



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Straw Sandals at My Feet”

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Centering Thoughts

Do not seek to follow in the footsteps of the wise; seek what they sought. Matsuo Bashō

*The moon and sun are travelers through eternity. Even the years wander on.
Whether drifting through life on a boat or climbing toward old age leading a horse,
each day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.* Matsuo Bashō

*Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal
which the reader recognizes as his own.* Salvatore Quasimodo

Breathe in experience. Breathe out poetry. Muriel Rukeyser

Sermon

You might have heard me speak before about how religious language is symbolic, a night language different from the day language of everyday experience and facts. Symbols and interpretive language allow us to speak of feelings and meaning, rather than facts; subjective rather than objective reality. Poetry is a night language. It speaks to emotions, our response to the awe, wonder, joys and sorrows of life. Poetry and religious language express our spirituality in a way that fact-based prose cannot. Poetry beats around the bush because that’s what it needs to do to express the sometimes inexpressible.

If I use the word ‘God’, for example, I convey very little if you don’t know what I mean by God. That’s why I often say, ‘the God of your understanding’ in order to include all ideas of God that might be meaningful to you. And if that word means nothing to you, I often add other descriptors for that ultimate source or concept that is greater than you and me, such as Spirit of Love and Life, or all that is good in the human heart and mind. The word God does not require belief in a supernatural entity for it to have meaning. When God replied to Moses, “I am what I am,” God left it to Moses to fill in the blank. Talk about beating around the bush, and a burning bush at that!

The 17th century Japanese haiku poetry made famous by Matsuo Basho well illustrates the intersection of religion, spirituality, and poetry. Basho’s poetry invites us to encounter the wonder of life and an inner spiritual world as we travel down life’s road.

Basho, born in 1644, was the youngest son of a samurai in service to the lord of Ueno (*Oo-eh-no*) Castle, somewhat near to Kyoto. Similar in age to the lord's son, he and Basho became study companions and devoted friends. But after his friend, Yoshitado, became lord, he died. The 22 year-old Basho was heartbroken. Vowing not to return, he left Ueno on a pilgrimage to enshrine a lock of his friend's hair at the Buddhist monastery at Mount Kōya.

There, amidst the temple, its tombs, and the hallowed forest, Basho began to reflect deeply on the transience of life and the sadness that accompanies death and change. He observed how nature reflects life's changing cycles. He considered becoming a monk, but chose to renounce worldliness while still living in it. And poetry called out to him.

Earlier, Basho had made a name for himself by competing in popular poetry games. Educated Japanese nobility, samurai, and the merchant class held poetry competitions at social events, known as *renga*. One person began by offering a triplet, three lines of verse. Others would add more verses attempting to outdo previous additions. These verses fit into formal poetry rules. Despite his skills, Basho didn't like the form's rigidity. His poetic expertise led him to edit a collection of other poet's work, along with his commentary. It was well-received and encouraged Basho to dedicate himself to improving his own poetry.

Basho went to Edo, now Tokyo, to write and study under a Zen master. After roughly ten years, Basho was a recognized writer and teacher of poetry, though he was extremely poor. To assist his writing and teaching, some students bought him a small cottage on the Sumida River. One student planted an exotic basho, or banana tree, beside the house. Basho loved to sit underneath its broad leaves and look out over the river and countryside. His home became known as Banana Tree Cottage and Basho took this as his final pen name.

In 1681, the 36 year-old published his first verse reflecting his emerging style. Here is an early haiku:

“On a leafless bough / in the gathering autumn dusk: / a solitary crow!”

Spare and unpretentious, it's a simple observation of nature. Let it paint a picture for you. [*Repeat poem.*] Its pure expression puts nothing between your experiencing that image.

Yet in these few words he communicates much more without explicitly saying so. Did you sense aging, death, or sadness? To me, the ennui is palpable. It's a frequent emotion in Basho's poetry and depression a frequent companion throughout his life. This next poem, the one shared with the kids, he wrote five years later.

“Ancient still pond / a frog leaps in / splash!”

Like the autumn poem, this is both obvious and subtle. This poem reflects Basho's growing depth. No longer writing about nature itself or the human condition of aging, he's writing about deeply philosophical Zen insights. The frog can symbolize you and me jumping into the ancient pool of life, eternity, God, or Ultimate Truth. And the impact of our lives, our transience, might be as short-lived as the ripples on the pond resulting from the frog's momentary entry in the water. Listen again. [*repeat poem*]

Zen masters teach that all things change, nothing remains the same. Zen wisdom also teaches ‘co-dependent origination’, a truth echoed in our Seventh Principle, that all things are interdependent. But this idea goes beyond mere interdependence to assert that all is one. Long before quantum physics or the Big Bang, Zen Buddhists affirmed we all come from the same origin. We are the frog, the water, the tree, even the wooden pew you sit on is still a tree growing in the forest. Nothing is completely self-originating. Basho’s study of Zen matured his observation of the world, of life, and profoundly influenced his poetry.

Basho also admired the Chinese and Japanese wandering poets of earlier times. He followed their example. He traveled simply, carried little, dressed as a Buddhist monk in sandals made of grass, and walked or occasionally rode a borrowed horse. Basho wrote:

“Another year is gone / a traveler’s shade on my head / straw sandals at my feet”

Mostly he slept out among the trees and stars or was invited into a disciple’s home. One journey, when Basho was 45, resulted in his most famous poetry and prose collection, *The Narrow Road to the Far North*, also translated as *The Narrow Road to the Interior*.

The title did not describe the actual road he walked or the direction he traveled. The narrow road described the unique journey every single person must take as a consequence of living. Robert Frost echoed this in his own poem centuries later titled, “The Road Not Taken”.

The far north referred to what is beyond seeing, what is unknown, and more importantly, what is within a person waiting to be discovered, that uncharted interior where true awareness lies. For Basho, the journey is life and no matter where we go, home is always there. We are like the snail for our bodies are the shell that holds who we are within. What lies within identifies who we are, not the physical descriptors of our outward appearance.

We do not need to make actual cross-country journeys to look within. But like many a wandering pilgrim, Basho did both. His travels around Japan were accompanied by self-reflection and detached observation. What he discovered appeared in his poetry.

Basho was ill when he set out on the journey that resulted in the *Narrow Road*. Because he didn’t expect to return alive, he sold his cottage before setting out. But he did return and his students built him a new cottage, complete with new banana tree. Basho lived a few more years, long enough to set off on yet another trip. Before returning, he died near Osaka, in 1694. Friends buried him there in a temple overlooking a lake he had briefly lived beside and loved.

Basho didn’t invent haiku so much as extract the first set of three verses that began those popular competitions of his day. He let these verses stand by themselves. ‘Elegant simplicity’ Basho called these three lines of five, seven, then five syllables. Unfortunately, English translations alter the poetic form and lose some elegance included in the original Japanese. Basho used assonance, alliteration, homonyms and culturally-understood symbols pointing towards their hidden meaning that are lost in English.

Basho didn’t want his students to follow formulas too rigidly, but he did establish haiku traditions beyond their 17 syllables and three-verses. Each haiku should have a meaning greater

than its observation of nature. Called the aftertaste, the poem was expected to linger after you heard it, provoking you into rich contemplation and a deeper awareness of its truths.

In Zen tradition, enlightenment comes in an instant. Basho's poems were not intended to trigger enlightenment, like a traditional koan. Instead, they were a record of that moment of awareness. In the frog poem, splash! is that moment. Haiku usually include an 'aha' or 'ahh' moment. The sun may rise, the moon beam, and we see what couldn't be seen before.

Because Zen Buddhism teaches that nothing is eternal and that all things change, haiku poems typically include something transient and something eternal. A seasonal reference most often voices the transient. Beauty in the natural world serves as a frequent subject because nothing is more ephemeral than beauty. But the eternal truth of beauty is that when you come to know your inner self and become aware of the world as it really is, that's beauty, too.

Basho wrote this next haiku after looking at a picture of Ho-tei, the Laughing Buddha. This legendary monk carries a never-ending bag from which he draws out goodies to make children happy. Look within the poem for what else it may have to say.

“How much I desire! / Inside my little satchel, / the moon and flowers” [*repeat*]

To look within, we simply look at what lies inside his little bag. In contrast to his enormous desires, within his little satchel lie treasures as huge as the eternal moon and as tiny as short-lived blossoms. So do treasures lie within us all.

Basho demands we look beyond the obvious, we work at getting to the truth behind reality's illusions. His over 300 year-old gift of poetry reminds us to look beyond day language, to see what the language of night, religion, and poetry tell us.

May the road gods beckon you, as they beckoned Basho and as they beckon me to a deep interior life. May it be so.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Your spirituality is your particular response to the world you encounter (its awe, wonder, joy, sorrow, and 'holiness'). Does poetry speak to your spirituality or experience of life? Explain.
2. Bashō claimed 'the journey itself is home'. Are you at home with your journey or are you more focused on arriving at a particular destination? Please explain.