

Existential Themes in Haiku: Part 1

by Robert Epstein

Introduction

Poetry in general, and nature-based haiku in particular, speak to the deepest stirrings of the human spirit. In fact, I was drawn to haiku many years ago because the poetry touched me, and deeply. I felt that the poets who wrote haiku were sincere and genuinely desirous of transmitting what they discovered. I discerned an earnestness and a subtle passion in their poetic voice. And, as they were intent on tuning into and learning from nature, broadly conceived, I was especially enlivened by the possibility of benefiting from their discoveries, which I found very inspiring. Through haiku poetry the inexpressible finds poignant expression, very much as it does in music. Indeed, poetry may be thought of, at least in part, as the ineffable set to music, poetically speaking. Insofar as this is true, poetry offers a pathway to wholeness that bypasses the limitations of language and everyday consciousness.

As a practicing psychotherapist, I have used haiku and senryu in the context of exploring various themes – usually existential – which often arise in the course of therapy.¹ I do my best to share the poems that come to mind in an understated and unobtrusive way, as I have no wish to sound pedantic, nor do I want to turn self-exploration into a literary diversion, which would take clients out of the emotionally aware place they are leaning into. Rather, I make passing reference to a poem that comes to mind as I am listening to the client recount his or her experience and share it, almost parenthetically, in the moment.² The client may pause to reflect on the haiku or not, though sometimes the person's reaction may occur later in our meeting, suggesting it's had some impact, however subtle.

What impels me to turn to haiku in the context of the psychotherapy work I do? I couldn't find a better or more accurate rationale than in the following passage by haiku poet, profes-

sor and publisher, Randy Brooks, quoted in *Lighting the Global Lantern*,³ a book about teaching haiku to adolescents and young adults. Although Professor Brooks is not speaking explicitly about the therapeutic potential of haiku, I believe it is precisely the reasons he outlines in general which prompt me to include haiku in therapy:

But what does haiku ask of us? To be alive. To feel. To know this is the way it is. To enjoy the moment. To laugh. To remember with all of our sensory associations. To imagine being here and here and here again. It takes us from here to here again. Haiku doesn't resolve a thing! It solves no problems! Haiku doesn't ask us to change who we are. A haiku doesn't ask us to pretend we are someone other than ourselves. We love haiku because it has no purpose other than to be, to feel, to love life. (47)

Against the background of Professor Brooks' view of haiku, I realized that I have been quietly reading with a therapeutic ear for existential themes from Basho, Buson and Issa to the present. In this essay, I would like to highlight some of these themes, which may point the way to self-healing—the recovery of one's sense of aliveness and well-being.⁴

Many people turn to therapy when they feel overwhelmed or worn out by Life's hardships and trials. Many feel like Sisyphus, pushing the big boulder up the steep mountain. They rarely experience any pride of accomplishment for a job well done; on the contrary, they feel ground down by everyday stresses and strains, which evokes self-doubt, anxiety, and insecurity. Such people enter therapy weary, demoralized, depressed.

As haiku poet Susan Antolin⁵ succinctly observes in *Wondrous Instruction and Advice from Global Poets* by Charlotte Digregorio:

It's far too easy to move hurriedly through each day, particularly in our fast-paced, technology-driven world, and in so doing, neglect to truly take note of the physical and emotional details

that comprise our day-to-day living. For me, the discipline of reading and writing haiku provides an invaluable countermeasure, a deliberate slowing down and sharpening of my perceptions of the world around me. (146)

Antolin continues:

For me, the discipline of reading and writing haiku provides an invaluable countermeasure, a deliberate slowing down and sharpening of my perceptions of the world around me. In noticing the progress of a line of ants across the pavement, or the way the stars look from a backyard lawn chair on a summer night, I'm better able to feel a part of the world and, I hope, move through it with more compassion and care.

A poem by the beloved Japanese haiku poet Issa usually springs readily to mind. I am looking to encourage self-compassion as well as hint at the value of patience and perseverance. As Antolin points out, it is not easy to carry on in the face of everyday stresses and strains.

little
snail
inch
by
inch
climb
Mount
Fuji

Issa⁶

birthcry!
the stars
are all in place

Raymond Roseliep⁷

evening rain –
I braid my hair
into the dark

Penny Harter⁸

a warm fall day,
I learn from the rock
to do nothing

Paul O. Williams⁹

Selfhood

As a concept, the self has evolved over time. It used to be considered interchangeable with the word individual; that is a whole person—one who is indivisible. More recently, the self is thought of as a composite of parts. These parts are not necessarily well-integrated; on the contrary, the disparate parts of the self may very well be in conflict. In fact, the Swiss psychiatrist, Carl Jung, who broke with Sigmund Freud to create his own psychotherapeutic approach, defined neurosis as self-division, and this appears to have become the norm. More than a few people seek therapy in hopes of addressing inner conflict or self-division and, just as Jung described the core problem, he also pointed the way to inner healing: one needs, paradoxically to foster acceptance as a prerequisite to change.

no full-length mirror --
I view myself
in pieces

Susan Antolin¹⁰

wildflowers
each of them
a different me

Victor Ortiz¹¹

the life I seek
is the life I am living

Lorie Stoelting¹²

Loneliness and Aloneness

Many people today live in urban settings, where nearly everyone is harried and rushing about, trying to juggle one too many responsibilities—whether it be work, school, parenting, socializing or all of the above. Self-alienation is not uncommon, nor is loneliness. There may be a longing for closeness and intimacy on the one hand, but a fear of it on the other, because the last thing one needs is another person making demands on the precious little time that is left to him or herself.

This road --
no one goes down it,
autumn evening

Basho¹³

Lonely silence,
a single cicada's cry
sinking into stone

Basho¹⁴

zthe gull
giving loneliness
sound.

Alexis Rotella¹⁵

I go,
you stay;
two autumns

Shiki¹⁶

Even though aloneness is an existential reality, there is something more, as Buson suggests:

Autumn evening –
there's joy also
in loneliness.

Buson¹⁷

(Self-)Doubt

Doubt may be, in part, a function of inner division. Many are consequently confused and uncertain. Doubt often accompanies anxiety (see below) and a vicious cycle may be set in motion: anxiety begets doubt and doubt, in turn, exacerbates anxiety. Harmony is the antidote to, or healing agent for, doubt as well as many other distressed states of mind. In the strength-based approach I take in therapy, I often pause with clients to suggest that feelings are forms of energy that communicate information which is seeking understanding. I repeat this as often as necessary.

how come
whatshisname
never speaks to me

Dee Evetts¹⁸

if onlys
what ifs –
twilight

Christopher Patchel¹⁹

Unable to decide
which balloon to pick
she begins to cry.

Arizona Zipper²⁰

Palm Sunday
a card game called
'doubt'

Fay Aoyagi (21)

Anxiety/Dread

The 19th century Danish philosopher and father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, wrote eloquently about an inherent aspect of human existence, which is characterized by angst or what he called *dread*. To feel separate and apart from others, irrevocably alone, can lead to a terror that chills to the bone. The fear of not living a fully

authentic life goes to the heart of what it means to be human, and one must know oneself deeply in order to live in the world with courage to persevere, despite.

The late Rollo May, a prominent existential psychologist, pointed out in *The Meaning of Anxiety*, that the root of the word existence means “to stand apart.” To stand apart opens us up to danger. As such, there is inherent vulnerability which gives rise to fear, and anxiety (including death anxiety) as well as worry, panic and dread.

wondering
if I'll ever be free
spring melt

Renee Owen²²

In the guest room
where my mother slept
I look for comfort.

Alexis Rotella²³

ironing
a white handkerchief
and my ancestral guilt

Fay Aoyagi²⁴

Emptiness, Anguish, Despair

Whether young or old, one may come face-to-face with a terrible feeling of emptiness. Nothing seems to matter. This may be the

result of external hardship or unremitting disappointment. Emptiness may also arise out of a loss of meaning. If one feels acutely different from others or that no one understands him/her, this can lead to a sense of alienation, that one does not belong. When such feelings are intense, as when one has given up all hope of things being different or better, the person may plunge into full-fledged despair. Hopelessness and despair significantly increase the risk of suicide though, as Irvin Yalom astutely observes in *When Nietzsche Wept*: “Despair is the price one pays for self-awareness.” He adds, poignantly: “If we climb high enough, we will reach a height from which tragedy ceases to look tragic.”

night bus
the emptiness
well lit

Bryan Rickert²⁵

store closing
a few cashiers dust
empty selves

Roland Packer²⁶

the empty place
inside me
. . . wild lupine

Roberta Beary²⁷

Alienation

Alienation deserves a section unto itself. One may feel alienated from oneself, from others, from the world or God (however one defines the latter). Alienation is a phenomenon that has existed throughout history, though I am not sure how many individuals would describe themselves this way during the present time. Young people especially are vulnerable to feeling numbed out, shut down or overwhelmed, but these be variants of alienation. Once upon a time, those who were alienated sought refuge in nature in order to calm and center oneself but today many withdraw into their own worlds, facilitated by the ubiquitous presence of the internet. Consequently, a marked decline in civility and face-to-face interaction is taking place. Even at restaurants, couples and families dine “separately together,” staring intently at their respective devices. I find it sad as well as concerning. Where is the human race headed if alienation or cyber-induced isolation becomes the predominant mode of being in the world?

the box to check
that I'm not a robot --
winter rain

Cheri Hunter Day²⁸

whale songs. . .
when did we stop
talking?

Bud Cole²⁹

Autumn wind:
gods, Buddha –
lies, lies, lies.

Shiki (30)

Addictions and Compulsions

Jung regarded chemical dependency as a misdirected search for the spirit. No one turns to alcohol or drugs with the intention of becoming addicted, but those substances which are effective in altering mood have great addictive potential. Those who ultimately develop dependencies on substances (as well as gambling, shopping and sex) do so, often, by self-medicating sadness, loneliness, depression, anxiety and other all-too-human emotions. The end result is a psychic numbing or deadening in relation to the trials and tribulations of living and, of course, the threat of death, which is both serious and real.

morning after:
empty bottles
full of regret

Guy Jefferson³¹

needle marks
on his right arm —
shivering sparrows

Fay Aoyagi³²

Editor's Note: Part 2 of this essay will appear in issue 49.1.

References

¹ Irvin Yalom, a highly respected existential psychiatrist, identified several key existential themes in his classic book, *Existential Psychotherapy: death, freedom and responsibility, meaning and meaninglessness, aloneness and isolation [loneliness]*. I have taken the liberty of adding several themes to Yalom's list, which I regard as salient. For a succinct overview of existential therapy, see also Kirk J. Schneider and Orah T. King, *Existential-Humanistic Therapy*.

² For a helpful exploration of the role of poetry in therapy and life, see David Richo, *Being True to Life: Poetic Paths to Personal Growth*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, 2009.

- ³ Randy Brooks in Terry Ann Carter, *Lighting the Global Lantern*. Canada: Winter-green Studios Press, 2011, p. 47.
- ⁴ No sooner did I begin working on this essay I realized that there is a sequel I want to write that focuses on transpersonal themes in haiku poetry, which will be forthcoming.
- ⁵ Susan Antolin in Charlotte Digregorio, *Wondrous Advice and Instruction from Global Poets*. Winnetka, IL: Artful Communications Press, 2025; p. 146.
- ⁶ Issa in David G. Lanoue, ed. *Issa: Cup of Tea Poems: Selected Haiku of Kobayashi Issa*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991.
- ⁷ Raymond Roseliep, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind: 108 Poems to Cultivate Awareness & Open Your Mind*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2008.
- ⁸ Penny Harter, *The Heron's Nest*, 2, 2000.
- ⁹ Paul O. Williams, in Bruce Ross, ed., *The Haiku Moment: An Anthology of Contemporary North American Haiku*. Boston, MA: Charles E. Tuttle, 1993.
- ¹⁰ Susan Antolin, *The Years That Went Missing*. Durham, NC: Backbone Press, 2020.
- ¹¹ Victor Ortiz, *The Heron's Nest*, 7, 2005.
- ¹² Lorie Stoelting, *Mariposa*, #25, 2011.
- ¹³ Bashō, in Robert Hass, ed. *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Bashō, Buson, & Issa*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1994.
- ¹⁴ Bashō, in Sam Hamhill, ed. *The Sound of Water: Haiku by Bashō, Buson, Issa and Other Poets*. Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1995.
- ¹⁵ Alexis Rotella, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind*, 2008.
- ¹⁶ This translation is attributed to Buson in Robert Hass' *The Essential Haiku*, 1994. However, this haiku actually was written by Shiki. See Michael Dylan Welch's essay, "Buson or Shiki: The True Authorship of the 'Two Autumns' Poem."
- ¹⁷ Buson, *ibid*.
- ¹⁸ Dee Evetts, *endgrain: haiku/senryu 1986-1997*. Winchester, VA: Redmoon Press, 1997.
- ¹⁹ Christopher Patchel, *The Heron's Nest*, 7, 2005.
- ²⁰ Arizona Zipper, in *The Haiku Anthology, Expanded Edition*.
- ²¹ Fay Aoyagi, *Beyond the Reach of My Chopsticks: New and Selected Haiku*. San Francisco, CA: Blue Willow Press, 2012.
- ²² Renee Owen, *Alone on a Wild Coast*. Ormskirk, United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2014.
- ²³ Alexis Rotella, in Cor van den Heuvel, ed. *The Haiku Anthology: Expanded Edition*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- ²⁴ Fay Aoyagi, *Chrysanthemum Love*. San Francisco, CA: Blue Willow Press, 2003.
- ²⁵ Bryan Rickert, *The Heron's Nest*, 21, 2019.
- ²⁶ Roland Packer, *The Heron's Nest*, 21, 2019.
- ²⁷ Roberta Beary, *The Unworn Necklace*. Ormskirk, United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2007.
- ²⁸ Cheri Hunter Day, *Frogpond*, 42.1, Winter-Spring 2019.

²⁹ Bud Cole, Frogpond, 34.1 Winter Spring, 2011.

³⁰ Shiki, in Lucien Stryk, ed. Cage of Fireflies: Modern Japanese Haiku. Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1993.

³¹ Guy Jefferson, Modern Haiku, 35.2, Summer 2004.

³² Fay Aoyagi, Chrysanthemum Love, 2003.

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