

# Stanley Hauerwas: A Short Biography<sup>1</sup>

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Joanna Hauerwas, like Hannah (1 Sam. 2), prayed for a son who would dedicate his life in service to God.<sup>2</sup> Her son was told of his mother's prayer at age six, which resulted in the boy dedicating his life to Christian ministry and becoming "saved" in the Pleasant Mound Methodist Church – about three miles east of Dallas and one of the first churches in Dallas county.<sup>3</sup> The son was Stanley Hauerwas. The week before Stanley was born on July 24, 1940, his parents saw the 1939 movie *Stanley and Livingstone*, about the Scottish missionary presumed to be lost in Africa and the intrepid Welsh reporter Henry M. Stanley sent to find him. The reporter's story inspired them to give his name to their only son.<sup>4</sup>

## THE TEXAN BRICKLAYER

Like most working-class Texans, young Stanley's acquaintance with hard work came early. By age four or five he was hoeing the family garden; by age six he was delivering beans in his wagon for sale;<sup>5</sup> by age seven, apprenticing with his bricklayer father, Coffee Hauerwas.<sup>6</sup> Hauerwas reflects on this lesson learned from his parents as follows:

1 Article is excerpted from *25 Texas Heroes*, by the same author, published December, 2020.

2 Hauerwas, Stanley, *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Eerdmans, first edition, April 16, 2010, ISBN 978-0802864871, 308 pages), page 3.

3 Nall, Matthew Hayes, "Pleasant Mound, TX," *Handbook of Texas Online* (last edited June 15, 2010) <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/hvp62>> accessed November 20, 2018. The article places the town at "Loop 12 and State Highway 352" and notes that when it was annexed by Dallas in 1950, it had a population of only 800.

4 Hauerwas, *Hannah's Child*, 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 18-19.

6 *Ibid.*, 20.



The word used for lives that just get on with it is "work." I cannot remember any time in my life that I did not have work to do. I never felt oppressed, even as a child, by the fact that I was expected to work, because I assumed, given the example set by my parents, that work was what everyone did.<sup>7</sup>

Even today Stanley gets up at five in the morning and works until six in the evening.<sup>8</sup> He learned another habit from his parents, and possibly from the Texas heritage that he is very proud to display: The habit of straight talking, even with unabashed swearing:

I assumed that my parents would never want me to be anything other than straightforward. Bullshit was not allowed. Plain speech and plain thinking was the hallmark of their life, and I took it to be the

7 *Ibid.*, 18.

8 *Ibid.*, 45.

hallmark of my life.<sup>9</sup>

The most colorful illumination of the centrality to Hauerwas of the concept of “narrative,” or “story,” appears in his essay “A Tale of Two Stories: On Being a Christian and a Texan.” His account is especially moving in its references to the Southern writer William Humphrey. Early on Hauerwas proclaims:

Texas, like the South, generally continues to represent a unique cultural experience which places its stamp on you forever. [...] To say that one is “from Texas” is never meant just to indicate where one happened to be born, but represents for many of us a story that has, for good or ill, determined who we are.<sup>10</sup>

Being a Texan does not provide an automatic ethic or philosophy, but it does provide something that stamps our identity: A history – a “fate,” if you like. Does that history contain injustices? Of course it does: All history is rooted in the sin and suffering of those who live it, who are born of it. But although fixed forever and undeniable, it provides the sure starting point for all steps to recovery and openness to divine grace: Acceptance. Hauerwas quotes Reinhold Niebuhr:

No society ever achieved peace without incorporating injustice into its harmony.<sup>11</sup>

The notions of locality, place, and communal life form the heart of “narrative,” meaning the local traditions represented as a story that provides context not only for personal identity but for the local community’s sanctioned moral values. “Narrative” thus defined is a concept

9 Ibid., 44.

10 Hauerwas, Stanley, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World, and Living in Between* (Labyrinth Press paperback, January 1, 1988, ISBN 978-0939464487, 266 pages), page 27.

11 Ibid., 28.

central to his interpretation of “virtue ethics.”<sup>12</sup> Naturally this exposes Hauerwas to the charge of sectarianism and relativism, since the term allows every sect and community to establish very unlike moral standards – something quite different from one morally absolute “rock of ages.” To the charge of relativism, at least, Hauerwas concedes.<sup>13</sup> Contradictory or not, the term allows him to deny not only any church with a universal narrative, but also any church with a national narrative. His use of the term allows him to boast that he has “made a career criticizing the accommodated character of the church to the American project.”<sup>14</sup>

## A BOOKISH JOURNEY

But for his mother’s prayer, Stanley Hauerwas might have lived and died a bricklayer. He had reading disabilities<sup>15</sup> in elementary school, and even today admits:

I cannot spell and [...] I have a penchant for getting word order wrong.<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, he realized early on that books were the way to the fulfillment of his mother’s prayer. Stanley earned a New Testament reading pin<sup>17</sup> from Linz Jewelers,<sup>18</sup> which the

12 MacIntyre, Alasdair, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, first American edition, 1981, ISBN 978-0268005948, 252 pages), page 221.

13 Hauerwas, Stanley, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (University of Notre Dame Press, fourth edition, 1981, ISBN 978-0268007331, 298 pages), 101.

14 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, ix.

15 Ibid., 19.

16 Ibid., 190.

17 Ibid., 6.

18 Joseph Linz came to Texas in 1877, to sell diamonds not exactly door-to-door but ranch-to-ranch; his Dallas store opened in 1891. See Hollandsworth, Skip, “The Carat and the Schtick,” *D Magazine* (published December, 1986) <<https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/1986/december/the-carat-and-the-schtick/>> accessed November 21, 2018.

jeweler offered to students in association with the public school system. He found in the Methodist church’s library *A Faith for Tough Times*, a book of sermons by Harry Emerson Fosdick.<sup>19</sup> At Southwestern University in Georgetown, just north of Austin, he found a true friend and intellectual peer, the celibate John Score, who introduced him to Plato, Nietzsche, and other philosophers.<sup>20</sup> Stanley also discovered the Cokesbury bookstore in downtown Dallas.<sup>21</sup> He joined the “notorious Faith and Life Community in Austin”<sup>22</sup> – notorious for its blend of psychotherapy and radical theology, and for its appeal to Tom Hayden.<sup>23</sup> During all his time at Texas schools, he would return home in summer to lay brick with his father.

In 1962, at age 22, Hauerwas went to the divinity school at Yale.<sup>24</sup> And although he just missed a legendary generation of theologians associated with Yale – H. Richard Niebuhr, Roland Bainton, Robert Calhoun, George Lindbeck, and Hans Frei, from whom he took just one course – he stated that “I am not sure if I became a Christian at Yale, but I certainly began to be a theologian because of what I learned there.”<sup>25</sup> What he did learn from one Yale theologian is telling:

[I]f anyone cares enough to try to understand the way I do theology they

19 Ibid., 5.

20 Ibid., 10.

21 Founded originally as the United Methodist Publishing House in 1789, it carried secular titles as well. The store that opened in downtown Dallas in the 1920s has long been closed, although a storefront still exists at 5905 Bishop Boulevard in north Dallas.

22 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 13.

23 Tom Hayden was one of the best known of the student radicals of the 1960s. He was one of the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society, author of the Port Huron Statement, and one of the defendants in the Chicago Seven trial in 1969.

24 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 47.

25 Ibid., 49.

will discover that I am a pale imitation of [Julian N.] Hartt.<sup>26</sup>

Hartt’s best-known work begins as follows:

As a form of criticism of culture the Social Gospel was lively, productive, and pertinacious. Reactions to it were remarkably diverse; and even its memory is execrated by people whose unyielding devotion to the King James Version is an integral part of a version of Christianity dedicated to the sanctity of private property, free enterprise, white supremacy, the segregation of the races, the gold standard, and the open shop.<sup>27</sup>

The intellectual formation at Yale nevertheless allowed time for Hauerwas to learn something of the problems of the working man. While working summers at G&O Manufacturing at New Haven, he became convinced of the need for labor unions;<sup>28</sup> he was “drawn into New Haven democratic politics,” especially under the influence of Robert A. Dahl’s study of power structures in that city in his 1961 book *Who Governs*;<sup>29</sup> and he was a defender of Black Power.<sup>30</sup> Looking back nostalgically on those days, Hauerwas says:

Of course, it would be a mistake to romanticize [the Sixties]. The liberations heralded destroyed many. But for me the sheer energy, the willingness of many to put their lives on the line, and the challenge to imagine a different world remain gifts.<sup>31</sup>

26 Ibid., 52.

27 Hartt, Julian N., *A Christian Critique of American Culture: An Essay in Practical Theology* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, April 1, 2006, paperback reprint of 1967 original, ISBN 978-1597522335, 464 pages), page 3.

28 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 56.

29 Ibid., 57.

30 Ibid., 79.

31 Ibid., 84.

## FORMATION IN THE NORTHEAST

Stanley has never felt the need to modify his statement that “[s]ometime between 1960 and 1980, an old, inadequately conceived world ended, and a fresh, new world began.”<sup>32</sup> The more bookish than activist Hauerwas protests that he is neither a liberal nor a feminist, yet he somehow manages to say that he prefers “the more radical feminists like Shulamith Firestone.”<sup>33</sup>

In 1970, Hauerwas went to teach at Catholic Notre Dame, although it was no longer dominated by the Holy Cross order: Jesuits, Protestants, and laity by that time were teaching there.<sup>34</sup> The interdenominational medley suited him. Then, as now, he is untroubled by any need to identify himself with a particular faith – for which mutability he has been accused of “promiscuous pew-hopping.”<sup>35</sup> As he said, “At the time, I did not think I was either Protestant or Catholic,”<sup>36</sup> and “I have never had a home in a particular ecclesial tradition.”<sup>37</sup> He admits that his “position” – which he protests is not a “position” at all, but theology proper<sup>38, 39</sup> – is “a strange brew of Catholic and Anabaptist resources.”<sup>40</sup> Despite being received into Broadway United Methodist Church in a poor part of South Bend, Indiana during Easter,

1980,<sup>41</sup> and moving to the Methodist Duke University later in the decade, he nonetheless has called himself an Episcopalian,<sup>42</sup> a “high church Mennonite,”<sup>43</sup> a “Mennonite camp follower,”<sup>44</sup> and a “neo-Anabaptist.”<sup>45</sup>

In spite of his equivocation of faith, sometime during his Notre Dame years he hardened unequivocal views in politics, stating that “I combine what I hope is a profound commitment to fundamental Christian convictions with a socially radical ethic”, and that “worship of Jesus is itself a politics [...and... b]asic to such politics is the refusal of [...] violence.”<sup>46</sup> He bluntly affirms his embrace of pacifism, names its inspiration for him, and seals it off from any theoretical questioning by making it an article of faith:

I am not a pacifist because of a theory. I am a pacifist because John Howard Yoder convinced me that nonviolence and Christianity are inseparable.<sup>47</sup>

Hauerwas considers his own 1991 pacifist manifesto for Christianity, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, to be the most comprehensive of all his work.<sup>48</sup> Beyond this fixed star of pacifism, however, Christianity can offer few answers:

When Christianity is assumed to be an ‘answer’ that makes the world intelligible, it reflects an accommodated church

32 Hauerwas, Stanley; Willimon, William H.; *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Abingdon Press, expanded 25th anniversary edition, April 15, 2014, ISBN 978-1426781902, 198 pages), page 15.

33 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 90.

34 *Ibid.*, 97.

35 Hauerwas, Stanley, *The Hauerwas Reader* (Duke University Press, first edition, paperback, July 23, 2001, ISBN 978-0822326915, 729 pages), page 22.

36 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 94.

37 *Ibid.*, 254.

38 *Ibid.*, 134.

39 *Ibid.*, 63.

40 *Ibid.*, 135.

41 *Ibid.*, 141.

42 Hauerwas, Stanley, “Why Community Is Dangerous,” *Plough Quarterly Magazine* (No. 9, published Summer, 2016) <<https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/why-community-is-dangerous>> accessed October 30, 2018.

43 Hauerwas, *A Community of Character*, page 6.

44 Hauerwas, Stanley, *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements with the Secular* (Duke University Press, May 24, 1995, ISBN 978-0822317166, 248 pages), page 22.

45 Hauerwas; Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 178.

46 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 135.

47 *Ibid.*, 60.

48 *Ibid.*, 137.



committed to assuring Christians that the way things are is the way things have to be. Such ‘answers’ cannot help but turn Christianity into an explanation. For me, learning to be a Christian has meant learning to live without answers. Indeed, to learn to live in this way is what makes being a Christian so wonderful. Faith is but a name for learning how to go on without knowing the answers.<sup>49</sup>

*The Peaceable Kingdom*, the key book in the Hauerwas corpus, was made possible by his momentous encounter with Alasdair MacIntyre’s groundbreaking book, *After Virtue*, published in 1981.<sup>50</sup> Yet the pacifism in *The Peaceable Kingdom* was not from MacIntyre, but from the second great philosophical influence on his thinking, the aforementioned John Yoder, whose most important book was his 1972 *The Politics of Jesus*.

It was from John Yoder that Hauerwas drew another line of thought: The critique of – as Yoder called it – America’s “Constantinianism.” This latter concept is the belief that Christians are an exceptional people whose beliefs anoint them with the ability, indeed the duty, to guide the nation-state, without necessarily merging the functions of church and state. Hauerwas would deny Christians the use of the political process to enact Christian legislation or pursue Christian social goals.<sup>51</sup> Naturally this exposes him to the criticism that he advocates a political quietism that withdraws Christians from political life entirely. Hauerwas responds not with a clarification, but with a pivot to the term “narrative,” a prolific theme inspired by his reading of Hans W. Frei, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and others. As mentioned, it is understood as a story rooted in locality and place:

Yoder understood well, therefore, that you do not free yourself of Constantinianism by becoming anti-Constantinian. For him the alternative to Constantinianism was not anti-Constantinianism, but locality and place. According to Yoder, locality and place are the forms of communal life necessary to express the particularity of Jesus through the visibility of the church. Only at the local level is the church able to engage in the discernment necessary to be prophetic.<sup>52</sup>

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attack, Stanley was dismissed from the board of the ecumenical, conservative magazine *First Things* – a prominent journal with 27,000 subscribers, founded by theologian Richard John Neuhaus – for his pacifist views.<sup>53</sup> In response to anti-terrorist measures 15 years later, Hauerwas stated: “If the Trump administration should follow its brinkmanship logic and begin forcibly to register Muslims, Christians might identify as Muslims” to subvert such registrations.<sup>54</sup> How then should a pacifist respond to terrorist attacks, especially on Christians? A few months after the European Union declared the ISIS attacks on Christians in northern Iraq to be genocide, Hauerwas recommended the certain martyrdom of sending “missionaries to be present in Iraq” during those attacks because “love to our persecuted brothers and sisters must mean facing the same dangers that they are undergoing.”<sup>55</sup>

52 Hauerwas, Stanley, “The place of the church and the agony of Anglicanism,” *ABC Religion & Ethics* (published September 27, 2012) <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-place-of-the-church-and-the-agony-of-anglicanism/10100274>> accessed October 23, 2018.

53 *Ibid.*, 268.

54 Hauerwas, Stanley; Tran, Jonathan; “A Sanctuary Politics: Being the Church in the Time of Trump,” *Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Religion and Politics* (published March 30, 2017) <<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/a-sanctuary-politics-being-the-church-in-the-time-of-trump/10095918>> accessed November 2, 2018.

55 Hauerwas, “Why Community Is Dangerous.”

49 *Ibid.*, 207.

50 *Ibid.*, 160-161.

51 Hauerwas; Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 43.

Closely related to the political criticism of the “American project” is his contempt for its economic system, of which he says:

[E]conomic liberalism is antithetical to the formation of communities capable of caring for one another in the name of the common good.<sup>56</sup>

## ACHIEVEMENTS

Hauerwas received one of theology’s highest recognitions by being asked to give the Gifford Lectures for 2001. These lectures provided the material for his book *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology*.<sup>57</sup> In that same year *Time* magazine named him “America’s Best Theologian.” The year before, his book *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* was listed among the 100 books that had a significant effect on Christians this century, according to the magazine *Christianity Today*.<sup>58</sup> His tremendously popular *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (co-written with William Willimon), a restatement of his themes from the point of view of a sharp distinction between the church and the world, still enjoys multiple reprintings, even after some 30 years.

Even now at age 83, Stanley remains very active, and he remains a prolific writer. In 2022, he received Lifetime Achievement Award from The Society of Christian Ethics.<sup>59</sup> In that same

year he published *Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth*.<sup>60</sup> He lectures and interviews frequently, always in that familiar Texas drawl that remains untouched by his great learning.<sup>61</sup>

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56 Hauerwas, *Hannah’s Child*, 269.

57 *Ibid.*, 262.

58 “Books of the Century,” *Christianity Today* (published April 24, 2000) <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/april24/5.92.html>> accessed November 23, 2018.

59 “Stanley Hauerwas, author of *Fully Alive*, Receives 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award from The Society of Christian Ethics,” *University of Virginia Press* (last updated December 4, 2022) <<https://www.upress.virginia.edu/news/stanley-hauerwas-author-of-fully-alive-receives-2022-lifetime-achievement-award-from-the-society-of-christian-ethics/>> accessed April 5, 2023.

60 East, Brad, “The Ruins of Christendom,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (published July 10, 2022) <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-ruins-of-christendom/>> accessed April 5, 2023.

61 Plough, “Stanley Hauerwas: What is the church’s mission?” (YouTube, length 2:06, last updated March 16, 2023) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=opKKCbvUFiE>> accessed April 5, 2023.