Companions on the Tao


REVIEWED BY NAOMI RUTH LOWINSKY

The Taoist sage Soshi says: only “he who has arrived” knows and understands that all things are One. (Blyth, 1949/1981, 43) It is out of this oneness of things that Haiku springs. Haiku is much more than a poetic form, it is an expression of the Tao, a way of living. There is no split between the realm of the gods and of the humans, no split between mind and camellia tree.

In their luminous book, *The Healing Spirit of Haiku*, Jungian analyst David Rosen and his friend of 30 years, poet, writer and Zen practitioner Joel Weishaus, are companions on the Tao. They are joined by the artist Arthur Okamura, whose eloquent monoprints offer a visual path. The book is arranged in a dialogue form around themes, such as “Learning to Bow” or “Seeing the Mountain.” They call their approach a “haibun of the psyche.” (6) A haibun, which is a combination of prose and haiku, is about a journey. Each section contains a haibun from David and one from Joel. They invite their readers into their personal landscapes and intimate dialogue. (Since they write as David and Joel I join their informality.)

There is a kind of poetry that leaps around associatively, amplifying, as we Jungians do with dreams. I read and write in that mode most of the time. Haiku comes from a different energy. It is quiet, inward, meditative; like a flower opening, it waits for what comes. I have read and admired haiku, and tried my hand at writing it, but have found it deceptively difficult. This book, perhaps because it is written by two westerners, perhaps because the haibun form helps the reader relate to the poems, has opened a door for me into haiku sensibility.

In each section, the prose piece provides narrative, back story, context. We learn, for example, how David came to write his first haiku. We can identify with his melancholy after much marital

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strife. He describes writing this haiku out of “the fertile soil of his depression.” The haiku that emerges out of this difficult state of consciousness is a shaft of light in a dark landscape. It is not only beautiful, but one can see clearly how the haiku works on David, how it transforms his consciousness, how it is in itself a healing. In the moment when “emptiness became enlightenment” this haiku came forth:

Dawn on a spring sea —
Then a glittering
From a thousand jumping fish

How better describe the rubedo?

Joel writes of the first haiku master Basho, that he “was always leaving home, always entering a liminal state, each journey an initiation, a deepening of insight, poetry and wit.” In the tradition of poetry as a dialogue over the centuries, an invocation of one’s poetic ancestors, Joel writes:

Basho’s thin legs carried everything needed.

This simple image cuts through our cultural baggage of consumerism, our cluttered psyches. It cuts through to the essence of things, inspires a spiritual path. It is illuminated by Arthur Okamura’s drawing of legs and their shadows. They seem to me at once planted on this earth and hovering in the air.

David and Joel write informal haiku, and don’t tie themselves down to syllable counts or strict rules about lines. They expand the genre, which traditionally focuses on the natural world, to include the subjective realm of human emotions. They enter psychological territory, and often their haibun turn around to confront them. Joel writes of being on guard duty, at 4 a.m. He wonders: “What am I guarding? The war’s inside myself!” His haiku is:

light and shadow
shadow and light
I cross both paths (17)

David writes:

Arms raise
I cry “I love you!”
No sound comes out (58)

Haiku obeys William Carlos Williams’ famous edict: “No ideas but in things.” One could enlarge upon that to say: “No feelings but in things.” Joel gives us an example of the power of this approach:

Head throbbing
A thin thread of light
Guides me home (13)

Clearly, much of their writing is informed by spiritual practice. Joel writes: “In Buddhism, life and death are cognate...with each in-breath, I am reborn. With each out-breath, I die again.” His haiku:

Moon, skull
Rise, set
Together (109)

However they do not flinch from the difficult issues of their personal and political worlds. A camaraderie of soul mates, their dialogues reflect on similar themes, often while they journey in opposite parts of the world. In the back story of David’s haibun on the theme “Making Peace with One’s Father,” he is in Japan, at the Bon festival, where you pray for the souls of your ancestors. David does a ritual for his father and writes this haiku:

Make peace with father
At home create altar —
Pray for his soul. (44)

After a week, he writes, he dreams that he and his father embrace, not something they did often in life. The haiku has shifted something in David’s psyche, al-
lowing him to embrace his father. Joel, in New Mexico, does a ritual for his dead father in the Sandia Mountains. He sets up a small altar, lights incense, while a storm threatens to destroy his offering. His haiku:

   "Howling wind, droning rain
   Who’s speaking?
   Who’s listening?" (45)

So we can see how a similar psychological issue takes each poet in a different direction. One to healing action, the other to the mysteries.

On an entirely different plane of being, both David and Joel write of "Nuclear Darkness." In Japan, David visits the Peace Park Museum. He writes: "When the Atomic bomb exploded, a man was sitting in front of (a) segment of... wall, all that remained was his shadow."

   "Shadow burnt into wall —
   Rain falls, leaving no sound
   Behind." (46)

Joel, in New Mexico, has been writing and thinking about Los Alamos, where the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki was created. His haiku is:

   "Never before
   Such sour
   Green rocks" (47)

I find a strange kind of relief in following these two wanderers on opposite sides of our planet, doing their psychological work in haiku, facing personal and collective shadow issues. I imagine our fragile earth held in a spinning resonance, a timeless contemplation of the oneness of all things, between these two poets. May many be called to such practices!

These haiku are brave, and very beautiful. They have a magnetism that seems to settle the soul. Often they are mysterious and lovely, carrying us, with words, to a world beyond words. David writes:

   "I flow into
   The world of dew
   A river streaming back toward the sun." (82)

And Joel writes:

   "Moon drifts past my window
   Reaching into darkness
   Her face is wet with tears." (101)

Taking a walk after I’d spent some time with David and Joel, I found myself noting small things with unusual clarity: light breeze on my skin, a dragonfly with glittering wings, the smell of mown grass; the song of an unknown bird, salt taste in my mouth. Haiku promotes such awakening of the senses, such clarity and spaciousness. It is bracing. It clears the head.

   "The Healing Spirit of Haiku is many things: a dialogue between soul mates, a record of many journeys and moments of clarity, a collection of haiku, a meditation on healing, on East and West, psychology and poetry, life and death, wholeness and emptiness. I recommend it as a spiritual companion, a book to keep by your bedside or armchair, to take up when your soul is troubled, when your heart needs healing.

You might even find yourself writing haiku. I did. Here’s one as thanks to David and Joel:

   "reading your words   a door opens
   smell of mown grass   unknown
   birdsong"

**Bibliography**