

Essays

Haiku of Care: Empathy and Compassion in Haiku Poetry

By Randy Brooks

In an essay, “A Careful Poetics: Caring Imagination, Caring Habits, and Haiku” Ce Rosenow and Maurice Hamington argue that “haiku supports the development of care capacities because it engages a caring imagination, helps people develop caring knowledge, and potentially encourages caring behavior.” Their claim builds on the social nature of haiku. Within the haiku community, writers and readers share experiences and feelings that nurture the development of a caring imagination. As they summarize, “Readers approach each poem with the expectation that they will share something of the speaker’s experience. Writers approach each poem as an opportunity to share their experiences and those of others with the reader. The belief that such shared experience has value is always already part of conveying the haiku moment.” (49) In addition to writing about their own experiences, haiku readers often “develop caring knowledge of others by increasing the capacity for empathy.” (64) Haiku often is an “assessable poetic means of sharing another person’s experience. To understand the haiku, readers must take pause to inhabit a reality that is not their own and imaginatively experiment with shades of feelings perhaps unfamiliar to them.” (64)

I have taught a college-level course on the art of reading and writing haiku for several years. I have observed how students respond to haiku with caring concern and write about their own efforts or struggles with caring for others or themselves. In this essay, I will examine the ways I have seen students engage in a caring imagination through the art of haiku.

Before we begin, I want to provide a brief overview of the nature of this course. First, I emphasize that, for a semester, the students in the class will be immersed in a haiku community. Like all

members of a haiku community, they will read a lot of haiku by contemporary authors, share favorites with each other, and write a lot of original haiku. The course emphasizes the importance of reader response. From day one, we read haiku out loud and share a variety of reading responses to that haiku. Second, I emphasize keeping a haiku journal and submitting new haiku for every class period. We share haiku through an anonymous kukai process, in which a sheet of selected haiku are read out loud and favorites are discussed by the students. We say that when a haiku finds a reader who loves it, it is born. After it is born, we ask who wrote the haiku and applaud their new work. By sharing various readings, connecting haiku to their own lives, and sharing their writings that come out of their own cultural perspectives and experiences, the entire class is a social community guided by growing respect and imaginative understanding of each other. As we can see, this becomes a ripe environment to address challenging issues, social concerns, human losses, and other struggles. We are not a support group, but rather a caring community of haiku readers and writers.

Before reading anthologies and historically significant haikai by authors such as Bashō, the course starts with students reading collections of selected haiku by contemporary English writers such as Peggy Lyles, Wally Swist, John Stevenson, George Swede, and a younger author, Aubrie Cox. While all of these authors address issues of caring and self-care, George Swede stands out as someone who often writes about the inner struggles of people in a variety of situations. My class has students from all parts of the university, and those who are studying psychology, social work, or nursing especially notice Swede's emphasis on caring for others. Several students have written essays on his haiku dealing with relationships or other psychological struggles. I will provide two examples of a reader response from an essay by student Morgan Oliver titled, "George Swede and Therapeutic Qualities of Haiku." She cites the following haiku as an example of being able to "master our fears, to begin to imagine a positive outcome."

Sunrise:
I forget my side
of the argument

George Swede, *Almost Unseen: Selected Haiku of George Swede*, 44

Oliver writes, “This haiku portrays the common yet complicated struggle of the strains we face in our human relationships. In this case, the strain is an argument, which could easily be applied to any relationship: friend, romantic, family or other. Often times, when we are knee-deep in a falling out with someone, we cannot see a solution or end to the problem. Fear of being in the wrong causes us to remain stubborn and relentless in our ways and we fail to compromise. One of the things that needs to occur to solve such a problem, and often one of the aims of therapeutic work, is to get both parties involved to see beyond their current crisis and get them to the point where they believe in resolution. This haiku offers a sense of hope by creating a mini-story that people can relate to, and in this story, things are solved. If people see that other human beings have felt the same way and come out of it alright, they are more inclined to believe that they too will be able to find their way out of the strain they face. This haiku allows the reader ‘to imagine a positive outcome,’ by suggesting that with a new day, a new ‘sunrise,’ with the passage of time, an argument can come to rest.”

Oliver also discusses another haiku as an example of the importance of making connections with others and finding hope so that people can “gain skills that will help them to cope with a struggle.”

in one corner
of the mental patient’s eye
I exist

George Swede, *Almost Unseen: Selected Haiku of George Swede*, 82

Oliver writes that this haiku “captures the empathy we as humans need to be sensitized to the world and other people. In order to empathize we have to be able to put ourselves in someone else’s shoes and look at things from their perspective. The speaker in this haiku does just that. He recognizes that the mental patient’s perception of the world is not wrong, but rather much different than his own. What exists in the speaker’s mind is not the same as what exists in the patient’s mind. Often, we believe that our own perception is the absolute truth and choose to ignore that there are other views of the world. In writing and reading haiku such as this one, it gives one a medium to pause for a second and give thought to other’s perceived situations. It helps us build a stronger connection to the world and the people in it.”

Another student, Alexa Duncan, writes that “No one likes to talk about mental illness. As a society, we’ve gotten a little bit better at de-stigmatizing things like anxiety and depression, but we still have a long way to go, and this haiku shows that struggle in a deceptively simple way. Those of us who struggle with mental illness tend to ‘hide’ in one corner of ourselves, like the speaker does in this haiku. I imagine a man, freshly out of his stint at a mental health facility, going back to that facility now that he’s out. He sees another patient there and he sees himself in that patient.”

Some of my students who studied behavioral sciences went on to develop successful practices as therapists. One, Kerry J. Heckman (formerly known as Kerry Hammergren), developed a very successful therapy practice and is an advocate for Somatic Transformation therapy. She is a licensed therapist, group facilitator, poet, writer, and speaker. On her blog, she writes that “This is a place to acknowledge and validate our suffering and trauma, while also learning how to turn toward aliveness and spaciousness.” She notes that “I believe in the healing powers of somatic processing, grounding, gratitude, intuition, stillness, and movement. We all have the innate ability to heal but healing often happens

in relationship. It takes courage to seek out connection and help from others.” After being diagnosed with Lyme disease, she moved from Chicago to Seattle to focus on healing. She received excellent care from her somatic therapy teacher, Dr. Sharon Stanley, and was inspired to extend that approach in her own practice. Heckman has a social media platform related to her therapy practice and explains that “I’ve always used writing as a way to express myself and cope with this beautiful and sometimes overwhelming life. Journaling, poetry, and creative writing were outlets in my childhood and continue to be a source of joy for me. Eventually, I started writing about my own healing path and was asked to write for health and mental health publications. This led to my second job as a freelance writer.” A couple of years ago, she re-connected with the haiku community and is now a frequent contributor to leading English-language haiku journals. Here are a few of her haiku that address issues of self-care and the ethics of caring.

humpback whale the grief finally surfacing

Kerry J. Heckman, *Whiptail* 6, 2023, Reader’s Choice Award

Margaret Walker provided a reader’s choice commentary: “This haiku incorporates multiple senses — sight, sound and smell (salt water) are obvious. But to this reader there is also ‘touch.’ The escape of air when the whale breaches and the ‘cry’ that accompanies that escape ‘feels’ like grief finally allowed to surface. This haiku has great resonance.” Everyone grieves in different ways on their own time. Sometimes we are surprised when grief surfaces after a long period of denial.”

In this next haiku, we get a glimpse of the life behind the professional therapists’ public face:

in between sessions
 the therapist practices
 breathwork

Kerry J. Heckman, *Failed Haiku* 80, 2022

Who takes care of the caregiver? It's important to provide self-care as well as care to patients.

between the pages
 of a self-help book
 four-leaf clover

Kerry J. Heckman, *Modern Haiku* 44.1, 2013

The author portrays someone looking for improvement. The self-help book suggests that the reader is trying to “heal themselves,” and evidently, they have placed a four-leaf clover between the pages—another sign of hope. Searching for ways to get better and utilizing signs of hope that are available are important in healing journeys.

While George Swede and Kerry Heckman have a professional background in psychology and therapy, most of the students in my class are simply drawing on their own personal experiences and knowledge from friends or families. I will organize examples of these haiku of caring into the following categories: (1) recognizing anxiety and reaching out for help, (2) struggling with identity and body image, (3) struggling with relationships, (4) dealing with loss and grief, and (5) the importance of self-care and developing tools for resilience.

In addition to student haiku, I will include several student reading responses from the class kukai, previously published as part of the class kukai favorites or from *The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku*. If the student reader response is not cited, it is from the class kukai

available on the Millikin University Haiku web site located at:
<http://www.brooksbookshaiku.com/MillikinHaiku/index.html>
(accessed 2023-09-25).

(1) Recognizing Anxiety and Reaching Out for Help

crisis hotline
she pops her gum
in between my words

Jenesi Moore, Fall 2018

The author writes that “this is one of my ‘darku.’ It refers to dark times. While I never myself have called a crisis hotline, I have a friend who did, and the person who answered the phone seemed to be more annoyed by my friend’s pleas for help than receptive to them. She said that she kept making a noise that sounded like she was clicking her tongue when she would say certain things. I felt bad for my friend. The ‘annoyance’ reminded me of how annoyed I get when people pop their gum or look away when I am trying to communicate with them.”

the oak
extends its branch
care to talk?

Nicole Curatti, Spring 2020

In this haiku, nature itself seems to offer help, a willingness to listen carefully to an anxious outpouring.

unable to cry
I sharpen
a stack of pencils

Nicole Silverman, Spring 2005

One of Nicole's classmates writes: "I could really relate to this haiku. Since it's the end of the school year and everyone seems to be under a lot of stress, crying turns into a regular event with my friends. However, there was a time in my life when I was really sad, and for some reason I could not cry. I would try anything else to release tension — I would play the guitar until my fingers were sore, run, or write in a journal until my hand cramped up. When I read this haiku, I was actually able to feel that frustrating feeling of built-up emotions and the need to release them. I also imagine the pencil sharpener is an old metal one that you have to grind and grind to get the pencil sharpened. By the end of the haiku, I can feel relaxed because I can imagine my arm getting tired and that tension being released, only after a whole stack is completely sharpened. (Sarah Bassill, Spring 2005, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 142)

shot after shot after shot
 the room starts spinning
 someone please save me

Naomi Klingbeil, Fall 2018

Fellow student Melanie Wilson found two different interpretations of this haiku's call for help: "One reading of 'shots' is like a shot of alcohol. I imagine that the author is at a party, has had too much to drink, and is starting to lose their bearings. Another interpretation, and my initial reaction, was that the shots are gunshots, which makes this very sad. I pictured a mass shooting, and that this was the narration of someone who is caught in the middle of it." (Melanie Wilson, Fall 2018, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 107)

This next haiku shares a moment of innocence:

bandaged arms
his little sister
calls them lion scratches

The author writes: “This haiku may be my absolute favorite haiku that I have ever written. To begin, this haiku has a story behind it, a story that is very near and dear to my heart. This haiku is based on a teenage boy I met in the adolescent behavioral health unit. His arms were severely cut from self-harm, but another little girl on the unit insisted he had lion scratches. I thought it was a beautifully innocent moment and this haiku makes that moment come alive. That moment was something I cherish and the experiences that came with it taught me so much.” (Shania Dvorak, Spring 2020)

in your rainstorm
I open
my own umbrella

Mikaela Vuglar, Spring 2019

Another student responds: “I like this haiku because it reminds me of one of my best friends. When I close my eyes, I see my friend, who always seems to have a rain cloud over her. There is thunder, lightning, and torrential rainfall pouring onto her head. I imagine myself trying to give her an umbrella, but she pushes it back towards me as she stomps away. I simply open my umbrella and step into the rainstorm with her. Some days, I can push the rainstorm away and the sun will come out. Other days, the rainstorm only grows, and I find myself choking on the copious amounts of rain that come with her storm. It is cold, the sky is dark, and everything is wet. The storm grows like a poison, and I would love to save myself, but only if I can save her first.” (Amanda Bivens, Spring 2019, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 106)

helicopter seeds
 my life spiraling
 out of control

Aubrie Cox, *Tea's Aftertaste*, 20

Years later, a student identifies with this haiku by Cox and finds solace that such feelings are not unique to her own life. "This haiku was one that made me laugh really hard. I am the helicopter seed during the semester. This semester has by far been the most difficult for me through all of the nursing program. Within the first couple of weeks, I failed my first test as well as my first quiz. This poem hit home hard! I thought 'oh my goodness... I made it through 7 semesters of absolute craziness, and now after it is finally almost over, I am going to fail my last semester!' However, things are starting to look up a little more each day. I have learned to go with the craziness for now, and keep pushing to graduation, thank God! Who would have known that the last semester which is normally thought to be fairly easy would be the craziest." (Paige Hockman, Spring 2021)

the weight of the world
 she tells herself
 just keep swimming

Bethany Wetherholt, July 2016

A fellow student admires the self-care, resilience, and determination evident in Bethany's haiku. She imagines a scenario for this haiku's heroine: "It's been a long day, a long month, and a long year! Life hasn't been easy since her divorce and it got even worse after she lost her job and couldn't pay rent. She is a single mom who is now on welfare until she lands another job. Job hunting has been her full-time workload these past two months and with every rejection she feels more beat down. As she walks into a local church to visit the food pantry she reads on the wall, 'Giving

up is not an option.’ Instead of tears, she breaks into a smile, grabs food for her children, and walks out of the church with a new-found confidence. Tomorrow, she will find work because she will just keep swimming.” (Sonja Chargois, July 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 148)

That same semester, another student notes the Finding Nemo allusion. “I really like this haiku because it has two meanings to me. One being the funny one from Finding Nemo and the second meaning more inspirational. Life is full of obstacles and storms, but you have to remember that the storm does not last forever. You can get through anything if you remember to just keep pushing and striving for greatness. Which is where I get the just keep swimming part.” (Marshaya Sangster, July 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 148)

the wind—
a reminder that this too
shall pass

Jennifer Tohill, July 2016

Students recognize the struggles and share strategies for self-care and healing. One of Jennifer’s peers writes: “This haiku is so true; that is why I enjoy it so much. It is such a big message in just three little lines. So many of us get caught up in a moment, bad or good, and do not realize that it is just one moment of the big picture of our lives. Unfortunately, I have had too many people take their lives due to this thinking. I try to encourage my friends and family to keep a blessing jar or journal so that in the midst of these bad times they are able to look back and remember that it is bigger than them. That where they are now will not be where they end up. Where they were a year ago was so different just like what the future holds. There are people and paths that they need to become a part of. This haiku is a reminder of those paths.” (Michelle Holsapple, July 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 158)

long shower
 I think
 where am I going?

Christopher Potter, Fall 2012

Another student picks this haiku as a favorite because it affirms one of his own ways of taking care of himself. Seth writes that: “For me the shower is where I do some of my deepest thinking about life other than before I go to sleep. I often think about current good things as well as bad things in my life, but other times I go further. I think about the future, and in doing so I feel lost from time to time. I have faith that things will work out, but at the same time, thinking about the future can be scary and overwhelming. I think the fact that this haiku is so simple but can trigger so many thoughts is remarkable.” (Seth Harshman, Fall 2012, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 156)

(2) Struggling With Identity and Body Image

naked
 she winces at her reflection
 Fat Tuesday

Nicole Silverman, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, 141

In this haiku, the author is very matter of fact about it being “Fat Tuesday,” a day of excess associated with Mardi Gras before the subsequent season of Lent, which often calls for restraint. Fellow students relate to the author’s “wince” at their naked self. One student states: “The woman in the haiku seems to have awakened in a compromising position and is probably delirious because of a hangover. She’s realizing what she did the night before and doesn’t seem happy; looking at herself in the mirror reiterates the deed she did the night before. I get the feeling that whatever she did was so bad that it’s difficult to look at herself the next day.” (Joanne Weise, Spring 2005)

Another student writes that this haiku conveys “a feeling that all girls get quite often of thinking they are fat. I hate looking in the mirror when I am naked, I try to get clothes on as soon as possible. The Fat Tuesday is funny because I feel like in this haiku that it has no significant meaning other than it is Tuesday and I feel fat, and it is such a common feeling among most people.” (Jill Guffey, Spring 2005)

I want to take scissors
cut and snip
until I am small

Sadie Scott, Fall 2020

Obviously less humorous than the “Fat Tuesday” haiku, Sadie Scott places us inside the perspective of someone wanting to take action. Classmate Binny Tamang responds: “This haiku made me think about people who've ever had body image issues. It also made me a bit sad. I know the issue is real because as a person with short stature, I have at many times thought how much I would like to grow some inches more. Life would be more convenient. But I also feel like my stature does not define me and is not significant enough to spend my time contemplating things I can't change. However, I would gladly accept a deal from God that'd make me taller, and that's why I like this haiku. (Binny Tamang, Fall 2020)

Student Sydney Griggs writes: “This haiku has a very melancholic tone to it. I can picture someone sitting in front of a mirror, overcome by emotions. They bring a pair of scissors to their hair, hesitating for only a moment before cutting it off. One small cut becomes several large ones in the span of seconds, hair gliding to the tile. Interestingly, I struggle to put a name to exactly what the writer is feeling. I think this is one of those pieces that give you a small part of the story like a puzzle piece. Having that half of a whole is what makes this piece so interesting to read because it

is impossible to just look at it. It is like I feel it. All the emotions are conveyed to the reader in such a way that I almost feel that I am in that scene I imagined.” (Sydney Griggs, Fall 2020)

dumb, fat, lazy . . .
I look in the mirror
believing his lies

Jacquelyn Manicki, January 2009

In this haiku, the narrator recognizes that his words are lies but also recognizes that she has accepted “his lies.” One of her peers writes that, “This haiku can be interpreted in so many ways. I take it as a woman being hard on herself, thinking she is an idiot because she keeps believing a man that she knows is lying to her. She lets him get away with it because she thinks she is fat, and lazy, so she hangs on to this liar thinking she cannot do any better.” (Julie Trimble, January 2009)

a B Cup
telling me
im not a woman

Hannah Haedike, Fall 2018

The author discusses what others say and how she is asserting positivity and confidence to resist those voices. Hannah writes: “This is something I have struggled with my entire life. I’m too short, I don’t have big boobs, I have thunder thighs and I will never be the ideal version of a woman. I’ve constantly compared myself to the women around me, including friends and family and what women are supposed to look like based on the tabloids and social media. Although the culture industry tells me one thing about how I am supposed to look to be a woman, I find strength and dignity in the fact that I will never look like that. I am a woman no matter what I look like. There is confidence I’ve

found in that. Every woman is different and that's what makes us all so unique and beautiful." (Hannah Haedike, Fall 2018, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 204)

Fine then!
I will be a dandelion,
weed in name alone.

Kaia Ball, Fall 2016

In this haiku, Kaia Ball exclaims that she will exalt in being "a dandelion". Her friend Alexsenia admires this poem and supports her healthy attitude: "I absolutely love Kaia's haiku. It's so defiant and sassy and strong. You can just feel the determination within those lines. It's as if she's saying fine, call me what you want, make your own assumption, but I know who I am. I will not change because you say so. I will not bend to become the thing that you think I am. 'I will be a dandelion/weed in name alone.' Knowing Kaia personally, I know that this haiku is personal, and I admire her for being able to write what she's feeling in a way that is healthy and beautiful." (Alexsenia Ralat, Fall 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 137)

(3) Struggling With Relationships

as we slowly kiss
i wonder if he'd love me
if i was pretty

Courtney Burress, Spring 2013

College students are often in relationships or seeking a relationship with plenty of uncertainties and doubts. Consider the two different perspectives in these reading responses. Darian Sloat writes: "One has to imagine this goes through the heads of many people when they are in a relationship. It's so difficult to

determine what role physical attraction should play in romance. As humans, we tend to be most interested in people we find physically attractive, but then it's easy to wonder if we are invested in the relationship for partially faulty reasons. I enjoy this haiku because it bluntly points out one of the most common thoughts humans have: am I loved for me, or the things I possess?" (Darien Sloat, Spring 2013, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 109)

Student Emily Crutchfield relates to these self-doubts and offers her approach: "I like this haiku because even in such a tender moment, when someone is kissing you softly, you can still feel self-doubts. She is having self-confidence issues despite the fact that she is receiving soft loving kisses. I can understand where she is coming from because I find myself doing that occasionally too. But what I've learned is that it is important to just cherish moments while they are happening, and not try to analyze them, because you will never get it right." (Emily Crutchfield, Spring 2013, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 109)

his honeyed words
stuck to my skin
hours of scrubbing

Alexsenia Ralat, Fall 2016

This, of course, is about a relationship gone wrong. As one student responds: "When I read this haiku, I picture heartbreak. This is relatable for anyone that has ever been led on by someone that they really liked. Even when you realize that the person is not good for you, it is still hard to accept. It takes a long time to lose the feelings that you once had for them. Even long after they are gone, they still sometimes cross your mind and that old hurting feeling comes back. This haiku gives a message that anyone who has ever loved and lost can understand." (Owen Pulver, Fall 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 110)

Another student writes that she likes this haiku "because of the use of the term honey. Honey in itself is something that is sweet and desirable, even innocent. Yet the author compares the lover's voice to honey, and the love betrayed has left the author scrubbing away the residue. I just think it's a very powerful piece that many of us can relate to." (Jordan Comish, Fall 2016, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 110)

wrinkly hands
from washing my dishes
i was not yours to fix

Bailey Banks, Fall 2021

In this haiku, the narrator is "washing my dishes" so long that their hands are "wrinkly." They are taking care of their own mess. They are on their own. Independent. They don't need someone else to do it for them or with them. The haiku ends with a declaration or realization that perhaps they weren't loved for who they are. They were only loved as a project to fix or to improve. One of the author's peers responds: "This haiku was my favorite for this Kukai! I love the imagery and the feeling it physically provides. You can recall the feeling of wrinkly fingers from having your hands under water for too long; you can smell dish soap and feel water on your skin. The last line is what really makes the haiku. It comes as a surprise, but one that makes complete sense. You wonder if they never asked for help with the dishes, if they're treated as lesser and incompetent. You wonder who "you" is — a lover? A friend? A family member? There are so many ways this haiku could go." (Maya Gomez, Fall 2021)

at the height
of the argument the old couple
pour each other tea

George Swede, *Almost Unseen*, 109

College students love this haiku. Perhaps they see their grandparents in it? Here are a couple of reader responses. “I found this one extremely warm hearted and it just made me happy, despite the fact that this old couple is arguing. They have been married for so long, I assume, that they know basically everything about each other, so they argue, just like anyone else, but their love for each other still shines bright as you can tell when they pour each other tea. Although they do not agree about something, they know that their love still holds true and that they will continue to love each other, but honestly, who agrees on absolutely every-thing? And if they do, how boring would that be? They have come to understand each other enough to know that people do not always agree but that their love will endure, and they will still respect each other, enough to still be courteous and caring to pour each other tea, even in the heat of an argument.” (Sydney Brangenberg, January 2017, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 98)

Another student writes: “This haiku is everything a relationship seems to strive for. The old couple, beyond the state of physical attraction and in a new stage of their relationship, are still challenging each other. They haven’t resigned passion. They still delve into new topics (unless this is an old argument). They respect each other enough to still pour each other tea in the heat of battle. Unfortunately, I haven’t met this mythical couple, this promise of the perfect marriage. I only imagine that someday I could have this. To find someone who would continue to challenge me for years to come seems a dream, and this haiku offers a glimpse into a dream.” (Bill Ryan, Spring 2009, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 98)

(4) Dealing With Loss and Grief

first funeral
hand-me-down suit
two sizes too big

Jennifer Godwin, Spring 2009

College students may not have had many experiences with death. While it may be a cliché excuse for absence, it is often true that one of their grandparents has died. Here is one student's response to this haiku about a first funeral: "This haiku brings a sad moment and a funny vision of a child in a suit that is way too big. Many people don't understand death and funerals when they are younger. I didn't really know the man that died at my first funeral. I remember feeling weird because everyone was sad, and looking at this man that was unmoving, but looked like a person. I think that a first funeral is a scary and memorable experience. I like how this haiku has a little comedic vision inside this otherwise scary experience." (Lizzy Kelly, Spring 2009, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 123)

Students write more poignant haiku when experiencing the loss of a friend or a parent.

best friends
an entire conversation
with a tombstone

Geoffrey Eggleston, Fall 2012

Students provide empathy and caring as they imagine their fellow student's loss. Hannah Gifford writes: "I find this poem, though about a very sad subject, to be brilliant. I imagine these friends were those who did everything together. Even with one of them passing, the other still goes to talk, just as they have always done. The last line really changes the haiku, but I also like the meaning in that last line. It gives me hope that the friend is still finding time for that relationship and healing at the same time." (Hannah Gifford, Fall 2012, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 156)

Another student writes: "I liked this one because I imagine someone sitting next to the grave of his or her best friend in life.

They are just sitting there having a normal conversation like they would if the friend were still alive. One friend is telling the other about what has been going on, whether it is school, work, relationships, or anything. It's just really cool that the person didn't forget even after the friend is dead." (Morgan Ewald, Fall 2012, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 156)

the family calls her
his fiancé
at his funeral

Lane Caspar, Fall 2017

In this haiku about the loss of a fiancé, students can imagine the difficulty of meeting family for the first time. Maya writes: "I love this haiku. It's so heartbreaking. I imagine that the man was planning to propose to her, and he told his family about it, but he died before he ever got the chance to ask her to marry him. If she didn't know about this until the funeral, that makes it even more devastating. It's so sad to think of what could have been for the two of them. They could have gotten married, had kids, and grown old together, but their time together was cut unexpectedly short. It's so unfair." (Maya Dougherty, Fall 2017, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 123)

dress by dress
the story of her life
day lilies close

Peggy Lyles, *To Hear the Rain*, 83

College students also love this haiku about going through a woman's things. Amy Eller writes: "I felt a very real connection to this haiku as I think of my grandmother. It has been one year since she has been gone. My grandmother was a very elegant woman. She always looked beautiful when she had to get dressed up. She had a

closet that was as long as the wall in her bedroom and it was full of clothes. We found clothes from twenty years ago in this closet and I think even longer than that. My mother and I had to go back to her house to find a dress for the funeral. The moment I walked in the house I could feel the pain of how much I would miss her. I walked up the stairs of her house and stopped at her bedroom door. I looked around to see all of her things just as she had left them. The tears began to swell in my eyes as I looked at pictures next to her neatly made bed. I opened the closet doors and saw the clothes neatly hanging in her closet. The minute the doors opened the smell of her scent hit me like a cool breeze. I stood there looking at the history of my grandmother's clothes. I could see her in the clothes as I ran my hand over them. Clothes she wore at Sunday dinner, clothes she played bridge in with her friends. As the tears ran down my face, I wrapped myself into one of her favorite dresses. This dress was a beautiful navy-blue dress that she wore to my wedding. She was so proud of this dress when she found it. The day of my wedding she was glowing in that dress. I put the dress up to my face hoping for a hint of her perfume. Holding that dress made me think of my wedding and how upset she was that the church would be decorated with white lilies. She was from England and they believed lilies were the sign of death, but I thought the church would look elegant. She thought it would look like a funeral. This was the only time that the two of us ever disagreed. I knew she could have a mind of her own and that it would all work out and that the wedding would be beautiful. Years after the wedding we would still bring up the white lilies just to tease her. When I see lilies today it makes me think of my grandmother. I stop and laugh to myself because I know she would want me to think of a rose or violet instead. I have many lilies of different kinds planted in my yard. I guess you could say we are all like day lilies, our lives come to a close and another one opens." (Amy Eller, September 2010, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 48)

wilted lilacs . . .
 your hand
 slips from mine

Aubrie Cox, *Tea's Aftertaste*, 15

Although this haiku could be about the loss of a relationship, several students imagine it is about someone dying. Michael Means responds: “This one is a good example (to me anyway) of what a haiku is all about. It perfectly ties nature to humans. When I think of wilted lilacs, I think of something or someone dying. I lost my mother about 5 years ago. She loved lilacs and the last two lines remind me of her passing. The ending in my head has her smiling back at me, and her eyes saying, ‘until we meet again’.” (Michael Means, July 2018, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 28)

(5) The Importance of Self-Care and Developing Tools for Resilience

In this last section, I want to share haiku and reading responses to haiku about becoming more independent and capable of recognizing the importance of self-care.

out of a relationship
 I can make
 my own rules

Carly Clo, Spring 2021

Often students have been through some difficult relationships or heartbreaks, so it is not surprising that they enjoy celebrating moments of independence. For example, Kaitlin asserts that: “I loved this haiku because it reminds me of how I felt when I had left my past relationship with my high school sweetheart. We had grown up together, and I even followed him to Millikin. We had a rough relationship towards the end, but I remember the

feeling of independence I felt after leaving for the last time. I was relieved. I found that I love being independent and not having to rely on anyone else.” (Kaitlin Hathaway, Spring 2021)

Another student remembered her feeling of release after being in a toxic relationship. “I really can relate to this haiku because I recently got out of a very toxic relationship. During that time, it was very stressful trying to be on their time and do everything they wanted instead of trying to fix myself. I was so focused on making them as happy as they can be rather trying to keep myself ok. A trait that I have is making sure everybody is safe around me first and then me. I just am too nice but, in the end, I tend to get hurt the most. I like that this haiku stated that they can finally make their own rules indicating that we as females are able to make our own decisions without worrying who is behind us.” (Danni Beard, Spring 2021)

cleaned the living room
for no one
but me

Trinity Pesko, Fall 2021

Even simple tasks, such as cleaning up, can provide a healthy sense of independence. Priscilla Sabourin notes how her view of household chores changed at college. “Growing up, I hated to do chores, like almost every other child in the world. I would begrudgingly finish them with threats of losing screen time. The worst was when we had guests over and my mom would decide that we had to clean the entire house. We dragged our feet and mumbled as we picked things up and vacuumed and put things away. It didn’t mean anything to us because it wasn’t really our space. We were young, and even though it was at our home, we hadn’t bought the house or poured ourselves into decorating it. Getting to college brought about a change. I may be too busy to clean my room as frequently or as well as I should be, but when I

do clean it, it is completely my own choice. Nobody will punish me or take away screen time. I clean it because it makes me feel nice and better and more put together.” (Priscilla Sabourin, Fall 2021)

Another student writes: “This haiku was very much me. I appreciate a clean house so much to the point where my whole mood is ruined if I feel like I’m living in filth. When I read this haiku, I felt so validated because I often find myself ‘crazy cleaning’ whenever I want to get my life back on track.” (Nico Velazquez, Fall 2021)

midnight . . .
I mosey
along the train track

Kersten Haile, Spring 2008

With such busy lives, sometimes just slowing down is a form of self-care. One of Kersten Haile’s peers enjoyed her haiku for expressing this. “I like this haiku because it makes me think of one of my favorite activities: walking. Not walking as in walking from one class to another, but walking with nowhere to go, at my pace. Most of the time this walking is with my dog when I take her out, a task I do at the beginning and end of the day. I like walking her more at night because there’s no one out, and it’s peaceful. It allows me to take a break from homework and breathe in some fresh air. It’s kind of like my personal break time to relax. It also frees my mind to think about anything else that I need to get done or how I need to manage my time.” (Brett Coffman, Spring 2008, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 78.)

spring morning
I shave my legs
for no one

Alyson Ludek, *Millikin University Haiku Anthology*, 17

Alyson's classmate Samantha Parks related to the importance of getting dressed up just because. She writes: "I love this haiku because there is such a sense of empowerment in it. I think every girl has this sensation at some point in their life. For me it came just after finally getting over a failed relationship. I woke up one morning and decided to shave and get all dressed up, not because I was spending a day with some guy but because it made me feel good about myself. There is a slight chance that this haiku could be interpreted more depressingly, however, the first line, spring morning, evokes sunshine and new life—happy sensations. Overall, this haiku reflects self-respect and inner peace for me, two things that are essential in order to truly be empowered and take command of your life." (Samantha Parks, Fall 2010, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 82)

the park bench
I tune everyone out
to think

Ashley Christenson, Spring 2020

Classmate Kevin Escobar related to the need to "tune everyone out" in this haiku. He writes, "This haiku sort of makes me feel very frustrated. There was a time when I was incredibly stressed and I just couldn't deal with the noise of campus anymore, so I decided to go for a walk in Fairview to calm myself down. When I got to the park, I tried to find a quiet place to sit and just be with my thoughts, but everywhere I sat there was still noise from other people. Children on the playground, a baseball team practicing, joggers without headphones. I finally found a bench with no one around and was finally able to just sit and breathe." (Kevin Escobar, Spring 2020)

I will conclude with this haiku that simply declares "resilience" in the first line:

resilience
 monarch butterfly
 lands on her shoulder

The author writes: “Throughout my life, especially in the last few years, I have become so strong and endured so much personal growth and truly learned to be resilient in times of weakness. As I have mentioned many times this semester, I have a love for nature-related haiku, and they bring me a sense of peace and joy. Including the imagery of the monarch butterfly paired with the word resilience was a way for me to express how the butterfly (which traditionally symbolizes the soul of a loved one, hope, endurance, and/or life) landing on my shoulder is like a reminder that my strength and my resilience is noticed, even in moments when I might not feel like it.” (Linnea Nordstrom, Spring 2021)

Conclusion

At the end of each semester, I ask my students to reflect on what they’ve learned by being an active participant in our haiku community. Several refer to a better understanding of themselves and empathy for others in the class. Here is part of Emily Sullin’s final reflection: “Haiku shares stories of life and reveals a little of the writer’s heart to the audience. Allowing ourselves to have feelings is another point that haiku has taught me. I have so many memories and happy childhood moments I would love to re-live over and over again. Likewise, I want others to experience the joy and cheerfulness I have encountered. I can achieve both of these goals with haiku. However, sometimes sorrow and grief needs to be allowed in these poems. Far too often, society tells us to put on a happy face and ignore our true feelings. With haiku, readers can experience whatever they need to at that moment in time. In class, I love reading others’ haiku and finding empathy.” (Emily Sullins, Fall 2018, *The Art of Reading & Writing Haiku*, 216)

The haiku and reading responses in this essay demonstrate Ce Rosenow's claim that "In the haiku community writers and readers share experiences and feelings that nurture the development of a caring imagination." Indeed, it has been my experience that two of the most significant benefits of engaging in haiku is that students develop an awareness and empathy for each other's struggles and gain strategies and understandings to grow more resilient and engage in self-care. They also get to enjoy the fun of sharing their lives through the art of reading and writing haiku! Kukai!

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