

Praying with William Stafford

Presented by Jerry Williams

Why I Am Happy

Now has come, an easy time. I let it
roll. There is a lake somewhere
so blue and far nobody owns it.
A wind comes by and a willow listens
gracefully.

I hear all this, every summer. I laugh
and cry for every turn of the world,
its terribly cold, innocent spin.
That lake stays blue and free; it goes
on and on.

And I know where it is.

WILLIAM STAFFORD (1914–1993) was born in Hutchinson, Kansas. In his early years he worked a variety of jobs—in sugar beet fields, in construction, at an oil refinery—and received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the University of Kansas. A conscientious objector and pacifist, he spent the years 1942–1946 in Arkansas and California work camps in the Civilian Public Service, fighting forest fires, building and maintaining trails and roads, halting soil erosion, and beginning his habit of rising early every morning to write. After the war he taught high school, worked for Church World Service, and joined the English faculty of Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, where he taught until his retirement. He received his PhD from the University of Iowa. He married Dorothy Hope Frantz in 1944, and they were the parents of four children. Stafford was the author of more than sixty books, the first of which, *West of Your City*, was published when he was forty-six. He received the 1963 National Book Award for *Traveling through the Dark*. He served as Poetry Consultant for the Library of Congress from 1970–1971 and was appointed Oregon State Poet Laureate in 1975. He received the Shelley Award from the Poetry Society of America. An enormously loved and admired writer, a generous mentor to aspiring poets everywhere, Stafford traveled thousands of miles in his later years, giving hundreds of readings in colleges and universities, community centers and libraries, throughout the United States and in Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Iran, Germany, Austria, and Poland.

Taken from [Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems of William Stafford](#). (2014)

Monday, April 28th - our place in the world

The poems chosen for today challenge us to think about our own place in the world. In both poems Stafford talks about his role as a writer. What place has God given you in this world?

Vocation

This dream the world is having about itself
includes a trace on the plains of the Oregon trail,
a groove in the grass my father showed us all
one day while meadowlarks were trying to tell
something better about to happen.

I dreamed the trace to the mountains, over the hills,
and there a girl who belonged wherever she was.
But then my mother called us back to the car:
she was afraid; she always blamed the place,
the time, anything my father planned.

Now both of my parents, the long line through the plain,
the meadowlarks, the sky, the world's whole dream
remain, and I hear him say while I stand between the two,
helpless, both of them part of me:
"Your job is to find what the world is trying to be."

Vita

God guided my hand
and it wrote,
"Forget my name."

World, please note -
a life went by, just
a life, no claims,

A stutter in the millions
of stars that pass,
A voice that lulled-

A glance
and a world
and a hand.

Tuesday, April 29th - being able to see

God's creation surrounds us. Sometimes, however, we are not able to see it clearly. In what way does this poem help us to see with new eyes?

A Message from the Wanderer

Today outside your prison I stand
and rattle my walking stick: Prisoners, listen;
you have relatives outside. And there are
thousands of ways to escape.

Years ago I bent my skill to keep my
cell locked, had chains smuggled to me in pies,
and shouted my plans to jailers;
but always new plans occurred to me,
or the new heavy locks bent hinges off,
or some stupid jailer would forget
and leave the keys.

Inside, I dreamed of constellations—
those feeding creatures outlined by stars,
their skeletons a darkness between jewels,
heroes that exist only where they are not.

Thus freedom always came nibbling my thought,
just as—often, in light, on the open hills—
you can pass an antelope and not know
and look back, and then—even before you see—
there is something wrong about the grass.
And you see.

That's the way everything in the world is waiting.

Now—these few more words, and then I'm
gone: Tell everyone just to remember
their names, and remind others, later, when we
find each other. Tell the little ones
to cry and then go to sleep, curled up
where they can. And if any of us get lost,
if any of us cannot come all the way—
remember: there will come a time when
all we have said and all we have hoped
will be all right.

There will be that form in the grass.

Wednesday, April 30th - being together

As God's people what commitment do we have to each other? What does the poem say about knowing others and about how we should treat each other?

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
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.

Thursday, May 1st - standing for peace

Owing to his spiritual commitments Stafford was a committed Pacifist. As a consciousness objector during World War II he was almost lynched by an angry crowd. How does this poem help us to see the "enemy" as human and as God's creation?

For the Unknown Enemy

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

Friday, May 2nd - the world waits

This poem relates an experience of finding the divine in nature. Does nature speak to you?

Earth Dweller

It was all the clods at once become
precious; it was the barn, and the shed,
and the windmill, my hands, the crack
Arlie made in the axe handle: oh, let me stay
here humbly, forgotten, to rejoice in it all;
let the sun casually rise and set.
If I have not found the right place,
teach me; for, somewhere inside, the clods are
vaulted mansions, lines through the barn sing
for the saints forever, the shed and windmill
rear so glorious the sun shudders like a gong.

Now I know why people worship, carry around
magic emblems, wake up talking dreams
they teach to their children: the world speaks.
The world speaks everything to us.
It is our only friend.

Saturday, May 3rd - incarnation

How does this poem challenge us to think about Gods presence in the world? Notice how capitalization is used in the second and third lines of the second stanza.

Stray Moments

We used to ask -- remember? We said,
"...our daily bread." And it came.
Now we want more, and security too:
"You can't be too sure." And,
"Why should we trust? - Who says?"
And Old-Who doesn't speak any more.

They used to have Thunder talk, or
The Rivers, or Leaves, or Birds. It's all
"Cheep, Cheep" now. It's a long time
since a cloud said anything helpful.
But last night a prophet was talking,
Disguised as a clerk at the check-out stand:

"Gee, it's been a good day!"
And we talked for awhile and I felt
that I wasn't such a bad guy.
We stood there looking out at the evening.
And maybe what we said, in its way, was
Thanks for our daily bread.