read Stafford's "Meeting My Muse." "What do you want to remember?" (*The Way It Is* 45) I read to myself when terrified or numb during my cancer diagnosis, subsequent surgeries and chemotherapy. Stafford's

poetry even traveled with me to Altoona, PA at the moment my father died of pancreatic cancer, my shaking hand on his knee, just 18 days after I underwent major surgery. Snow filled the windows, and I thought to myself, “What the sky says, I say” (*Stories That Could Be True* 19).

All things converge if you follow the line of what you love. Dancing, tripping and getting up again at the convergence of poetic language and the language of the body, I've done a lot of writing, including a chapbook of poetry about cancer, *Reading the Body,* and a memoir on cancer, community and returning to the body called *The Sky Begins At My Feet.* The writing workshops I've led in the community have coalesced especially around offerings for people with cancer, Parkinson's, M.S., diabetes, head trauma and other illnesses. Since 2003, when I led my first session for people with cancer just months after my final surgery, I've given talks to doctors in a small Iowa auditorium, an in-services for nurses who wrote poetry while standing at tall counters before their 7 a.m. shift, and many writing workshops for patients and caregivers at Turning Point: The Center for Hope and Healing, a visionary non-profit supporting individuals, families and communities facing serious illness.

In generic-looking office building at 89th and State Line Street in Kansas City, we gather on a Sunday afternoon each month or two, 20-25 of us to meet in Turning Point's back room, a space often used for yoga and Tai Chi classes. Around the hodgepodge of tables put together in a giant rectangle, and beside a small table loaded down with cinnamon rolls, cut vegetables and various salty, crunchy things, we start out with introductions: what brought us here, what challenges we go home to or carry in our pockets, why we write or write to want. I share the ground rules, designed to give people greater ownership of what they write. “You're the boss of you,” I tell them after explaining that no one has to read aloud, and everyone is free to ignore the writing prompt I suggest and write something else. After reading aloud a poem by Stafford or other writers to evoke our own poetic responses, whether we're writing letters, journal entries, dialogue or our own poetry, we launch into our own writing for 10-15 minutes, each of us entering our own rhythms of silence and words. Then we come back together and go around the circle, sharing the writing or the process or just saying, “Pass.” The only thing not

allowed is insulting ourselves before we read, a tendency for most of us. We pass around a bowl of M&Ms and the box of tissues as we lean in to listen carefully to one another read about holiday traditions or their funeral plans, the latest failed treatment or the next great trip to the Rockies, the moment all is safe and the many moments of danger.

The honor of introducing Stafford to people looking over that edge of the world, and sometimes in the act of falling, shows me how much Stafford's words -- a phrase here, a sentence there, an image that endures -- serve as lanterns in the dark. This is especially vital during the times when, to quote Stafford, “We live in a terrible season” of loss of function, loss of who we used to be, and at times, loss of loved ones. “Done with the compass! Done with the chart!” writes another over-the-edge-telegram-sender, Emily Dickinson, and like Stafford, she speaks to that state of being in which the territory is unfamiliar without any sense of where to go first (5).

Spending your days generating enough energy to get dressed and get an infusion of chemo before coming home to nap, eat something that won't aggravate your mouth sores, and watch something that won't induce nightmares is akin to leaving the country everyone else seems to inhabit and wandering a parallel landscape, everything happening in triple-slow-motion. This is precisely why Stafford's poetry gives essential nourishment to people with the kind of illnesses that proclaim how much life is a terminal condition. “Time wants to show you a different country,” Stafford writes in “The Gift,” and that country, when the constructed world around us is suspended, has its benefits (*My Name is William Tell* 49). Whenever I mention to my Turning Point workshop participants how much I paid attention to the birds outside my window when I was at my sickest, they nod knowingly, ready to write pages, if not volumes, about a naughty squirrels, spectacular rose-colored iris, or terrified neighborhood rabbit. The country of illness, to call on Robert Lipstye's book of the same title about his cancer, is a land where we spend afternoons watching one bare branch tremble in the wind rather than wrap ourselves in our culture's usual focus on future plans and past reckonings.

Writing allows us together to face the deepest unfoldings of reality. Stafford writes in “Bi-

Focal" how "the world happens twice," once as we experience it and the second time as "legends itself/ deep, the way it is" (*The Way It Is* 72). We write to find the world the way it is for us, whether navigating a wheelchair for the rest of an unpredictable life because of progressive MS, or steering the jumble of words coming onto the page in new rhythms because of a recent stroke. It helps us come to terms with a slow and persistent form of cancer, such as what John Willison lives with daily. It gives people like Peggy Mulvihill a place to catch up with herself, and the trauma and fear she endured while taking care of her greatly-in-pain and at-risk daughter, who fought for her life against a rare tumor. It even helps us reckon with illnesses that could have been prevented, such as the Parkinson's disease Lou Eisenbradt contracted from being exposed to Agent Orange while a nurse in 1969-70 Vietnam.

Lou, who has participated in the Turning Point writing workshops for close to ten years, writes eloquently of this compass-less, chartless journey, working earnestly with her writing hand on days when it's shaking more than usual, and balancing side effects from the medication she takes to keep her Parkinson's from progressing as much as possible. She courageously faces on and off the page what she fears most as well as her new daily reality. Drawing on Stafford's Poem, "To My Young Friends Who Are Afraid," Lou replies:

What I Fear Will Not Go Away

A slip of the foot on uneven paths
That strange ache in my leg as I write

The face, uneven, like a one-eyed queen
Shaking limbs, showing the world my imperfections

Thoughts, meant to stir the soul to action,
Not yet in focus, needing to be recycled again and again

Love, not lost or lessened

Lust, buried deep, needing a GPS to locate it

Fear this? Fear tomorrow's advancing demons?

Sure! But what's to be done?

Grab fear and uncertainty by whatever presents itself

Hang on till life is wrestled from its grasp.

Take its energy; change its direction

Turn it within; transform it to hope.

Keep advancing and leave fear to find a new home!

Living with both the actual disease and the fear of what the disease will do next has a habit of silencing people at times, making them feel like they have no voice in what's happening to their bodies. Many in the workshops over the years have laughed knowingly when I said that getting diagnosed often catapults onto our a moving walkway taking us around unknown bends. Yet in the journey, there can be, as Lou writes of her new normal, homecoming.

Serious illness can be especially grueling and searing when the illness takes root in your child, something Peggy knows all about after several decades of taking care of her daughter, Megan. Born with a pilonidal cyst and undergoing surgery at just six days old, Megan faced precarious years growing up, and Megan and Peggy spent hours in doctors' offices, days in hospitals, and nights in pain and uncertainty. In December of Megan's senior year of college, the cyst flared up so much that she was no longer able to walk without agony. As an abscess threatened her life, she was rushed into

emergency surgery, and Peggy spent the next month keeping her bed-ridden daughter alive and thriving. “The hardest part of raising my daughter was seeing the tumor get bigger and not really knowing what it was, or what would happen in the end. They did not find a name for it till she was 21,” Peggy says.

As Stafford writes in “There is Blindness,” “Pain is real” and yet over our shoulders, “There looms real home -- / There's the world” (*A Glass Face in the Rain* 33). Peggy knows that pain and that world beyond pain well, as she writes about in her version of “Ask Me,” riffing off Stafford's poem of the same title:

Ask me

When the tumor won over

Her ability to move, ask me

How love empowered and raged me

From rockabye momma

To momma fearless.

Thoughts of boxes filled with childhood photos

Ribbons of races won,

And glitter glue art of faded love gifts,

Ask me what really mattered most.

Listening to doctor’s litany of post-surgery home procedures

Ask me if the C in science affected anything that counted in the outcome of healing

Her precious being.

The preciousness of one another is something central to John's writing and life. John began attending the writing workshops about a year after his treatment ended for parotid cancer, which was now happily in remission. Several years later, in August of 2012, the cancer returned, metastasizing to

his spine in three places. After radiation to beat back the tumors enough that he could walk with greater ease, he now faces a future, save a miracle, that includes cancer, likely more radiation, and whatever evolving treatment are worth trying for this steady cancer that John describes as a freight train, “Slow, but unstoppable.” Living this close to mortality leads John to other paths, as he writes about in this poem, inspired by several Stafford poems.

Wild Song

As we walk along the path
Marking the boundary between
The Eastern forest
And the once barleyed field,
Now planted with Winter Wheat,
My fingers wrapped in her mittened hand,

The lights of the distant city
Cascade across the dome of clouded sky.

Our eyes are drawn heavenward.
The snow is falling up,
And gently gathers us in.

This pleases her, and
Her laugh, taken by the wind,
Is caught by the branches of a Black Oak,
Hangs there,

Clear, crystalline, chiming.

In a near pasture,

Full with sleepy cows,

The coyotes come in their nightly assembly,

Flakes reflected in their amber eyes

Their fur, brush stroked white.

All sinew and wild song,

They raise their

Heads in unruly chorus.

I hear her voice, somewhat distantly,

Saying: "Isn't this paradise?"

I simply nod

And place my hand

In the familiar small of her back.

We set off dancing

Toward the edge of the rounding earth,

Swirling the hours away,

Tipping the night into day.

Friends,

Stop making plans.

No more mad scribbling.

Don’t stray from here.

Stay.

Partake of this life.

Feast on this world.

“The darkness is deep,” Stafford writes in “A Ritual to Read to Each Other” (*New and Selected Poems* 75), and at the same time, as he tells us in “In Response to a Question,” “....the rage without met by the wings/ within that guide you anywhere the wind blows” (86). John navigates this darkness by meeting the rage of the cancer through his body with the wings to experience this world with as much love and vision as he can muster.

There's nothing like the limitations of being a body to show us who we are as animals with all the vulnerabilities and promise of an uncertain lifespan. In our workshops at Turning Point, we write ourselves into that raw and beautiful clearing we make together about what matters most: how to live, and what it means to be a person. In the weight we give to listening deeply, we lift up this time we share, because of and despite what will happen next or just happened. “How you stand here is important. How you/ listen for the next thing to happen. How you breathe,” Stafford writes in “Being a Person” (*Even in the Quiet Places* 89). Writing our way to truth and community aligns our words, our breath, our attention, and in doing so, changes us. As Stafford writes in one of his four superb volumes on the writer's vocation:

> Writing--literature--springs new experience into being: it is much more than just partially achieved recollections transferred from a fervent author to an accepting reader: a new life springs into focus, by being told. To create means to change, to change writer and reader. (Merchant 154).

This change also brings together writer and reader, and in our writing workshops, those living

with pain, discomfort, unpredictable side effects of medications or complications, and caregiving for their beloveds. In writing together, we all find what Stafford says in his poem "Assurance": "You were aimed from birth:/ you will never be alone" (*The Way It Is* 153). The whole world rains down, but it includes this world we inhabit together, witnessing one another and being witnessed, and in the process, feeling the true weight of our lives.

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