

Good Company for the Self

An Interview with WILLIAM STAFFORD

BY JOSEPH P. GARSKE

William Stafford is the former poet in residence of the Library of Congress. He is presently poet laureate of the state of Oregon, winner of the National Book Award, and author of several books of poetry, among them *Sunday Maybe*. With Clinton Larson, poet-in-residence at Brigham Young University, Mr. Stafford has co-edited *Modern Poetry of Western America*. He has written for *Harpers*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Saturday Review*, *American Scholar*, and many other leading journals. He is currently professor of English literature at Oregon's Lewis and Clark College.

How long have you been writing?

It seems I've been writing all my life—I can't remember an interval since I learned to write that I haven't tried to write. I started in grade school when *everyone* writes. I would sometimes like to reverse that question and ask, "When did everybody else stop?" Everybody writes during school years, and I

just kept on, due largely to family encouragement. The major works just naturally grow out of little things. Notes and letters become essays; essays become books.

Do you keep a journal?

In effect, yes; it is a loose leaf, and I use typing paper. I start a new page each morning, and I save all those pages. I have boxes of them at home from as early as the 1940s. But they're not really the same as a diary, because I don't always write just daily occurrences.

What's usually on those pages?

Almost invariably it's a date. To anyone else, and even sometimes to me, those pages look quite aimless; sometimes the words put down are phrases, sometimes sentences, sometimes whole paragraphs. But often they are fragments, and they can be very exotic, spotty, and unaccountable.

For instance, I tried to write this morning; for some reason I thought

of ink blots. I began to imagine that I was being given an inkblot test. I gave the doctor hundreds of different interpretations, he selected the ones that were symptoms. I wrote them down, I studied his diagnosis. In other words, I began to treat *him* as a patient—and then I began to slowly bring him into *my* universe. Sometimes a simple bunch of ideas like that can evolve into a poem.

what seems to be a real “writer’s block.” I believe it’s because their standards are too high. They simply believe that what’s occurring to them every day is not good enough.

But for me, writing is a process of coasting the periphery of your thought, whatever the thought is. I don’t regret where that periphery is; I just record where it is, and it’s always there. You can’t stop thinking.

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of your thought, whatever the thought is.”**

Is there an example of work you’ve generated out of these writings?

Yes; a spectacular example would be the time I read on the college bulletin board that a meteorite had hit the hill above campus. I got on my bicycle and looked for the meteorite for some time, and then I returned home and sat in the backyard and began to write a poem. It was eventually titled “The Star in the Hills.” I wrote the poem almost the way my feelings came to me at the time, and it all started with the note on the wall that said “a meteor hit just above campus.” Actually, I never found that meteorite or the site where it landed. But in my imagination I went on to search, to find something; the poem just spun off from there.

Do you ever have mental blocks?

No. I’ve felt a little awkward sometimes. Many writers I know tell me writer’s block is a real menace. I’ve never in my life felt it. It’s one of their dreams as far as I can tell. Perhaps some writers do experience

Some people conceptualize writing as a process of recording something worthy. I don’t have that concept. I believe that writing is a process of recording what happens, and something *always* happens. I’ve never forgotten how to record what happens. Having a writer’s block is like forgetting how to form the letters, and I’ve never forgotten how to form letters. I still remember. So I’m not making a claim for accomplishment; I’m just making an assertion about how I view the activity.

Do you ever feel that what you’re writing isn’t good enough?

I don’t ask myself whether it’s any good; that’s the wrong reaction to look for, even from yourself. That’s like asking, “Am I breathing right?” If it feels all right, it’s right. I believe that what one does when one writes is to converge somehow with the living edge of one’s consciousness. To distort that in any way is to make a mistake, and you may distort it by trying to anticipate

what others want. You may distort it by having taken a position ahead of time about what you're going to believe, or what someone else ought to believe. You're no longer doing the job of following where consciousness goes when you do that. The job of a writer is just to be good company for the self.

Some writers want to change their writing before they change the self, which leaves them without any guide. You don't become a good writer by learning a skill. I think you relax on an actuality.

Back to your question: "Do you ever feel that what you're writing isn't good enough?" Yes, all the time. I guess I never have a feeling that it's good enough. On the other hand, I never feel that it's too bad. Later when I look at my writing I may evaluate it.

I like to keep separate in my mind and in my life two operations: one is faith in what's happening; the other is a close look at something once it's written. I ask, "Would anyone else want to see this?" If I find a part that is vaguely dissatisfying to me, I revise it—sometimes over and over again. Finally I either abandon it or I decide it's all right. But that judgment part is kept strictly separate from the writing-down part: the writing-down part is blind trust.

Do you think that writers should write for a market—in other words, consider their public, what the public's desires and interests are, and how to meet their needs?

One of my impulses is to deny all that, so maybe we ought to explore that question briefly. Think of what a frightening world you are creating when you assume that a writer does

that kind of thing. It's a world in which anything you read is a calculated attempt to skillfully engineer your feelings, your convictions, and your actions. I don't like that kind of a world; I don't like the feeling that I'm surrounded, in effect, by people running for office and selling things to me.

I like the feeling of being in a world where I'm in a joint venture with others. They share with me their discoveries; they feel free enough to confess doubts, hesitations, and alternatives; and they are not suppressing either (in their minds or in their utterances) those things that would detract from their maximum engineering leverage on me. So as a writer, I abandon that world of competition, that world of engineering; I do not presume myself to be bringing about a change in another person that is not totally congruent with all my thoughts and feelings. I would rather be ineffective and valid in the compiled joint enterprise we have than to be effective at the cost of breaking communion with other people.

The way to get communion with other people is to abandon that engineering attitude toward communication—when we talk with friends we assume that they will not be calculating. The best way for communion to happen is by implication and sincere conversation.

Do you think the practical side and the poetic side are potentially congruent with each other, or are they hazardous to one another?

I think they are potentially congruent with each other. The most effective people and the most effective communities are the wholehearted, open-communication ones. To me this is the way to be as a

writer and as a person. Somehow a Walt Whitman who was conniving (and this happened in Whitman sometimes) is not nearly so winsome and effective, to me, as one who had the audacity to forget and violate what was happening in American poetry.

As you learn to communicate openly, your company will be the best people, and your life will be full. And your writing can get better and better. But if you learned a technique you are locked into whoever taught you and you will never be a productive, cooperative member of society.

Do you think an Emerson or a Thoreau could survive in our world today?

Yes. The people who are the most interesting to all of us have an element of audacity and integrity in them. People who try to wallpaper over every part of what they're doing and who try to manage society and their lives by anticipating a kind of Harris poll beforehand are in Watergate trouble. Doing what the poll says people want you to do is a terrible violation of what leadership is all about. For instance, if I even get a faint whiff that some leader of mine isn't really leading, my faith is entirely gone. I think it's pretty hard to hide that kind of thing. The validity of talk and action is as apparent as it ever was—it's more scary now, in fact, because even temporary deviations can be so devastating.

Some writers are afraid that if they follow their own impulses in their writing they won't be able to survive in the commercial world. The real hazard is exactly the opposite: it is the blight of poems and stories that are written to formula by people

who are afraid to follow their own originality. This is especially evident in poetry. The real danger is when you try to do that impossible thing of Shakespeare, without really being Shakespeare. But learning the technique to become Shakespeare doesn't hurt.

How do you think an editor would respond to that?

The editors I know are intelligent people; they need the help of writers, of someone who can take them someplace they haven't been before. An editor's job is to find the best material he can for his readers. And if he is the kind of editor who has already downgraded his reader—decided just what the reader is like and anticipated what the writer should write—then he's not an editor. He's got to be a discoverer to be an editor. A writer also has to be a discoverer!

What about the practical considerations of a person who faces the future of supporting a family or making a living—what kind of prospects does he or she have?

Well, the prospects you have in the commercial world in any endeavor depend so much on the market. I hate to say that anyone who coasts the periphery of self and consciousness would make a good living writing, because many selfs don't have coasts in the right place. But it's the only coast you've got, and to try to fake another one is an alternative you shouldn't even consider.

But you cannot count on success in writing. In fact, it just takes a lot of luck and the right conditions in your own life and mind and the way you think. But you can't give up the valid connection between

your feelings and thoughts and the words you write. The best way to become a significant writer is to develop the kind of independence I've been talking about.

In order to make a living you can submit material to all kinds of publications. And there are a whole hazard of people who live on a kind of intellectual muzak. They're not after anything and they don't get anything. You can go through the shelves at the airport and read *Airport*. That's a whole dead end of its own. It's a kind of delirium.

What do you think about a person who's really interested in writing as a central part of his life work? Is there danger or is there value in having another source of income?

I think it depends so much on the individual. Most writers, at least in the history of English literature, have been people who had incomes from elsewhere. If you read through an English literature anthology you will be reading work written almost entirely by upper class, wealthy people. John Keats is a spectacular violation of this law. He didn't last long enough to starve.

ours, someone who can teach has something already. Others make a good living by lecturing and giving readings.

Can you cite some fairly well-known examples?

Yes. Robert Bly, for instance, lives on a farm in Minnesota. He and his wife decide how much money they need for the next year; he accepts public speaking engagements up to that amount of money, and then he returns home to the farm to write.

Someone like Galwood Canal would be another great example. I have been in the room with him when he has decided he wants to go to some part of the country, has called someone in that area, and has said, "I'm going to be in your part of the country. Is there a meeting for me?" He immediately has air fare there and back.

The amount people like that take in is partly measured by the amount of time they're willing to give. I'm sure there could be a perpetual motion lecture—but they wouldn't be invited if they weren't good

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What about poets in America today?

In our country there are many ways for a poet to be sustained. A large percentage of them earn money teaching. There is a natural, close connection between reading, writing, and teaching. And in a culture like

writers. Writing is commercially valuable, for, say, the top fifteen American poets.

Where do you see your place as a writer? What do you see as the real value of what you're doing?

A question like this is a troublesome one to me because usually I try to keep from asking myself whether I'm doing anything valuable. I don't really have an opinion about my writing. I feel pretty neutral about it. But as for the *process* I'm involved in—the coming alive to one's feelings, and the individual's individuality of experience—I think that's very important. That's what life is all about. The important thing about my writing is that it is my own little local manifestation of something that is utterly important to me. I separate the objective evaluation of my poems or stories from the evaluation of the way of life that's embodied in those poems and stories.

realize the values of other people's lives. It is a liberating kind of thing.

How do you feel about the Mormon community as a base for a person interested in creative writing?

In some ways I envy it because I myself have been a part of different groups who have had a sustained group feeling. I sense among the Mormons a consciousness of their own society, commitments, and values.

I've lived in groups like this for forty years of my life. I was a conscientious objector during World War II and was put in concentration camps. In some ways life in those camps was a strangely liberating

"I sense among the Mormons a consciousness of their own society, commitments, and values . . . great advantages for a writer."

What would you say to an aspiring young writer?

First, a person who would ask me about writing would already have some motivation, so my response would assume that this person probably has enough interest to commit to it, to deserve as clear a view as I can give of what it's all about. Writing makes your life more vivid. It's like living your life several times. To let the actual feeling of living experience reverberate with itself as it does in the arts is a great multiplying factor in one's life.

Writing is one of the arts, and the arts are like a great discovery for mankind. Art sort of separates us from the vegetables, and it feels good. Writing might even help you

experience, especially as we felt kinship—not with any geographical group, but with an absolutely limitless group over the whole world. Our allegiances were not so much geographical or ethnic, but were the relation with those of like mind that went everywhere. Sort of the Quaker inner-light feeling. Later I taught at the Church of the Brethren College, where we had what seems to be very much like the feeling I sense among Mormons.

I think the writer in such a group has both disadvantages and advantages. You have disadvantages in the sense that you are deliberately somewhat out of step with some things happening in the society in which you are embedded. You must

just accept that. Then there comes the advantages: it's a distinction, and distinction these days is often something very much worth cultivating. I wouldn't feel at all blanked or alienated or stalled by being part of a group that's somewhat different from the mainstream of society. It helps dramatize in your life what is actually true, or ought to be true for every individual.

What are some of the problems of writing in an exclusively Mormon group?

One hazard would be that you might begin to plume yourself on differences that don't make any difference, or very much difference. You might sort of count on an already organized public that would accept anything you do. That's very bad. We're under no obligation to like someone's talk or poem or story because they're in our conscientious objector camp or church group or college. Human life is larger than these distinctions. One of the dangers would be that you'd begin to treat these distinctions as justification for all kinds of shortcuts and lapses.

How does the climate for Mormon writers compare with the climate for the rest of the people in the country?

Well, one part of me switches immediately back to envy. There are vivid, almost universally recognized reference points in society that are cohesive. Because of this, there could be great advantages for a writer (and anyone in the arts) to have a living structure of beliefs, images, legends, myths, and convictions. It's the kind of thing Henry James felt he had to go to England for. America didn't have it—this cultural overlay.

What would you like to see the Mormon writing community produce?

I think I would be most interested in the flourishing and the welcoming of the residues of history of the group. It's surprising how available stories and poems are to people with different histories. And you don't really have to have footnotes. We have read about the Greeks, the Hebrews, and all kinds of groups who have special histories. What I would like to see come out of any group is a welcoming, an embracing of distinctions. Not an exaggeration, but not a down-play. Just an accepting of the flourishing of the feeling of the society.

I feel that many people share a revulsion about American culture. Wherever the correctives to that revulsion come from, I'm interested in them. Mormonism's one of the possibilities.

What do you think of the idea of using one's talents to serve the Lord? Is that a good thing?

This is a part of my life. It's not a surprising issue because of my associations and my natural way of thinking. Ultimately one's decisions come from many sources: from what others tell you, from traditions that you've shared in, and from intellectual introspection that you perform right there on the spot. And if you give up the aid of people around you and the use of the immediate intelligence that you're capable of in the situation because of some kind of prior commitment, maybe even when you were younger, impressionable, or overwhelmed in some way, you've given up part of life.