

English-Language Death Awareness Haiku by Robert Epstein*

There is no task as urgent for us as to learn daily how to die. . .

- Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Life*

Death is everywhere, and yet nowhere to be found.

If our own death must ultimately remain forever a mystery and its meaning ungraspable, how then can one say anything at all? While silence is one possible response to the enigma of one's own death, it is not the only one. In the West, where the notion of self has, to a considerable extent, replaced the notion of God as the source of meaning and salvation in life, anxiety frequently permeates the Western mind whenever thoughts of death arise (if at all). As such, death anxiety underscores the limitations of a self thrown into a world that appears indifferent to one's needs, projects, accumulations, and aspirations.

Despite the progress of science and technology in the West, the hopes and expectations of the 18th century Enlightenment have not come to fruition. Reason has not succeeded in eliminating any of society's ills: poverty and oppression, greed and corruption, war and aggression, disease and old age. For a period, it seemed as though science would render religious belief childish and naive. Yet, while major faiths like Judaism and Christianity may not have created panaceas for Westerners seeking guidance with regards to death, religion of course is far from defunct.

Still, among Western haiku poets writing about their own mortality, religion does not appear to figure prominently. It could be that contemporary haiku poets writing in the West have intentionally left out any trace of religious belief because it is regarded as a private matter or secondary to the haiku spirit. Then, again, for many in the West, religion has yielded to spirituality - a broader, less formal notion - that puts more emphasis on a sacred connection with Nature and others (human and non-human alike) than does the Judeo-Christian tradition.

But does a love of Nature lead to answers about one's place in the universe? About what happens when the individual dies? Walt Whitman unequivocally believed so. Here is what he declares in *Song of Myself*:

I depart as air - I shake my white locks at the runaway sun;
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.

I bequeath myself to the dirt, to grow from the grass I love;
If you want me again, look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am, or what I mean;
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fibre your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first, keep encouraged;
Missing me one place, search another;
I stop somewhere, waiting for you.

Poet and novelist May Sarton intends to find her way back to the earth via the wind:

I would like to believe when I die that I have given myself away like a tree that sows seed every spring

and never counts the loss; because it is not loss, it is adding to future life. It is the tree's way of being. Strongly rooted perhaps, but spilling out its treasure on the wind.

If human beings are composed of the elements, as Whitman and Sartre suggest, then it would appear that, upon death, we return to Nature - to the earth, sea, and air. But is this knowledge in and of itself sufficient to allay anxiety or instil peace and serenity? For some, perhaps. But others will object that a love of Nature does not explain what happens to individual consciousness - the awareness that I exist as a separate and unique individual - when I die. Even if one does not subscribe to the idea of a soul which continues after death, the question remains: Is there life after the body dies?

More than a few poets contributing to the anthology I edited and published in 2011 have met this question with uncertainty. One poet went so far as to request that I manage the amount of philosophy that could seep into poems in order to allow enough space for this quality associated with mortality. Even those who have had close encounters with death, sometimes called near-death experiences, have not, in fact, died, so our uncertainty persists. In the final analysis, we do not and cannot know what happens to us after we die, and must live with this unknowing until the very end.

From a certain angle, haiku (and its related forms, senryu and tanka) are perfectly suited to communicate this quality of uncertainty. Insofar as haiku has been described as a form of wordless poetry, there is a tacit acknowledgment that whatever may be said or written about death is inherently tentative, provisional, and language is incapable of capturing that elusive something. Haiku, then, both point to and reflect the very uncertainty that characterises death and does so by surrounding the theme with a rim of silence. In embodying the uncertainty associated with mortality, something transcendent appears to surface, however faintly.

Our everyday consciousness is a trance; I dare say that we typically walk through life hypnotised most of the time. Those who regard haiku writing as a "way", a spiritual path, endeavour to awaken from the stupor of everyday living by beholding each moment as unique and whole unto itself. In effect, the haiku poet has unselfconsciously stumbled on to a means of dying psychologically, as it were, to the past. "Dying", remarks Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the physician who opened up the domain of death and dying in the United States, "is something we human beings do continuously, not just at the end of our physical lives on this earth." When we become willing to die to the small deaths throughout our lives, time stops and new dimensions present themselves which are apprehended as one's intuition peers through a portal into the Eternal Now.

This is why the most subtly attuned poets offer up insights and revelations that startle and move the reader. Often the subject matter or setting seems utterly ordinary and commonplace. In breath marks, Gary Hotham, quoting T S Eliot, provides us with a glimpse into the workings of the attuned poet:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

When one realises that life and death are not, in actuality, separate - that such separations exist only in the realm of thought - death is suddenly seen as part of a whole. The Austrian-born poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, couldn't have been more emphatic when he wrote in *Letters on Life*:

All of our true relations, all of our penetrating experiences reach through the Whole, through life and death; we have to live in Both, be ultimately at home in both.

Fear, anxiety, or dread may drop away at the moment when one comprehends the whole; or it may still persist, though perhaps in a somewhat muted form. In this connection, the reader might ask him or

herself: Do you remember feeling fearful or anxious before birth? While this sounds like a ridiculous question, because one lacked consciousness before birth, the same may be no less true after death. Only those who believe in notions like karma or reincarnation may argue that consciousness does exist before birth and after death but, again, I would respond by contending that these are, at best, provocative concepts, suppositions which cannot be proved or disapproved on this side of life.

Common Themes

Uncertainty

What, then, are some common themes that Western poets have discerned in the meditations on their own mortality? As previously mentioned, one key, recurring theme centres on uncertainty. Haiku writing provides a way by which to live with the uncertainty intrinsic to human existence.

Poets Ed Baker and Stanford M Forrester, respectively, give voice to the uncertainty that travels everywhere with us like our shadow:

full moon
here 66 years
will I see you again

death poem -
what happens
if I don't write one

I don't think I'm alone in having observed that the more comfortable I become with uncertainty, the less frightened I feel about my own mortality. Of course, how I will react when in fact I die remains uncertain. We shall see. If I find myself terrified or overcome with sorrow as I take my last breaths (assuming I am awake and oriented), then so be it. As the Zen teacher Katigiri Roshi compassionately observes in *You Have to Say Something*:

. . . we shouldn't have a particular idea of what a happy death is. One person is struggling and screaming in his or her last moment, another person is praying to God, another person is chanting the name of Buddha, another person is expressing anger and hatred. That is fine. Whatever a person does is fine.

The Buddhist teacher, Joan Halifax, couldn't agree more. The author of *Being with Dying* had this to say when asked what she thought about "a good death": "I feel such aversion to the term 'death with dignity.' It's hype." How liberating it is to know that there is no "right" way to die.

Such freedom opens the door to whatever happens; it also opens a window to light-heartedness or even humour. This is long overdue in regards to death and dying. While I have no particular interest or desire to paint a rose or clown's face on a garbage can, I also don't want to preclude the possibility of a light-hearted spirit surrounding one's final days. Pain may make this an unlikely prospect, but even in the throes of unbearable pain, one might very well grasp the absurdity of it all and blurt out some inanity that cracks one up and those around one. Something akin to this happened when I read the following dialogue between the Zen master Hakuin and a nobleman quoted in *The Art of Dying*:

'What happens to an enlightened man at death?'

'Why ask me?'

'Because you are a Zen master.'

'Yes, but not a dead one.'

Death Dreams

In the nocturnal world of dreams, our unconscious endeavours to work out what the conscious self cannot. Death is one of the themes that can recur in dreams; some of these death dreams are so harrowing that they may be vividly recalled years later; others disappear so quickly upon awakening that one may have completely "forgotten" the dream by the time he or she sits down with a cup of coffee. (Freud called this repression.)

Although I collected about 500 poems related to death awareness, only one poem by Bill Higginson specifically approaches death from the vantage point of dreams and hints at anticipatory grief. The poet's anxiety about death is both palpable and poignant.

death dream . . .

I struggle awake to the cry
of a mourning dove

Dying

Death is an instant in time - no different, in this respect, from any other moment - yet of course it is also momentous; everything we have been ceases. But death is preceded by a process of dying, the details of which are the subject of many poets' attention. Dying is treated as worthy a topic as death is and no less significant.

Insofar as science and medicine have prolonged the life span of modern poets, it is often the diagnosis of a terminal illness, rather than the conquest of triumphant warlords, which presages dying. And so more than a few poets find themselves writing about their first brush with death, as does Marian Olson:

diagnosis
spring sweeter
because of it

The practical realist is not invariably undone by the dissolution of everything with death. Diligence must be brought to bear even in dying - perhaps as a means of managing anxiety - and so Carmi Soifer goes about her business:

preparing for
my death
I sort the bills

Still, even putting one's papers in order can be messy. Carmel Lively Westerman hints at the acrimony or avarice that, sadly, can all too often be triggered by a parent's death:

dental gold -
I will it to my son

Time

Central to death is our relation to time. While most people in their daily lives relegate death to the basement or the back of the closet, time cannot be so easily banished.

On the contrary, most of us living harried, modern lives are preoccupied, if not persecuted, by the passage of time. There are many platitudes that people share with one another, almost on a daily basis, which reinforce the collective sense of being tyrannised by time, and this sharing may also serve to offset the feeling of aloneness in the face of such tyranny. It's not uncommon to hear a co-worker or family member bemoan how time is flying by or the days seem to blur together. In this one-line poem, George Swede succinctly combines life's transience and the sound of the clock:

falling pine needles the tick of the clock

Margaret Chula, reflecting a Buddhist view, roots herself in the here-and-now:

this moment
is all - cracks
in the stone Buddha

Denis M Garrison realises that the convergence between death and the ending of time culminates in stillness, where the separation between self and world is transcended:

and when
the sand runs out?
the stillness
of the hourglass
and I are one

Emptiness

A number of poets grappled with the implications of our transient nature. If there is nothing permanent about human existence, if there is nothing to grasp or hold on to, then life itself appears inherently empty. It takes great courage to behold emptiness, which usually fills people with terror, yet doing so is anything but nihilistic.

William Cullen, Jr. writes with great sensitivity and compassion:

a chill at sunset
the empty snail shell
casts no shadow

And S B Friedman, invoking the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism (Daoism), suggests that emptiness (like death) is no less a part of life:

the dao gathers in emptiness winter chill

Impermanence

To make peace with the chill of emptiness is to free ourselves from attachment (clinging or craving in Buddhism). So much of life is about seeking to fulfil our desires, longings, aspirations. Yet, insofar as life is intrinsically ephemeral, there is nothing we really can hold on to, in the final analysis. As meditation teacher Stephen Levine has observed: If we don't get the teaching that everything is impermanent during our lifetime, we get a crash course at the end.

Letting go of our attachments is what Thom Williams (who passed away at the end of 2010) is nudging us toward:

End of summer
Just another thing
I can't hang on to

Invoking the everyday image of a common weed, Stanford M Forrester eloquently conveys the essence of transience:

that's what
dandelions do . . .
blow away

God and Faith

Interestingly, only a few poets alluded to God or heaven while contemplating their own mortality. Robin Beshers depicts a domestic scene, attending to an apple tree in her backyard:

Wondering about God
I pluck flawed apples
from the tree

Ernest Berry can't wait to get home from the doctor's office where the results from a recent biopsy have thrust death in his face, abruptly and unexpectedly. To manage his anxiety, if not panic, he hops on the computer and does an internet search:

biopsy
i google
god

We don't know what the poet found in cyberspace; as for the reader. . .

David Lanoue is content to remain on this plane - the plane of Nature:

no heaven, no hell
just the whispering
rushes

Details

A good many poets grapple with the practical aspects of death; that is, funeral arrangements, the manner in which one's body will be disposed of; details regarding one's gravestone.

it doesn't matter
where the beach is, or how
you get me there . . .
lay me on a sheet of wind
like a sand mandala

- Michael McClintock

Raymond Roseliep, a Catholic priest and poet, slides back the veil which separates himself (and the reader) from a tactile encounter with death:

ordering my tombstone:
the cutter has me feel
the Gothic "R"

Of course, there is the secret wish, the wordless longing, to be spared from death, after all. One hopes and prays for a last-minute stay of execution. Cherie Hunter Day gives voice to the universal plea one makes to be passed over:

crimson maple
maybe death
won't recognise me

When does the reality of death first come into awareness? Surprisingly, only one poet traced back the birth of death awareness to a moment in childhood:

Seven or eight
first shudder at my own death
walking home from school

- Bruce England

Naturally, one's own mortality affects others. Nothing is more poignant for a parent than when his or her child suddenly realises that mummy or daddy is going to die one day. The precocious among us, like Bruce England in the previous poem, glimpse the reality of death some 40 or 50 years (if we're lucky) before it happens:

And so I agree
not to die before she does
the sound of crickets

- Susan Antolin

Ideas like reincarnation and heaven may have originated in our attempt to allay death anxiety. Regarding life after death, two poets represent the continuum between which the rest of us fall:

one bead at a time
counting
on an afterlife

- Susan La Vallee

flagstone patio
never believed in an afterlife
still don't

- Michael Ketchek

But John Martone faces his future here and now, knowing what we are made of:

rubbing earth
on my face
my future face

Humour

Humour appears indispensable in facing the hardships and adversities we face in life. Then why not with death, too? With humour we find a way to bear the unbearable, to take the inevitable not-so-seriously, as in Andrew Shattuck McBride's poem:

plotting
my green
burial

Humour does not deny the insults and injuries we endure on the long and winding road; it sheds light when we find ourselves in a dark wood. Humour is our flashlight, a candle, a match, that enables us to see just enough to take the next - or last - step. I dare say that most of us wouldn't have gotten as far as we have without a touch of light-heartedness. "Like the man who went to the psychiatrist and said, 'I'm afraid I'm going to die.' And the psychiatrist reassured him, 'That's the last thing you're going to do!'"¹ For another example of humour around one's own mortality, see Vincent Tripi's poem below.

Homecoming

For many death is the ultimate journey home. Take these two haiku by Robert Spiess and Carlos Colon, respectively:

the field's evening fog -
quietly the hound comes
to fetch me home

pointing
my way home
the starfish²

These poems are about homecoming and hold special meaning for me, as my parents uprooted me at the tender age of 13 when my father obtained a new job in another state. My sense of home was shattered; it wasn't until I rediscovered love years later that I reclaimed my sense of home.

Often in life we feel cast out of our homes and it seems to us as though we must embark on a journey to return. The metaphor of journey pervades the poetry of both East and West. Roberta Beary punctuates her journey with fireflies - a familiar and poignant symbol of impermanence.

It lights up
as lightly as it fades:
a firefly

Ruth Franke, in her essay on American death poems, goes so far as to assert that American haiku poets are fascinated with death because, consciously or unconsciously, we seek death. She invokes Sigmund Freud, who postulated what he called the "death drive" - an unconscious wish to die, as though doing so was equated with a return to the womb. Deriving a death drive from the reality of death is a bit like deducing that, because hunger is a drive, there is a concomitant "evacuation wish or instinct". Most contemporary psychoanalysts - at least in America - have debunked Freud's belief in a death instinct³, but it persists in the minds of some, nonetheless. Once again, I suggest that birth and death may, in the last analysis, be likened to starfish pointing toward that which lies beyond the field of knowledge and experience, residing in the ineffable.

Mystery

Without a permanent self or world to hold on to, what's left? It is very evident to me that life is, as I have already suggested, fundamentally and ineradicably a mystery. "Death," Emily Dickinson declared, "is a wild night and a new road." Far from evoking terror or despair, I delight in, if not celebrate this realisation, as do many other poets in this collection.

John Stevenson does not appear to be put off by the mystery that is life-and-death. On the contrary, the mystery is all together evocative in an almost Whitmanesque way, as in this subtle haiku:

seated between us
the imaginary
middle passenger

Last Writes

To fully embrace the mystery that is life-and-death, what can one say, in the last analysis? In facing death head-on, everything is washed away: All beliefs, ideas, illusions, theories, even images.

What remains for those who have the courage to gaze down the well is poetry stripped bare, reflecting what in Buddhist meditation is known as "bare attention". Toko, a Japanese poet who died in 1795 at the age of 86, encapsulated bare attention by exposing the very writing of death poems as a form of clinging or attachment:

death poems

are mere delusion -
death is death

Of course, there is a mystifying irony in Toko's death poem, quoted in *Japanese Death Poems*, because it contains an existential truth even as it preserves the very form it decries. Perhaps the best death poems hint at a riddle or conundrum that leaves the reader bedevilled or bemused insofar as the answer or solution to death eludes the rational mind.

In the following death poem written by contemporary poet Karma Tenzing Wanghuk, it is unclear whether the poet is echoing or responding to Toko's death poem:

no
death
poem

Is Tenzing suggesting (a la Buddhism) that there is no death and, hence, no death poem; or that no death poem can be written by anyone who is still alive and kicking?

Undeterred by such metaphysical questions, vincent tripi mischievously invokes Basho's most famous frog haiku⁴:

The old pond
my death poem
plop!

tripi's poem is about as far from morbid as one can get. He links past and present by harking back to the ancient pond that the father of haiku brilliantly depicted in his original poem, which was not his last poem. In substituting his own death poem for the frog of Basho's haiku, tripi is playfully suggesting that our death, like our life, contains amphibian-like qualities; our death, like us, can adapt to changing circumstances, forms, or media. As for that inimitable sound the frog makes when jumping in. . . Well, there is perhaps no more perfect sound for a death poem, after all is said and done, than plop.

Ah, That

I recognise that "plop" may not satisfy one and all as the last word (or sound) on the mystery that is life-and-death. What, then, could this unfathomable question mark at the centre of our lives be pointing us toward? One possible answer, I think, could lie in what the author of *Walden* realised while mourning the untimely death of his older brother, John, of lockjaw. "The only remedy for love," he confided in his journal, "is to love more."

We certainly know what happens where love is absent: People grow old and bitter; their hearts close, they become depressed, demoralised, despairing. Their days are filled with complaints, regrets, and an impatient longing to die in hopes of escaping the prison of this so-called veil of tears.

Among the poets included here, there is little trace of bitterness, resentment, regret. I dare say that love abounds, however subtly, in many of the poems. In fact, it is really the medium of love that enables fear, anger, disappointment, loneliness, and sadness to float, as mindfulness meditation teacher, Stephen Levine, is fond of saying.

Thirty-five years ago, our family dog, whose name was Corky, was whisked away by our father, when we were all out of the house on a winter Sunday. Dad was well-meaning in his desire to spare us the anguish of taking Corky to the vet to put him down. A month or so before Corky died at the age of 17, I had a short dream about him that remains with me still: He and I were jogging to the freeway entrance near my parents' house. Just as we were about to enter the freeway, Corky veered off to the right and, as he jumped effortlessly over a chain link fence that ran along the freeway, he turned to me and said, "We

must continue on, lovingly."

Though I had this dream long before I trained as a psychologist, it was one that required no interpretation; the meaning and significance of the dream were instantly clear to me, and I have drawn strength and courage from Corky's message during many losses in the intervening years.

Love, then, becomes all the more vital in living with the unfathomable, with loneliness, illness, pain, uncertainty, and the ultimate loss of everything dear to us. Thoreau, a Transcendentalist, understood this sacred truth, which is why he had no trouble declaring his faith in a letter to a contemporary: "Our religion is where our love is."

Yet, love is not a quality of consciousness that can be cultivated or called forth by an act of will. Love is a well, an indwelling, accessible whenever one's heart is open.

Haiku, I suggest, is a poetry of the heart; it is a repository of love. To write haiku is to realise from moment to moment that the world is whole and we are an integral part of that whole. As a sometime student of Zen, Basho, the father of Japanese haiku, apprehended the truth of wholeness centered in the here-and-now⁵. Virtually all of his haiku are written from this place, which is why, I suspect, he responded to a request from his students for a death poem, by saying that any of his poems could be considered his death poem. They persisted and he relented, writing the poem that forms the title of this anthology, a few days before he died:

Sick, on a journey,
Yet over withered fields
Dreams wander on.

Dreams wander on, and we ourselves must find a way to continue on, lovingly. . . until we breathe our last. This, I suggest, is what links the ancient Japanese poets with the contemporary haiku poets writing in the West.⁶ We have taken Basho's advice to heart and sought what the ancients sought, rather than merely echo their poetic spirit. What we have found is already merging with the wind in the pines.

Footnotes:

* This essay is based on the Introduction to *Dreams Wander On: Contemporary Death Awareness Poems*, edited by Robert Epstein.

1. Quoted in Steven Harrison, *The Love of Uncertainty*, pp. 35-36.
2. In her essay, "American Death Poems", Ruth Franke regards the starfish in Colon's haiku as reflecting uncertainty as to which way leads home. An alternative interpretation (among many) is possible: To the extent that the reality of death is accepted as an inextricable part of life, one may return home by heading in any direction.
3. See, for example, A. J. Levin, "The Fiction of the Death Instinct", *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 21, 275-276, 1951 and Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis* (W W Norton, 1945). Of Freud's death drive, Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung had little more than passing interest in, as he put it, the "questionable nature of the conception". *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* (Princeton University Press, 1966) p. 29.
4. Basho's frog haiku: old pond/a frog jumps in/plop! (Alan Watts, translator.)
5. Basho death poem from: *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill*, copyright 1973 Stryk, L., Ikemoto, T., and Takayama, T., translators (Grove Press, New York, 1994). Used with permission.
6. Out of respect for those who have worked sedulously to divorce haiku from Zen, I want to emphasise

that one need not be a follower of Zen or a student of Buddhism to write haiku or death awareness poems. Still, there is an attunement in Zen to matters of life and death with which I deeply resonate; hence, the references to Zen that appear throughout the essay and for which I take full responsibility.

Editor's note: Robert Epstein is a licensed psychologist and published haiku poet who lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area (California, United States). *Dreams Wander On* was published in 2011 and this essay, which has been adapted slightly from the book's Introduction, appears here with the kind permission of the author.

To read more about death awareness haiku, visit [Robert's blog](#) on the subject. To purchase a copy of *Dreams Wander On* go [here](#).