

Every War Has Two Losers

William Stafford on Peace and War

Edited & With an Introduction by KIM STAFFORD
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Kim Stafford's collection of his father's most important writing on nonviolence and reconciliation has much to recommend it, including a substantial selection from William Stafford's unpublished "Daily Writings," the journal he kept from 1951 until his death in August 1993. The collection also contains about 40 poems and several fascinating but obscurely published interviews, along with various other unpublished notes and statements. All of these will engage any reader genuinely interested in understanding the logic and idealism of nonviolence and reconciliation, especially as they were practiced by William Stafford and the more than 12,000 conscientious objectors (COs) who performed "alternative service" during World War II. Whether we're revisiting pieces already familiar to us or encountering Stafford's previously uncollected work, the events of September 2001, along with our government's continuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, give Stafford's writing a haunting sense of currency.

Take, for instance, the first section, entitled "The Mob Scene at McNeil," drawn from Stafford's too-little-known prose volume from Oregon State University Press, *Down in My Heart* (1998). The scene is a tiny town in 1942 Arkansas, the cast a group of townsmen or "patriots" who come within a rabbit's whisker of lynching Stafford and his fellow conscientious objectors. The COs are on a day's leave from their nearby internment camp in Magnolia when "an intricate succession of misfortunes and blunders" creates a fragile series of moments. As the scene plays itself out, it's difficult not to think of the daily confrontations between Iraqis and American soldiers or Israelis and Palestinians.

As his son notes in his introduction to the book,

All his life William Stafford was witness for a comprehensive view. He believed in the fragile but essential community of the world, and he wrote on behalf of what he called "the unknown good in our enemies."

"If you want peace," the old saying goes, "work for justice," but as William Stafford notes in one of his most famous poems, "justice will take us millions of intricate moves." Even in the last year of his life, long after he had endured the internment camps and become a National Book Award-winning poet, Stafford continued to affirm that his position as a pacifist was "not so much an achieved position as a desired position." Stafford understood peace and reconciliation as a fundamental process, a daily job, and his commitments to nonviolence and reconciliation were absolute. He started from an assumed position of goodwill on all sides. "Angry thoughts are not bright thoughts," he often reiterated, and assuming goodwill is "part of the attitude" one must deliver in order to

act right [in order to] overcome by understanding, by kindness, by showing [the opposition] that it's in their interest to act right. They don't know that.

Sometimes Stafford's friends would tell him, "Your policy of reconciliation would work if people were good, but they are not [good]," to which Stafford responded, "Some of the people." Being prepared for anger and lack of goodwill is important, of course, and even the most passionate and dedicated advocate of nonviolence is vulnerable to anger. Stafford writes,

To hold the voice down and the eyes up when facing someone who antagonizes you is a slight weight—once. But in a lifetime it adds up to tons.

For Stafford and others who share his ideals, taking the high road—refusing to be angry and assuming goodwill—"is a position of power. It's moral jujitsu." As in the physical practice of the martial arts, so in Stafford's practice of nonviolence: "The more aggressive the opposition is, the more vulnerable they are." Assuming goodwill, then, is not an easy position, but it can be learned, and it can be practiced. What's more, we are all obligated to practice it, particularly in our world today. Kim Stafford gives us a great book from which to take those important first steps. ■

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