

When you read a piece of literature, you interact with it in a way that allows you to create meaning. Your own experiences and perspective inform the meaning that you find through reading the text. It is not necessary to know about the author’s life for you to find a story or poem meaningful. However, inquiring about an author’s life experiences and perspective can add another dimension to your reading.

Read the following selection, written by William Stafford. As you read, pay particular attention to connections you can make between Stafford’s experiences with nature and the poem, “Traveling Through the Dark.” Record your thoughts in your **Response Notes**.

Views on the Writer’s Vocation

from *Writing the Australian Crawl* by William Stafford

Our family is from Kansas, the middle of it, where I was born. We moved from one little town to another during my school years, following my father’s jobs, which varied, but always provided income for our needs and books. We liked the towns and countryside, where we fished, hunted, and camped along the mild, wandering streams. Our lives were quiet and the land was very steady. Our teachers were good. Not till I finished my BA degree at the University of Kansas and went on to graduate school in another state did I ever see an adult drunk or enraged or seriously menacing. Higher education and the coming of World War II supplied a new aspect of experience.

As a pacifist I was in camps for conscientious objectors from 1940 till 1944. We fought forest fires, built trails and roads, terraced eroding land, etc. . . .

Response Notes

Are conscientious objectors usually in tune with nature?

* Compare your **Response Notes** with a partner’s. Describe the strongest connection you made between the writer, this part of his biography, and the poem, “Traveling Through the Dark.”

✱ Imagine you have the opportunity to ask William Stafford anything you want about his poem, “Traveling Through the Dark.” What are you curious about? What would you like to know about his experiences or perspective that might inform your reading of the poem? Write your questions here.

Sometimes we hear directly from authors commenting on their work, whether in talks, interviews, or essays. In this case, you are going to read an excerpt from a personal letter Stafford wrote to a friend and fellow poet, Ted Kooser. In this letter Stafford describes how he imagines the driver of the car in “Traveling Through the Dark.” As you read, write **Response Notes** about how this letter informs, or changes, the way you read the poem.


Letter to Ted Kooser by William Stafford

About my poem “Traveling Through the Dark,” my own feeling (though I’m ready for anyone to fish out their own any time) is that the speaker is alone in the car, and that when he says “our group” he is saying two things, the immediate one being just whatever is suddenly preciously there—deer, fawn, car, engine, exhaust—whatever can hurriedly be clustered together by someone feeling abruptly scarily alone. The other part of a meaning, or shade of a meaning I feel is that the speaker feels a kind of representative, suddenly, for all those others who must depend on isolated individuals carrying out their obligations even when alone—so that our group hears the wilderness listen any time we become aware of how alone we sentient beings are in a world with cliffs, rocks, death around. . . . ✱

Adios—
Bill Stafford

What is a person's responsibility?

✱ Discuss your **Response Notes** with a partner. Add any new thoughts.



✿ Stafford describes the speaker who feels like “a kind of representative” and indicates that the decision to push the deer over the edge may be for the protection of others. Think about a time when you were a “kind of representative” for other people and you had to make a decision that would affect others, even if they were not there. Fill in the graphic below with your reflections about the incident.

Describe the situation and whom you “represented.”

What were your choices?

What did you decide to do and why?

✿ Use your graphic to write about the incident. Share your draft with a partner.

Title _____

How does knowing about Stafford and relating his reflections to your own help you to understand and connect with his poem?