

# The Transcendent Function of Haiku

Robert Epstein

It's the best free medicine in the world.

~ *Roberta Beary*

Like most poets, I think of haiku, first and foremost, as an art form with a distinct aesthetic. Poets and critics may debate the nature of the aesthetic, which can mutate by country and era, but haiku as art is indisputable.

I deeply appreciate the art form as well as the sensibility I associate with haiku, but that's not all. For me, haiku also serves an important instrumental function that has been of inestimable value. I have turned to haiku, again and again, as a means of expressing the inexpressible. It is evident to me that this instrumental function was as true for the Japanese masters— Bashō, Buson, Issa and Shiki—as it is for contemporary English-language poets.

For illustrative purposes, let me take a brief detour here to offer a few examples from the masters. One poignant poem by Bashō comes readily to mind. It also happens to be Bashō's last poem:

Sick on a journey,  
Yet over withered fields  
Dreams wander on. (1)

Bashō is not just writing about an illness; it is his final illness, which gives the poem that much more intensity. I am eternally grateful to the father of haiku for summoning the energy to write such a moving poem. I feel a kinship with Bashō and feel less alone when ill as well as in facing my own mortality.

Masaoka Shiki, who died young of tuberculosis, wrote forthrightly about his disabling illness, which I greatly

respect. In the poem below, which appears in Janine Beichman's biography, *Masaoka Shiki*, there is more than a trace of frustration, even self-pity, yet the discerning reader may catch a hint of *something more*:

all I can think of  
is being sick in bed  
and snowbound . . . (2)

Growing weaker as his illness progresses, the life force in him persists and is evident in this poignant poem:

lifting my head,  
I look now and then—  
the garden clover (3)

Here, in Shiki's haiku, the balm of nature is clearly recognizable. He loves the clover and, if it is all he can do to lift his head up long enough for a glimpse, so be it.

I also would like to quote a poem by Taneda Santōka, a wandering haiku poet, who freely expressed himself in his poetry. The poem that follows appears in *All My Walking: Free Verse* by Taneda Santōka:

chill chill of earth  
I give up  
my feverish body to it (4)

With regards to grief and loss, Buson and Issa penned two of the most heart-rending haiku I have read, which no doubt accounts for their persistence through the long corridors of time:

a piercing chill—  
I step on my dead wife's comb  
in our bedroom  
~ Buson (5)

The world of dew  
is the world of dew.  
And yet, and yet --  
~ Issa (6)

And, this heartbreaking poem by Issa, as well:

Mother I never knew,  
every time I see the ocean,  
every time—(7)

As I have written elsewhere, haiku (in conjunction with journal writing) has been the primary source for mourning profound losses in my life, especially my parents, (8) and I have found a measure of peace and solace in using haiku as a way of coming to terms with my own mortality, writing what I call death awareness haiku. (9) On a more mundane level, I rely on haiku—or a hybrid mix of haiku and senryu—as a way to give voice to the stresses and strains of everyday life, including chronic illness and pain as well as the vicissitudes of winter. (10)

For example, it is late December and I am home sick with a cold. I find great relief in expressing the angst and loneliness that accompany being ill by writing haiku about stuck at home with a cold. Here are three:

home sick—  
my departed mother  
still helps

home alone --  
my sneezing scares even  
the dust puppies

sick again—  
and why not welcome  
the rain?

It should be noted that, psychologically speaking, the act of writing haiku offers instantaneous company to oneself: I am sick and I am writing poetry about being sick; *I am therefore not alone*. Herein lies a significant therapeutic benefit of haiku writing. (For more on this, see below.)

Nor is this the first time I have written haiku when sick with a cold or flu; in fact, if I look back through my haiku journals, I can find lots of poems whose first lines typically begin with “home sick.” In this light, I can say, without hesitation, that haiku serves as an *essential balm* for me, and I believe it does for many of my haiku compatriots. Without the salve of haiku, I dare say many of us would be in a lot more anguish and distress.

Each time I write haiku when sick or grief-stricken I am astonished at how I manage to write. Despite sleep deprivation and listlessness, sneezing and coughing, I manage to find ways to put into words what I am feeling. In reality, I cannot lay claim to much in the way of agency or creative will because, if I am honest, the poems find their own expression. I think of myself mainly as a witness who is recording the poetry.

Still, as paradoxical as it may sound, I maintain it is the act of writing haiku when sick or grieving that has a therapeutic or medicinal effect, which is why I say it is an essential balm for me. I may be exhausted and foggy-headed, but the writing comes from a different place in me that seems untouched by illness or grief, which I find quite extraordinary.

In looking through contemporary English-language haiku journals, it is easy to find numerous haiku about cancer, dementia and Alzheimer’s as well as grief and loss. Here are just a few examples from recent haiku publications like *Acorn*, *Frogpond*, *Mariposa* and *Modern Haiku*:

dragonfly  
the dramatic peaks and valleys  
of this cancer

~ Beverly Acuff Momoi (11)

chemo chair  
outside the window  
another new leaf  
~ *Gregory Longenecker (12)*

she dons a bow  
on her bald head  
Mom's last Christmas  
~ *Seren Fargo (13)*

first frost  
today she misplaced  
our names  
~ *Robyn Hood Black (14)*

snow angels  
the weight  
of lost children  
~ *Rob Grotke 15 )*

his dad's birthday  
a boy weights balloons  
at the grave  
~ *frances angela (16)*

Are poets like myself compromising—or, worse, diminishing—the integrity of haiku by using it in this instrumental way as a balm? I respond unhesitatingly with a resounding no! Quite the contrary, giving voice to one's own pain or suffering infuses haiku with a poignancy that touches the human heart, since both pain and suffering are universal. In turn, haiku elevates human sorrow, which counters the sense of loneliness or isolation that we tend to feel in the face of illness, pain, loss or trauma. I believe that this is, in part, what prompted the late haiku scholar, William J. Higginson, to say that haiku is for sharing. (17)

I want to make something very clear: I am not meaning to suggest that haiku is no different or better than an aspirin or a heating pad. That would certainly cheapen or trivialize the power of haiku poetry.

What, then, is the source of haiku's healing qualities? The source, I believe, lies in grounding one's pain or suffering within the larger context of nature from which we arise and to which we return. To the extent that we humans feel separate or isolated from nature as well as our fellow beings, we feel more alone, more frightened, more at risk of falling into depression or despair. The reading and writing of haiku restores our fundamental connection with the natural world and the human family and this, in itself, is medicinal, healing. Music functions in a similar way, I suspect, which is why I think that haiku can legitimately be thought of as *healing music in poetic form*.

As humans, most of us seek stability and security in our lives, both inwardly and externally. Internal conflicts and stressors are highly destabilizing and so are external crises, hardships, adversities and traumas.

Falling ill, especially if the illness is cancer or some other serious disorder, can trigger tremendous fear and anxiety. For sensitive souls, even a cold or flu can be upsetting. We are no longer at peace, nor is recovery a certainty. It is not uncommon for those who are ill or in pain to feel alone, isolated, apart from the rest of the world of healthy family, friends and coworkers.

Similarly, a person thrust into crisis precipitated by an external situation such as job loss, eviction, or the traumatic death of a parent, spouse, or child, may feel estranged, avoided or neglected by others, including loved ones. How does haiku help in such circumstances?

As I suggested earlier, the act of writing haiku creates instant company. In giving voice to my distress or anguish, I am bearing witness to myself, which ameliorates isolation and aloneness, if only momentarily.

This form of self-soothing releases a balm that is inherently therapeutic; it induces self-healing or integration. The poet in distress is no longer completely isolated or alone; there is now a witness to one's sorrow or woe. But it is not only the haiku poet who experiences relief through the act of writing; I maintain that the reader can, too, insofar as his or her heart is touched by what the poet has given voice to. The late mindfulness meditation teacher, Stephen Levine, put it eloquently: "Who you are looking for is *who is looking*."

Haiku reading and writing is precisely the self-realization that Levine is pointing to. Insofar as expressing one's anguish or sorrow in poetic form when sick or grieving helps to recover one's sense of wholeness, haiku writing facilitates what the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl G. Jung, called in relation to personality development a *transcendent function*. (17) In other words, haiku is an extraordinary means of going beyond painful or adverse circumstances by accepting them. As paradoxical or ironic as this may seem, acceptance paves the way for transcendence. Again, Levine hits the nail on the head when he observes: "It is hard to change anything you don't accept."

Even protesting one's painful situation can lead to transcendence, as the ancient Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, suggests, insofar as the Tao, or Way of Nature, encompasses everything. That is, nothing lies outside the Tao, including ranting, raving, or protesting one's situation. Realizing this, one's mind settles again, comes to peace. I thank haiku reading and writing for that.

## Notes

1. Bashō quoted in *Zen Poems of China and Japan: The Crane's Bill*. Lucian Stryk, T. Ikemoto, and T. Takayama, tr. New York, NY: Grove Press, 1994.

2. Masaoka Shiki quoted in Janine Beichman. *Masaoka Shiki*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1986; p. 66.

3. *Ibid.* p. 71.

4. Taneda Santōka, *All My Walking: Free Verse of Taneda Santōka*. Burton Watson, tr. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2003; p. 35.
5. Buson quoted in [www.graceguts.com](http://www.graceguts.com). Michael Dylan Welch, ed. Accessed on 12/28/19.
6. Issa quoted in *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, & Issa*. Robert Hass, ed. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994; p. 191.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
8. "Motherloss and Mourning Haiku." *Modern Haiku*, 49.3, 2017. See also Robert Epstein, *Free to Dance Forever: Mourning Haiku for My Mother*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2018 and *Days of Remembrance: Haiku in Honor of My Father*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2018.
9. See Robert Epstein, *Checkout Time is Noon: Death Awareness Haiku*. Shelbyville, KY: Wasteland Press, 2012; and *Checkout Time is Soon: More Death Awareness Haiku*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2018.
10. See Robert Epstein, *Healing into Haiku: On Illness and Pain*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2018. See also *Reckoning with Winter: A Haiku Hailstorm*. West Union, WV: Middle Island Press, 2019.
11. *Acorn*, #43, Fall 2019; p. 48.
12. *Mariposa*, #41, Autumn-Winter 2019; p. 13.
13. *Modern Haiku*, 50.1, Winter-Spring 2019; p. 22.
14. *Frogpond*, 42:1, Winter 2019; p. 13.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
16. *Acorn*, #42, Spring 2019; 50,
17. William J. Higginson in *Haiku: The Art of the Short Poem: A Film* by Tazuo Yamaguchi. Tazuo Yamaguchi and Randy Brooks, eds. Decatur, ILL: Brooks Books, 2008; p. 96.
18. See Calvin S. Hall and Vernon J. Nordby, *A Primer of Jungian Psychology*. New York, NY: The New American Library, 1972; p. 84.