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## A HAIKU WRITER'S TIME: LEARNING FROM KENNETH ATCHITY

*by Michael Dylan Welch*

In *A Writer's Time*, Kenneth Atchity's classic book on time management for writers (New York: Norton, 1986), the author makes a number of observations that would seem to apply to haiku poetry. If haiku is a poetic means of capturing—and releasing—haiku moments, then what can we do with our time to write this ephemeral poetry as best as we can?

Atchity lays the groundwork for his discussion of time management by identifying four founding principles: vision, responsibility, productivity, and professionalism (xviii). What sort of vision do we have with and for our haiku poetry? For many poets, the vision is simply to share personal experience, and thus create emotional connections and empathy between the writer and reader. We need not have a vision larger than that, because having certain agendas, such as promoting world peace or social justice, could easily distort haiku as an aesthetic endeavor. But giving some thought to our vision for haiku—that is, our own haiku—would seem to be a fruitful exercise. What is our goal with each poem, or a body of poems? What are we trying to accomplish? Beyond that, we all want to be responsible with our work, which may mean being true to human experience (which is not necessarily the same as reporting “what actually happened”), and not violating the privacy of others in what we write (and avoiding appropriation). We also want to be as productive as we wish to be, and as professional as possible in keeping records and in sharing and publishing our original work.

Atchity expands on these principles by offering four guidelines for good work habits (xviii). The first is to write with a purpose, which is an expansion of having vision for your work. Vision can also be the commitment to apply yourself to the task.

He begins his first chapter by saying simply that “Writers write” (1), noting earlier that “Discipline is the key...Talent is not a rare commodity. Discipline is” (xvii). He also says, as the second good work habit, to write to make a difference, which applies the goal of being responsible. For haiku, that difference might be as simple as brightening the day of one reader’s life with a carefully observed epiphany. If the purpose of haiku is to share them, as William J. Higginson said in the first paragraph of *The Haiku Handbook*, then sharing alone can make a difference if just one reader is sympathetic. The third habit is to keep the audience in mind. For haiku, this involves a transition from process to product, editing to prevent misreading, and knowing when to do that. Editing any text, including haiku, is a transition from the private to the public self, or, as Atchity puts it later, “In editing, you take out the private voice” (72). The fourth habit is to convey emotion, which is really the point of haiku, or at least a primary one—a transfer of energy from the source to the poem to the reader, as Charles Olson once defined poetry. We present objective sensory images to create emotion in the reader. As I say in my workshops, don’t write about your feelings; instead write about what *caused* your feelings. The point of all these principles and work habits is to “hook the attention of the reader” (xix). Indeed, Atchity says, “Writing must have an element of magic to it. When that magic takes over, the writer himself loses track of time during the writing—and the reader will lose track of time during the reading” (xix). Those, indeed, are haiku moments, and through them we approach the infinite and timeless.

In his first chapter, Atchity notes that “the business of being a writer is the business of developing self-awareness and honest introspection” (4). He quotes Keats as calling this “soul-making.” Our haiku cannot begin if we don’t notice, nor can they develop if we don’t contemplate what we notice. In his second chapter, the author says that “Learning to write is learning your own mind” (14). For the haiku poet, I would add that writing haiku involves not just close attention to the world around you, but the careful observation of your own emotions in reaction to everything you sense with our five senses. This is where haiku comes

from, and it all stems from learning your own heart and mind. Know thy haiku self.

Writing, Atchity reminds us, involves specific steps to creativity, which he outlines as dreaming, doodling, assembly, gestation, agenda, vacation, first draft, vacation, revision, focused gestation, agenda for revision, revision, and product (18). While this sort of timeline might be more relevant to writing novels or other long books, or even essays, we might still apply these steps to haiku. It's important to dream and doodle, and not to edit or revise at this point. This is a step of being vulnerable, and it's exactly this act of vulnerability and freedom that writing guru Natalie Goldberg promotes with her ten-minute free-writing exercises. It's important to take vacations from what we write, even if just a single haiku, so we can assess it objectively later. Put your poems aside for at least a month—maybe even a year (I try to fill up an entire notebook before considering any of its poems for publication). It's important to work through the most obvious images or juxtapositions we come up with in our first drafts to see if something better might be possible, especially to show rather than tell—although it's also good to know when to tell. But sometimes we can't see that until months later. And finally, we need to shift our focus at some point towards the audience and what will be clear to them instead of just clear to us.

In his third chapter, the author addresses the challenge of finding time to write. For me, a simple choice made all the difference for my haiku writing, and that was to buy a small pocket-sized notebook and keep it with me *all the time*. I always have a notebook in one pocket and a pen in the other. You might type into a smartphone instead, but the idea is the same. It gives you no excuse to avoid writing. More than that, it encourages you to write more, to be on the constant lookout for moments or phrases that might become haiku (and also gives you a single place for all of your new haiku). This opens the door to creativity. "Instead of trying to finish your work," Atchity says, "you need merely find time to do your work; then simply concentrate on doing it the best you can" (31), and that you should "Aim to do what *only you* can do" (32). Ultimately, he says, "No time is more

important than the time used to examine and schedule your time” (34). Do we, for example, give ourselves the gift of going for a walk in the woods or around the neighbourhood at least once a week specifically with the goal to write haiku? And if not, why not? If you build your haiku habits, haiku will come.

Atchity makes many other observations not just about the management of time, but about writing itself. For example, he says that “fiction is based on your success in activating the reader’s imagination, not in supplanting it” (69). This is a reminder to show, not tell, to let us feel wonder at the shade of low afternoon light that warms a glaciated mountain top. I particularly like his thought that “You learn to write quickly by learning to write well, not the other way around” (75). This might explain why some haiku writers can write good haiku quickly—because they’ve already learned to write well by writing slowly (and often).

One question that comes up naturally in the exploration of haiku is the matter of authenticity. Some haiku writers choose to write only what they personally experience. Others welcome vicarious experience from television or books. Or they riff off overheard conversations or engage with writing prompts. Still others welcome the imagination. My personal feeling is that all of these sources have useful potential. The trick is to make the poem, the finished product, come across to the *reader* as a believable experience. Authenticity is thus judged by the effect of the poem itself (often emotional), not by whether the event “really happened” or not. As Atchity notes in this regard, “Any writer who writes both nonfiction and fiction knows that both forms are ‘creative.’ Biography and even history are, in many ways, as fictional as fiction; and fiction can be as informative as nonfiction” (103). Haiku too, I would say.

As we know, haiku is an art of leaving things out. This is true of fiction, too. “Some of the greatest practitioners of dramatic fiction, including Hemingway and Chekhov, achieve their greatness by how little they leave in,” Atchity says. “The less there is on a page, the more the reader’s imagination is involved in recreating the fictional world. Through that involvement artistic communication is accomplished. The reader comes to share the writer’s

vision” (105–06). Surely the same is true for haiku. As Atchity says later, “The writer’s aim is to engage the audience’s imagination so that the audience feels it is creating the story” (129).

With poems as short as haiku, it’s understandable that we might repeat ourselves or others with similar subjects or experiences—part of something I’ve called *déjà-ku*. There’s a point where this becomes excessive, or even plagiarism, but for the most part we can’t help referring to what has been referred to or experienced before. Indeed, it’s this very sharedness of experience that makes it possible for one person’s poem to resonate with a complete stranger. We’ve all seen a toddler explore her first tide pool, or play fetch with the family dog. After all, there’s nothing new under the sun. As Atchity says, “Great writers don’t invent stories; they retell them, just as *Apocalypse Now* retells Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. It’s the development that distinguishes one creative work from another, and makes them worth our attention” (120–21). Later, Atchity also quotes Philip Johnson as saying “You always copy. Everybody copies, whether they admit it or not. There is no such thing as not copying. There are so few original ideas in the world that you don’t have to worry about them. Creativity is selective copying” (176). This stance should not be seen as an invitation to irresponsibility, but we can also give ourselves a great deal of leeway, certainly at the drafting stages of our work. It seems to me that we should feel empowered to express ourselves freely. In copyright law, of course, you cannot copyright an idea, only the *expression* of an idea. Ultimately, instead of endlessly trying to “make it new,” we can do what Jane Hirshfield advises, to “make it yours.”

Whether we write haiku or other kinds of poetry, we love what we do. Sometimes we need to make time for haiku, or change our habits so we are able to give more attention to this art. It all comes down to passion. As Kenneth Atchity says in his introduction, “A writer, after all, is only a person who loves writing and believes in it strongly enough to want to do it well” (xiv). Isn’t that what all haiku writers are after, to do it well?