



Otilie Stafford— Creator of Worlds

They came as Goldwater Republican chemists and left as reforming English teachers.

by Norman Wendth

I STARTED COLLEGE AS A CHEMISTRY MAJOR (occasionally calling math a second major). I had enjoyed science in high school, and my parents were pleased with the practical direction my education was taking. They dreamed of a financially comfortable son; I envisioned myself in a white lab coat with a Texaco pocket protector, mixing bubbling, colored liquids by day and reading great books by night. Then, in the honors section of Freshman Composition, I met Otilie Stafford.

Students never accused Stafford of coddling them. The first (and easiest) book we read that year was J. B. Phillips' *Your God Is Too Small*; soon we were wrestling with Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Desert Year*, with Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, and with the difference between J.B. and Archibald MacLeish's biblical original, *Job*. I still find most of those books challenging; at 17, I was

close to overwhelmed.

Close to, I said. Actually, the class was confusing but glorious. It was confusing because, as I believe is true with most great teachers, Otilie Stafford seemed much more interested in how we were growing than in the facts we were learning, and I was not alone in feeling confused when parroting the "right answer" no longer proved enough. We were expected to thoroughly master all assignments, of course, but not because *The Grapes of Wrath* was going to be on the Graduate Record Exam. Rather, for Stafford, ideas like "academics" and "integrity" were part of the ethical fibers of her very being, and we were expected to feel—and perform—likewise.

In my own case, Stafford kept pushing me to be more honest and less glib in my reactions to class reading. In responses to an essay on ethics in public life (Walter Lippmann?), I wrote a long, smug essay demonstrating the Protestant roots of Goldwater conservatism and arguing its resulting ethical and spiritual superiority. Years later I still wince at the word *oversimplified*, in Stafford's distinctive red

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scrawl at the end of that early essay, it inspired a terror I had never before known. (Most of my classmates remember the phrase “be concrete and specific” appearing in their nightmares.) After I slipped a quick, angry protest note under her office door, I plunged back into my own thought processes, determined to prove myself complex and sophisticated. I only emerged breathless and red-faced at the immensity of my own naivete. Not only were my parents’ Adventism and Eisenhower’s Republicanism not identical, but I hadn’t really understood either one. I don’t remember Stafford actually trying to talk me out of my youthful enthusiasm for Goldwater; I clearly remember her pushing me to think critically, not only as an academic necessity but also as an issue of character.

Stafford’s classes gave me the dizzying sense that doors were opening into entire worlds

I hadn’t known were there—which, in turn, proved to be thresholds to even newer and larger mental universes. Others may have called the author of their confusion “rotten, mean, and hateful” (Stafford’s favorite quote when she’s being self-deprecating), but I never heard any student actually say so. I began to see her as a charismatic, intellectual liberator. And I finally wrote a successful college essay. It argued that real education cannot give a student the means to grow, without first destroying the illusions that had been holding him back. The essay was clearly autobiographical; it was also the very first time I ever really stopped to ask myself why I was in college. Happily, I not only received my first “A” from Stafford (all right, all right, it was an “A-”), I also started a thinking process I have not yet concluded.

One less immediate result was that in my junior year I became an English major. Judging

Stafford—In Her Own Words

Nothing in my childhood or youth would have led me to believe that women were made to be silent, invisible, and submissive. . . . In the New York Conference, my mother for several years was in charge of the Sabbath school department. For an even longer period, Mabel Vreeland was a district leader. Although Miss Vreeland loved young people, we ran when we saw her approaching, not because we disliked her, but because her handshake was so dynamic we feared for our elbows and shoulders.

—“On Mislaying the Past” (Spectrum, Vol. 15, No. 4)

I [recall] an English major who . . . was a plodder, not brilliant at all, never impressive, doing only barely adequate work. We debated every semester whether or not we should advise the student to change majors or at least not to plan to teach English. . . .

The student finished college . . . and did indeed become a teacher. Not long ago I sat in that person’s classroom,

warmed by the obvious affection between students and teacher. The teacher was now alive with a quickness and confidence that stimulated the students’ thinking. One community of memory had nurtured a person who was fostering another that would, in turn, shape the memories of the future. . . .

—*Scales Lecture, Pacific Union College, 1980*

I would hope . . . that your lives will be filled with the excitement of curiosity, the hunger and thirst for knowledge, the keen delight in the quest, that you will be driven from question to question as you learn and find answers, that the mysterious and the inexplicable will always be there, that you will be freed from the familiar and the trite, that you will be neither fool nor pedant, but will so combine imagination and knowledge that you will have the power to change your personal worlds and the worlds around you.

—*Commencement Address, Canadian Union College, 1992*

The grand apocalypse moves from the factual world of geographically located cities to a geography filled with unreal beasts, symbolic women, and polarized cities, where all humanity is wound on two spools of good and evil.

In the perfect city is gathered the perfect society. As evil deepens in the earthly society portrayed in the Apocalypse, the contrast with goodness is heightened. Gradually the society governed by the beast becomes unnatural, ghastly, filled with groans and the sound of weeping. Everything is lurid. And like the nightmare world it has become, the natural world turns grotesque: insects fill the air, water is blood, the heavens speak of doom, leaders of the society think only of warfare. Horror grows until God’s people are called to come out of the dreadful night and the violence of Babylon. Then the contrasting society is pictured. Groaning and weeping are replaced by song; messages of doom followed by shouts of praise; suffering and violence end and the splendid city is filled with order and love. . . . The Christian’s chief responsibility is to become a visionary and a revolutionary.

—“The Bible As Visionary Power” (Spectrum, Vol. 13, No. 2)

by what I remember of their comments, most of my friends assumed either that I enjoyed being considered a part of the elite, or that I had been seduced away from the real world by the impractical beauty of literature. Both were in part true, of course, but both missed the main point. My chemistry classes were rigorous enough for any elite, and I found physical chemistry at least as beautiful as Shakespeare's mighty line. The real reason for my new major was that I had changed my entire purpose for being in college. Rather than training for a job, I was addicted to the rush of having my worlds instantly remade. That meant hanging around Otilie Stafford; to do that as much as possible, I became an English major.

Again, Stafford showed the genius of a great teacher. She never argued me into a reluctant belief that I needed to switch majors. She introduced me to Roy Branson, a recent AUC English graduate, and over a couple of lunches all my fears of "what will I do for a job" were handled by someone else. Instead, Stafford treated me as part of the departmental "family" long before I had even decided to be an English minor. She would discuss cybernetics with me, while Dr. Smith, my physics professor, was teaching me about Norbert Wiener. She hired me to work for the English department, where I could listen to academic gossip. She let me play softball with her sons on the lawn behind the English department when I wasn't being productive. She invited me to her home for lasagna. In short, she saw to it that my education broadened beyond English and included the personal.

The experiences Stafford created helped me throughout my entire four years at AUC. Once Stafford showed me what a class could do, I started treating other classes as capable of the same. I doubt a week went by without some lecture or assignment pulling the intellectual rug out from under me, although

no one did it as often or as well as Stafford. Even more importantly, no one else so quickly showed me that new worlds were ready to replace the old. She transformed my life.

I have now spent most of that life as a professional educator in the Seventh-day Adventist college system. Much more than non-educators could possibly imagine, that means countless hours in committee meetings with colleagues, discussing—often heatedly arguing—not only how best to reach our goals but even what our educational goals properly are. The more committees I sit through, the more I realize how much our teaching attempts to do for others what has been done for us. I am convinced that both our practical teaching and our educational goals are shaped little by theories of education. Rather, what we strive to do—what we believe education ought to be—reflects our love and respect for some one teacher.

I walk into literature classes prepared to confuse my students, but also to help them work their way through their confusion; I argue in committees that interpreting is more important than memorizing; I believe we are not done teaching until our students know us personally. My colleagues, themselves shaped by their own teachers, want their students to be professional, or to be committed to the search for Truth, or to be skilled researchers. They know I am right, and I know they are right, and we vote to modify a general studies requirement and move on. And then, when crises force me to rethink whether or not we need Seventh-day Adventist colleges, or *Spectrum* asks me to write an essay, my reflections come back to the same place. *Real* education is that heady experience of having a daring teacher catapult you to the side of Keats' Cortez on an intellectual "peak in Darien," about to walk into a New World.