

## THIS NATIONAL POETRY MONTH IS A TIME TO REMEMBER WILLIAM STAFFORD

By Eleanor Berry, with Mike Shuler, Steve Slemenda, & Larry Tyle

For poetry lovers in the United States, April is a month for celebrating—National Poetry Month. Especially for poetry lovers in Oregon, all of 2014 is a time of celebration—centennial year of the birth of the late William Stafford, former Oregon Poet Laureate and longtime teacher at Lewis and Clark College.

Many articles and programs on Stafford's life and work will enumerate his publications and honors. For the April Poetry Corner, several of us who have been writing these monthly columns want to focus on Oregon's best-known and most beloved poet in a different way. We want to share what Stafford means to us individually.

Mike Shuler writes: William Stafford spoke with clarity about important things, using simple, lyrical language. He descriptively invited us to explore exterior and interior depths of our experience, rather than overtly presenting his own perspectives. Meaning leaps from his poetry like trout, exposing us to flashes of insight regarding what may be beneath the surface of our lives. To me, his poems are best savored, like tea, fresh bread, profound awareness, or love.

Steve Slemenda writes: William Stafford's poetry reminds me that the fundamental value and obligation of being human is to pay attention. For that I am beholden to him. His charge is perhaps best expressed in "A Ritual to Read to Each Other," particularly these lines:

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.

The very same poem and passage are also important to Larry Tyle. He writes: Stafford, a pacifist and humanitarian, often referred to the thread that connects us as humans. A favorite poem of mine is "A Ritual to Read to Each Other." ... I believe the truth in this poem is a charge

to all that breathe: Be truthful to yourself as well to others. I have the poem posted on my refrigerator.

As for me, on the wall of my study there is a photograph of Stafford taken by Salem photographer and videographer Michael Markee. It shows the poet lying on a sofa, head propped on a pillow, writing in a notebook. Beneath it is hung a broadside of a poem that Stafford might well have drafted in one of his daily early-morning writing sessions on that very sofa. It's called "Any Morning," and begins, "Just lying on the couch and being happy." Photograph and poem together inspire me to keep making time for writing of my own, remind me of the value of that time to preserve an inner quiet in the midst of the ordinary business of the day:

Little corners like this, pieces of Heaven  
left lying around, can be picked up and saved.  
People won't even see that you have them,  
they are so light and easy to hide.