Document generated on 03/28/2024 5:30 a.m.

Canadian Journal of Bioethics
Revue canadienne de bioéthique

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Volume 1, Number 2, 2018

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1058273ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1058273ar

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Publisher(s)

Programmes de bioéthique, École de santé publique de l'Université de Montréal

ISSN

2561-4665 (digital)

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Cite this document

Dwyer, J. (2018). Haiku, Spiritual Exercises, and Bioethics. *Canadian Journal of Bioethics / Revue canadienne de bioéthique*, *1*(2), 44–47. https://doi.org/10.7202/1058273ar

Article abstract

Pierre Hadot has discussed the deep connections between ancient Western philosophy and spiritual exercises. The author appreciates these connections, but he explains why he explored a different path. He began to write haiku as a form of spiritual practice. He wanted to use these short verses to become more mindful, present, and responsive – in his life and in his work in bioethics. After comparing traditional haiku and modern haiku, the author gives some examples from classical sources. Then he considers how reading and writing haiku might help bioethics to focus less on deliberation and choice, and more on attention and perception. Haiku might help bioethics to attend to the contexts, life conditions, and lifeworlds that shape and situate people's lives. These short poems might even illuminate some of the backgrounds and existential grounds of ethical life. At the end, the author presents some haiku that he wrote about modern life, young children, older adults, illness, medicine, and death.

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TRAVAIL CRÉATIF / CREATIVE WORK

Haiku, Spiritual Exercises, and Bioethics

James Dwyer[1]

Résumé
Pierre Hadot a discuté des liens profonds entre l'ancienne philosophie occidentale et les exercices spirituels. L'auteur apprécie ces liens, mais il explique pourquoi il a exploré une voie différente. Il a commencé à écrire le haïku comme une forme de pratique spirituelle. Il voulait utiliser ces courts versets pour devenir plus attentif, présent et réactif – dans sa vie et dans son travail en bioéthique. Après avoir comparé le haïku traditionnel et le haïku moderne, l'auteur offre quelques exemples à partir de sources antiques. Ensuite, il envisage comment la lecture et l'écriture du haïku pourraient aider la bioéthique à moins se concentrer sur la délibération et le choix, et plus sur l'attention et la perception. Le haïku pourrait aider la bioéthique à s'intéresser aux contextes, aux conditions de vie et aux mondes vécus qui façonnent et situent la vie des gens. Ces poèmes courts pourraient même éclairer certaines des origines et des fondements existentiels de la vie éthique. Finalement, l'auteur présente quelques haïkus qu'il a écrits sur la vie moderne, les jeunes enfants, les personnes âgées, la maladie, la médecine et la mort.

Mots clés
haïku, exercices spirituels, bioéthique, habiter et percevoir, contextes

Abstract
Pierre Hadot has discussed the deep connections between ancient Western philosophy and spiritual exercises. The author appreciates these connections, but he explains why he explored a different path. He began to write haiku as a form of spiritual practice. He wanted to use these short verses to become more mindful, present, and responsive – in his life and in his work in bioethics. After comparing traditional haiku and modern haiku, the author gives some examples from classical sources. Then he considers how reading and writing haiku might help bioethics to focus less on deliberation and choice, and more on attention and perception. Haiku might help bioethics to attend to the contexts, life conditions, and lifeworlds that shape and situate people's lives. These short poems might even illuminate some of the backgrounds and existential grounds of ethical life. At the end, the author presents some haiku that he wrote about modern life, young children, older adults, illness, medicine, and death.

Keywords
haiku, spiritual exercises, bioethics, inhabit and perceive, contexts

I was busy. I had ethics consults to do, classes to teach, administrative work to handle, an article to write, and my own health problems to deal with. Often I wasn't mindful of the present moment and activity. Too often I was thinking ahead to the next thing on my list. So I began to write haiku as a form of spiritual practice. I wanted to be more mindful, present, and responsive.

Both the East and the West have long traditions of spiritual practice, and I could have taken a different path. I've always admired the work of the French philosopher Pierre Hadot (1922-2010). He was a distinguished academic philosopher and historian of philosophy. He knew many languages, understood historical contexts, and read texts with the utmost care. He also championed a view of philosophy that connected it to exercises and practices. One of his books was even titled *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* [1]. Another book, *What is Ancient Philosophy* [2], sums up the view that he developed and championed:

> It would take a large volume to tell the entire history of the reception of ancient philosophy by medieval and modern philosophy. I have chosen to concentrate on a few major figures: Montaigne, Descartes, Kant. We might mention many other thinkers – as different as Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Schopenhauer, Emerson, Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, William James, Bergson, Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, and still others. All, in one way or another, were influenced by the model of ancient philosophy, and conceived of philosophy not only as a concrete, practical activity but also as a transformation of our way of inhabiting and perceiving the world [2].

I wanted to transform my "way of inhabiting and perceiving the world," but I also wanted to change the world in certain ways. With these ethical aims in mind, I could have taken a Western philosophical path, but I was busy, so I began with haiku.

Traditional Japanese haiku comprise 17 syllables, in a 5-7-5 pattern, with a cutting word (*kireji*) that divides the poem, and a seasonal word (*kigo*) that indicates the time of year. These short poems embody a Zen spirit: a focus on the moment, an emphasis on concrete perceptions, a coupling of nature and human nature, and a deep sense of the impermanence of life. Good haiku are often detached and touching, commonplace and insightful, serious and playful – all at the same time.

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ISSN 2561-4665

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Since the 17-syllable requirement does not work well in European languages like English and French, the journal *Modern Haiku* [3] gives the following gloss of this poem:

> 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. Good haiku avoid subjectivity; intrusions of the poet's ego, views, or values; and displays of intellect, wit, and facility with words [3].

I was happy to be freed from the 17-syllable requirement, but the rest of the guidelines proved difficult. Although I tried to focus on the concrete, my lifeworld is filled with abstractions: ideas about solidarity and justice, problems about futility and technology, and shortcomings in structures and systems. I was reluctant to give up all abstractions because some of them are useful tools in certain contexts. The American philosopher John Dewey (1859-1952) observed, "abstraction deliberately selects from the subject matter of former experiences that which is thought helpful in dealing with the new. It signifies conscious transfer of a meaning embedded in past experience for use in a new one." [4] Although I tried to keep the seasons in mind, much of my environment tries to keep the seasons out: hospitals and flu shots, grocery stores and imported fruit, parking lots and snowplows. Although I tried to quiet my ego, I am often asked to explain my views and values. Indeed, ethics consults often involve articulating views and values.

To begin, I read about and from the great Japanese masters of haiku: Basho, Buson, and Issa. I admired how Basho (1644-1694) transformed the witty and courtly linked verses of his time into the form and spirit we now call haiku. I read about how he spent the last nine years of his life on a spiritual pilgrimage across Japan. His travel journals (*haibun*) from this period combine prose and poetry. Here is one haiku that shows his keen perception [5]:

> Early fall –
> the sea and rice fields
> all one green.

This haiku almost overcomes the dualism of perceiving subject and perceived object.

Buson (1716-1784) was a great poet and painter. I admired his clarity of perception and his luminous sense of common things. He urged his students to "use the commonplace to escape the commonplace." [5] While his commonplace included a lot of trees, birds, and snow, my commonplace includes a lot of email reminders, hospital policies, and educational bureaucracies. Clearly, I had work to do, but this little verse shows what might be gained [5]:

> I go
> you stay;
> two autumns.

So powerful, clear, and brief!

Issa (1763-1828) was my favorite haiku poet. I admired his compassion for insects, birds, horses, young children, and old adults. I admired his disregard for social status and social hierarchies. And I admired how he maintained an awareness of suffering and a deep sense of justice, without becoming weary of the world. This haiku shows his attention to communal life [5]:

> The snow is melting
> and the village is flooded
> with children.

This haiku recognizes concern and connection [5]:

> Her row veering off,
> the peasant woman plants
> toward her crying child.

This haiku focuses on nature and human values [5]:

> Were it sweet,
> it'd be my dew,
> his dew.

And this haiku shows how much death is a part of life [5]:

The moon tonight –
I even miss
her grumbling.

Issa provided me with many examples and lessons.

Using haiku as a spiritual practice is very promising, but how might this practice help bioethics? The discipline of bioethics has tended to focus on two aspects of ethical life: deliberation and choice. Of course, we need to deliberate well and choose wisely when dealing with treatment options, ethics consults, health policies, and all the issues of bioethics. But attention and perception are also important aspects of ethical life. We need to attend widely and perceive clearly. We need to attend to the contexts, life conditions, and lifeworlds that often shape and situate people's lives, including their choices. Haiku might help us to perceive the natural, social, and built environments that are often in the background of modern life and medicine. These poems might even do something more. They might illuminate existential grounds of ethical life.

So I began to write haiku. Every day I wrote a haiku, in my notebook or on an index card. By looking for and writing haiku, I became a bit more mindful and present. I was able to attend to the contexts, life conditions, and lifeworlds in which other people and I live our lives. Sometimes I had a glimpse of different ways of being in or inhabiting the world. I don't really know whether I became more responsive, but I kept writing. At the end of each month, I edited and saved a few of my haiku. After a while, I tried to arrange the saved poems according to the seasons: from the beginning of spring, through summer and fall, into the heart of winter. But that didn't work. So I arranged them into the following categories: modern life, young and old, illness, medical world, and death.

Modern Life

the Milky Way:
billions of stars
obscured by city lights

I take
half a pastry –
twice

the sun sets
through the window –
the meeting goes on

cars exiting
the church lot –
still in a hurry

a Turkish beach
a refugee child
washes ashore

Young and Old

children blowing
on dandelion puffs –
coevolution

adults
irritated with the child
for playing like a child

children helping
their mother –
dig through the dumpster

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

every birthday
restaurant music
gets worse

bent pines –
a picnic bench
with bent men

Illness

living alone:
small splinter
big problem

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

every morning
good sleep or bad
birds chirping

cancer center:
today a visitor
tomorrow snow

outlines of
leaves blown away –
Alzheimer's

Medical World

waiting room TV
with Fox News –
sick twice

he winces
at the stitches
and the copay

hospital meal –
hard to remember
to say grace

cutting off
the hospital bracelet –
cicadas buzzing

a second opinion:
it is a
world of dew

Death

red highlights
in maple leaves –
my mother's hair

my footprints
in the snow
mere dimples now

Remerciements
L'auteur aimerait remercier Jean Maria Arrigo, Vincent Couture, Jacques Quintin et William Ruddick pour leur aide et leurs encouragements.

Acknowledgements
The author would like to thank Jean Maria Arrigo, Vincent Couture, Jacques Quintin, and William Ruddick for their help and encouragement.

Conflit d'intérêts
Aucun déclaré

Conflicts of Interest
None to declare

Édition/Editors: Vincent Couture & Jacques Quintin

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Reçu/Received: 5 Mar 2018 **Publié/Published:** 25 Apr 2018

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