

My Haiku Practice

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Article abstract

I was busy. Often, I was not mindful of the present moment. Too often I was thinking ahead to the next thing on my list. So I began to write one haiku each day. I thought it might help to become more present, mindful, and responsive. In this essay, I describe my haiku practice. At first, I wanted to save my haiku and arrange them by seasons, but that didn't work. So I arranged them in these categories: walk to work; nature and human nature; young and old; married life; modern life; computers, AI, and the Internet; academic life; medical world; pandemic life; retirement; political life; spiritual practice; death; and attitude toward death. I explain these categories by giving examples of the haiku that I wrote. I also add a short, tentative conclusion that refers back to my spiritual aims: to become more present, mindful, and responsive. My practice did help me to become more present and mindful, but I'm not sure that I'm any more responsive. I believe that to become more responsive, I will need to develop new habits — new ways of inhabiting the world. I conclude with steps that might help me to become more responsive.

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ART, CULTURE ET OEUVRE DE CRÉATION / ART, CULTURE & CREATIVE WORKS

My Haiku Practice

James Dwyer^a

Résumé

J'étais très occupé. Souvent, je n'étais pas vraiment attentif au moment présent. Trop souvent, je pensais déjà à la prochaine tâche sur ma liste. J'ai donc commencé à écrire un haïku par jour. Je me suis dit que cela m'aiderait à être plus présent, plus attentif et plus réactif. Dans cet essai, je décris ma pratique du haïku. Au début, je voulais conserver mes haïkus et les classer par saisons, mais cela n'a pas fonctionné. Je les ai donc rangés dans les catégories suivantes : trajet pour aller au travail; nature et nature humaine; jeunes et vieux; vie conjugale; vie moderne; ordinateurs, IA et Internet; vie universitaire; monde médical; vie en période de pandémie; retraite; vie politique; pratique spirituelle; mort; et attitude face à la mort. J'explique ces catégories en donnant des exemples de haïkus que j'ai écrits. J'ajoute également une brève conclusion provisoire qui renvoie à mes objectifs spirituels : être plus présent, plus attentif et plus réactif. Ma pratique m'a aidé à être plus présent et plus attentif, mais je ne suis pas certain d'être devenu plus réactif. Je crois que, pour le devenir, je devrai développer de nouvelles habitudes — de nouvelles façons d'habiter le monde. Je termine en proposant quelques étapes susceptibles de m'aider à devenir plus réactif.

Mots-clés

haïku, pratique spirituelle, pleine conscience, réactivité, réflexion éthique, vie quotidienne

Abstract

I was busy. Often, I was not mindful of the present moment. Too often I was thinking ahead to the next thing on my list. So I began to write one haiku each day. I thought it might help to become more present, mindful, and responsive. In this essay, I describe my haiku practice. At first, I wanted to save my haiku and arrange them by seasons, but that didn't work. So I arranged them in these categories: walk to work; nature and human nature; young and old; married life; modern life; computers, AI, and the Internet; academic life; medical world; pandemic life; retirement; political life; spiritual practice; death; and attitude toward death. I explain these categories by giving examples of the haiku that I wrote. I also add a short, tentative conclusion that refers back to my spiritual aims: to become more present, mindful, and responsive. My practice did help me to become more present and mindful, but I'm not sure that I'm any more responsive. I believe that to become more responsive, I will need to develop new habits — new ways of inhabiting the world. I conclude with steps that might help me to become more responsive.

Keywords

haiku, spiritual practice, mindfulness, responsiveness, ethical reflection, daily life

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INTRODUCTION

I was busy. I had classes to teach, ethics consults to do, my own health problems to attend to, and people to care for and about. Often, I was not mindful of the present moment and what I was doing. Too often I was thinking ahead to the next thing on my list. So, I began to write one haiku each day. I wanted to be more mindful, present, and responsive. This is my report on the use of haiku as a spiritual, and ethical, practice.¹

I followed Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) in using haiku as a form of spiritual practice (3,4). Indeed, Basho transformed linked poems that were courtly displays of intellectual skill into poems that embody a Zen spirit. He developed what we now call haiku. However, in acknowledging my debt to Basho, I want to be clear about two things. First, I am not claiming that my poems embody the skill and depth of Basho's. Second, although I embarked on writing haiku as a spiritual practice, I am not claiming that this practice is a sufficient and necessary condition to become a good person.

My haiku practice is simply one way to address a problem that I noticed in my own living. I don't think there is one way, with sufficient and necessary conditions, to becoming a good person. I think that good living has many aspects. The aspect that bioethics has focused on is deliberation and decision, but paying attention is an important part of moral life, and I've also come to sense that responsiveness is very important. I wanted to see if my haiku practice could help me pay attention, perceive more clearly, and respond more effectively. Later in my essay, I will try to explain responsiveness, the quality of responding to the situation or context.

I used my haiku practice to try to cultivate some Zen values: attending to the present moment, moderating intellectual abstractions, viewing the self in connections, and recognizing the impermanence of life. Although I admired these Zen values, I couldn't help but thinking about how Zen failed to address, criticize, and dampen the rise of militarism in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s (5). Like many institutionalized religions, Zen was often used to rationalize and justify forms of warfare.

¹ This is my third report on my haiku practice; for the first two, see (1,2).

Classical Japanese haiku are very short poems of 17 syllables. Traditionally, they include a seasonal word (*kigo*) and a cutting word (*kireji*). The seasonal words set the poem in the natural cycle, and the cutting word helps to contrast the images in the poem. I had trouble with all these requirements. 17 syllables does not make sense in European languages like English and French. So, I was happy to free myself from that requirement. Although I tried at first to include a seasonal word, I realized that so much of my world works to keep out the seasons: the flu vaccine that I get every fall aims to keep out seasonal trends and to protect patients. I did try at first to contrast concrete images, but I note later how even that requirement proved difficult.

The journal *Modern Haiku* commissioned a panel of experts to come up with a definition of haiku. The panel failed. However, the journal does include this gloss on their website:

Haiku is a brief verse that epitomizes a single moment. It uses the juxtaposition of two concrete images, often a universal condition of nature and a particular aspect of human experience, in a way that prompts the reader to make an insightful connection between the two. The best haiku allude to the appropriate season of the year (6).

Of all the problems with using haiku practice as a form of spiritual development, I found the avoidance of abstraction to be the most problematic. Although I tried to use concrete images in my verse, I realized how my lifeworld is permeated with abstractions: ideas about solidarity and justice, problems about futility and technology, and shortcomings in structures and systems. In my early years in bioethics, I thought in terms of universal theories, but now I think that the facts of the case are often decisive. I have become more of a particularist, and I use theories as tools or prompts to help me think about salient factors. However, Zen Buddhists and haiku practitioners are radical particularists. They don't believe in tools, but I am getting ahead of myself.

In this essay, I want to describe my haiku practice: what I did, what it helped me to do and become, and what it didn't help me to do and become. Every day I looked for a haiku moment and wrote one haiku in my notebook. At the end of the week, I reviewed them and saved many on my computer.

WALK TO WORK

My practice began on my walk to work. Instead of thinking about what I needed to do when I got to my office, I paid attention. I still remember the first haiku that I formulated on my walk to work:

first footprints
in the snow
except the squirrel's

With surprise, joy, and a touch of vanity, I saw that I was the first to walk through the new snow. Then I saw the squirrel's footprints tracking across the snow to the base of a tree. I realized that I was the second creature to walk there, just a small part of a larger web of life that will change over time.

On my walk to work, I also noticed the strange, auto-centric way we treat snow:

snowplows
clear streets
block sidewalks

In clearing the streets, the snowplows form a metre-high mound that blocks access to the sidewalks. If you are able to get to the sidewalk, you find it covered with snow, but the situation is worse. The problem is not the trudge through the snow. The problem is that under the snow that covers the sidewalk is a sheet of ice. The dilemma is to walk on the sidewalk and risk a fall or to walk on the street and risk a collision with a car. I often chose the street.

Another snowy haiku moment:

PT restroom
taking off long underwear —
automatic flush

On another morning, I walked by a church:

blue spruce
my church has
no office

Months later, as the snow changed to rain, I observed:

rainy morning
worms on the sidewalk —
dead

I also had haiku moments on the walk home:

libertarian
roofers held together
OSHA rope

I didn't really know that they were libertarians, but I liked the contrast. This was a case in which my guess affected — or infected — my haiku practice.

After a while, I had a lot of haiku saved on my computer. At first, I tried to save them according to the seasons: spring coming alive, then the long days of summer, then the crisp days of fall, and finally the snows of winter. But that didn't work out; classifying my haiku according to seasons tended to change their meaning. Since my life is too separated from the natural seasons, I found other categories to classify the meaning of my haiku. I will give some examples in each of the following categories.

NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE

My haiku practice helped me to attend to the natural world and my attitude toward it.

seems too early
for geese heading North —
evolution decides

I also saw my wishful thinking:

confidence:
the last snowstorm
of the year

My attitude toward the weather was part of the problem:

we need rain
but not on
my day off

But what troubled me was my own attitude toward nature:

a spider
in my space —
his space

Concerned about the domineering attitude that humans often assume, I formulated a very critical haiku:

a gaggle of geese
a zeal of zebras
a plunder of people

However, I tried not to adopt another extreme attitude, the misanthropy that I saw in myself and sometimes found in environmental ethics. I tried to view my own life as a small part of a changing web of life.

YOUNG AND OLD

I attended more to children than I had in the past, and I noticed differences between children and adults, at least in my culture. I noticed how children play:

children blowing
on dandelion puffs —
co-evolution

spring roll:
a grassy slope
with dandelions

One day, I ate at the local Korean restaurant, and listened to the son of the woman who owned the restaurant:

summer day
almost first grade
he says proudly

Then I came upon a social context, the dumpster outside the hospital:

children helping
their mother dig
through the dumpster

Then I wondered about the relationship between children and adults:

a child's question
launches her father's
prepared lecture

Next, I turned my attention to older people and my own aging:

a few years ago
turns out to be
fourteen

I used to admire
the oldest man in the gym
before he was me

planting a fruit tree
on her eightieth birthday —
justice between generations

At least I could still go to the gym and plant fruit trees.

MARRIED LIFE

Of course, married life is an important part of living:

grocery shopping
with a fasting wife
with ADHD

Married life always involves some pretending:

small pretense
acting as if I
like her haircut

I worried more about large pretenses:

topics we avoid
the after life
the present life

But I was devoted to married life:

begin to like
my silicon
wedding band

red maple leaves
a long walk with
my wife

MODERN LIFE

In this category, I notice just how strange modern life is:

laundry day
another sock
gone AWOL

the Milky Way:
billions of stars
obscured by lights

I take
half a pastry —
twice

Part of the strangeness of modern life was watching and reacting to what we call news:

a Turkish beach
a refugee child
washes ashore

I also noticed what we are losing:

lost to progress
hand-written
Thank You cards

About this loss, the so-called conservative parties have little to say. With my practice, I continued noticing aspects of modern life:

careful plans
spray painted on
the sidewalk

It was time for a vacation:

a real vacation:
a week without
political news

hike to
Balanced Rocks —
tripped on a root

And then there was a solar eclipse:

eclipse
sunglasses in hand
rain clouds in sky

And memories of other countries:

Mexican market
half-remembered words
familiar flavors

a whole country
bicycle trailers
to pull cellos

airport toilet
clean and neat —
in Japan

familiar
sounds of recess
in Taipei

But mostly I found my own environment strange:

workers pushing carts
use ADA push buttons
more often than ...

stickers on laptops
a modern language
I don't comprehend

picnic blanket
with pale young women
in bikinis

Strange too were the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions in my own life:

aspirations
of minimalism
Amazon order

Indian
veggie bowl with
Bollywood music

COMPUTERS, AI, AND THE INTERNET

The machines that dominate my life, and provide both frustration and joy, are mostly computers. I don't really know how much of the frustration comes from the computers themselves, from my lack of skill, or from the social context in which computers function. In living, these frustrations are often mixed:

online chat with
a human being
who types a reply

I fail
two-factor authentication
twice as often

real cost
of a modest donation
daily emails

These computers, which include cell phones, were supposed to simplify my life, but they often left me with more things to do:

one more task
to block spam calls
on my cell phone

The frustration sometimes left me at a loss:

important matter:
long phone tree then
placed on hold

Google Maps sends me
in the wrong direction —
twice

Often, I blamed myself:

monastically
out of touch —
computers

But I was tempted to generalize about function:

disconnected by
all the ways to
stay connected

Internet
designed to attract
and distract

However, my computer life also left me with a smile:

friendship:
I check the weather
where he lives

ACADEMIC LIFE

My academic life included teaching, writing, doing ethics consults at the hospital, and much more. When the pandemic struck, I taught more online, but pandemic life deserves its own category. Here are some haiku from academic life:

continental divide
those who generate email
those who must respond

not my type
she actually likes
Track Changes

journal club
talk about everything
but the article

An important part of my work were ethics consults:

attitude test:
the pager beeps
Friday at four

I always tried to be clear about the ethical issues, but now I paid more attention to the patients themselves. I noted the variety of patients:

emergency nurse
struck in the eye —
by a patient

hasn't seen a doctor
in thirty-five years —
now wants everything

wants to leave
Against Medical Advice —
to check on her dog

patient with
a rare disease —
dysfunctional family

Another aspect of my academic life was writing. This aspect had its own haiku:

hours of struggle with
the online submission —
the root problem is ...

no easier with age:
rejection letter from
a journal

And I noticed things about myself that I didn't like:

shutting the door
only excludes
external distractions

Some aspects of academic life had nothing to do with ethics consults or writing. For example:

summer day at
university library
wool sweater

And my feelings when reading the world news:

the cunning
of history doesn't
seem so smart

Of course, there were meetings that I had to attend:

meeting
cancelled
a gift from God

the sun sets
through the window —
the meeting goes on

Yes, the sun was setting.

MEDICAL WORLD

I saw the medical world both as a worker and as a patient. My experience as a patient began with hematuria:

layers of
medical providers
same questions

"pink or red
or merlot?"
urologist asks

"bladder cancer"
I say it aloud
on the way home

they ask for
the copay now —
just in case

And yet I had a dumb sense that things would be all right:

I'll be okay —
it's only raining
in the puddles

My own experience of illness helped me to pay attention to the experience of others:

I shake
his cold hand —
Raynaud's

losing weight
unintentionally —
new problem

doctor's office
he brings his daughter
who looks sixty

outlines of an
oak leaf blown away —
Alzheimer's

I knew how close we all are to a sudden end:

a diagnosis
all it takes to realize my
days are numbered

Although I had a dumb sense that I would be all right, I was not hopeful about the larger social context:

Fox News on
the clinic's television —
sick twice

PANDEMIC LIFE

The seasons changed, and my lifeworld too. Soon the pandemic was upon us, and brought with it its own haiku moments:

still dark
footprints in the snow
approach the hospital

All classes shifted online to Zoom classes. The university was slow to shift back because it discovered how much money it could save. More haiku:

Zoom class went well
except for the student
in the waiting room

"end meeting"
I longed to click yes —
a year ago

I thought about the larger issues that the pandemic raised:

picnic tables
covered with snow —
vaccine waitlist

I want the vaccine
that helps me to live
with purpose

receding snow
white litter with
blue face masks

I noted the lack of solidarity:

they cherish
their liberty to
infect others

The pandemic went on and on, until it became the background in which we live.

RETIREMENT

There were many reasons, both negative and positive, why I decided to retire. Negatively, I lost all patience with the requirements of the medical school. I remember when they began to require us to write comments to and about students in a certain format. Probably that requirement made it easier for the dean to copy what we write into the dean's letter, but what got lost were educational goals and values. Also, I noted that the university discovered that it could save money by having us teach online. Again, there were no discussions of educational goals and values. Positively, I wanted to write a few things, without interruptions, and I wanted to find or create some meaningful forms of political engagement.

This phase in my life provided more material for haiku:

retirement fantasy:
email from people
I know

My retirement income was quite sufficient:

luxury of waiting
Social Security increases
8% per year

Downsizing was a long-standing practice of mine:

deep satisfaction
of giving another thing
to Goodwill

But I was surprised to notice a peculiar form of impatience:

I forget
how to sit
in long meetings

I was able to affirm my decision to retire when I rode the bus:

city bus
silent college students
with cell phones

Although I said I didn't like teaching online, I found myself doing it:

reputation for
teaching online in India
for free

POLITICAL LIFE

I didn't know whether political life was an appropriate topic for my haiku practice, but I've come to see that politics, in the best sense of that word, is inevitable (7). So, I began with climate change, where even no response is a response — usually a bad way of responding. I began by paying attention:

beautiful but ...
earliest cherry blossoms
in a thousand years

August day
requiem for
a glacier

carbon offsets:
Martin Luther
would not approve

climate change
what I owe children —
a lot more

Then three haiku that reflected the American situation:

networks of
strong ambulances
weak neighbors

we live in
a world where *he*
might be elected

the supreme court
decision makes no
historical sense

Then some of the frustrations of trying to engage in:

politics with
people raised on
the Internet

I made a joke about my volunteer work, but jokes have meaning:

I'm a poll worker
prepared to die
for a fair count

And then some reflections on the nature of politics:

to live an ethical life
without political life:
impossible

political life:
how we should organize
our life together

In the end, my haiku practice didn't change my view about the inevitability of political life.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

I began my haiku practice because I wanted to be more present in the moment, more mindful, and more responsive. This practice did help me to become more present and mindful, but I'm not sure it helped me to become more responsive. I will return to the problem of cultivating responsiveness at the end of this essay, but I am coming to think that this problem deserves its own essay.

I begin this section about spiritual practice by making fun of myself:

a notebook to
to record my
lack of progress

birthday celebration:
extra spoonful of yogurt
on my steel cut oats

later I will
pay attention
to the moment

Then I reflected on the dispositions that I say I want to cultivate:

perseverance
cultivating that virtue
this week

humility:
knowing when to
not claim credit

But some dispositions, or at least the lessons that I extracted, seemed too saccharine:

be nice to people
especially when you
don't feel like it

And some dispositions reflected deeper problems:

when I see
my imperfection clearly
the seer feels proud

I saw my problematic relationship to lists:

although it's done
I write it on the list
to cross it off

to-do list
a guide becomes
a tyrant

But I believed deeply in forming habits:

if goodness
is like fitness —
training helps

I also reflected on what I called the cultural context of spiritual practice:

no God to call us
what's left of a vocation —
just enough

possible regret:
a condition of
meaningful choice

Slowly, I came to see that all my training in philosophy was not helping me:

philosophy
taught me to misinterpret
useful advice

Furthermore, I was critical of other people's spiritual practices:

cars exiting
the church lot —
still in a hurry

However, I also saw what counted for me as spiritual progress:

neighborhood
Korean church
bike tracks in snow

And I saw how spiritual practice was connected to a good life:

demoralized:
life without
moral ideals

Social accountability was built into my practice:

Buddhist pen pal
checks on me monthly
checks on herself

And so, I did not quit. I wanted:

to live again
but only if I can
live better

Perhaps that was the deep goal of my practice.

DEATH

There is a long tradition among haiku poets of formulating death poems (8). Although these were supposed to be poems voiced on their death beds, it seems that some of these poets cheated and formulated the poems in advance. However, most people that I am acquainted with live as if they are not going to die. But what does it mean to live as if we are going to die? Here again, it is easy to misunderstand:

I live today
as if it's my last day —
skip the laundry

One idea is that we should prepare now for God to assess our lives and pass a judgment about the rewards and punishments that we deserve. But this idea is very Christian, even punitive, and — dare I say it? — undemocratic. The idea turns life into a contest with very high stakes. Unlike the idea of vocation, I do not think that the idea of judgment day survives when we give up the theological context. So, I moved on.

Death hit hard when my older brother died. Then I noticed a lot of death in my life:

dented fence
where the spruce tree
fell to its death

October
a month of birthdays —
and deaths

When a good friend died of pancreatic cancer, I reflected:

what does a
pancreas do when it's
not ending a life

today I wanted
to telephone my friend —
long dead

I was critical of other people's attitudes:

he professed
very deep love
after she died

But I was also critical of my own attitude:

I don't fear death
because I don't love life —
enough

I say I'm not
afraid to die —
but not now

I learned that:

people die
on their schedule
not mine

When it came to my own death, I didn't think in terms of relationships, regrets, or prospects in the world. Since my mathematical training had a deep influence on me (7), I formulated my death poems in mathematical terms:

my death
poem
 ϕ

In other words and symbols:

my
death
{ }

But maybe the way I was living was contributing to my thoughts about death because I noticed:

walk in the forest
banishes thoughts
of death

Slowly, my attention shifted to a different way of living.

ATTITUDE TOWARD DEATH

Over time, I began to think less about the idea of a judgment day, and more about the importance of living well. To put it philosophically, I thought less in terms of right and justice, and more in terms of goodness. I noticed this shift during my hike in the forest. My old way of being was clear:

if the prospect of
death doesn't reform me
what will

But my haiku began to reflect doubts about my old view:

thoughts of death
don't make me live better —
and you

What began as a few doubts became a shift:

I understand
we will all die but
how we live ...

I summed up this shift with a haiku:

practice
living
not dying

But this shift was not easy. It involved more than new terms, lenses, and tools. It required new habits — new ways of inhabiting the world.

MY TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

My haiku practice helped in my spiritual development. As I said, I hoped it would help me to become more present in the moment, more mindful, and more responsive. But I learned that responsiveness required its own practice, training, and essay. I also learned that to become more responsive, I would have to confront some of the habitual ways of responding that are part of the unspoken background in my culture. Those are the next steps that I need to take, but moral practice is never finished, not because we are imperfect beings, but because change is a part of life.

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