

THE SELF WHO WRITES

Mary Stevens

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer, Quaker and teacher of teachers, asks, “Who is the self that teaches?” He writes that a teacher’s inner terrain has a spiritual component. He defines “spiritual” as “the diverse ways we answer the heart’s longing to be connected with the largeness of life.”¹ I have entertained this question many times over my teaching career and, as I have developed as a writer, have come to consider the question, “Who is the self who writes?”

golden grasses
I vanish within
circles of birdsong

In exploring this question, it is helpful first to consider three other ones: Why write? What does writing haiku require of me? and What am I writing?

WHY I WRITE

I’ve discerned four needs of mine that are met through writing. I’ll admit that one motivator for me is to be seen.

first dream
Mick Jagger
gives me a second look

While embarrassing to admit, there really should be no shame in the pleasure of being published and winning contests; to be seen is a basic and universal human need. And some say that each of us is actually obligated to share our creative efforts with others. Benjamin Franklin wrote, “Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What’s a sundial in the shade?”²

I also hope that my writings might contribute something meaningful and/or beautiful for readers. Perhaps someone might read a poem of mine and recognize the experience and feel less alone. I would hope that my words move people.

the heft
of a cast-iron skillet
autumn deepens

An extension of this feeling of contribution is the desire to create change. I love the poems by such greats as marlene mountain, Rowan Beckett, and Terri L. French for their courage and activism. They say what needs to be heard.

makeup counter
all the shades
of white women

But there is a reason I write that is less conscious than recognition or contribution. I don't set out to write for a certain journal or to move someone. I actually write because I must. When considering alternative careers to teaching, I asked my spouse what they thought might be a good career for me. They observed, "Well, you write a lot." That made me laugh as I got a glimpse into what I looked like to my partner: someone who has her notebook out in the house, at the river, or at the coffee shop; who jots notes on her phone when stranded without pen or paper. And for whom, if she goes more than a few days without journaling, things get ugly.

Of all the reasons for writing, though, this one is the closest to my heart: it is so satisfying to capture in words the suchness of a being, a situation, a dynamic. It allows me to develop a close relationship with those with whom I share the world.

Friends' meeting
the guide dog thumps his tail
for each latecomer

WHAT HAIKU-WRITING REQUIRES OF ME

In broad strokes, writing haiku asks me both to make myself available to the haiku moment and to cultivate my craft. Developing in the craft mainly involves reading haiku, many—and connecting with haiku poets.

More challenging for me is opening to the haiku moments. They require that I pay attention. That I look and see. Of all the senses, this is the one that I access the most. It takes special intention to listen and hear, to smell and taste and savor, to touch and feel.

cloudless sky a plane tugs its sound

cherries
their shine
on the tongue

evening breeze
the cut grass
stuck to her feet

I consider my own emotions and those I intuit of others as another sense.

morning sunshine
a doe up to her shoulders
in sweet corn

To access the haiku moment, solitude is essential. I require much time alone in order to create. Haiku moments also pop up in new situations. John Cleese wrote, “If you want creative workers, give them enough time to play.”³ For me, adventure and creativity feed each other. This can mean something involved, like taking a trip, or something as simple as visiting an art gallery. I also access the spirit of adventure through exploring my creativity in other ways. Expressing myself through dance puts me in touch with my feelings and my connection with the creative source.

dancing
all of me
for me

What the noticing, the play, and the solitude all have in common is openness. Bruce Lee said, “The creative process is a process of surrender, not control.”⁴ And for me it is the key to nurturing the Self Who Writes.

WHAT I AM WRITING

What emerges from this state of openness? When readers read our work, they see what we see and what our lives are like. What we write shows what draws our attention and what we value.

When I was selecting poems for my haiku collection, *enough light*,⁵ I was aware of certain subjects and themes I tend to write on, and then I noticed there were some recurring ones I was unaware I had been writing about. Many of my poems refer to the body, which was not surprising to me, since I have been practicing tai chi and authentic movement for many years and I love to dance. But I was surprised that 20% of my poems mentioning body parts referred to the feet! Other surprisingly high-frequency topics included freedom; home; and story, talking, and conversations.

Romantic relationships and eros are also important and intentional topics for me.

waves slip over the jetty	skin warm to the touch
his apology	a magnolia blossom
will do	slips to the ground

As a Unitarian Universalist, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to discover poems about a variety of spiritual traditions, some of which were not part of my upbringing and others from a religious upbringing that I had disengaged from.

But my poems on the spirituality I have developed are intentional. The poems in the rest of this essay move from the theme of impermanence and letting go to fruition and healing through faith. The moon is of great

importance to me, personally: on the full and new moons, I go on what I have come to call Moon Rambles. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I take a very slow walk down my long dirt driveway, setting and affirming my intentions. For each goal, I ask myself why I want it and what it requires from me to reach it. The moon is so important to me that I structured my book around its phases to support its narrative arc, which moves from loss to empowerment.

last of the moonlight
these little practices
in letting go

when better than nothing
becomes not enough
waxing crescent

forest fireflies
only enough light
for the next step

at the end of the diving board yes

milk moon
my palms full
of light

In this essay, I have revealed this Self Who Writes as it shows up in my person. What an act of vulnerability to do so in front of haiku poets, with their keen powers of observation! But I invite you to answer these questions for yourself: What needs does writing haiku meet for you? How can you support your writer self? What subjects and themes do you tend to write about—both intentionally and unconsciously? Who is your Self Who Writes? I'm grateful and so happy to meet you!

NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at Wild Graces on August 24th, 2024. Thanks to Robin White and Marshall Hatch for inviting me to read at their event. All of the poems in this essay are mine.

¹ Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998, 5.

² Franklin, Benjamin. *Poor Richard's Almanac*, 1750.

³ Cleese, John. "Business and Life Lessons from John Cleese" in *25iq*. www.25iq.com/2018/04/28/business-and-life-lessons-from-john-cleese/. Accessed Oct 12, 2024.

⁴ Villa, Sylvia. "The Importance of Creativity: Part 4." www.sylviavillamusic.com/blog/the-importance-of-creativity-part-4. Accessed Oct 12, 2024.

⁵ Stevens, Mary. *enough light*. Winchester, Va.: Red Moon Press, 2023.