

COMPOSING ZEN HAIKU:

STEWART W. HOLMES*

Training to Make Sense

I'VE TITLED this paper "Composing Zen Haiku: Training to Make Sense" because I think the practice of composing haiku requires a discipline in a person's thinking and emoting patterns similar to, and in some ways as rigorous as, the general semantics system for training people to make sense. The kind of haiku I'll use as a model was developed by a Japanese poet named Basho, who lived from 1644 to 1694. As a Zen-trained person, he evolved what I call "Zen haiku."

I'll describe how such haiku are written and give some guidelines you can follow to create your own. I'll point out how this practice can help you become aware of the way you make meanings inside your head from your contacts with the world "out there." My intent is to show how the study and practice of composing haiku can help give meaning and substance to the primarily intellectually rigorous study and practice of general semantics.

* Stewart Holmes, who lives in Hendersonville, North Carolina, has written two books, *Meaning in Language* and *Zen Art for Meditation*. His essays have appeared in *ETC.* since its first year of publication, 1943.

I shall distinguish three characteristics of Basho's Zen haiku.

1. They are short. In Japanese they have only seventeen syllables. English-speaking authors of haiku usually try to use only enough words to add up to seventeen syllables.
2. Zen haiku authors describe scenes without using words that directly convey their feelings about the things or events in the scene. By "feelings" I include both emotions and evaluations, that is, meaningful reactions.
3. Haiku composers describe things and events that happened in such a way as to arouse richly meaningful responses in them. You may create your own particularly meaningful response as you react to the scene described by an author's words. Also, because of the objective references of the words, your responses will be your own and not the author's. Subjective references incline you to copy, or be influenced by, the author's reactions.

Here are four haiku that Basho wrote.

In the fish shop
The gums of the salted sea bream
Are cold.

The Rose of Sharon
By the roadside
Was eaten by the horse.

The moon becomes clear;
A grasshopper
Is erecting its whiskers.

Seas are high tonight...
 Stretching over Sado Island
 Silent clouds of stars.

Note that each haiku describes a single experience Basho had. Also, note that he avoids subjective words that would describe how he felt about these scenes. He uses objective, report-type words that described simply what he saw or heard.

To give you an idea of the discipline involved in choosing words that make sense by being "purely" descriptive of what is happening, I'll go through the process of composing a Zen haiku. Recall that authors of Zen haikus (ideally) use only report-type language. I've outlined four steps:

1. Having a significant experience;
2. Describing the experience;
3. Deleting subjective words;
4. Limiting the number of syllables.

Step 1. Let's say you are outside your house on a clear November morning a couple of hours before sunrise. You look up at the sky, where planets and stars are shining. Several tall leafless trees are silhouetted against the sky, swaying slowly. You hear no sounds. There arises in you a feeling of a particular relationship between you and this scene.

Step 2. You say to yourself:

Stately black trees
 Dance back and forth
 Under the gaze of watching planets.

Step 3. You ask yourself if there are any subjective words, words that describe your reactions to the sources of sense stimuli rather than describing the sources themselves. "Stately." Does stateliness exist in trees or in your mind? In

your mind, or course. For the first four syllables, try "Black tree branches" or "Black branches spread." Trees and branches do exist independently of your interpreting activity.

How about "dance"? The idea of trees performing a human ritual exists only in your mind. Beware of metaphors, words that explicitly or implicitly relate your interpretation of an event rather than the event itself. They tell about you rather than "directly" about the event. "Move" will do the job, or "sway." How about "gaze"? "Gaze" may imply what happens when a human being directs his or her interested attention to something. The same situation rules out "watching." Let's substitute "Against the patterns of planets and stars" or "Against the patterns of constellations." But where do such patterns exist? In human minds, not in the heavens. Do those seven stars near the North Star make the pattern of a big dipper for people in every culture? No. Out with "patterns." Out with "constellations" for the same reason. Let's try "Silhouetted against the unmoving stars."

Step 4. Now let's count the syllables. Oh, oh, you have nineteen syllables. Take out "unmoving" and use "bright." Now you have seventeen syllables of words describing more or less objectively the things in the scene.

Black branches
Swaying back and forth,
Silhouetted against the bright stars.

While this haiku would not win a place in an anthology of haiku, it does illustrate the characteristics of a Zen haiku. Blyth, a famous scholar in this field and translator of Japanese haiku, says in his *A History of Haiku*, "It may be asked, how can we distinguish between mere objectivity and poetry, if thought and emotion in both cases are omitted?" He adds, "The answer is that we feel it in the choice of words." The composer of a haiku worthy of the name chooses picture-making words that help the reader to feel something, to create his/her own meaning of the visualized event. This

meaning does not exist in the world of things, in the world of sources of sense stimuli. Each person's meaning exists uniquely in his or her mind.

Now let's consider why I can say that composing Zen haiku helps us think and talk sensibly rather than non-sensibly. To do this, I'll briefly describe how we make our meanings.

1. We humans live in two worlds, the world of things and the world of words. By "things," I mean sources of sense stimuli. I shall distinguish between these worlds by calling the world of things "Reality-1" [R-1, for short] and the world of words "Reality-2" [R-2].

2. When we're born, we're aware essentially only of Reality-1.

3. As time goes on, we learn to use words. If we're born into an English-speaking community, the word "hungry" comes to symbolize the sensation we feel. The word "milk" comes to symbolize the liquid we want to drink. We can't drink the word "milk"; that belongs in Reality-2. We can drink the liquid; that belongs in Reality-1.

4. As we grow up, our store of words increases. With these words we make culture-conditioned associations. We use these associations to create our meanings.

5. This process of creating meanings can be triggered by input from the R-1 world or from the R-2 world. Starting the process with input from the R-1 world fosters accurate communication. Starting the process with input from the R-2 world is less likely to foster accurate communication. Compare "I need some milk" (Reality-1) and "I need some milk of human kindness (Reality-2)." Which conveys meaning more reliably?

6. The R-1 world exists. It is without meaning. Whatever meanings we make from our contacts with it are meanings that we have created.

7. Words exist (Reality-2) and we tend to believe they are meaningful. That is, we think words have meanings as trees

have bark. Words, in the strictest sense, however, are formed from sound waves from speakers or light waves from printed materials. We make meanings in our brains. Words do not have meanings; people have meanings for words. For example, the word "chien" has no meaning in and of itself. However, French-speaking people would visualize a dog if they heard or saw that word. People who did not know that French word would not do so. The meaning of "chien" exists only in the minds of people who know that word.

Readers of a Basho-type haiku start their meaning-creating processes with mental pictures of an R-1 scene or event. The meaning they then start creating is not influenced by the meanings of the author. Basho did not tell us what he thought of the fish shop or the gums of the salted fish or the temperature of the gums. It is up to us to create our own meaning from these words.

As you try writing haiku like Basho's, you'll probably go through the filtering process as I did in the sample exercise. As you work to rid your haiku of words that convey your (R-2) feelings, you'll find yourself getting closer to the R-1 world.

Here, then, is one way to make more sense. Become aware of the difference between basing your meanings on the R-1 world and basing them on the R-2 world. Being able to trace the origin of a statement back to what is going on or what went on in the R-1 world will help you make sense. Using "data" from the R-2 world, the world of non-sense, often will lead to your making nonsense.

Composing haiku may help you become more attuned to the R-1 world, to making sense of your existence. Your senses will become more sensitive; your reactions, more sane, meaningful, and pleasurable. An analogous situation — when I got a camera, I found myself opening my eyes to many photographic possibilities. My vision seemed sharpened and widened. When I started reading and writing haiku, the quality of my reactions to scenes and events changed.

Try writing Zen haiku and watch as you become more and more sure of the meanings you create. Try reading Zen haiku and observe your thoughts and feelings. Do you have a heightened sensitivity to the wonder of life? I hope so.

For practice, try making meaningful, preferably wordless, responses to these haiku.

The old fisherman...
Unalterably intent
In evening rain.

Mountain-rose petals
Falling now, falling, falling —
Waterfall music.

Silent, the old town;
The scent of flowers floating
And the evening bell.

Don't touch my plum tree,
My friend said, and saying so,
Broke the branch for me.

A single cricket
Chirps, chirps, chirps, and is still.
My candle sinks and dies.

At Furue in rain
Gray water and gray beach sand
Blend without an edge.

Copyright of ETC: A Review of General Semantics is the property of Institute of General Semantics and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.