

## Haiku and Christian Practice

The universe is relational. From protons to neutrons, from fish to chips, everything exists in relationship. To name our relations, we use language. Words are small rags, but they are all we have to polish what we share. Among words, images seem to stay on the job longest. Some images belong to those who share a language or culture. Other images are universal and speak powerfully across our differences in the poetry we write about being human. More particularly, some images help convey the seasons, experiences, and particular ultimate concerns of people who share a common set of scriptures, history, art, literature, devotional reflection, and music. In this essay, I briefly explore the relationship of English language haiku to Christian images and practice.

Not only does the reader finish a poem by incorporating an experience of the poem, haiku have the capacity to be formative. In a recent class taught by Scott Mason, a former associate editor of *The Heron's Nest*, Mason said, 'great haiku are almost therapeutic, healing, and offering more attentiveness and more mindfulness because we have paid attention.'<sup>1</sup>

As a poet, I write the relations I see in my life as a United Methodist minister in a North American midwestern urban location. As a reader, I linger longer in the poetry that floats along images that connect me to my vocation. I look for my own devotional insights when I see a haiku about 'heels that pinch' on Ash Wednesday (Julie Warther Schwerin) or 'the river in different places' (Gary Hotham) after a baptism. When I see a poem advocating for the marginalized, I take that experience into the consideration of my own practice. As a man of European descent, I benefit from the poems that remind me I know nothing of Black experience in the United States or the experience of refugees in Europe. From the Book of Psalms to R.S. Thomas, poets have long tried to render the metaphysical through particular wonders.

My own connection to writing poetry that has become more clearly a devotional practice came from sitting at the feet of a Pure Land Buddhist who wrote about the way of simple trust.

In his book, *Pure Land Haiku: The Art of Priest Issa*, David Lanoue powerfully connects the poetic life of Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) with his knowledge and practice of the precepts of Shinran's popular Jōdo

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Mason, Main Line School Night class, April 21, 2021

Shinsū Buddhism, a school of Pure Land Buddhism. Issa so identified with this sect that he called himself ‘Priest Issa of the Haiku Temple.’ Pairing Issa’s poems and ultimate concerns, Lanoue reveals how Issa’s poems often hinge on specifically Jōdo Shinsū concepts of sin, grace, faith, and salvation, karma, transience, etc. Lanoue asserts that Jōdo Shinsū practice is essential to understanding Priest Issa:

come what may  
trusting in the Buddha...  
the year ends

Issa is writing from a specific location that is familial, economic, cultural, political, and religious. As an adherent of Jōdo Shinsū, Issa writes one-breath offerings of simple trust. This poet of frogs and spiders chooses images that convey humble faith in Amida Buddha’s ‘Original Prayer’--the one great vow to save all sentient beings from this existence to life in the Pure Land. For the adherent, this calls for a simple trust in the gift of salvation wrought by an Other Power.

While Pure Land Buddhism does not feature a theism corresponding with Christianity, simple trust is just a stone’s throw away from the Christian scripture in Ephesians 2:8 as rendered by the New Revised Standard Version: ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.’ Reading Lanoue’s book on my own Sabbaths<sup>2</sup> and enjoying the haiku of Issa, has led me to some of the following theological reflections: Do my poems increase the good I believe and value? Does writing from such a position harm or heal? Does everyone write from some personal sense of philosophy whether they are conscious of it or not? Lastly, who is writing about the poet’s own personal philosophy, and what path have pioneering Christian poets worn?

In Kaneko Tohta’s case an essential element to being a poet is the development of one’s own living ideology, or shiso. The Shiso is a stance in the world that is both moored in a deeply discovered perspective, and freedom from which to critique society.<sup>3</sup>

In *Poetry As Consciousness*, Richard Gilbert explicates the notion of shiso or stance asserting: ‘just as notable poetry is unique, its artistry is inseparable from personal philosophy—our evolving philosophical thoughts metamorphosing subliminally in sustained, contemplative

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<sup>2</sup> Since Sundays are days of intense work for a clergyperson, I take Fridays as a day of Sabbath for rest and reflection.

<sup>3</sup> *Kaneko Tohta Omnibus*, Gilbert, Yūki, Ostman, Hori, Franz, Franz, & Takeyoshi, 2019.

effort.’<sup>4</sup> For Kaneko, a stance is something that can be perceived through various lenses: aesthetic, political, psychological, philosophical, the particulars of exploration being left to each artist. That said, Gilbert is clear: Kaneko was not a parrot and strongly rejected ‘-isms’. With the deep reservoir of a stance, the poet is free to render, and his or her art is continually vivified to redescribe the world.

A look at Father Raymond Roseliep’s (1917-1983) work makes clear how a stance of creativity and love anchored the living ideology from which Father Roseliep sculpted his work. After success in traditional poetry, he turned to haiku in the 1960’s, where he stretched form and content in North America. Roseliep’s creativity led him to dabble with one-line poems, concrete poems, linking haiku, and mixing traditionally western sensibilities with haiku. Moreover, his creativity carried a voice of playfulness and irony into haiku aesthetics that preferred hiding the poet behind more objectivity.

According to Randy Brooks in *The Collected Haiku of Raymond Roseliep*, in an ‘ars poetica’ essay titled ‘Devilish Wine’, published in *Voyages to the Inland Sea*, Roseliep asserts:

The poet is an animal with the sun in his belly. He (She) is one breed of the species cited by Luke the Physician as ‘a whole body...filled with light’ (Luke 11:36)...He (she) is essentially a maker...The poet is...made to the image and likeness of God, and on the highest level of his (her) operation, he (she) imitates the Creator.<sup>5</sup>

Later in the same defining essay Father Roseliep continues: ‘With language he (she) puts flesh on ideas and feelings; to airy nothing he gives local habitation and name.’

bathing you,  
sick brother...

the fallow field <sup>6</sup>

In an essay in *Modern Haiku* (40.3, Autumn, 2009) Brooks shows how Roseliep wrote love poems to God and praised life and love in the flesh with haiku that can make a Methodist blush.

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<sup>4</sup> *Poetry As Consciousness*, Richard Gilbert, Keibunsha, 2018, p.73.

<sup>5</sup> *The Collected Haiku of Raymond Roseliep*, Brooks Books, Introduction, n.p. (no page number)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.133.

father's oil lamp  
in the dawn  
my body's milk <sup>7</sup>

The Christian belief in incarnation is alive in Roseliep's love haiku and in poems that celebrate the body. His work of 'local habitation' is not only set in an identifiable vocational location as a Catholic priest and Christian adherent, but in the embodiment of places near Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. By means of such particular embodiment, a writer advocates for the life of places, locations, and particular relations. Roseliep begs us to see *this* location, stance, and place with urgency:

the rosetree  
bandaged for winter  
I look for my life <sup>8</sup>

ambulance  
through applebloom  
siren off <sup>9</sup>

recovery room  
snow goose bound  
for home <sup>10</sup>

the cry  
is here  
where I buried it <sup>11</sup>

loving  
you  
in poor light <sup>12</sup>

And, in this last haiku sent to the editor Hal Roth:

grave wind  
whistling through my ribs  
my father's too <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.198.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.174.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.199.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.144.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.154.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.202.

Any person can develop a stance and social location by means of life lived in a vocation, whether as a park ranger, biologist, prison dentist, or elementary school teacher. Donna Bauerly's fascinating biography: *Roseliep: Man of Art Who Loves The Rose*, underscores the weaving of his life, priesthood, and poetry featuring both the struggle and the sun in his belly right up to the end of his days. Bauerly suggests he may have left what was meant to be a death poem on his bedstand. Note the Christian image of self-emptying--to be given freely without claim--which is characteristic of kenotic spirituality<sup>14</sup> born in the first century Christian hymn from Philippians 2:6-11. That passage describes the capacity of Jesus to 'empty himself,' in order to renounce the divine nature, simply trust, and become obedient:

who, though, he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something  
to be exploited, but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness... (Phil. 2:6-7)

Especially in what might be, possibly, Roseliep's death poem, I hear a connection to the words, 'he emptied himself' when I see:

of berry  
nip  
you dissolve <sup>15</sup>

Many fine writers currently anoint the pages of our haiku journals with haiku that are not Christian bumper stickers but that sing a page from the Old, Old Story, as one hymn describes the Christian narrative. Poems born in Christian practice may serve to do any number of things, but they can be written from a stance that serves as a living ideology and basis from which to offer prophetic critique—which can be true of writing from the practice of Judaism or Buddhism, etc. What follows are a sampling of poems by John Martone, Gary Hotham, Eve Luckring, and Julie Warther Schwerin.

bread and wine to read again <sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kenotic spirituality is a stance of self-giving in union with Christ's offering for humans to redeem and renew.

<sup>15</sup> *Raymond Roseliep: Man of Art Who Loves the Rose*, Donna Bauerly, The Haiku Foundation, 2015, p.265.

<sup>16</sup> John Martone in *Haiku 2021*, edited by Lee Gurga and Scott Metz, 2021, n.p.

our bare feet  
next to each other  
next to the ocean <sup>17</sup>

lily buds --  
a Catholic girl  
engorged with doubt <sup>18</sup>

Good Friday  
digging a grave  
for this seed <sup>19</sup>

Some haiku name the struggle to consider the 'more than rational' as in these haiku by Jill Whalen, Lee Gurga, and Tyrone McDonald:

Good Friday  
I hand the carpenter  
his last nail <sup>20</sup>

first snow a practicing non-believer <sup>21</sup>

Black Bible  
a lesson  
in gravity <sup>22</sup>

Haiku featuring worship and the sacraments explore shared image-experiences such as this one by Gary Hotham followed by Julie Warther Schwerin:

after the baptism—  
the river in  
different places <sup>23</sup>

Ash Wednesday  
wearing the heels  
that pinch <sup>24</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Hotham, *Stone's Throw*, Pinyon Publishing, 2016, p.24.

<sup>18</sup> Eve Luckring, *The Tender Between*, Ornithopter Press., 2018., p.24.

<sup>19</sup> Julie Warther, *Presence* #63, p.23.

<sup>20</sup> Jill Whalen, *blossom moon*, Modern Haiku Press, 2020, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Gurga, *blossom moon*, Modern Haiku Press, 2020, p.51.

<sup>22</sup> Tyrone McDonald, *Haiku 2016*, Modern Haiku Press, n.p.

<sup>23</sup> *Stone's Throw*, Pinyon Publishing, p.48.

<sup>24</sup> Julie Warther, *Modern Haiku* 46:2, p.98.

Whether writing from one's own dislocation, or from the stance of advocacy, haiku ask us to consider another's experience as in these poems published by Elmedin Kadric and Julie Warther Schwerin:

outside the zoo  
a family of refugees  
feeds the pigeons<sup>25</sup>

preferred pronoun  
today, an ice cube  
for the orchid<sup>26</sup>

Lastly, in an encouragement to haiku writers, I would suggest the possibilities of 'Sabbath' or a 'day of rest,' as worthy of consideration as a rhythm word. Human rhythms and their disappearance, and the battle to maintain life and work balance is appropriate to this time of increasingly long work weeks and the experience of juggling two and three minimum wage jobs. The pandemic has sent more workers home to explore how to successfully balance work and domestic life. Wendell Berry and others have written powerfully of their own Sabbaths and advocated for making space that can renew perspective. A Sabbath can be understood in Judeo-Christian terms as a resistance to being commodified.

In Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Sabbath-keeping communities taste a freedom their practice would share in their relations with the household, the animal world, and the powerless in the land. Exploring the Sabbath as a rhythmic topic--much like a season word--might assert the rhythm of well-being that is not anxious about answering endless emails and external prompts. Many lament they no longer have leisure time to look at larger horizons. My own rhythm means I write Sabbath poems often, especially when my own practice reveals something new:

enough birdsong on hand Sabbath morning <sup>27</sup>

In Judeo-Christian terms Sabbath rest is a practice of God's rest after six days of creation—and trust that creation is abundantly good because God has provided in it. Many religions and voices could mine the moments that help us discover sufficiency and gratitude.

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<sup>25</sup> Elmedin Kadric, *Light Packing*, red moon press, 2020, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Julie Warther, *bones*, 19, p.102.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Schwerin, *Modern Haiku*, 49:1, p.109.

Any religious outlook or living ideology could explore, as some of our poets do, the needs of refugees, the plight of migrants, care for the creation, racial justice, and equal rights and community for persons who identify as LGBTQ. Haiku limited to butterflies and blossoms articulate something shorter than the truth about our social, economic, or cultural location, our places, and our moments.

For those who wish to explore further, I might suggest some follow up considerations. If, as Paul Tillich suggests, religion is a state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, how do your haiku reflect, like Priest Issa and Father Roseliep, matters about which you are ultimately concerned? What life experience fuels your perspective and your critique of conventional wisdom?

Each of us arrive from some ark of living. Upon arriving on the shore of today, what gratitude or wonder would you wish to express? How might our poets in India or the Congo or South Africa or the United Kingdom articulate what it means to be human and be situated in creation? What might we learn from poets who bring a stance forward in effective haiku that leave an opening for us to be a co-creator? And what do we mean when we write poems that whisper *how meaningful!*

*Dan Schwerin*