

HAIKU AND THE ORDEAL OF MOVING

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I recently lived through the ordeal of moving, which would have been highly stressful even under the best of circumstances. Although lots of people move every day—and I have as well—this move felt markedly different for me.

I have lived in the same two-bedroom rental in the San Francisco Bay area for thirty years. Although I didn't own the single-family house, it had been home to me for more years than I had lived anywhere else. I get attached to places because I was forced to move as a thirteen-year-old when my father got a job in another state and he tired of commuting every day to work. As a teen, that move was traumatic for me for reasons I need not detail here.

late winter walk —
in an abandoned nest
nothing stirs

When my landlord died late last year in her 90s and the heirs decided to sell the property four months after her death, I was forced to move within sixty days. The current move brought up all the feelings of powerlessness and displacement I had felt as a vulnerable adolescent nearly sixty years ago.

Of course, as an adult I have more awareness and resources at my disposal to cope with a major displacement. One key resource I didn't have access to in 1967 was haiku. With the current move, I immediately turned to haiku as a vital means of expressing what I was living through, just as I have done when each of my parents died over the past twenty years. This move too felt very much like a death to me.

crickets
oh, the crickets how
I will miss their song

Writing haiku has been therapeutic for me because the poems bear witness to my anguish and sorrow, my fear, loss, and sense of isolation. The writer-as-witness means I am not alone even though I felt very much so throughout this move just as I did at age thirteen. The poetry I write, whether objectively good or bad as literature, embodies a healing agent in the form of a witness, which I lacked when I was forced to move as a teen. At that time, my parents were preoccupied and overwhelmed and no relative or older adult checked in with me to see how I was doing in the face of this world-shattering change. I coped with the ordeal by shutting down and becoming depressed for years. No one was present enough to bear witness or offer comfort as a means of coping with the anguish that I felt.

Bearing witness is not merely being an eyewitness. To bear witness means to be fully present and aware with (self-)compassion. I do not need someone to validate what I am experiencing. This is not even possible, despite the fact that many, if not most, people often go to therapy in order to have their feelings “validated,” and therapists misguidedly think of themselves as “validating” their clients’ feelings.

I am the only one who can validate my experience or my feelings. Others may affirm what I am grappling with or strengths I possess, but they cannot validate what I am living through. Thus, if I write haiku about the grief and sorrow I am living through, the haiku represent a poetic validation of this experience. In this sense, haiku poetry contains a self-therapeutic or healing aspect, which advances recovery from major losses such as my recent move. To put it another way, writing haiku serves an important integrative function.

I don’t have to block out the anguish, anger, aloneness, and other feelings I am beset by. I can acknowledge and affirm them myself, creating a haiku record in the process. This is precisely what I did. Before, during, and after the move, I wrote frequently about what was coming up for me, which led to a book of haiku about the vital importance of home.¹

sunlight
through the blinds
my broken heart

I hasten to add that I did not self-consciously decide to write a book of haiku about the loss of home. On the contrary, the last thing on my mind was to publish in the midst of this crisis.

Yet, a coherence began to emerge among the poems that naturally suggested a book which could be shaped from what I was living through. After all, I am a writer and I have a deep-seated desire to share not only the poetry but any insights I may have gleaned through the crisis. I am not looking for accolades or pats on the back. Rather, I care about others and want to offer support and inspiration in the event that even a few readers might recognize themselves in what I have recounted. After all, we are all part of the same human family notwithstanding our differences which are all too often overemphasized during these polarizing times. Perhaps it is self-evident, but I wish to point out that the act of sharing counteracts any feelings of isolation or separation that may be lurking in my psyche.

In addition to serving as a means of self-expression, haiku enable me to situate the crisis of change within the larger context of Nature. This fact alone is therapeutic and healing. Regardless of what is happening to me at any given moment in time, haiku reminds me that I am an integral part of the Whole, which includes Nature. This is no less true in the suburbs or urban setting as it would be had I moved to a remote, rural location in California or anywhere else for that matter.

so small a consolation —	displaced —
my dear friend's goats declare	my old friend, the creek
it spring again	takes care of that

It occurs to me that writing haiku while living through this crisis could be thought of as stepping stones I am laying down that lead me—to quote haiku poet and Zen meditator, Christopher Herold—from here-to-here. That is, rooted in the present moment, haiku enabled me to bear the hardship and heartbreak of the move. Once written and recorded, I (and others) could look back and apprehend how I got through the crisis to recovery. This too is a salient aspect of the integrative function.

I can easily get overwhelmed by intense emotional reactions to what is happening. This certainly happened daily for months before, during, and

after the move. Recording my experience in the form of haiku enabled me to not only bear witness but relate to my experience rather than exclusively from my experience. Fear and anxiety, for example, could readily turn to panic without intervention. Haiku enabled me to step back just enough to respond to my fear, rather than react from it and this made just enough difference to allow me to bear what often felt unbearable. This aspect of haiku writing likewise augments the integrative function I maintain haiku poetry serves.

alone with my loss
around the rosemary bush
bees humming

Unlike the move in adolescence, I vowed not to abandon myself through the recent move; and I didn't. With the help of haiku, I remained present from beginning to end, and this has made all the difference. I managed to find, as the Chinese saying goes, the opportunity lying within the crisis.

My limited (and limiting) notion of home has been significantly expanded, which seems vital to me as I enter the last phase of my life. Home needs to accord with the existential fact of mortality—something I did not fully recognize or appreciate just a few months ago. All I wanted, and wanted desperately, was to remain in the house I called home for thirty years. This reflected an attachment that caused great suffering. As the late meditation teacher, Stephen Levine, used to say in his “Conscious Living, Conscious Dying” retreats: “If you don't get the teaching of impermanence during this lifetime, you get the crash course at the end.”

What the ordeal of moving propelled me to do was a close examination of what the sense of home means to me. Because I had been uprooted in my early teens by being forced to move, home has represented a physical structure that provides uninterrupted shelter and familiarity. I knew every inch of the house and yard I lived in for thirty years. The sense of home has included not only the contents of the house but the routines I maintained in relationship to the house.

Clearly, given the fact of impermanence, my sense of home cannot be grounded in some illusion of, or attachment to, a permanent place.

Facing this illusion through the lens of haiku has led to an expanded view and deeper understanding of home as a quality of consciousness rather than walls and roof to house my possessions.

Am I completely free of attachment? Of course, the honest answer is no. Has my sense of home undergone a change? Yes, and a significant one. The haiku I have written during this recent ordeal reflect change. My sense of home is a work in progress. I expect this project to continue right up to my last breath. Why do I say this? Because I don't want to take any crash courses in impermanence. I want to leave this world free as a bird if at all possible. I also wish the same for one and all in the human family.

breathing in
breathing out
home sweet home

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one
more
minute
to
go
now**here**

NOTES

¹ See *Finding My Way Home: Haiku & Senryu*. Calif.: privately published, 2023. Many of the poems appearing in this essay are drawn from the book.