

## Haiku Poetry and the Parenting Principle: An Exploration

by Robert Epstein

Even small acts of love enrich oneself and the world.

~ Anonymous

For many years now, I regularly turn to haiku poetry to explore the world, which includes the human psyche—my own and others'. Carl G. Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, who broke with Freud to discover his own spiritually oriented approach to psychotherapy, emphasized the vital role of *archetypes* in the realm of psychological life. The author of *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* defined the term in the following way:

Archetypes are, by definition, factors and motifs that arrange the psychic elements into certain images, characterized as archetypal [recurring, primal], but in such a way that they can be recognized only from the effects they produce. They exist preconsciously, and presumably they form the structural determinants of the psyche in general.<sup>1</sup>

Jung continues:

As *a priori* conditioning factors, they represent a special, psychological instance of the biological "pattern of behavior," which gives all of living organisms their specific qualities. Just as the manifestations of this biological ground plan may change in the course of development, so also can those of the archetype. Empirically considered, however, the archetype did not ever come into existence as a phenomenon of organic life, but entered into the picture with life itself.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many important archetypes that might be identified, the Mother and Father archetypes are prominent. These appear

key in the psychological development of the Self, a seminal archetype in Jung's psychology.

Although I do not consider myself a Jungian analyst, I appreciate Jung's contributions to understanding the human psyche.<sup>3</sup> I have long maintained that we humans possess an innate capacity to parent ourselves, drawing on what I would call a mothering and fathering principle or spirit.<sup>4</sup> The mothering principle is not merely an internalized image of one's biological parent, though we are certainly greatly influenced and impacted by interactions with our mother and father (or other primary caregivers) but, rather, a built-in predisposition to love, care for, and nurture ourselves, as well as others.

Naturally, no parents—being human—are perfect, but the parenting principle may become blocked or distorted from an early age, especially if one's parents or caregivers are indifferent, neglectful, or abusive. In fact, many of the therapy clients I have worked with over the years come to therapy with significant deficits in self-parenting. In such instances, a main focus of the therapeutic relationship entails facilitating access to, and reinforcing, the parenting principle.

For the purposes of the present discussion, I would like to define the parenting principle in simple and straightforward terms: it refers to that part of the self which loves, cares for, and nurtures one's own being throughout the lifespan. Self-love, which I distinguish from self-centeredness, selfishness, and narcissism, is altogether wholesome, a vital quality for the long-term health and welfare of the individual.

Self-love, the core of the parenting principle or spirit, manifests in a variety of ways, but I wish to compress these into three fundamental categories: Self-Care and Self-Compassion; Learning and Exploration; Personal Responsibility and Self-Transcendence.

To the best of my knowledge, Jungian psychology has not explicitly rooted the notion of archetypes in Nature, but the human psyche is, indeed, an outgrowth of Nature or the Whole. This insight is no more readily grasped than in the related archetypal image of Mother Earth or Mother Nature.

What are the implications of this? From my vantage point, as a therapist and a haiku poet, to parent oneself is to ground oneself in the larger context of Nature or the Whole. Doing so, within the constraints of contemporary life dominated by technology, fosters inward peace as well as external harmony.

### **The Place of Haiku Poetry in the Parenting Principle**

Haiku poetry is considered a literary art. It is certainly that, yet much more. The stirrings of poetic perception and intuition, I suggest, are rooted in the parenting principle, which underlies a love of Nature or the world. Even if only implicitly, we value Nature (at least in part) because the parenting principle within us seeks union or harmony with Nature. We experience a sense of wholeness when all is well in the world. Notwithstanding the pursuit of happiness, which is enshrined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and hailed by the Dalai Lama, it may very well be that *wholeness* is truly what we are after, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Haiku poetry is a skillful means for learning from Nature and, as such, helps to heal childhood as well as contemporary wounds. Insights derived from a passionate interest in, or love of, Nature (broadly conceived) foster self-care, compassion for self and others, as well as equanimity and well-being. This has certainly been my personal experience and, as far as I can tell, the experience of many fellow poets. In short, I propose that reading and writing haiku can be construed as acts of self-parenting and, hence, self-love.

For a long time, I attributed my interest in haiku poetry to Alan Watts' and D. T. Suzuki's writings on Zen Buddhism. This was true, historically speaking. But, in probing more deeply, I realized that the Japanese appreciation of Nature, which forms an integral part of Zen, reminded me of my mother's love of Nature. From an early age, I saw how tenderly my mother rescued distressed plants from the local nursery and planted flowers in the yard that bloomed brightly. She squealed with delight whenever she encountered a cactus of any kind and stealthily "stole" seeds of plants from arboretums and gardens that she wished to grow indoors at home.

This realization led me to the insight that haiku poetry, like the flora and fauna my mother loved so much, was a compelling way for me to connect with Nature. Haiku takes me back to Nature; it is not a substitute for, or intermediary between, Nature and myself.

In the sections below, I would like to highlight several haiku that reflect different facets of the parenting principle which, in turn, embody intuitive observations culled from active engagement with our surroundings. I am intentionally writing minimal commentary on specific poems, as I prefer that the reader enter each poem for personal reflection and self-discovery.

### **(Self-)Love, (Self-)Care, and (Self-)Compassion**

It may be apparent by now that I am proposing that the parenting principle "makes the world go round." This is not intended to reflect a reductionistic point of view but, rather, a holistic perspective as articulated, for example, in Lao Tzu's classic Taoist book, *Tao te Ching*.<sup>5</sup>

I want to suggest that healthy being (physical, psychological, emotional) depends on love, care, and nurturance from parents or caregivers. To remain healthy throughout the lifespan, we

“take over” or embody love, care, and nurturance in the form of self-parenting. Even if what we were originally taught about love was limited, we can learn how to nurture ourselves by establishing relationships with others—including relatives, mentors, teachers, coaches, friends, and lovers—who care deeply for us. These relationships may offer healing or compensate for deficits from the “imperfect” parenting that we received.

As I intimated above, love manifests in a number of different ways: via affection, care, interest, empathy, guidance, reassurance, problem-solving, the sharing of wisdom, information, exposure to new experiences, etc.

In the realm of self-love, self-care, and self-nurturance, the poems below reflect some of the ways that poets have observed these vital qualities in themselves or others.

In the widest sense, self-parenting is a bearing witness to one’s Being in the larger context of the world around us. Bill Pauly puts this eloquently in the following poem:

onion skin  
I open myself  
to the rain<sup>6</sup>

Bill Pauly

*Witnessing* as self-love can also be called self-acceptance:

sunbeam —  
happy to be  
just as I am<sup>7</sup>

Marianna Monaco

Reflecting mindful awareness and self-acceptance, Ce Rosenow manages to maintain inner balance, knowing that emotional reactions, though momentarily intense, are impermanent:

porch swing my feelings come and go<sup>8</sup>

Ce Rosenow

Here is another poem embodying self-acceptance:

butternut blight  
... the stretch marks  
I no longer hide<sup>9</sup>

Nitu Yumnam

To parent oneself is to tell the truth, which means to be honest with oneself. The poem below may hint at self-reproach or regret, but it really reflects the poet's emotional honesty:

so many times  
I wanted to say yes . . .  
summer stars<sup>10</sup>

Angela Terry

The poet below is engaging in self-nurturance by allowing for solitude and massaging his sore feet:

solitude —  
I massage  
my own feet<sup>11</sup>

sekiro

If we are attuned to what we need, we might find ourselves soothed or nurtured by Nature itself. The poet here shows us how the pine tree across the way calms her:

the slow sway  
of the neighbor's pine tree  
feeling better<sup>12</sup>

Elizabeth McMunn-Tetangco

Paul Chambers highlights the way parenting as self-care includes coping with illness and pain as well as exercising patience during the course of recovery:

convalescence . . .  
autumn revealing  
the river<sup>13</sup>

In the face of hardship or adversity, we may be tempted to escape or numb ourselves. While there may be a place for temporarily shutting down emotionally, abandoning oneself is not congruent with living life fully. We need to be present to *what* is if we are to respond skillfully. Regarding the importance of presence, Buddhist psychologist, Tara Brach, observes in *Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of RAIN*<sup>14</sup>:

Presence has three primary characteristics: wakefulness, openness, and tenderness or love. Many spiritual traditions describe presence as an open, sunlit sky. When presence is full, like the sky it is luminous and boundless, and it provides warmth and nourishment for life. (Brach, 9)

In just six words, this poet illuminates the mystery and magic of living in the moment:

just now  
this leaf  
this light<sup>15</sup>

Libby Brydolf

In the following haiku, Seren Fargo chooses *not* to abandon herself, despite the adverse circumstances she faces. Remaining present and open calls for her courage, and her poignant poem reflects this:

eviction —  
I pack the pieces  
of my favorite bowl<sup>16</sup>

Seren Fargo

In everyday life, self-love includes reminders to slow down, to climb off the hamster wheel of relentless “doing”:

shooting star  
my wish for  
an unhurried life<sup>17</sup>

Lauren Mayhew

Because the world is largely beyond our control, we all experience self-doubt, worry, and adversity from time to time. It is self-caring to reassure oneself in such moments:

swelling buds  
I tell myself there is  
a tomorrow<sup>18</sup>

Kala Ramesh



power outage —  
after the panic  
the self-talk<sup>19</sup>

Robert Epstein

Maybe a simple reminder to be here now is enough to center oneself:

worry beads —  
a string of moments  
now and now<sup>20</sup>

Marianna Monaco

*button up* —  
that would be  
my mother's voice<sup>21</sup>

Robert Epstein

The longtime poet and scholar, Randy Brooks, knows that friendship is nurturing to him; hence, making sure he connects with them is an act of self-care:

lunch with a friend  
how so few words  
hold me up<sup>22</sup>

Randy Brooks

Love, by its very nature, is expansive. Thus, if one has learned to love oneself, that love circles out to others, human and nonhuman alike. Love, then, appears as care and compassion for people close to us and even strangers. The very word *compassion* points to this: it includes the words *compass* and *passion*. That is, if I love and

care for myself, I will naturally be directed to care passionately for those in need or distress. Consider these thoughtful and sensitive poems that reflect empathy, care, and compassion:

shifting clouds  
I guide the spoon  
into dad's mouth<sup>23</sup>

John McManus

his illness  
I sign my letter  
with pink ink<sup>24</sup>

Yvonne Cabalona

this one life  
I move the sparrow  
to higher ground<sup>25</sup>

Renée Owen

about to kill an ant  
but no, it's carrying  
a corpse<sup>26</sup>

John Brandi

Let's not forget how love for others makes itself known through affection. The latter may be expressed in words, action, or touch, but whatever the means, the root is the same.

In the following poem, the warmth of affection is so dear and innocent:

kindergarten:  
two five-year-olds  
hold hands<sup>27</sup>

Emily Romano

In this haiku, the poet's cup of affection spills over:

the world a blossom  
I make up a song  
for my dog<sup>28</sup>

david boyer

The reader may recognize in the poems below how care and compassion guide one toward reconciliation and forgiveness:

scanning the tide charts  
we seek the way back  
to each other<sup>29</sup>

John Hawkhead

far from home  
a red-tailed hawk  
... forgiving my father<sup>30</sup>

Roberta Beary

### **Learning and Exploration**

Even while in the comfort and safety of the womb, life is not necessarily easy to navigate. The challenges we face in childhood and beyond may appear overwhelming at times. Learning and exploration are key to making our way in the world. Woven into

the parenting principle are qualities of adaptation that include, but are not limited to: curiosity, creativity, courage, experimentation, observation, resilience, and much more.

Listen to the myriad ways the poets below have learned to transform clear perception into wisdom via insight:

housebound  
learning the art  
of going nowhere<sup>31</sup>

Meg Arnot

folded prayer flags  
learning to live  
without answers<sup>32</sup>

Kathryn Bold

learning to eat  
around bruises  
winter apples<sup>33</sup>

Debbi Antebi

getting it  
after 50 books  
zen is not in books<sup>34</sup>

Robert Epstein

winter night  
my old dog teaches me  
silence<sup>35</sup>

Gloria Jaguden

paddleboarding  
a painted turtle shows me  
how it's done<sup>36</sup>

Debbie Strange

building a house  
without hands ...  
the robin<sup>37</sup>

Pat Davis

with eyes closed spring grass<sup>38</sup>

paul m.

### **Personal Responsibility and Self-Transcendence**

Freedom, love, and responsibility go together. Self-love is not an end in itself. Why? Because individuals do not live in a vacuum. The late Zen meditation teacher and Nobel Prize nominee, Thich Nhat Hanh, emphasized that the self is made up of non-self elements—air, earth, rain, sun, farmers, truck drivers who transport the goods we buy, store clerks, and so on—which means that all life exists in relationship. To love oneself is to love the Whole. Understood in this light, self-parenting grounded in love leads to self-transcendence or what Transpersonal Psychologist, Ken Wilber, calls *no-boundary*.

The haiku mind turns our attention to that which lies beyond our limited sense of self (the thinking mind). Again and again, we discover our inextricable connection with the world, even if we might view ourselves as isolated, alone, alienated, or misunderstood.

in the company  
of birch trees  
our shared roots<sup>39</sup>

Jeannie Martin

Consider the subtlety of transcendence in this haiku that points to our interconnectedness:

quiet rain  
the deeper quiet  
of uncut roses<sup>40</sup>

Roberta Beary

Caring about others, including the environment, arises out of a natural sensitivity and attunement. Compassion and sensitivity go together; the two bring about self-transcendence, but the latter is egoless. If I care, I tread with thoughtfulness and kindness. In the case of the poet below, this is both literally and figuratively so:

walking on the mountain's back tenderly<sup>41</sup>

William M. Ramsey

Thus far, the examples above pertain to the living. The poet in the poem below realizes her beloved father may no longer be embodied but that does not mean he is gone. Indeed, as Bob Dylan sings: "Death is not the end." Is this poetic license, or

poetic truth? Perhaps grief takes us to the edge of the known and into the mystery of life-and-death, such that a departed loved one may still be very much “alive”:

raven speak  
I hear my father  
from a dead tree<sup>42</sup>

Sandi Pray

### In Summary

Notwithstanding the age-old hardships of illness, infirmity, and death; the horrors of crime, violence, and war; natural disasters and man-made catastrophes, we are here to share love and embody peace. For this, we need the wisdom and guidance of the parenting spirit we are endowed with. As with all the arts, haiku poetry turns us toward the Whole from which we arise and to which we eventually return. To remember this is to be made whole, again and again in each moment. May it be so.

### Notes:

1. Carl. G. Jung quoted in *The Wisdom of Carl Jung*. Edward. Hoffman, ed. New York, NY: Kensington Publishing Corp., 2003; p. 61. For further reading, see: Carl.G. Jung. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, & Co., 1955. David. H. Rosen, *Synchronicity and Individuation: A Primer of Jung's Analytical Psychology*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2023.
2. Ibid., p. 61.
3. For further reading, see: Carl G. Jung. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, & Co., 1955. David H. Rosen, *Synchronicity and Individuation: A Primer of Jung's Analytical Psychology*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2023.

4. In these polarized and politically correct times, I have no interest or desire to foment controversy with regards to what qualities are associated with the mothering and fathering principles. I shall leave that to the reader to determine.
5. Lao Tzu, *Tao te Ching*. Stephen. Mitchell, tr. New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988.
6. Bill Pauly, *Frogpond* 38.3 (Autumn 2015).
7. Marianna Monaco, *bottle rockets*, #16 (2007).
8. Ce Rosenow, *Frogpond* 36:1 (Winter/Spring 2013).
9. Nitu Yumnam, *Frogpond* 46:3 (Autumn 2023).
10. Angela Terry, *Frogpond* 43:1 (Winter/Spring 2020).
11. sekiro, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Summer 2022).
12. Elizabeth McMunn-Tetangco, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Winter 2022).
13. Paul Chambers, *Frogpond* 41:1 (Winter/Spring 2018).
14. Tara Brach, *Radical Compassion: Learning to Love Yourself and Your World with the Practice of Rain*. New York, NY: Viking, 2019.
15. Libby Brydolf, *Acorn* #49 (Fall 2022).
16. Seren Fargo, 2013 San Francisco International Competition for Haiku (Third Place).
17. Lauren Mayhew, *The Heron's Nest*, Volume XIII, Number 2 (June 2011).
18. Kala Ramesh, *Acorn* #49 (Fall 2022).
19. Robert Epstein, Unpublished.
20. Marianna Monaco in Robert Epstein, ed. *The Sacred in Contemporary Haiku*, CreateSpace, n/p: 2014.
21. Robert Epstein, Unpublished.
22. Randy Brooks, *Frogpond* 36:3 (Fall 2013).
23. John McManus, in Robert Epstein, ed. *The Sacred in Contemporary Haiku*, CreateSpace, n/p: 2014.
24. Yvonne Cabalona, *down the mermaid's back*, cafe nietzsche press, Windsor, CT: 2010.
25. Renée Owen, *Acorn* #28 (Spring 2012).
26. John Brandi, *Weeding the Cosmos*, La Alameda Press, Albuquerque, NM: 1994.
27. Emily Romano, *Modern Haiku* 44.1 (Winter 2012).
28. david boyer, *The Heron's Nest*, Volume XIV, Number 1 (March 2012).
29. John Hawkhead, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Winter 2022).
30. Roberta Beary, *The Unworn Necklace*, Snapshot Press, UK: 2007.
31. Meg Arnot, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Summer 2022).



32. Kathryn Bold, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Winter 2022).
33. Debbi Antebi, *The Heron's Nest*, Volume XX, Issue 1 (March 2018).
34. Robert Epstein, Unpublished.
35. Gloria Jaguden, in R. Epstein, ed. *The Sacred in Contemporary Haiku*, CreateSpace, n/p: 2014
36. Debbie Strange, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2023).
37. Pat Davis, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Winter 2022).
38. paul m., *Few Days North Days Few*, Red Moon Press, Winchester, VA: 2011.
39. Jeannie Martin, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Spring/Summer 2023).
40. Roberta Beary, *The Unworn Necklace*, Snapshot Press, UK: 2007.
41. William M. Ramsey, *Frogpond* 35:1 (Winter 2012).
42. Sandi Pray, *Akitsu Quarterly* (Summer 2022).

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