The Providence of Moments

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It is November now. The trees, more than half bare. Multitudes of leaves have flared and fallen. Maybe some were seen, the way anything red captivates attention, whether on a retail store shelf or on a woman's lips.

Maybe.

Maybe there was one. One leaf. One that was not just seen. One that was felt. One that was noticed, the way the Latin root suggests: *notitia*, "a being known." Among the millions of leaves, this one was known. This one had meaning, or it gave meaning.

Out of obscurity, the leaf became a known being, or at least a being known to the viewer, perhaps a poet. Since spring, the leaf had existed. Maybe longer. Why notice this leaf? Why in the cold crisp air? Why this afternoon? Among the infinite moments between its budding and its fall, why notice it now?

Why *this* moment?

November woods
the color of the leaves turns
to silence.

The "haiku moment" has been called the "a-ha moment," the "epiphany," and the "insight." Some Western haiku poets tend to view this moment through an Eastern lens, particularly Buddhism. Haiku moments have been described as satori, which are awakening or "life-changing moments of insight and awareness." There are references to the "satori moment."[1] Commonly associated with these experiences is what the Japanese refer to as *mono no aware*, an awareness of the passing of life and time and the "gentle melancholy" it evokes.[2] These experiences exemplify the Buddhist aesthetic of *wabi sabi*, which finds beauty in life's impermanence.

English-language haiku, however, struggles to answer the question of "why this moment?" almost as much as it does with the question of what

a "moment" is. While Western poets have been fast to embrace *satori* and *mono no aware*, Buddhist concepts for "moments," such as *samaya*, *kalavada*, *ksana*, and *en*, are largely absent from the English-language haiku lexicon. That suggests the haiku moment, as it has been embraced by English-language poets, is more of an amalgamation of Eastern ("haiku") and Western ("moment") concepts than of a purely Japanese aesthetic translated into English. Western philosophies, such as transcendentalism and existentialism, can play an important role in bridging this cultural gap between haiku and moments.

What is missing from the definition of the haiku moment is eternity, and without that there is no answer to the question of "why this moment?" "Eternity" is a religious word, meaning omni- or all-temporality and generally understood as omnipresence, according to the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who played a major role in introducing German existentialist thought to Americans after being exiled by the Nazis in 1933. The haiku moment's dependence on this religious word, however, does not make the literary art a function of religion; rather it is an expression of revelation. Distinguishing the two, Tillich said, "Religion moves from man toward God, while revelation moves from God toward man."[3] Eternity's absence from discussions on the haiku moment is perhaps Western haiku's greatest blind spot.

Even when "the eternal" is occasionally invoked in descriptions of the haiku moment, it often has a secular cosmic nature or a timidly religious character. Joan Giroux, author of *The Haiku Form*, defined the haiku moment as "an instant in which man becomes united to an object, virtually becomes that object and realizes *the eternal*, universal truth contained in being."[4] Anita Virgil, a past president of the Haiku Society of America, similarly noted that haiku demonstrates the "nature of all things of this world: their unique identity and yet their sameness, their evanescence and their *eternal* quality."[5]

It is usually not clear whether "the eternal" referenced in descriptions of the haiku moment relate to the Eternal God conceptualized as the Eternal Now in Christianity, Buddhism, or Hinduism. In the least, these descriptions of the haiku moment acknowledge a rift between the poet's existence and eternity as well as a sense of belonging to it (e.g., "united").

The experience of this separation—whether from eternity, other people, or ourself—is existential estrangement.[6] That was what Martin Luther King Jr., influenced by Tillich's theology, was referring to when he wrote in his letter from the Birmingham jail that "sin is separation."[7] In a way, the psalmists were as concerned with moments as haiku poets but without the ambivalence over eternity. "Where the invocation 'Eternal God' means participation in that which conquers the nonbeing of temporality, there eternity is experienced,"[8] said Tillich.

Without eternity, the haiku moment becomes an aesthetic, a paradox. For example, R.H. Blyth said, "The nature of the haiku moment is *anti-temporal and its quality is eternal*, for in this state man and his environment are one unified whole."[9] But the moment is not against time; rather it is for eternity, which suddenly enters our temporal existence and bridges our past and future without resisting the flow of minutes. What is felt as time stopping is actually an encounter with eternity. Simply describing the moment's "quality" as eternal sidesteps the religious implications of our not only encountering eternity but accepting it, too. And neither is the moment separate from eternity, as the poet Jane Reichhold indicated when she wrote "'The Haiku Journey' ... is eternity—and it is now."[10] In contrast, the Danish existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard held that "The present is the eternal, or rather the eternal is the present, and the present is full." This is why we speak of *presence* of the divine, as in the God that is the present. Spiritual Presence.[11]

Perhaps English-language haiku's aversion to eternity has stemmed from an adherence to *wabi sabi*'s emphasis on the impermanence, with all its beautifully tragic endings and passing of time. After all, eternity's Latin root is *aeternus*, which means "enduring" or "permanent." But eternity does not negate *wabi sabi*; instead, eternity gives it depth. "Nothing is as swift as a blink of the eye, and yet it is commensurable with the content of the eternal," Kierkegaard said.[12]

Giroux described the haiku moment as a "*timeless*" event in which "man is united to his environment and realizes that he partakes of the *eternity* of the universe."[13] However, in the Western sense, eternity does not mean "timelessness" or "endlessness of time," and not even the Hebrew word for the term, *olim*, or the Greek *aiones* indicated as much,

according to Tillich.[14] That said, in Buddhism, Dharma is "a reality of the present" and "timeless reality" that leads to Nirvana, which is closely associated with eternity.[15] But that begs the question of why Western haiku poets more commonly reference "the eternal" than *samsara* or Nirvana. Either way, Tillich said, "Every moment of time reaches into the eternal. It is the eternal that stops the flux of time for us ... Not everybody, and nobody all the time, is aware of this 'eternal now' in the temporal 'now.' But sometimes it breaks powerfully into our consciousness and gives us the certainty of the eternal, of a dimension which cuts into time and gives us our time."[16]

Without eternity, time cannot seemingly stop in the moment, nor we with it. When the moment grips us in the present, the past and future do not wait. Without eternity, the march of moments "infinitely vanishing" into the past would have no "foothold" in the present, the lack of which would deny the past and future of a dividing point.[17] Claims that the moment can find such a foothold in "an infinite succession of time" make a "parody of the eternal," Kierkegaard said. And that parody is found in definitions of the haiku moment that blend concepts of synchronicity and infinity.

In the seminal anthology *Haiku Moment*, editor Bruce Ross cited Marshall Hryciuk's definition for the book's namesake term as a "spontaneously occurring condition or context in which the constituents, and there won't be many, are wholly themselves and 'this worldly' and yet simultaneously and without cause or logic indicate or realize the infinity which ultimately is their source."[18] Here, Hryciuk, the former president of Haiku Canada, frames the haiku moment in the context of synchronicity (i.e., "spontaneously occurring condition ... without cause or logic"). Ross later went on to say, "In a haiku moment the mind does not intervene in the essence of things or the *synchronicity* of things."[19] The psychologist Carl Jung described synchronicity as "a meaningful coincidence of two or more events," where he adds, "Synchronistic phenomena prove the simultaneous occurrence of meaningful equivalences in heterogenous, casually unrelated processes."[20]

While Hryciuk's definition of the haiku moment does identify "infinity" as the ultimate source of haiku, it is important to remember that,

in the context of synchronicity, infinity is a mathematical (i.e., secular) concept, as in an unlimited supply of material probabilities. Without question, infinity is vital to the poet's experience of the moment, especially in the case of transcendentalists, but it is not a scientific reality. "Infinity is a demand, not a thing," said Tillich.[21]

Tillich called infinity a "directing concept," not a "constituting concept." He wrote, "It directs the mind to experience its own potentialities, but it does not establish the existence of an infinite being." This "directing" is what happens within the haiku moment: time and space, which are not things, are transcended in the mind, but "the mind remains bound to the infinitude of its individual bearer."[22] The eternal gives poets a "now" on which to stand, and there they have "infinite reality and infinite significance," Tillich said. Now, in the moment, the poet feels alive and present, because "eternity *is*," and a haiku is an expression of what *is*.

The awareness of the infinite significance of every moment was especially acute among the American transcendentalists. To notice the scarlet oak in autumn, Henry David Thoreau said, it must, "in a sense, be in your eye when you go forth. We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads,—and then we can see hardly anything else."[23] For the transcendentalists, the divine was infinite, everywhere, eternal: in nature, in human beings, always. Beauty and music are the "rule and character. It is the exception that we see and hear," Thoreau said.[24] The haiku poet goes on a walk (*ginko*) with this very conviction: that he or she can find the rule of nature. But this beauty is not just everywhere, it exists in every moment. That is why Thoreau wrote in his journal one day in mid-winter, "Such is beauty ever: *neither here nor there, now nor then*, neither in Rome nor in Athens, but wherever there is a soul to admire."[25] Martin Luther similarly saw the divine in everything. He believed God had "found the way that his divine essence can be completely in all creatures, and in everyone especially, deeper, more internally, more present, than the creature is to itself."[26]

While Thoreau could step into the woods with the conviction that he would find a scarlet oak because he was "possessed" with the idea of the tree, it is always easier to find the finite outside of us than the infinite within us. For the finite and infinite alike, Thoreau's observation rings

true: "Objects are concealed from our view, not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear them."[27] But often when poets embark on a *ginko*, they do not know what, if anything, possesses them. They do not know what lurks in their unconscious. They may latently sense something stirring within them. Maybe the *ginko* does not yield a poem. Maybe a poet must wait longer, walk farther. Maybe there is restlessness. Maybe hope. Maybe despair.

Then, suddenly, the poet is grasped by something in nature: maybe a red leaf or the orange setting sun. Whatever it is, in the *now*, it corresponds to the infinity within the poet. "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit," said Thoreau's mentor, Ralph Waldo Emerson.[28] For Emerson, what the poet notices in nature corresponds to something ineffable within him or her, and "it can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture."[29] This belief corresponds with the concept of the Zen formless self. As the Zen Buddhist scholar Hisamatsu Shin'ichi told Tillich, "Scenery, such as mountains and rivers or flowers and birds, constitutes the *Moment* for the Formless Self to express Itself. Zen art has nothing to do with a realistic copying of natural phenomena. When painted, the landscape may seem to be the content of the painting, but the true content is the Formless Self."[30]

Importantly, a haiku cannot translate what is experienced in that moment. A haiku is our substitute for a word that does not—and cannot—exist but that has content rooted in infinity that needs to be expressed for the present to be fulfilled and true. A haiku can only indirectly describe or suggest what Rudolph Otto, a German Lutheran theologian and Tillich's colleague, called the *numinous*. The *numinous* is the "holy" but before any connotations of morality or purity are to it attached. It is raw holiness. It is a category of value and an "irreducible" and unfathomable mental state. "The *numinous* can only be suggested by means of the special way in which it is reflected in the mind in terms of human feeling," Otto said.[31]

As seen in the landscapes that yielded the ineffable for Emerson and the formless self for the Buddhist, encounters with the *numinous* are marked by an unutterable quality and, especially in mysticism, self-

depreciation, according to Otto. In these moments of encounter, the person we refer to as "I" shrinks as much in size as in value when contrasted with an "overpowering" element of the holy, or *majestas*. To varying degrees, there is a sense of "submergence" or "nothingness," which is the Western mystic's equivalent to the Eastern's "void." And it is through the contrast of the depreciated self and the "overwhelmingness" of the *numinous*, that the foundation for religious humility is laid, according to Otto. This humility, in part, explains the haiku poet's aversion for writing in the first person ("I"). In the poet's hesitation to write "I," there is, at least unconsciously, a nod to what Otto said the mystic declares in his or her nullity: "I am naught, Thou art all."[32] For poets, this self-nullification is usually not absolute, leaving room for the first-person narrative. Even the mystic states "*I* am naught."

"Our faith comes to us in moments," Emerson said, and haiku is an expression of this truth when the moment is viewed in the context of eternity.[33] That makes writing haiku an act of faith, and even English-language haiku's lexicon supports this idea. Faith, Tillich said, is a state of "being grasped by an ultimate concern."[34] For haiku, this state of being "grasped" is vital to the poem. Not coincidentally, the *kire* is commonly translated as "surprise." "Surprise" has the Latin root *prendere*, which means "to grasp" or "to seize." But this is no mild grasping—it is *super* + *prendere*. This grasping, Tillich said, does not constitute any "dramatic conversion experience"; instead, it "means only that we did not produce it, but found it in ourselves .... the ultimate that grasps us will be more powerful, demanding a decision of our whole personality."[35] Any poet who has felt a great weight when choosing a word for a haiku knows this powerful demand on his or her entire personality for a decision.

While the *kire* does not demand anything beyond surprise, attempts to equate the haiku moment with "epiphany" suggest an ultimate concern, which Tillich alternatively explained as "taking something with ultimate seriousness or unconditional seriousness."[36] Ross also defined the haiku moment as "the conjunction of the particular and the absolute in a moment of time. Haiku is then basically an epiphany."[37] The word's root is the Greek *epipháneia*, which combines *epi* (upon) and *phainein* (to manifest or show), and it initially was invoked for the showing of a deity. In

Catholicism, Christmas Eve is known as Epiphany Eve. But even without any deity, an epiphany associated with the *kire* would not deal with anything less than something involving unconditional seriousness.

Thoreau's comment about objects being concealed from our view suggests that what happens in the haiku moment is more a matter of revelation than epiphany. "Revelation" in Latin is *re* (back) and *velare* (to veil), making it the drawing back of a veil. Tillich said, "A revelation is a special and extraordinary manifestation which removes the veil from something which is hidden in a special and extraordinary way."[38] And any piece of finite reality can become a medium for revelation, or a "bearer of divine power": stars, stones, kittens, leaves, rainbows, bushes, people. And the moment that finite thing assumes a holiness, it acquires a personal nature that supports both self-relatedness and world-relatedness, according to Tillich.[39]

The clue to the riddle of "why this moment?" lies in these relations unveiled in revelation. That is because, Kierkegaard noted, the synthesis of the temporal and eternal is an expression of the "spirit," which awakens in the synthesis of the psyche and body. "As soon as the spirit is posited, *the moment is present*."[40] Kierkegaard's "spirit" is akin to Zen's formless self and Thoreau's "soul to admire." In sum, a haiku is the expression of the moment when, in the blink of an eye, we are humbled through a revelation facilitated by a piece of finite reality that takes on a divine power, or holiness, and corresponds to the infinitude within us that is a reflection of the God in whose image we are made. In the humility of the moment, perhaps when a leaf is noticed, the veil of the self is lifted enough for the poet to receive the overtures of eternity, to which the haiku is a testament.

Why this moment? Answer, Tillich: "God is the answer to the question implied in being."[41]

The Greeks had only abstractly conceived of eternity and lacked a concept for spirit. Consequently, Kierkegaard noted, rather than use what we call "the moment," Plato used the word ἐξαίφνης, which translates to "the sudden."[42] However, the Greeks had two words for time: *chronos*, which is "normal time," and *kairos*, which is "the right time" or "timing." The Buddhist equivalents to k*airos* are *samaya* (an appointed time or

proper time), *kala-vada* (a ripening or maturation of time), and *ksana* (a moment of fulfillment or purpose).[43] In Japanese, there is also *en* (the right condition at the right time).[44]

Through much of the New Testament, Tillich has noted, Jesus repeatedly says it was not his time, but when he rode into Jerusalem, that was his right time, his *kairos*. In Christianity, *kairos* is "the time which God thinks is the right time, to that moment when God sends his son. So *kairos* is the right moment, not any moment, but the particular moment of God's choosing," Tillich said.[45] And we can reject the moment God chooses. Jesus wrestled with that decision in the Garden of Gethsemane. We can throw ourselves into our work, in hobbies, in politics. Find meaning only in the finite. Numb ourselves with social media or drugs. But without an ultimate concern that relates to the infinite, we will not have genuine moments. And if we try our hand at writing haiku, it will be painfully obvious to those who read it.

Cor Van Den Heuvel, the editor of *The Haiku Anthology* and past president of the Haiku Society of America, made this clear when he pointed out the absurdity of Japanese-style *gendai* and similar contemporary haiku moments that stress the "juxtaposition of a psychological, emotional, or an intellectual situation or thought with a brief reference to an element in the natural world, as if the combination will create a haiku moment."[46] *Gendai*'s technical utilization of juxtaposition is an exercise in what Tillich called "controlling knowledge," which "looks upon its object as something which cannot return its look." There is no revelation. No synthesis. No spirit. No moment. There is no infinite beyond the finite. A kitten is just a kitten: an object. And the same is true about the poet.

Regarding controlling knowledge, Tillich warned that "Man has been lost in this enterprise ... Man has become what controlling knowledge considers him to be, a thing among things, a cog in the machine of production and consumption, a dehumanized object of tyranny or a normalized object of public communications." In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, existentialism emerged as an attempt to counter this dehumanization. "It [existentialism] says 'No' to this world, but, in order to say 'Yes' to something else, it either has to use controlling knowledge or

to turn to revelation," Tillich said.[47] *Gendai* says "No" to the world but resorts to controlling knowledge. It has no right time, no *kairos*.

On the individual level, *kairos* is not necessarily a conversion experience; it can be a moment of "deepening," Tillich said. A moment can be *kairotic* when, in the course of our personal experiences, "something new, unexpected, transforming, breaks into our life."[48] In this way, haiku moments can be *kairotic*, so long as the moment expressed relates to the ultimate meaning of a poet's life. Even a haiku about a kitten can have an ultimate meaning by, for example, pointing beyond the finite creature to an innocence rooted in its essential nature that is saved from the existential estrangement that human beings experience. Kobayashi Issa demonstrated this pointing beyond:

> a kitten
> stamps on fallen leaves,
> holds them to the ground [49]

This deepening, *kairotic* haiku aligns with what Randy Brooks, the author of *The Art of Reading and Writing Haiku* and a Millikin University English professor, described when he said poets should not be "seeking moments of satori or epiphanies." Instead, they should be writing haiku from "our own back yard."[50] These haiku moments are not dramatic transformational experiences. We are moved in these moments. Nudged. But a movement toward what?

We feel led by these moments, guided. Remember, infinity is a "directing concept" and *kairos* is a particular moment of God's choosing, not ours. What guides us is the Divine Spirit within us, which is unveiled in the moment of Kierkegaard's synthesis of psyche and body. This Spirit, Tillich notes, is not a mysterious substance or part of God but God Himself. "The Spirit is always present, a moving power, sometimes in the stormy ecstasies of individuals and groups but mostly quiet, entering the human spirit and keeping it alive, sometimes manifest in great moments of history or personal life, but mostly working hiddenly through media of our daily encounters with men and world."[51]

A recurring theme in my book, *children & bubbles: Haiku on Fatherhood* (Red Moon Press, 2023), is how moments guide us. "Moments lead

us to beyond where we feel we belong, to where we were reluctant to look. It is the world's way of ensuring it will not be forgotten by those living in it." Every haiku we write is like a star in the night sky. Our heaven is the collection of these stars, and some can be strung together to form a constellation that tells a story: the story of a life. Each moment leads us closer to whom we are meant to be, and the Spirit is present in each moment. The Spirit *is* the moment. "The Spirit must give us new words, or revitalize old words, to express the true," Tillich said. "We must wait for them; we must pray for them; we cannot force them. But we know, in some moments of our lives, what life is."[52]

this is life
my daughter
hands me an acorn

This collection of moments expressed in haiku, this constellation of stars: this is Providence. Providence, Tillich noted, is not a divine plan in which people have no say. It is not a pre-determined future. That would turn God into a tyrant who has robbed people of the freedom with which he had endowed them. Rather, Tillich said, "Providence means that there is a creative and saving possibility implied in every situation, which cannot be destroyed by any new event."

We do not know when our potent moments will come or to where they will lead us. But they demand of us the faith to wait for them, to look for them, to accept them, to follow them. It is a choice: one we can make with creativity and courage or with anxiety and conformity. Tillich said, "The infinite significance of every moment of time is this: in it we decide, and are decided about, with respect to our eternal future."[53]

Yes.

We decide.

In three lines.

Notes

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[38] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 110.

[39] Tillich, *Biblical Religion, and the Search for Ultimate Reality*, 22-23.

[40] Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 88. (Author's emphasis).

[41] Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume One*, 162.

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