
ESSAYS

MOTHERLOSS AND MOURNING HAIKU

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After a slow decline due to dementia and cancer, my mother died on April 7th, 2017, a few months before her 91st birthday. My family and I thought she would die sooner; she experienced cardiac arrest in January but, thanks to the quick intervention of her devoted caregiver, my mother managed to live through the winter months and snow, which she intensely disliked. No one can ever tell for sure why we die when we do, but the timing of my mother's death was not lost on me: She died the day before my 63rd birthday (and ten days before her first great granddaughter was born).

I experienced anticipatory grief long before my mother took her last breaths. Because of the onset of dementia, I felt that I was losing my mother slowly but surely for several years before she died. I started a journal of anticipatory grief, which included a lot of haiku. When my father died at the age of seventy-eight in 2002, I instantly and unhesitatingly turned to haiku as the primary means for expressing grief. I can thus say, accurately and without exaggeration, haiku has been the means by which I mourn my deepest losses.

And so I began a number of years ago to write haiku relating to the gradual loss of my mother to dementia. This loss preoccupied me whenever I picked up a pen to write haiku. When I write, I often begin by reading other poets' haiku for inspiration. No matter what Nature themes I found in others' poetry, the haiku that I wrote invariably centered on missing my mother due to dementia. Later, when I learned that my mother was diagnosed with cancer, I found myself giving expression to my impending grief by writing many, many poems about her terminal

diagnosis. An outsider might characterize my haiku poetry during this time as “obsessed.” I would have no quarrel with such a description. I was trying to bear witness to my helplessness through the poetry.

Eventually, it dawned on me that what I was writing were *mourning haiku*. Although I am certainly not the first to write mourning haiku in the face of loss—many other poets have done so—to my knowledge no one has identified this poetry as mourning haiku, per se. In a recent haiku anthology I edited, *They Gave Us Life: Celebrating Mothers, Fathers & Others in Haiku*, I tried to more clearly define what I meant by this term, which I consider a sub-category of haiku poetry:

Mourning haiku refers to haiku written during a period of bereavement that give expression to the many facets of grief and loss held within the larger context of Nature. Like traditional Japanese death poems, mourning haiku may reflect the spiritual essence of the departed loved one’s life and thus could be rightly called filial or legacy haiku.¹

Mourning haiku, as the primary mode of grieving, has facilitated self-healing for me. I agree wholeheartedly with my friend and tanka poet, Joy McCall, who wrote to me a week after my mother died: “... I looked out at the blossom[s] and the bees and sunshine and wind. Nature is what heals me.”

Situating these profoundest of losses within the greater context of Nature, which my mother loved, has enabled me to slowly braille my way to wholeness again. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke observed in *Letters on Life*: “Through loss, through great, immoderate loss, we are actually quite introduced to the *Whole*.”²

I do not say that I have recovered a sense of union with the Whole after a year of writing mourning haiku, but I feel that I am on my way, at least. I fully appreciate what the late meditation teacher, Stephen Levine, often repeated: “Grieving is the work of a lifetime.”³ I therefore continue to mourn and pen mourning haiku and am happy to do so for the foreseeable future.

If I step back a little to reflect on what it means to write mourning haiku, some things come clear to me. When I would take a walk in Nature

or sit at a nearby marina to watch the docked boats, my anticipatory grief or sorrow would unsurprisingly surface. The emotional pain, I believe, sought to be understood or given expression within a larger context. As a pre-reflective form of knowing, my intuition sought to make sense of my fear, sadness, longing, or loneliness through a connection with my surroundings. Pain, in short, was juxtaposed with Nature, which led to an insight that, more often than not, felt calming or soothing. Spiritually speaking, I have wondered if what is healing about haiku, as a reflection of Nature, is knowing that we come out of the Earth and ultimately return to it. In addition, I believe that what is also healing is the *sharing* of haiku, which the late haiku scholar, William Higginson, regarded as key to haiku's purpose.

I can recollect the occasion on an Indian Summer day when I called my mother as I strolled on a level path near a suburban development. I was, as always, happy to hear my mother's voice, but she had by this time great trouble completing sentences. She had some awareness of the cognitive decline she was experiencing due to dementia and, at one point in the conversation, my mother managed to let me know—with humor—that she was impatient over her difficulty communicating. She said: "My brain has floated downriver." On an earlier occasion, Mom conveyed frustration by colorfully noting: "My brain died and went to heaven." During each of these phone calls, we both laughed, but it was black humor that enabled us to share in the loss. I recorded the moment by writing a poem that conveyed something of what my mother was living through then:

November afternoon
Mom tells me her brain
has floated downriver

At other times, writing haiku turned into the literary equivalent of Edvard Munch's iconic painting, "The Scream." I felt impelled or compelled to write haiku to give raw expression to my anguish, distress, fear, powerlessness, aloneness. The healing factor in these haiku had to do more with the release of emotion than in grounding emotion within the arms of Nature, so to speak, for ease and containment. Examples of such

poetic outbursts, mostly about my mother's cancer and death, include the following:

walking cancer my mother the rain	I loathe the rain
	even more now
	mourning Mom

With my mother's passing, I was desperate to get to the bottom of her death; that is, to find the deepest possible meaning of it for my life. I didn't realize it at the time, but this pursuit was an all-consuming way of maintaining a connection with my mother, of holding onto her. More than ever, I felt cast out to sea with my mother's death, as this poem explicitly reveals:

Mom's gone
drifting to nowhere
in a dinghy

Despite my misgivings about making meaning where *nothingness* needs to be faced, I sought desperately to make meaning out of my mother's death. Because my parents' deaths threw into sharp relief my own mortality, I resolved to come to terms with my own finiteness, once and for all. Since my mother's father died when I was five, I have had a great fear of death. For many years, I have worked to free myself of this death anxiety. With my mother's death, there was no longer any place to hide, as this haiku makes clear:

mourning Mom
now no one stands
between death & me

In the days and weeks following my mother's death, I meditated deeply on what her death signified and one day, while writing in my mourning journal, this insight or realization came to me: *My mother's death was her last act of love*. I was taken aback by this; it felt like a revelation. As is often

the case with flashes of insight, my rational mind couldn't comprehend it. But, I realized, if love is not ego-driven nor an act of will, then it could be present even as one lay dying. It was crystal clear to me that my mother's life had been characterized, first and foremost, by love, so why wouldn't love be present as she took her last breaths? My mother's death was her last act of love; she bestowed the gift of courage and ultimate liberation on us all. My mother showed me the way to die and I cannot overstate the profound impact this realization has had on me. For a moment beyond time, I experienced a sense of calm or peace in the midst of mourning, which was and is precious to me. In short, it was love and love only that enabled me to bear the unbearable.

Following these insights or realizations, mourning has taken a turn in the direction of gentle questioning. The unspeakable anguish has thankfully subsided some. Here are a few poems that illustrate this turn:

blooming hillside —	just an inkling
my mother was always	sunlight streaming in
my mother to me	her empty kitchen

More recently, the mourning has headed, unsurprisingly, in the direction of the afterlife. Although I am very uncertain about what happens to human beings following death, I have been more willing to lean into the question and consider the possibilities. Some haiku that reflect musings on the afterlife include:

gone six months	this hummingbird life
sunlight on Mom's gravestone	how long before
<i>death is not the end</i>	my mother returns

Other mourning haiku contemplate reunion in the here-and-now, rather than in life after death. I consider these poems a variation on the after-life theme, but they are seen rather through a spiritual lens, rather than a conventional religious view of heaven or reincarnation. Here are a few examples of such poems:

wondering
 where my mother is
 the lamp timer clicks on

June gardening —
 my mother can't be
 too far off

Encouraged by fellow haiku poet, David H. Rosen, I decided to gather the mourning haiku I had written into a book titled, *Free to Dance Forever: Mourning Haiku for My Mother*. While I consider the book to be part of my mourning, it is also intended as a celebration of my mother's life. She always talked about writing a book, but never sat down to actually write one. *Free to Dance Forever* is not the book that my mother would have written, but it does convey something of the essence of my mother's life and *that* is deeply meaningful to me.

As I indicated earlier, mourning is far from over, and I don't need it to end anytime soon. Too many people feel pressured from others and themselves to "move on" after the profound loss of a loved one. Contrary to what many since Freud have believed, loss is not something to be gotten over but to be integrated into one's life. Thus I am unafraid of continued sadness or sorrow. In the introduction to *Free to Dance Forever*, I wrote:

For countless generations, world religions have prescribed rituals and timelines for the bereaved as a means for containing grief and offering comfort. While these may work for many, I believe that there is, in reality, no time frame with respect to mourning. Mourning is not subject to the clock or the calendar. By its very nature, mourning takes place out of conventional time and is thus not subject to such constraints. It is therefore unreasonable to expect anyone—child or adult—to have completed a mourning or grieving process within a specified amount of time like six months or a year. Such expectations are arbitrary as well as contrary to the spirit of mourning, which is wholly unique and unfettered in terms of conventional time.⁴

As I tell psychotherapy clients who are grieving the loss of a loved one, the intensity of their pain reflects the depth of their love. Just to be clear: I am not suggesting that anyone needs to suffer as proof of enduring love

for the departed. I only mean to say that missing a loved one, feeling sad over their absence is all together natural and may not completely disappear.

In the end, mourning haiku contain what I am now calling *midnight truth*: insights and realizations gained by lowering oneself into the well of life-and-death. Haiku poetry is not only about the beauty and wonder of Nature, though such poetic reflections are no less precious. Death and loss are inescapable facts of Nature and integral to human existence. We need to be able to give full expression to *what is* when it comes to illness, aging, death, and loss. I am eternally grateful to haiku poetry; it has saved my life, spiritually speaking, over and over again. I look forward to writing a *jisei*, my death poem, when the time comes. When I do, I may very well have my dear mother foremost in mind.

NOTES

¹ Epstein, Robert. *They Gave Us Life: Celebrating Mothers, Fathers & Others in Haiku*. Middle Island Press, 2017.

² Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Letters on Life*. Modern Library, 2006.

³ Levine, Stephen. *Healing into Life and Death*. Anchor, 1989.

⁴ Epstein, Robert. *Free to Dance Forever: Mourning Haiku for My Mother*. Middle Island Press, 2018.