

Ep #40: Lessons from William Stafford



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Leah Badertscher

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“Kids, they learn to dance before they learn there is anything that isn’t music...” poet William Stafford. So, today, my friends, I have a treat for you. I, as you know, have a lifelong obsession, fascination with creative genius and with the creative process. And today, I’m going to share with you a book on writing from one of my favorite creative geniuses, the American poet William Stafford.

So, I hope you will join me today as I think there is so much to be gleaned from William Stafford’s generous spirit about the creative process and poetry. And even if you are not a writer or poet, as you’ve heard me say before, the process of the creative process is the process of creating a life. So I know you’ll have takeaways from this episode that you can apply to your own medium, whether that’s relationships, business, painting, dance, entrepreneurship, parenthood, there’s something for everyone in the wise and beautiful words of Bill Stafford.

You are listening to *The Art School Podcast*, a show for artists and creatives who want to become the next greatest version of themselves. Learn how to cultivate an extraordinary way of being and take the mystery out of making money, and the struggle out of making art. Here is your host, master certified life coach, artist, and former lawyer, Leah Badertscher.

Hello all my beautiful creative soul friends and welcome back. Thank you for tuning in and listening. So, today’s episode, I had been wanting to share parts of this book for a while, and if you haven’t read any of Bill Stafford’s work, I highly encourage it. He is one of my favorite poets, and I think of him as a teacher too, even though I’ve never met him and he’s passed. And I’m grateful to my living poetry teacher, Fran Quinn, for introducing me to Bill Stafford and his work.

And Fran has had the pleasure of meeting Bill Stafford in his lifetime and it sounds like he was just as marvelous in the flesh and blood as he is through his spirit and the words on the page. And so then what prompted to

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be like, now is the time to share Bill Stafford and his words on writing and creativity with you was that I was recently at the pool with my kids, as has been our custom this summer, to go to the pool a lot, I love doing that with them.

And they all know how to swim now, though we're still working with the younger two on having them be more comfortable in the water. So I was working with my middle son, Sammy, who is eight, and he's always been a peanut, and now he's this very long skinny peanut. He's all skin and bones. And he was working on the back float and he gets so tense when he does it.

And I taught swim lessons for years when I was growing up and lifeguarding at the North Springs pool in northern Iowa, and so I taught many children how to swim and many children how to do the back float. And so I know that the key to that is relaxing and letting go and just trusting that the water holds you up.

And so Sam was having a hard time doing that, it was just tensing up and trusting. So I had his head on my shoulder and was just telling him to relax and let the water hold him up. And it made me think about all the ways in which that lesson applies in life, about how water doesn't seem like it's going to hold you up.

We don't even know the buoyancy of water when we're fighting against it, and we almost have to learn how to be different within ourselves in order to have a relationship to the buoyancy of water. We have to learn how to trust both ourselves and the water and practice in a safe place in order for that buoyancy to work with us.

And then that all made me think about this book of Bill Stafford's which is called *Writing the Australian Crawl*. Because, for me, it was such a refreshing take when I first read this book on the art of writing poetry and

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also just the art of living a creative life, any creative life, and having any creative practice. Because to me, he both seems like a very grounded person, a person of the earth, and I didn't even know he had spent time in my beloved Iowa city and that he was proud to one day call himself an Iowan until I read the back of this book.

But he did grow up in the Midwest and then spent time in the Pacific Northwest, but there is something, like a salt of the earth, there's a grounded earthiness to his poetry and there's also something of the sublime and the mystic. And to me, it has the feeling of a Midwestern mystic of someone like Willa Cather. And I have a belief that that part of the country, just, there is something to that, that particular feeling of groundedness and mysticism. And I have some clients who exude that as well.

So, in his book, *Writing the Australian Crawl*, it's refreshing because it comes from the point of somebody who is a craftsman, who lives the creative life, and while always being respectful, he also challenges a lot of established thinking and teaching about writing and creative writing. And he takes it to task. And perhaps I enjoy it because it's a way that feels like a validation and an affirmation for me.

So I wanted to share, obviously I can't share the whole book, but today, I wanted to share some highlights from that book. And as I've said before, I just have a love for anything to do with what is creative genius. And to me, it's a fascination with tapping into something that's greater than us. That's, for me, what that creative genius is, that guardian spirit within, those times when we can tap into something that is greater than ourselves and access knowing and flow that is beyond us. It's accessing that place where we are so self-forgetting but also feel more like ourselves and more at home in the world than ever. And when I read Bill Stafford's poetry, to me, it strikes me that he's writing from that place. And as I read his book on writing, I can see why as well.

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So again, even if you are not a poet or a writer, again, look at this as meta-wisdom. This is wisdom you can take and apply to any area of your life to creating, improving, enriching, understanding any area of your life or yourself.

In the beginning of the book, he writes, “Back in school, from the first, when I began to try to write things, I felt this richness. One thing would lead to another, the world would give and give. Now, after 20 years or so of trying, I live by that certain richness, an idea hard to pin, difficult to say, and perhaps offensive to some for there are strange implications in it. One implication is the importance of just plain receptivity.”

So I want to stop here and say that – this is such a beautiful dovetail onto conversations we’ve been having in the past few episodes about trusting yourself and trusting that- if you have a vision for something, which I’ve talked about as having a desired result or intention to create something, that is receptivity. That is allowing it in and approaching it from an orientation that if it occurs to you, there must be something there.

So, he goes on to say, in this plain receptive mode, that it’s like fishing, “I do not wait for very long, for there is always a nibble. And this is where receptivity comes in, to get started, I will accept anything that occurs to me. Something always occurs, of course, to any of us.”

So, if you remember from last week’s episode, when I was talking about my client, Lisa and helping her move her creative process model for sculpting onto her process for creating money, that her creative process for sculpting was very much that’s he knew that’s something would occur to her. She didn’t have to wait and think hard about, now nose, no wait, ear comes before nose, oh wait, maybe I should do the eyes. It’s just that place of trusting where you know I always know the best thing to do and something always occurs to me.

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So you can do that. you can practice this receptivity and this trust, like trust what you get, but also be awake to noticing what you get and then trust it, receive it, and know that there is always something coming. I thought that was profound that he said, "Something always occurs, of course, to any of us," because that seems like such a simple little sentence, but how often do we not live that way and we let doubt swoop in and we get so anxious.

What if nothing occurs to me? What if this doesn't work? What he's saying is so much from such a different energy, from an energy of this is the process, there's always a nibble, there's always a bite, something always comes.

And then he goes on to say one thing comes, and then another, it might be hot or cold, but things start to come. "And if I let them string out, surprising things will happen. If I let them string out along with this initial readiness, receptivity, then there is another readiness. I must be willing to fail. If I am to keep on writing, I can't bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me or even slow me down."

So, that's huge. That ties into, again, so many things we've talked about in all of these episodes, and especially the last three. I have talked to you in an episode about, you know, lowering your standards to elevate your art. And that goes if you desire to make more money too. Lower your standards to increase your income.

And this doesn't mean that you're acting out of integrity. It means you are getting your ego out of the way and that you're making your ability to create what you want, that that is your sacred art. And he writes too, "I must be willing to fail."

So that has to be that orientation towards failure that must be willing to fail is not only something you embrace in the creative process, but that it is just

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an inherent part of it. Nothing has gone wrong. If you're not failing, you are probably not actually creating or creating at your edge.

So then, he goes on to write, "There's something I'm not thinking about such matters as social significance, positive values, grammar, consistency, mechanics. I resolutely disregard these. Something better, greater, is happening. I am following a process that leads so wildly and originally into new territory that no judgment at that moment can be made."

So, that again, you can take and apply to anything, to not judge in the moment but just to plunge into something greater. There's a difference between the time to create and the time to edit.

He later writes, "So, receptive, careless of failure, I spin out things on the page and a wonderful freedom comes." How often do we talk here about freedom being the end result that we're after anyway? "And a wonderful freedom comes. If something occurs to me, it is alright to accept it. It has one justification; it occurs to me."

And right there, I am so tempted just to end the podcast on that note, that the justification for what you're about to create can be that it occurs to you, that you don't need to look for outside permission or validation, but that the end result that you're ever-seeking, in large part again, is that permission to trust what occurs to you. So again, I'd like to stop there, but there's a few more things I want to share with you yet here, so we'll go onto those.

He talks some more about answering what, assuming there will be objections about, if you just write what occurs to you, won't that be just too not eloquent and not enough for sustained attention or intelligence? But he said he doesn't insist on any of that in that moment, "For I know that back of my activity, there will be the coherence of myself and that indulgence of my impulses will bring recurrent patterns and meanings again."

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That line I have underlined and highlighted so many times because a pivotal moment in my own journey, in my creative career, was when I decided that something within me, that there is a self-organizing intelligence within me, because so much of my fear about allowing myself to lean into my creative and intuitive side, lean into that unknown was that it was unknown, that I couldn't logically see the path forward, that I couldn't connect the dots that I was, in the moment, creating that would ensure that what I was doing would ultimately have coherence.

And so, long story short, through a lot of soul searching and meditating and self-coaching, the truth I came upon was that I have a self-organizing wisdom and intelligence within me. And so the more I trust what comes to me in the moment, and as he writes, indulge in those things that I moved to write and create and say and do in the world, the more that the patterns and meaning will evolve over time because I can trust that that organizing intelligence within me is very wise and that there is a design, even if I can't always see it logically in the moment.

Then, onto this chapter, here is the part where, if you were wondering what the connection was between teaching my son to do the back float and why it made me think of this book is the chapter on – it's the name of the book, Writing the Australian Crawl.

So he's talking about taking this road trip with his family and his daughter, Kit, was six years old and keeping him awake talking to him as they drove. And he said, "So the road winds ahead and she bubbles along, composing with easy strokes, imagining a way of life for the two of us."

And this is what his daughter said, "We'd have an old car, the kind that gets flat tires. But inside would be wolf skin on the seats and warm fur on the steering wheel and wolf fur on all the buttons. And we'd live in a ranch house made out of logs with a loft where you'd sleep and you'd walk a little

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ways and there would be the farm with the horses. We'd drive to town and we'd have flat tires and be sort of old."

And then he writes, "This artless bit of talk is a cue from my contention that the writer, like the talker that finds his best subject and responds eagerly with his whole self, can easily pour out a harmonious passage. Writing, like talk, can be easy, fast, and direct. It can come about through the impulsive following of interest and its form, in proportion, can grow from itself in a way that appears easy and natural."

That one paragraph, for me right there, sums up so much about my desired way of living as a creative, living as a creative entrepreneur, and I will use it as the close actually for this podcast so you can hear it again because I have written it out just in order to take it in and absorb it more. But there are a few more things in this chapter that I wanted to share with you as well.

So, he says, "It is strange to me that we can come to accept the idea that language is primarily learned as speech, is soaked up by osmosis from society by children. But then we assume the writing down of this flexible language requires a study of linguistics, a systematic checking of lists with standard practices and so on.

Now I realize that we possess many canned arguments about prescription versus description. And we share many nuances on this subject. But I want to take a definite position. And my main plea is for the value of an unafraid face-down flailing and speedy process in using the language, just as any reasonable person who looks at water and passes a hand through it can see that it would not hold a person up, so it is the judgment of a common sense people that reliance on the weak material of students' experiences cannot possibly sustain a work of literature.

But swimmers know that if they relax on the water, it will prove to be miraculously buoyant and writers know that a succession of little strokes on

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the material nearest them, without any prejudgments about the gravity of the topic or the reasonableness of their expectations will result in creative progress. Writers are persons who write, swimmers are persons who relax in the water, let their heads go down, and reach out with ease and confidence.”

So, my friends, this brings me to the part of the podcast where I want you to do more than just listen. I want you to take this information and make it transformational. I want you to take what’s here and really move the needle forward in areas of your life from the inside out so that you know you were more of who you want to be, you’ll like yourself more and more every day, and you’re also in love with the process of what you’re creating in the world and your creations.

So, what I want to offer you today is to try on the wisdom of Bill Stafford. Try, if there is any area in your life where you feel you’re afraid to swim, where you’re longing to jump into the water but you don’t think you can float, here’s his advice; try an unafraid face-down flailing and speedy process. Trust relaxing in the water. Trust its miraculous buoyancy.

And being a poet, he also uses words that count. So when he says flailing and speedy process, again, that says to me, be unafraid of making mistakes. And also speed, I don’t think that was an accidental word. I think, if there are times when you don’t think you can swim, don’t think you will be supported or held up, there is something to adding some action in which you are moving quickly that helps facilitate that process and helps you break through some invisible membrane.

If you recall from my interview with Ashley Longshore, for me, it really stuck out how much she emphasized action in both that interview, and if you’ve followed her, you’ll see she is a very action-oriented person, so not getting caught up in is this good enough, not getting caught up in the dogma of the art or in the theories of creating business or in the theories of living a life,

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but going out and doing it and knowing that there is something miraculous about your own flailing face-down unafraid speedy process.

Bill writes again on this – I call him Bill because we’re friends – I propose we start with the assumption that people, even the, quote en quote shallowest, do have ideas. Ideas spring from motion and the mind is always in motion. “Just as the swimmer does not have a succession of handholds hidden in the water, but instead simply sweeps that yielding medium and finds it hurrying him along, so the writer passes his attention to what is at hand and is propelled by a medium too thin and all pervasive for the perceptions of nonbelievers who try to stay on the bank and fathom his accomplishment.”

So I think Bill’s coach with him advice there would be to not stay on the bank and try to fathom how it’s done, but get in and do it and learn how to swim. He goes on again and writes, “When we’re writing, there’s an assumption that one choice or the other is the right move. No. Almost everything we say or think or do or write comes in that spacious human area bounded by something this side of the sublime and something above the unforgivable.

We must accustom ourselves to talking without orating and to writing without achieving. When you write, simply tell me something. Maybe you should tell me how we could live. For kids...” and here he goes back to talking about his six-year-old daughter, “It was easy. She knew. And I can receive again the content, the pattern, the beginnings of a wonderful turbulence and her little dog paddling toward great expression as the two of us kept awake that night coming through the coast range. We’d have an old car, the kind that gets flat tires, but inside would be wolf skin.”

Thank you again so much for listening to another episode of *The Art School Podcast*. I hope you enjoyed this episode. If you did, I would love it if you could take the time and leave a review on iTunes. Also, if you enjoy this

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podcast and you want to take the work even deeper, if you want to really take this work and make it transformational, move the needle from the inside out in all areas of your life, coaching is an extraordinary way to do that.

So, I was thinking again, since I knew I was going to do this podcast, and I was thinking about the associations in my mind, like what is that magic place between when I was helping Sammy learn to back float and it made me think of teaching children to swim when I was growing up and a young person myself and how much I love this book by Bill Stafford and his approach to creativity and what that all meant and let the ideas come to me and the associations come to me, something that emerged was, you know, relaxing into the miraculous so then you can move through it with ease.

And to me, that is one of the most exciting and profound opportunities we have available to us as humans now. Relaxing into the miracle that is who we are, that is all around us, and then what do we do that really learning to be adept swimmers in this medium of this miraculous life that we have, this miraculous creature, human being that we are. And to me, creativity poses this wonderful portal and doorway in which to do that because I think our potential is not this finite thing within our being, but it's something we can all tap into and creativity is a way of cultivating that. And it requires both action and motion and also relaxation.

So to me, that really sums up a lot of what my own creative process and journey has been, and also what so much of my coaching is about, helping people to realize the potential that they have, to relax into that power, and also then take action in the world.

And so, in closing, here again, I think, is Bill Stafford reaching forward through time on the page and giving you some coach with me words of wisdom. And again, if you're not a writer, just insert the noun, verb that works for you.

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“My contention is that the writer, like the talker who finds his best subject and responds eagerly with his whole self can easily pour out a harmonious passage. Writing, like talk, can be easy, fast, and direct. It can come about through the impulsive following of interest and it’s form in proportion can grow from itself in a way that appears easy and natural.”

So go forth, swimmingly, my friends, and have a beautiful week. I look forward to talking to you next time.