

Basho's Road

preached by Rev. Colin Bossen, April 29, 2012

Haiku was the first form of poetry I learned. I encountered it in elementary school. I think I was in fourth grade. As part of an exercise designed to help us learn about syllables, one of my teachers taught us to write the simple form. Three lines: first line five syllables; second line seven syllables; third line five syllables. No rhyming necessary.

I have no memory of my first haiku. I doubt it was sophisticated. Most likely it was a concrete pile of images, sparked by something simple I observed on my daily walk to and from school.

Blue jays fly over
my head. Green tree leaves are
everywhere I go.

It was not until college that I realized that haiku was a serious literary form. I engaged with it through the Beat poets Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. A lot of their haikus were not proper haikus. They captured the essence of the form, instead of following it precisely. What I noticed reading them is that haiku could be more than just a series of images. Instead, they could contain a compressed narrative like this selection from Snyder's "Hitch Haiku:"

They didn't hire him
so he ate his lunch alone:
the noon whistle.

There is more packed into that little poem than there is in a lot of sermons. It offers many questions and few answers: Why didn't they hire him? Who was he? Where did he eat his lunch? Reading the poem I picture a grizzled itinerant worker, in dungarees, sitting on a flat large stone, sun shining over head, in a small woodland clearing behind a factory. I imagine the kind of factories I used to discover rambling through Detroit and Chicago. Brick, half-crumbled and pressed up against a spot of vacant industrial land slowly being reclaimed as wilderness. You probably know of such places, we have them here in Cleveland too.

It was from the Beats that I eventually made my way to the Japanese haiku masters. I loved Kerouac's "On the Road" and someone told me that Kerouac was inspired partially by the Japanese poet Matsuo Basho's "The Narrow Road to the Interior," a text whose title is alternatively translated "The Narrow Road to the Deep North."

Basho was one of the greatest writers of haiku. He composed what is the most famous work in the form:

Breaking the silence
Of an ancient pond,
A frog jumped into water--
A deep resonance.

Numerous commentaries exist on this text. Most observe that Basho was a Zen Buddhist and that for him the pond, and water more generally, was a metaphor for the mind. When water is clear and still it is like the mind when it is enlightened. Undisturbed, the reflections on its surface are the images of objects, not the objects themselves. The actual objects exist outside the pond, just as everything we perceive exists outside of our minds.

Any motion of the water in the pond is produced by external factors. Waves come when wind riles up the surface. They disappear when the wind dies. Ripples emerge when an object pierces the water's calm top. They too quickly fade.

In the poem, the frog can be understood as a thought. It appears from nowhere. Troubles the water with its splash, leaves behind a dissipating sound and then is gone under the surface. Perhaps it will reappear again, frog eyes sticking through duck weed and scheming their next step.

The poem's popularity and such interpretations have led to parodies. There is this by Gibon Sengai:

The old pond!
Basho jumps in,
The sound of the water!

Haikus like these were presented either alone or as part of a series of interlinked poems called renga. Renga can contain somewhere between two and a few hundred haiku. Some of them are authored by a single poet. Others are written by many working collaboratively. One of my favorite pieces attributed to Basho is perhaps not even original to him. It appears in one of his texts as composed by a priest who traveled with him:

Regardless of weather,
The moon shines the same;
It is the drifting clouds
That make it seem different
On different nights.

This piece, like many other of Basho's haikus, appears in one of his travel sketches. This series of texts, which include "The Narrow Road to the Interior," narrate some of Basho's travels around Japan in the late 17th century. They alternate, as I have been doing in this sermon, between narrative descriptions, philosophical reflection and poetry.

They describe Basho's journeys as pilgrimages. That works well for us since this month our theme for worship is journeys. Pilgrimages are a kind of intentional journey, undertaken usually with some sort of spiritual or religious purpose in mind.

Usually when we think of pilgrimages we think of traveling to a specific destination. In the Christian tradition, people have long made pilgrimages to Jerusalem, to the sites of miracles and to the tombs of various saints. On such pilgrimages, the journey is completed when the destination is reached. Sometimes the object being travelled to is thought to have supernatural powers that grant

a blessing on the pilgrim. This blessing may be a healing that comes in this life or a cleansing of sins that leads to a better afterlife.

Basho's pilgrimage was of a different sort. Instead of seeking a particular destination, he sought to travel for self-discovery. While this kind of pilgrimage does appear within the Western tradition, it is more common within Buddhism than Christianity. Within this kind of pilgrimage there is usually a recognition that life itself is a journey. As Basho himself writes in "The Narrow Road to the Interior:" "Days and months are travelers of eternity. So are the years that pass by. Those who steer a boat across the sea, or drive a horse over the earth till they succumb to the weight of years, spend every minute of their lives traveling."

Within these sentences is a recognition that to be human and alive is to be in motion. Think about it. We spend much of our lives traveling. Whether it is from home to work and back again or to some distant city to visit friends and relatives, our lives are filled with travel. Some days, it seems like all I do is move. Between driving Asa to and from preschool, dropping Sara off and picking her up at work and fetching Emma after track I might spend as much as two hours in the car. Sound familiar? I imagine it does. The average roundtrip commute time is 45 minutes. Once the time spent traveling to grocery stores, to the gym, to your religious community and out for social engagements is added the amount of time spent in motion each day is higher.

Even when we are not navigating the way through our lives we are still in motion. The Earth spins on its axis and orbits the sun. The sun, in turn, circles the center of the Milky Way. The Milky Way rushes its way out from the origin of the Big Bang as the universe expands. On a smaller scale the atoms of which we are comprised are moving too. Each of these trillions of particles that compose our bodies consist of tightly packed bundles of neutrons and protons surrounded by rapidly moving clouds of electrons. Existence itself is motion.

The wisdom of Basho's practice of pilgrimage is to seize this moving reality and then use it seek enlightenment. For the Buddhist this means something particular, an understanding of the transitory and illusory nature of existence. For us as Unitarian Universalists it may mean something else. Either way, a helpful tactic within Basho's practice of pilgrimage is to seek inspiration, what we might call the divine, in the ordinary. This leads to sometimes humorous results as in this haiku:

Bitten by fleas and lice,
I slept in bed,
A horse urinating all the time
Close to my pillow.

Such a poem suggests that when life is viewed as pilgrimage than every experience has religious potential. For most of us, it is probably difficult to imagine every experience as a potential religious experience. But consider this, we can learn from every interaction we have and everything we encounter. Pain or joy, success or failure, extraordinary or banal, each moment and experience in our lives contains within it a kernel to reflect upon. It all depends upon what approach you take and how open you are to exploring your life.

Take something ordinary like cooking. Within the act of preparing a meal there is the opportunity to learn about the ingredients themselves, the chemical processes which we use to prepare foods

and the social dynamics around eating. An apple can be only an apple. Or it can be a way to reflect upon the chains of dependency which comprise our lives. The apples I bought last week at the grocery store came from someplace other than Ohio. They were picked by hands besides mine. Transported to the city by many people. They derive from countless generations of cultivation. Thinking about the apple then could be a way to think about the whole structure of civilization and the dependent reality of human existence. Without food, whether it is that particular apple or another form of sustenance, we cease to be.

Such reflective wisdom might run counter to Basho's own spiritual tendency. He wrote, "Whatever such a mind sees is a flower, and whatever such a mind dreams of is the moon. It is only a barbarous mind that sees other than the flower, merely an animal mind that dreams of other than the moon." But then again, perhaps not. The contemporary Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh has written an elegant meditation entitled "Interbeing." In it he claims:

we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. We cannot point to one thing that is not here--time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper...

Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be... The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of "non-paper" elements. And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without non-paper elements, like mind, ...sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it.

The religious quest, I believe, is partially about reaching this state of awareness of interconnection. It certainly speaks to the seventh principle of our Unitarian Universalist Association, "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." The question for me is not if such an understanding is one of our goals as religious people. We can find such a goal attested throughout many of the world's traditions. Rather, the question is how do begin to reach such a goal.

One consistent answer has been to practice asceticism and shed attachments to individual material things. At the beginning of "The Narrow Road to the Interior" Basho notes that before beginning his journey he sold his house. With this action then everyplace and no place potentially becomes his home. Rather than fixing his home as some place in particular it becomes wherever he is. As he writes,

I felt quite at home,
As if it were mine,
Sleeping lazily
In this house of fresh air.

Similar advice for seeking the religious experience can be found elsewhere. In Luke, Mark and Matthew, there is a story about Jesus giving advice to a young rich man. Many of you, I imagine, remember some version of the text. In Matthew it reads: "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your

possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me."

In our tradition, the life of Henry David Thoreau offers a slightly different example. Thoreau was a kind of ascetic. He went to Walden Pond to try to live, as he wrote, "alone in the woods... in a house which I had built myself... living by the labor of my hands only." His famous book reflecting on his experiences is filled with his scorn for the material conveniences of civilization. The clear implication throughout is that such goods inhibit a life of spiritual, Thoreau would probably say philosophical, reflection.

I have been thinking a bit about such advice these last weeks as Sara and I have gotten our house ready to sell. As most of you know, we are moving to Boston over the summer. These days the practice of preparing a house for the real estate market is known as staging. Staging a house means basically removing all of the personal effects from it that make it a home. In the process it is transformed from the place where you live to an object you are trying to sell.

In our case, and I imagine in most cases, this meant getting rid of a lot of things that we had accumulated over the years. The clothes that the kids had out grown were sent off to Goodwill, toddler furniture we no longer needed was given away and boxes of used books were carted off to Macs Backs for sale. We also had to pack away much of our art and the various brick-a-brac we used to decorate bookshelves and mantelpieces. In the process I reflected upon my relationship to my materials goods. How much of them really matter? How many provide nothing more than brief distraction when they are procured and then sit on a shelf collecting dust? What do I really need in life?

Again, turning Basho, I find some useful advice. At the start of his journey he dispossess of some but not all of his material goods. He writes, "the load I... carried... consisted of a paper coat to keep me warm at night, a light cotton gown to wear after the bath, scanty protection against the rain, writing equipment, and gifts from certain friends of mine." We could dissect this list. Rather than doing that let me just point out that it implies that even if we take an ascetic spiritual route some things remain essential.

Such an observation suggests that any pilgrimage requires a certain level of material comfort to succeed. Even with his ascetic tendencies Basho did not wander the countryside naked. To journey through life material goods are to some extent necessary. As Thich Nhat Hanh would say we inter-are with them. That is not say we are dependent upon fancy sports cars for our existence. But we all need food, shelter and clothing.

And it is worth remembering that even if try to walk life's paths alone we are never really completely independent. Reading "The Narrow Road to the Interior" one finds that Basho traveled in the company of others. Some of the haikus he records do not even originate with him. This one, for instance, comes from his companion Sora:

Rid of my hair,
I came to Mount Kurokami,
On the day we put on
Clean summer clothes.

With that observation, I think of my own path to Basho. It began with an elementary school teacher, wound its way through my college years and helped deliver me here. Along the way I have had companions. Not the least of whom has been my wife who, I discovered when I picked it up, peppered my copy of Basho with commentary. Another reminder that the journey we take may be our own but we do take in the company of others.

We all receive help on our individuals journeys, whether we are cognizant of it or not. If we look at the practice of pilgrimage closely we will discover buried within it are justice questions. What is necessary for each of us on our journey? How much do we all need it? Can we have too much, so much that it prevents us from ever seeing what is really there? What obligations do we have to those who travel with us? Such questions are their own reminder that when we see things as they are a certain richness opens up. It is like the form of haiku itself, the poems appear simple but hide a wealth just below the surface. As another translation of Basho's frog poem reads:

pond
frog
plop!

May we, like Basho, travel through life blessed with companions, and a religious community, that helps us to see things as they are.

Amen and Blessed Be.