

**A HOMILY GIVEN BY REV. PAUL KOTTKE
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Sunday, July 7, 2008

Title: Reflections on Poetry: William Stafford's "The Way It Is"

Scripture: Psalm 25

Comments: Stafford began publishing his poetry late in life. His first major collection entitled *Traveling Through the Dark* won the National Book Award in 1963.

As I mentioned last week, for this section of this summer's sermon series, I am drawing from the book *Leading from Within*, editors: Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner, 2007, [Jossey-Bass]. The poems in this book are selected by national leaders who have participated in the Courage to Lead retreats. On the right side of the book is the poem they have identified as important to them. On the left side of the book is their reflection on the meaning for the poem for them.

The format of these sermons is to lift up some biographical information on the poet, to hear the poem read, to hear the reflection by the national leader, and then for me to offer an additional reflection. The intent of this process is not to declare the singular meaning of the poem as if there is one answer. But rather to provide an opportunity for the poem to speak to you, to your soul. If you find some image or meaning arising for you, then explore that meaning. What it is saying to you is far more important than what I might have to say. The beauty of poetry is that it accesses the language of the soul from what might be called The Third Way – that which comes to us from a slant, comes to us in surprise, speaks to us in an unexpected way – and yet once we hear its voice, we know its truth for us.

William Stafford - born in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1914. During WWII, he was a conscientious objector and worked in the civilian public service camps. From 1947 to 1980, he taught at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon.

His first major collection of poems *Traveling Through the Dark* was published in 1962, winning the National Book Award the following year. In 1970, Stafford was named Poet Laureate by the Library of Congress. He died suddenly of a heart attack in 1993.

What is of interest is that his style was often compared to Robert Frost in that they both had a simplistic presentation but upon reflection, a distinctive and complex vision would emerge. After his retirement, he had a summer home in Bend, Oregon. I have been told by a man who lives in Bend that each week in the local hardware store a Stafford poem is written on the chalkboard behind the service desk, as the town honors its adoptive son. His poems clearly reflect the ordinary experiences of life.

Poem: "The Way It Is" - See if this poem speaks to your experience of life.

There's a thread that you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you are pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it is hard for others to see. While you hold it, you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread.

In 1971, William Stafford said in an interview, "I keep following this sort of hidden river of my life, you know, whatever the topic or

impulse which comes, I follow it along trustingly. And I don't have any sense of its coming to a kind of crescendo, or of its petering out either. It is just going steadily along."

This poem was selected by Michael Intrator who works with a couple of national programs for emission reduction and trading environment commodities.

He writes: It's hard to say when it took root. It could have been when I was a kid tucked into a tent on our family's camping trips. Or it could have been its absence, growing up in New York City. In any case, my connection to the outdoors and nature had become an integral part of who I was before I left high school. By the time I graduated from college, I was leading trips in the backcountry, sharing my passion for the natural world.

In 1993, I left the backcountry...ten hours later I was walking across the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The abrupt transformation of my surroundings crystallized my understanding that, although the wilderness seems endless when you are creeping up the side of a mountain...the truth is that these places are small, fragile, and shrinking fast; saving them from our encroaching civilization is going to require a different kind of environmentalism.

Today, I am still following that thread through boardrooms and trading floors in New York, Beijing, and Tokyo. I structure transactions

that finance global greenhouse gas abatement projects...Bumper stickers and recycling programs matter, but if we're serious about preserving this planet, we need to develop financial incentives for reducing pollution.

This man's life might seem very different from that one he led as a wilderness guide. And yet he knows that he has hold of the same thread and is following it faithfully.

Thirty-one years ago, on my first day of orientation at The Iliff School of Theology, I sat in the booth of a restaurant over on University and Evans that is no longer there. I diligently tried to imagine what the pathway of my life was to be. In truth, I was not even close – and yet through it all, I have felt intuitively that I have followed the same "thread." While I could not tell you what was to unfold, I have had a deep sense of following the pattern that was mine to follow.

Is there a "thread" within your life that you have been following, with all the curves and turns, with all the unexpected celebrations and challenges, a thread that has defined the consistency of your life – even if others could not see? Is it not true that as long as you have a firm hold of this "thread," you can't get lost?

Thanks be to God that this thread is trustworthy, that it serves a deep purpose, that it leads us into the uncertainty of tomorrow - if we do not let go of this sacred thread.