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## ESSAYS

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### HAIKU QUESTIONS: A PORTAL INTO MYSTERY

*Robert Epstein*

#### Introduction

**D**uring a psychotherapy meeting, a client, who is a devoted poet in her own right, proposed that haiku prompt important questions.<sup>1</sup> The questions that haiku give rise to are a portal (the client's word) into understanding not only this brief form of poetry that originated in Japan but into the essence of one's very life.

I instantly responded with a resounding *yes!* My mind went straight away to Zen koans, which are impossible riddles given to students intended to jar them out of their analytic minds and into the here-and-now or what Zen adherents call the Eternal Now. Haiku may be likened to contemporary koans or puzzles but without the formal trappings of Zen Buddhism. One need not be a Zen student to benefit from attuning to the questions that haiku evoke.

For illustration, a couple of famous Zen koans include the following: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Another is: “What is your Original Face before your parents were born?” Again, these conundrums cannot be “solved” through the ordinary power of reason or logic. In fact, they are nonsensical. The challenge is to approach each with meditative awareness—with a beginner’s mind—such that receptive curiosity may trigger intuition that fosters insight or self-realization. Answering a koan is not an act of will or the fruit of arduous study. As the late haiku poet, Eric Amann, observes in *The Wordless Poem*:

Each haiku is like the reply of a Zen master to a beginner's question about the meaning of life. And the answers will be seen to lie not in the ninth circle of heaven, nor on the lips of preachers and prophets, but scattered

around us, in myriads of forms, in the falling of a leaf no less than in the sting of a gnat, the sound of a frog no less than in the song of a nightingale...<sup>2</sup>

Without taking issue with Amann's assertion, I am inclined to suggest that haiku poets answer the question regarding the meaning of life with a question (rather than an answer) that *prompts* a more provocative insight than the ordinary mind can muster.

To be clear about the sequence of things: a fundamental question does not lead to a haiku; it is the poem that leads to fundamental questions. In other words, the haiku poet does not go out into the world in search of a subject to write about that will provoke a question for readers to ponder. If the poet is true to his or her art, the latter will be no less surprised than the reader by the question or questions that the poem elicits. True questions arise in innocence, not artifice. Haiku differ from Zen koans in that the questions they give rise to *follow* the writing of haiku, whereas koans are given to students.

### The Nature of Questions

Before turning to several examples of poems and the questions they elicit, it would be useful to briefly describe the nature of questions. It is easy to take questions for granted, since they are so commonplace in our lives.

The dictionary identifies several aspects of questions:

- \* a sentence worded or expressed so as to elicit information
- \* a doubt about the truth or validity of something
- \* the raising of a doubt about or objection to something
- \* a matter forming the basis of a problem requiring resolution

The aforementioned aspects of questions are not quite the kind of questions that haiku evoke. In addition, what I am calling haiku questions are genuine questions and not statements, assertions, opinions, or judgments that masquerade as questions. The latter have no place in the writing or reading of haiku.

The questions that haiku evoke are not a form of amusement, a brain-teaser or intellectual exercise, nor are they rhetorical; that is, they are real, searching questions that may even have more than a hint of urgency to them. Haiku questions are substantive by their very nature; they *matter greatly* to the reader.

I recall a plaque attached to a wall that a therapy client saw at a church, which he liked. The plaque read: “God is happy to question your answers.” The questions that haiku give rise to similarly question the would-be answers we inherit from society, from parents, and other authority figures.

What sort of questions, then, do haiku give rise to? For this, I turn to psychotherapy, as evocative questions in a strength-based or spiritually-oriented approach come closer to the quality of self-inquiry or self-exploration that haiku elicit. Questions in therapy are designed to communicate respect, interest, and curiosity; they are also intended to trigger surprise, interrupt an entrenched or self-defeating pattern of thinking, and stimulate creative problem-solving or force the client to look for new possibilities.

The late Diane Shainberg, a Buddhist-oriented therapist, discusses the central role of questions in therapy that I find applicable to haiku. Of questions, Shainberg remarks in *Healing in Psychotherapy*:

Questions are a primary tool of the therapist. With the question we inspire further looking.... The point of a question is to open a person to their own process ... to come in from a different angle than the client. The question states the angle that we use to reflect a new possibility.... For many clients being asked a good question is like “having some new energy,” as one person put it.<sup>3</sup>

Fundamentally, I regard haiku questions as rooted in the mystery at the heart of life. Insofar as haiku embody mystery, it makes sense that they give rise to questions, especially when the poems spontaneously activate surprise, intrigue, and enthusiasm.

In this connection, I want to quote Alan Watts, a British transplant in America who popularized Asian spirituality in the 20th century, and who invoked Bashō in *The Way of Zen*:

“To write haiku,” [Basho] said, “get a three-foot child”—for Basho's poems have the same inspired objectivity as a child's expression of wonder, and return us to that same feeling of the world as when it first met our astonished eyes.<sup>4</sup>

In effect, haiku questions help to restore the wonder and astonishment of childhood that we have lost touch with. R.H. Blyth, the British haiku scholar, echoes this notion by highlighting that haiku is a poetry of sensation. It is, he states, “the poetry of meaningful touch, taste, sound, sight, and smell: it is humanized nature, naturalized humanity, and as such may be called poetry in its essence.”<sup>5</sup>

I want to suggest that the fundamental questions embedded in haiku point the reader to the links between nature and our humanity. The questions, which activate one's intuition that lead to insights, help to humanize nature and naturalize humanity, to use Blyth's terms.

### Some Classic and Contemporary Examples

I would like to begin with one of the poems I love most by Bashō, the father of haiku. The rendering is more of an interpretation than a translation by the American poet, Robert Bly:

the temple bell stops  
but the sound keeps coming  
out of the flowers<sup>6</sup>

Rationally speaking, no one has ever heard the echo of a bell arising out of nearby flowers in a field or garden. This makes no logical or scientific sense whatsoever. But haiku poetry is not rooted in science or rationality. Haiku are revelations of truth beyond science or conventional consciousness.

With the thinking mind suspended, one question which the poem gives rise to is: how does the sound keep coming out of the flowers? Straight away, we are in the land of koans here. Another: What is the nature of a temple bell that enables the flowers to pick up and preserve the sound it makes? Or this: how do the bell and flowers *commune* with one

another? What crucial part does the poet—as well as the reader—play in facilitating this communion?

I am loathe to offer responses to these questions in the same way that Zen teachers shy away from providing comprehensible “answers” to the Zen koans that students take up. No parent can (or needs to) walk for his or her toddler, who is in the throes of learning this vital function. The ability to walk is built-in; walking only needs to be encouraged or facilitated. Likewise, the reader possesses the capacity to discern the questions that open into an insight or realization that pulsates with poetic truth.

Let me turn to another well-known haiku that I love; this one is by the beloved Japanese haiku poet, Issa, written in grief following the death of his young daughter:

The world of dew  
is a world of dew.  
And yet, and yet — <sup>7</sup>

There are so few words in this haiku and even these few words are repetitive. In effect, the haiku can be condensed into *this world of dew and yet*. Issa was steeped in Buddhist teachings at the heart of which is the notion of impermanence. The untimely death of a child is a profound teaching with respect to impermanence. How does the poet hold onto a shred of faith in the face of such unspeakable sorrow? What seeds of transcendence are discernible in the fleeting dew of devastating loss?

With this poem, in particular, the reader must grapple with the most fundamental question of all: the nature of life-and-death; mortality and eternity. Is there a definitive answer for one and all? I don't think so. But haiku is not scripture, reflecting core beliefs associated with a religious or faith tradition. Haiku is not religion. Nonetheless, haiku may elicit a strong spiritual sensibility if approached in a contemplative way.

For more contemporary English-language haiku, I could choose any number of poems that are close to my heart. Below are several that come readily to mind and what follow are some fundamental questions that arise for me:

in her old voice the mountains

*Marlene Mountain*<sup>8</sup>

Can the mountains be heard in the voice of an old woman? Out of a life-long love of them, is the old woman *speaking* for the mountains? Is there a resonance discernible because the old woman speaks the same language as the ancient mountains? Are the old woman and ancient mountains one? Have the mountains given birth to a woman who, in her old age, utters the Word of God; that is, starts the world anew?

I stop to listen;  
the cricket  
has done the same.

*Arizona Zipper*<sup>9</sup>

How does unself-conscious listening unite human and cricket? What is it that cricket and human hear which brings about inter-species communion? The late meditation teacher, Stephen Levine, said: "Who you are looking for *is who is looking*." Borrowing from Levine's profound insight, could the reader be listening to the silence of his own being echoing in the poet and cricket?

now that fallen leaves  
have buried the path  
the trail is clear

*John Brandi*<sup>10</sup>

How can dead leaves burying the path bring the trail to life? What does it take for we, the living, to fully realize and appreciate how much we rely on death for guidance and direction? In what ways must I die to the past *with every step* in order to be reborn? Are the journey and the destination one-and-the same?

starry night ...  
what's left of my life  
is enough

*Ron C. Moss*<sup>11</sup>

If the night sky can hold the light from stars long dead, is it possible for me to find illumination in my own finiteness? What is the relationship of my limited life to the stars shining at night? How does the light remaining of my own limited life “shine one corner of the world,” to quote the Zen teacher, Shunryu Suzuki? Can the acceptance of mortality be a light that shines as brightly as those of the stars?

### Sharing and Caring

The fundamental nature of the questions that haiku stir in the reader alters the relationship not only to the poem but to the poet. The late American haiku scholar, William J. Higginson, suggested that haiku are for sharing. In the context of haiku questions, I have a greater appreciation for what he meant: the questions that haiku evoke forge a bond between the poet and reader which may be accurately characterized as intimate. I, the reader, may come to love both the poem and the poet through the tether of questioning. Questions that point in the direction of mystery are experienced as a form of caring. That is, the act of composing and sharing a poem is simultaneously an act of caring. Perhaps this is why every haiku that helps me to feel at home in the world stirs affection and appreciation for both the poem and the poet.

### Conclusion

A good haiku is thought to be one that invites readers into the poem so that they can discover their own story or have their own experience, which may be similar to, or different from, the poet's. To my mind, there is too much emphasis on what the poem offers by way of story-telling. Instead, I want to suggest that haiku open a door to self inquiry and meditative awareness that takes one closer to the heart of the mystery that is the very ground of life-and-death. In other words, haiku elicit mystery-inspired questions that reveal poetic truths about our existence and beyond, which may or may not resemble definitive answers. More often than not, they are not definitive in nature and need not be. “Liv[ing] the questions,” as the Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, suggested in *Letters to a Young Poet*, may be quite enough.

I will let Blyth have the last word. Consider the many questions that

arise in the beautiful, poignant, timeless passage that appears in *Haiku Vol. 1*:

A haiku is not a poem, it is not literature: it is a hand beckoning, a door half-opened, a mirror wiped clean. It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, our Buddha nature. It is a way in which cold winter rain, the swallows of evening, even the very day in its hotness, and the length of the night become truly alive, share in our humanity and speak their own silent expressive language.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express gratitude to G.O. for this extraordinary insight into the relation between haiku and the questions they give rise to. Personal communication; 12/12/19.

<sup>2</sup> Amann, Eric W. *The Wordless Poem: A Study of Zen in Haiku*. Ontario, Canada: The Haiku Society of Canada, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> Shainberg, Diane. *Healing in Psychotherapy: The Path and Process of Inner Change*. New York, NY: Gordon and Breach, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Watts, Alan W. *The Way of Zen*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> Blyth, R.H. *History of Haiku Vol 1*. Japan: Hokuseido, 1963, 25.

<sup>6</sup> Bly, Robert, ed. *The Sea and the Honeycomb: A Book of Tiny Poems*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Hass, Robert, ed. *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, & Issa*. Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> in Van Den Heuvel, Cor, ed. *The Haiku Anthology*. New York: Touchstone, 1986, p. 158; revised edition.

<sup>9</sup> in Van Den Heuvel, Cor, ed. *The Haiku Anthology*, 321.

<sup>10</sup> in Brandi, John and Dennis Maloney, eds. *The Unswept Path: Contemporary American Haiku*. Buffalo, NY: White Pine Press, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Moss, Ron C. *The Bone Carver*. United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2014, 110.

<sup>12</sup> Blyth, R.H. *Haiku Vol. 1*. Japan. Hokuseido, 1949, 272.