

A Haiku Way of Life

by Tom Clausen

A beginning place for me is to go back to the haiku I read and the various books and essays about haiku which made indelible impressions and so captivated me at that time. To this day, the gift and sense of those earliest readings remain very strong.

The first haiku I encountered were in Cor van den Heuvel's HAIKU ANTHOLOGY, R.H. Blyth's multi-volume series and numerous individual books by authors I discovered through Cor's Anthology.

Ten (now twenty-some) years ago, when I first dipped my toe into the haiku pond rather tentatively, I was nervous with excitement and amazed at how kindred and welcoming my first contacts were. The feeling that I got from haiku was true gladness to have discovered a manner of expression that completely clicks for me – it simply felt right, perfectly concise, precise and not telling me how or what to feel as much as simply giving me the wholly decent chance to get there on my own. The brevity and discipline of the haiku form was the obvious antidote to combat my tendency toward wordiness, overstatement and excess. It was entirely refreshing to me that haiku insisted on the writer utilizing the fewest words possible – to convey the poetic in the ordinary anywhere, anytime.

I can remember early on being so happy with haiku that internally I vowed to read and write haiku for the rest of my life. Such was the appeal and strength of feeling I had then and still have to this day.

Admittedly, in these past ten years there have been moments of doubt, dry spells, lulls and wonders – if I had maybe lost my way and lost interest in haiku. Yet repeatedly, I've discovered that reading haiku and finding good poems can and will spark my interest and get me going again. A great haiku is its own best endorsement. To read a great haiku is bound to reinvigorate anyone who has at any time felt the magnetic charm of haiku. The true satisfaction I get from each great haiku is but one of the reasons I avidly remain engaged and feel assured now as I did ten years ago, that I'll keep reading and writing for a long time to come if not for the rest of my life.

Haiku puzzle me. There are many haiku I read that don't move me and do disappoint. Yet I find most haiku at least pleasant and many I find wonderfully intriguing, even inspiring. The very best haiku often appear seamlessly "easy" to have written. This, of course, is rarely so, which makes the illusion of ease beguiling. Speaking for myself

here, I feel no closer to any consistent ability to write a good haiku now than I did when I began ten years ago. This phenomena is both compelling to keep at it, and of course, a bit to a lot frustrating. It does guarantee a perpetual state of beginningness that is somewhat unique and humbling. It is quite appealing that haiku are highly portable and can be worked on as an exercise in the mind wherever you are until it becomes itself, just right.

John Stevenson once wrote in a letter to me that he viewed his joining the haiku community on the order of moving to a new small town where the community was both welcoming and eclectically interesting. I knew what he meant – it spoke well for my own sense of connection and camaraderie that began almost immediately after I read a news article in an Ithaca paper profiling Ruth Yarrow. Shortly after reading this awakening article, I sought out anything "haiku" I could find – my first source was Cor's Haiku Anthology through which I then subscribed to Modern Haiku, Frogpond, Wind Chimes and Brussel Sprouts, to name a few.

The breadth and brilliance I discovered in the many voices I read at that time instantly aroused in me a sense of deep inner knowing and inspiration that is the connection of a well-conceived haiku. I'll never forget the initial immersion and beautiful opening I felt reading poems like these from Cor's Anthology:

time after time
caterpillar climbs this broken stem
then probes beyond

– James Hackett

the swan's head
turns away from sunset
to his dark side

– Anita Virgil

hot night
turning the pillow
to the cool side

– Cor van den Heuvel

And the following two by John Wills that are haunting in their dreamlike poignancy:

the river
leans upon the snag
a moment

I am so drawn to that snag, the force of that river and that perfectly rendered moment where the snag no longer can hold forth and surrenders. It is staggering that eight words can convey something so evocative and dynamic.

boulders
just beneath the boat
it's dawn

Here we are given the earth, the waters and the heavens, with us in the boat to help us recognize just where we are in this life – very much in between all these eternal forces.

These poems and many others I'd love to share, compel me to constantly search for the next holy or purely precious haiku. I thoroughly enjoy the arrival of each new haiku magazine and the perusal that follows. I keep notebooks of my personal favorites and enjoy the internal sensation that goes into each selection.

With my own writing, I have learned repeatedly not to trust myself and to graciously place my trust in the editors, haiku community, friends and my wife to discern what is truly worthy of being submitted or published. Here is my sense of what goes into haiku creation – from a letter written to Jim Kacian:

Over the years I've valued very much the little notes of feedback from editors – we each find our way more or less collectively by virtue of the community where the group is constantly giving guidance to the individual. I often feel that any little success I've had is less about me and more about the range of editors and haiku friends, and the guidance I've received simply by reading widely what's out there, then forgetting it, but letting the spirit of it seep into and permeate my being ...

I am tremendously grateful for the work of editors who in tireless devotion sift and cull from the masses of submission those that they deem worthy. The number of off-base,

uninspired, and maybe even embarrassing attempts at haiku I've created over this past decade is highly relevant to why I must keep at it. With hope that an improved sense of craft and consistency will develop!

Somewhere I read that Basho wrote about 2000 haiku in his life of which 100 or so are considered excellent, and of which he believed there were maybe ten that truly hit the mark. This is a tough ratio but perhaps holds a realistic perspective for us all. Excellent haiku craft requires tireless resolve to keep at it despite the misses and bunches of weaker attempts, with hope that out of the effort will surely come some keepers, and, if we are lucky, serendipity may provide an opportunity to create a haiku that will stand the test of time.

There is no way to predict what will become worthy, but the whole process of jotting notes, refining, submitting and seeing what gets selected is a near endless divination of what is and is not haiku. This could playfully be called the Haiku Wars and they are no doubt as endless as the poets putting their heart into the form. It is worth keeping at it just to see what and who next will break the surface of our haiku pond, either jumping in, feeding or getting out.

A major reason I keep reading haiku is that I hope to find good ones or another haiku that simply "wows" me and fills me with a grateful sense of being alive, so that I am one with that haiku moment (even if just a flash!).

At work nearly ten years ago, I posted this poem by Ryokan:

the thief left it behind
the moon
at the window

No matter when or how many times I read and feel this poem's koan quality, I am glad for it, for myself, for all life, for this world. Perfectly, in three lines is the solace of truth and mystery conceived.

A real blessing of haiku is its portable, direct simplicity that allows a favorite poem to be kept in mind. As I prepared what to say today, I opened a fortune cookie that seems right to share here today, and perhaps holds the key to what appeals above all else in each of us about haiku:

Keep it simple. The more you say the less people remember.

In this spirit, a haiku by Ruth Yarrow that I've meditated on over and over:

after the garden party the garden

This great one liner says practically all I could want to say about human existence. We each are part of a garden party, yes, but the garden after the party is the place we alone seek out to find ourselves and our deepest nature.

Once on a hospital form, under the category of religious affiliation, I checked "other" and wrote "haiku." Haiku to me is a way of life, a choice of focus and a form of spiritual appreciation requiring us – reminding us to see beyond self or as Basho said, Haiku is simply what is happening in this place at this moment.

HAIKU HAPPENS, as a bumper sticker proclaims, will happen to us only if we remain open and ready to engage in the range of myriad nuances and subtle cues from nature that are voices simultaneously taking us inward and outward, connecting us with the nature we have come from and will return to.

In R.H. Blyth's THE HISTORY OF HAIKU, he lists thirteen characteristics of the state of mind which the creation and appreciation of haiku demand. They are:

1. Selflessness
2. Loneliness
3. Grateful acceptance
4. Wordlessness
5. Non-intellectuality
6. Contradictoriness
7. Humor
8. Freedom
9. Non-morality
10. Simplicity
11. Materiality
12. Love
13. Courage

These all appeal to me as affirmations and good qualities to navigate our life stream with. The practice of reading and writing certainly serves to hone these qualities. To extend the spirit of R.H. Blyth's list, I've come up with my own additional thirteen characteristics:

1. Faith
2. Sharing

3. Discipline
4. Concision
5. Solitude
6. Humility
7. Awareness
8. Ritual
9. Creativity
10. Centering
11. Truthfulness
12. Curiosity
13. Patience

I'd like to discuss briefly each of these 13 characteristics and explain what about each of them might serve to sustain a haiku interest.

FAITH

Haiku, to me, is a faith in all of nature. The changes in nature are infinite and yet, as with all changes, there is a return to where things begin. The miracle of cycles large and small provides that each nuance of nature is unique and at once universal. These billions of nuances provide sensations that are faithful, and it is these matters that comprise the subject and feelings that are haiku. In my nearly 50 years, I've come to be entirely enchanted by the flow of seasonal changes, shift by shift, subtle and dramatic, that without fail, are induced like birth itself, by a magical timing that makes every moment the conclusion of a ripening – our weather, our day and night gives each creature a chance to sleep and be reborn to greet a new day as it truly is . . . a new chance.

The past and the future are not real in the sense that only the present tense, always now, is really happening. Past and future are mere abstractions, inaccurate memories and predictions. Haiku as faith is the poetry of the here and now, and focuses us on the reality that this is all we have – ever.

SHARING

A haiku for me is often, if not always, conceived and worked on in solitude, yet the essential path that sanctifies or completes the creation is when that poetic moment reaches someone else and creates within them a sensation that in some way approaches that which gave rise to the haiku. Without a reader, without sharing, a haiku is like a seed adrift on a breeze . . . waiting to be received.

By nature, I am more of a loner and a seeker of solitude than a social being. However, I

learned long ago I am uncomfortable being always alone. Haiku then, for me, provides the perfect medium for recording what transpires for me in solitude, sharing these findings and learning which, is any, of these resonate with others.

DISCIPLINE

To write haiku, one must remain aware, ready, open, and sensitive. For myself, I can sense when my life manner is eroding and getting out of balance. When this happens, it is usually because my pace has become too fast, my priorities mixed up, and motives far removed from natural rhythms. Living in a way where one is a true witness to nature, as one must be to write haiku, is a discipline which encourages and even demands a constant contact with a deeper understanding.

CONCISION

This may be as critical as any quality as to why I personally must continue to read and write haiku. I have a lifelong tendency to overwrite, to say too much and generally revel in excess. What better antidote to this than haiku?

SOLITUDE

In solitude we find the beauty of seeing things on their own terms. Nature naturally, quietly speaks for herself. No human values, pronouncements or expectations need intervene. Being alone in nature allows us to be as a ghost, without distraction, open, ready and able to experience purely.

HUMILITY

The haiku perspective, by recognizing poetry in the affairs of things, gives to all creation an equal footing. Aside from this humility, which is an essential part in the act of writing haiku, I've found to be at times extremely humbling. To fiddle and fumble with a few little words, trying them this way, then that, without being able to get them just right, shows how difficult it is to write a good haiku, however simple the result may seem.

AWARENESS

This is the readiness to fully read then record the poetic messages that constantly surround us.

RITUAL

Haiku encourages a heightened awareness of the pageant that is the flow of the seasons.

By embracing seasonal changes, we create an honoring ritual acknowledging the inevitability of our involvement in the constant state of passage.

CREATIVITY

To read and write haiku, one must have a desire to fulfill the inner calling to create, and to express in words that which gives us the "ah" or "aha" quality in life.

Anita Virgil, in her essay "When Is A Haiku?" (Red Moon 1997 Anthology), wrote It happens to us all. It makes one say or think or feel – ah! as we suddenly see the ordinary in a new light. It is a moment of intuition, an insight into the vital inevitability of things as R.H. Blyth calls it. It can be a glimpse of the beauty or cosmic humor of life, of pathos, of poignancy or paradox. It can be intensified awareness of natural phenomena which reflect human emotion. One does not wish to lose this moment. One wants to share it with someone or record it for one's own enjoyment. Whatever the impetus, these moments serve to point up our aliveness and connection with the world, our brief time upon the earth. They point to our very humanity.

Creativity is moving with one's life and recognizing it to be worth recording and recreating in part of in whole.

CENTERING

Jim Kacian, in his book, *Six Directions*, states, "Through the cumulative effects of small moments, we expand our sense of the universe to its full size, that the only way out of a circle is through its center." He goes on to state, If we did not believe the former, we would not believe in haiku as a way and a means. When we pass through the center, subject and object, time and space disappear and we move outside of the plane where we began, infinity, eternally changed.

Haiku is effectively a centering. Whether reading or writing haiku, the bottom line is one must enter the moment wholeheartedly, becoming in essence one with the moment – centered in it.

No one escapes unscathed the pains and burdens in life. We each develop ways of dealing with these inevitable aspects of life. For me, haiku and the centering that it inspires has provided a useful strategy for coping with more difficult times. At times, our existence creates a paradoxical tension where we feel a potential to be unified with everyone and everything, yet feel simultaneously, every alone and separate . . . to me, a haiku is a harmonizing of unity and separation.

TRUTHFULNESS

In the preface to *HAIKU*, Vol. I, R.H. Blyth states, Haiku does not aim at beauty. Like the music of Bach, it aims at significance, and some kind of beauty is found hovering near. The real nature of each thing, and more so of all things is a poetical one. Haiku shows us what we knew all the time, but did not know we knew; it shows us that we are poets insofar as we live at all.

Haiku are kernels of truth, unadulterated by opinion, emotion, through or desire. They stand bare boned and crystal clear to exact the truth of what is.

Basho, in the following taken from Eric Amann's highly recommended book on haiku, *Wordless Poem*, further suggests the utter truthfulness of haiku when he states, "Haiku are a way of seeing, hearing and feeling, a special state of consciousness in which we grasp intuitively the identity of people and nature and the continuity between ourselves and the larger cosmos".

Further, Basho said, Learn from the pine about the pine, from the bamboo about the bamboo. But always leave your old self behind, otherwise it will get between you and the object. Poetry springs out of its own when you and the object have become one, when you have looked deep into nature to see the hidden gleam. No matter how well worded your poems may be, if the feeling is not natural, if you and object have not become one, your poems are not true haiku, but merely imitations of reality.

CURIOSITY

Reading and writing haiku allows an exercise of one's naturally felt curiosity about life and the world. The subject of haiku is often obvious, but requires the relation to the subject to reflect the subtle and magical occurrences and interactions always in our midst.

PATIENCE

This quality may be more personal than universal, but I've found that haiku are not always there for me to write. Much as I'd love to write a haiku a day or even more, the reality is, I can't. My ability to produce is more on a sporadic level and between attempts, there are definite "dry spells" which require much patience to wait through.

Having gone through my 13 reasons, I'd like to give another incentive for my involvement with haiku: I love to get mail! Even as a child, my love of mail led me to write for travel brochures, to railroads, pencil companies – anyone who might respond

with something for me in the daily mail delivery. Since joining the haiku community, I have discovered a wonderful treasure-trove of correspondence – not only do I get mail, but it is of a highly enjoyable and special nature.

I'd like to conclude with a final thought that summarizes what sustains my haiku habit. Haiku for me is the perfect record of my simply existing here and now. Each haiku, in a way, can be thought of as a farewell poem – an acceptance of the transitory nature of everything. Reading entries from a lifetime's worth of my journals is at this point, only of minimal interest to me, and I'm sure not even that to anyone else. Yet the better of those haiku I've written, I am pleased to return to and would be happy to have someone else find and read someday.

the damsel fly leaving
the lily again and again
 only to return

The above paper was read by the author at the Haiku Society of America meeting, September 19, 1998. Grateful thanks to the poets for permission to reprint their haiku here.

Learn how to listen as things speak for themselves - Basho