

Essays

Existential Themes in Haiku: Part 2 by Robert Epstein

In “Existential Themes: Part 1” (Frogpond, 48:3), I highlighted a number of themes appearing in contemporary haiku poetry which matter to poets and readers alike. Among these were: Being; Selfhood; Aloneness; Anxiety; Alienation and Addictions. I wish to continue the discussion by calling attention to additional existential themes that grip the hearts and souls of poets as well as those who love the poetic form that originated in Japan during the 17th century.

Illness and Pain

Contemporary life appears to be characterized more and more by health problems that too often turn into chronic illness and pain conditions. For a healthy person who has been accustomed to living an active, unencumbered life, he or she may experience shock and disorientation. By its nature, chronic illness and pain alter one’s life dramatically and there are multiple losses to be mourned and worked through. Living well with pain or illness calls for resilience, flexibility and a willingness to change, which is admittedly easier said than done.

biopsy
i google
god

Ernest Berry¹

father's dementia
the path that rain makes
through a cloud

Ron C. Moss²

assigning my pain a number of autumn clouds

Susan Antolin³

the numbness
of scar tissue —
forsythia

Peggy Willis Lyles⁴

released from pain,
 through the open screen
 I look at the roses. . .

Shiki, trans. Eric W. Amman⁵

Aging

The Buddha was an early existentialist. He had lived a sheltered life in his father's kingdom after his beloved mother died, but inasmuch as life cannot be walled off indefinitely, the Buddha came to see that inherent in this human existence from birth is sickness, old age, and ultimately death. Notwithstanding Madison Avenue's extravagant advertising campaigns costing billions of dollars, we cannot avoid aging. Of course, we do our best to ignore, minimize, deny and laugh (if we are lucky) at the changes that take place with our bodies and minds yet, as my grandmother used to say, "the age is there." As with chronic health conditions, one needs to adapt to the changes associated with aging in order to avoid feeling sorry for oneself. The late spiritual teacher, Ram Dass, discusses the challenges associated with aging in his book, *Still Here*. In *Aging as a Spiritual Practice*, Lewis Richmond likewise proposes that aging be considered an opportunity to elevate the existential into a spiritual approach to life.

the old man
 cutting barley –
 bent like a sickle.

Buson, trans. Robert Hass⁶

middle age I believe the azaleas' pink lies

Katherine Cudney⁷

the age of the river a ripple in stone

Peter Newton⁸

Loss. . . and More Loss

There are many losses associated with the natural aging process: We lose our hair, muscle tone, memory, stamina and agility, eyesight, hearing, teeth and, in advanced years, our independence and control over bodily functions—to name but a few of the losses that accompany old age. As if this were not enough, during the course of our lives, we experience a multitude of losses. Although life isn't solely about losses, they are an unavoidable part of life. Many people feel chronically bereft because they haven't come to terms with this existential reality. Relationship breakups can, and usually are, extremely painful, but they are workable if one allows oneself to grieve. Jobs end, people change and outgrow friendships, there are graduations which contain both endings and beginnings, and in our highly mobile society we—or loved ones—frequently relocate, which entails the loss of home, haunts, and neighbors.

piercing cold
stepping on my dead wife's comb
in the bedroom

Buson, trans. Patricia Donegan⁹

hot afternoon
the squeak of my hands

on my daughter's coffin

Lenard D. Moore¹⁰

her death date
I pause the river
in my cupped hands

Carolyn Hall¹¹

Trauma

Trauma (including vicarious trauma) happens and not just to a few. Several people may be involved in a car crash where one or more individuals die or are maimed for life, Another person is diagnosed with cancer and has six months to live. School shootings have become all too common in the lives of young people and the horrors of war persist. Poverty is a worldwide phenomenon. The causes of trauma are endless. Yet, many manage to slowly piece their shattered lives back together, though not all find the wherewithal to.

rape victim
they keep forcing me
to say "survivor"

Hortensia Anderson¹²

psych ward
out in the night air
my turn to fall apart

Susan Antolin¹³

Violence/Global Threats

While a large majority of people seeking counseling or

psychotherapy are prompted to do so by some personal or interpersonal conflict or difficulty that they are struggling with, this is not to say, however, that individuals are preoccupied only with themselves or their small circle of friends and family. Although many may feel overwhelmed by the stresses and strains of their everyday lives, increasingly those pursuing therapy may also feel deeply troubled by the violence, environmental destruction and war they see around them. It is also true, as we have seen, that global health crises like the Coronavirus pandemic we have lived through impelled millions to seek mental health services due to depression, anxiety, social isolation, grief and loss, as well as a host of other reasons.

The spiritual teacher, J. Krishnamurti, talks about facing what is. For the author of *Freedom from the Known* and dozens more, countenancing reality-as-it-is leads the way from inner turmoil and self-division to freedom and harmony.

war news
the underbelly of a moth
pressed to my window

Carolyn Hall¹⁴

timber train
a thought about
Auschwitz

Johan Bergstad¹⁵

Hiroshima Day
multi-colored threads
on the weaving machine

Fay Aoyagi¹⁶

nuclear disaster
the heads of state
share a cucumber

Robert Whitmer¹⁷

Meaning and Meaninglessness

For quite some time, I met with a person in therapy whose primary source of meaning was the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Later in life, this individual developed an age-related illness that dramatically reduced this person's capacity to fulfill their sexual desires. This led to a loss of meaning. The loss of meaning can result in what existential therapists refer to as a "world collapse," which is often accompanied by depression, alienation and, in extreme cases, despair. The healing challenge is to find new meaning or purpose, which accords with one's values. Even in dire situations such as imprisonment and torture in a concentration camp, it is possible to find meaning as the Viennese psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, poignantly demonstrated in his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*.

From the window of despair
May sky
There is always tomorrow

Nejii Ozawa¹⁸

Drunk and disillusioned
Two green lights
Sam Fankuchen¹⁹

Mortality

The existential states of mind thus far mentioned point rather sharply to an inescapable fate that awaits one and all; namely, death. Each and every one of us will die someday. None of us knows the hour and this uncertainty can fill one with dread. Our mortality or finitude is an existential reality that each of us must come to terms with. Some existentialists maintain that most of our everyday worries and anxieties derive from the primal fear of death (often referred to as death anxiety). Whether or not this is true, our views about death do color how we live.

One way in which the Japanese have dealt with the reality of impermanence or transience is by writing death poems. Originally written only by samurai, nobility, and Buddhist monks, the tradition has become widespread over the past several hundred years. Yoel Hoffmann, a Buddhist scholar who has translated Japanese death poems into English, observes that death poems represent the spiritual essence of a person's life; it may be viewed as a kind of farewell testament imparted to the living.

It would be easy to conclude that death poems are, by their very nature, gravely serious if not morbid. This couldn't be further from the truth, Though many death poems are serious, there are just as many that are written with humor, wit and light-heartedness. After all, if one can rise above life's travails, it is possible to catch a glimpse of the absurdity that is woven into the fabric of life. Beholding this absurdity is to transcend it, if only fleetingly.

Given my disposition, I am inclined to quote in therapy poems that draw on this quality of humor, even black humor, when clients are grappling with mortality or impermanence. Naturally, I am very respectful of the therapy client's state of mind and do not in any way wish to convey condescension or a trivialization of their emotional struggles, I always err on the side of reticence when in doubt; however, if there is a well-established rapport with the person and I believe he or she may be able to appreciate the absurdist perspective, then I may share one of several haiku on mortality that I have collected*:

hospice...
she asks me to bring back
a shell from the sea

Michele Root-Bernstein²⁰

This world of dew
is only a world of dew –
and yet

Issa, trans. Sam Hamill²¹

that's what
dandelions do
blow away

Stanford M. Forrester²²

Freedom
Freedom is as central to each and every life as the very breath we
breathe. It is our inalienable birthright, the ground of what it
means to be whole. Freedom is also far more than doing whatever
you want or getting what you expect. It has nothing to do with
anything goes or moral relativism.

second time around
at the justice of the peace
wearing sensible shoes

Charlotte Digregorio²³

thinking of retirement
he realizes he never
had a job

John Brandi²⁴

lost in the woods
 i find a better
 meditation spot
 vincent tripi²⁵

Responsibility

Fritz Perls, the cofounder of Gestalt therapy, an existential-humanistic approach that gained popularity in the 1960s, pointed out that responsibility is the ability to be responsive. Responsiveness calls for presence and attunement, much more than self-reproach or self-blame. Responsibility is intimately correlated with freedom: with freedom comes responsibility. Conscience is born out of freedom and responsibility. That is to say, if I am true to my moral principles and values, I will experience a personal sense of integrity and self-trust. If I violate my conscience, I will feel guilt, which is different than what Rollo May identified as “neurotic guilt,” which is excessive out of proportion to the transgression. Neurotic guilt is not the voice of conscience but, rather, one’s inner critic or internal judge. It is important for one’s mental health to discern the difference between these two forms of guilt.

about to kill an ant
 but no it’s carrying
 a corpse
 John Brandi²⁶

morning glories
 the well-bucket entangled
 I ask for water

Chiyo-Ni, trans. Patricia Donegan²⁷

Truth

Truth is our north star; it enables us to know where we are and where we are going. Over the past several decades, especially, it has been obscured and muddied by the infiltration of postmodern thinking and moral relativism. This has ushered in a corrosive exacerbation of self-doubt, second guessing and chronic confusion, if not anxiety and depression. It takes courage, meditative awareness and emotional honesty to recover the inner compass of truth, but each of us has everything we need to do just this. Naturally, outside encouragement helps, but it is not necessary.

Nagasaki anniversary
the constellation
we never see from here

Fay Aoyagi²⁸

Halloween twilight
again my son waits
alone by the door

Roberta Beary²⁹

Love

Historically, existential psychology has not emphasized the importance of love, but I regard it as vital to living fully. Indeed, love is what we are here for. Love (in its myriad forms) makes the world go 'round, or used to. It is the most powerful force in the world in terms of healing the self, relationships, and the world. In this age of the smart phone, I have to wonder—somewhat cynically, I confess—that if love still plays a part in our lives it is in relationship to one's "devices," not our fellow beings. Despite this concern, I earnestly want to believe that love has not withered on the vine of what it means to be human.

crescent moon
a bone carver sings
to his ancestor

Ron C. Moss³⁰

empty house —
a whisper of mother's voice
in the autumn wind

Curtis Dunlop³¹

forgiving each other
with only a look —
wisteria in the rain

Mitsu Suzuki³²

shall we die together,
my lover whispers —
evening fireflies

Masajo Suzuki³³

Endnotes

- 1 Ernest Berry, *The Haiku Foundation; Haiku of the Day*, 7/23/21.
- 2 Ron C. Moss, *The Heron's Nest*, 16, 2014.
- 3 Susan Antolin, *The Years That Went Missing*, 2020.
- 4 Peggy Willis Lyles, *Frogpond* 27:1, Winter-Spring 2004.
- 5 Shiki, in Eric Amann, *The Wordless Poem: A Study of Zen in Haiku*, 1978.
- 6 Buson, in Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku*, 1994.
- 7 Katherine Cudney, *The Heron's Nest* 5, 2003.
- 8 Peter Newton, *The Heron's Nest*, 15, 2013.
- 9 Buson, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind*, 2008.
- 10 Lenard D. Moore, *The Heron's Nest* 6, 2004.
- 11 Carolyn Hall, *The Heron's Nest* 17, 2015.
- 12 Hortensia Anderson, *Frogpond* 33:1, Winter-Spring 2008.
- 13 Susan Antolin, *The Years That Went Missing*, 2020.
- 14 Carolyn Hall, *The Heron's Nest* 5, 2003.
- 15 Johan Bergstad, *The Heron's Nest* 10, 2008.
- 16 Fay Aoyagi, *The Heron's Nest* 10, 2008.
- 17 Robert Whitmer, *The Heron's Nest* 13, 2011.
- 18 Neiji Ozawa, in Violet Kazue de Cristoforo, ed., *May Sky: There is Always Tomorrow: An Anthology of Japanese American Concentration Camp Kaiko Haiku*, 1997.
- 19 Sam Fankuchen, *Modern Haiku* 34.3, Autumn 2003.
- 20 Michele Root-Bernstein, *The Heron's Nest* 17, 2015.
- 21 Issa, in Sam Hamhill, ed., *The Sound of Water*, 1995.
- 22 Stanford M. Forrester, in Robert Epstein, ed., *Dreams Wander On: Contemporary Poems of Death Awareness*, 2011.
- 23 Charlotte Digregorio, *Haiku and Senryu: A Simple Guide for All*, 2014.
- 24 John Brandi, in John Brandi and Dennis Maloney, eds., *The Unswept Path: Contemporary American Haiku*, 2005.
- 25 vincent tripi, *call it haiku*, 2018.
- 26 John Brandi, in John Brandi and Dennis Maloney, eds., *The Unswept Path: Contemporary American Haiku*, 2005.
- 27 Chiyo-Ni, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind*, 2008.
- 28 Fay Aoyagi, *Beyond the Reach of My Chopsticks*, 2012.
- 29 Roberta Beary, *Tokutomi Memorial Haiku Contest*, 2006; 1st Prize.
- 30 Ron C. Moss, *The Bone Carver*, 2014.
- 31 Curtis Dunlop, *Frogpond* 31.1, Winter-Spring 2008.
- 32 Mitsu Suzuki, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind*, 2008.
- 33 Masajo Suzuki, in Patricia Donegan, ed., *Haiku Mind*, 2008.