

A MEANS OF LIVING, SEEING, AND TEACHING THROUGH HAIKU

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Abstract

Natalie Goldberg's *Three Simple Lines: A Writer's Pilgrimage Into the Heart and Homeland of Haiku* was reviewed by several Kansas Association of Teachers of English members who participated in a book study. Goldberg's text is applicable not only for one's own creative pursuits, but it is also valuable for instruction of haiku in ELA classes and social-emotional activities. No matter where one is on their life or pedagogical journey, there's something for everyone to unpack from Goldberg's text.

Keywords: book review, haiku, Natalie Goldberg, creative writing, ELA, English, education, poetry, curriculum, lesson plans, social-emotional learning, mindfulness

If one passage were to encapsulate Natalie Goldberg's memoir on haiku, *Three Simple Lines* (2021), it is this: "[T]his is how we learn to write. We fall in love with an author and realize we are what we love. No separation" (p. 27). How easy it is to identify oneself with the author that first sparked one's love for reading, who drove the creative writer to start their own novel, who led the individual to become a teacher. Goldberg's inspiration was Buson; however, he is not the sole focus of her text. She also explores Basho, Issa, Shiki, Chiyo-ni, and Ginsberg as those who greatly influenced her work. Nevertheless, as Goldberg developed affinity for her mentors, it is just as simple to fall in love with Goldberg while reading this text.

Living and Seeing through Goldberg

Goldberg's candid travel narrative helps readers understand her as a poet and inspire themselves to follow in her footsteps. Each of the aforementioned Japanese poets has their own section in her text, where Goldberg ventures on both literal and figurative pilgrimages to visit their graves, their histories, their traditions, and their overall contribution to the evolution of haiku tradition. Goldberg's text helps to unpack the complexities of humanity alongside the simplicities and ambiguities of haiku.

One invaluable part of Goldberg's text is the history of the canonical haiku poets. Their histories are something people do not traditionally learn in Western education, and Goldberg provides a delicate taste of what each has to offer. These vignettes are the perfect opportunity for any educator—elementary through post-secondary—to quickly brush up on some historical and cultural context and add a bit more depth to lessons on haiku. Basho's innovation distills the renga form to produce haiku through observation of nature and reflection on humans' transitory existence. Buson, a painter and a poet, chose to follow the Way of haiku that Basho founded; the second generation haiku master's poignant lines tie together nature and emotion and capture Goldberg's poetic imagination. Issa's haiku endears him to Goldberg, who offers up his wry humor and robust range of emotions in poetry that develops across personal tragedy. Shiki, whose criticism of Basho reveals his predecessor's humanity, recovers Buson and offers his own haiku to express the cruel frailty of humanity's short life and honor nature's elemental power. Finally, Chiyo-ni's haiku expresses the "sad beauty" or "understanding and acceptance of impermanence" as she connected with diverse communities (Goldberg, 2021, p. 95).

The last poet in that list, Chiyo-ni, is also the only woman. Basho and Buson, frequently exhibited in both Eastern and Western textbooks as exemplars, may be the only connection to haiku for an average reader; thus, the audience may find themselves on a journey of discovery like Goldberg (2021), who posits, "I knew when I listened to Ginsberg, so many years ago, that women were involved but not mentioned [in haiku tradition]. I am not a patient person, but in this one way I am—I listen to the boys and wait with certainty that the women will be revealed. They have to—they were there too" (p. 97). In a conversation relayed to the reader, Goldberg reveals that even some Japanese students who were familiar with Chiyo-ni did not know that the writer was a woman. Erasure is too often a problem, regardless of culture, but it has a solution: teach more women writers and acknowledge their contributions to the craft; teach more multicultural and non-Western writers so that more students witness themselves and their histories or cultures reflected in the educational canon.

Issues of translation inform engagement with haiku, which can seem a simple form. Western educators who seek to understand spiritual, linguistic, and cultural contexts will benefit from this text's adept explanations of the poetry and its contexts. If one does not know the tenets of Buddhism or the concept of Zen, much of the instruction of haiku becomes surface-level at best, trite or hackneyed at worst. How might the Western perspective shape our thinking and teaching? Goldberg's friend Mitsue provides insight into the difference of the linguistic perspective: "English builds from the inside out. Japanese from the outside in. The inside of Japanese is hollow, soft, empty of a personal self. You don't have to say everything. It can be ambiguous. Less is better. Least is best" (Goldberg, 2021, p. 73). Zen is key to understanding the linguistic focus, something that might be difficult for ego-centric Western students whose culture values the individual over society.

Luckily, the linguistics and spirituality also tie to culture, and the advice Mitsue gives may allow for teachers in the West to create a connection:

Jibun equals 'self.' Sometimes Japanese uses *I*, but not the concept of *I*. We think of another person and almost enter the other person's consciousness. We try to stand with the other's point of view. In the Japanese language we can even change what we are saying right in the middle if we see evidence that the other person doesn't like or agree with us. We want harmony. This is what matters. (Goldberg, 2021, p. 73)

Any English teacher worth their snuff should see connection to other Western texts canonically taught, like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and its core themes of empathy and justice and considering others' perspectives, walking a moment in their shoes. After all, that's what Goldberg eventually did.

When put into practice, one should hopefully recognize their students following Goldberg's path, as she herself grew from ignorant American to culturally conscious over the text. Goldberg offers an intimate view of her selfishness, naivete, and later wisdom. In an early scene, Goldberg (2021) knowingly breaks a cultural more by asserting her dominance at a hotel and ordering dessert from a closed kitchen; furthermore, later—upon learning more about Japanese culture—she naively forgets to wrap and decorate some presents for her mentor Harada (pp. 53-114). Finally, she returns to the states and works in a writing group and humbles herself and her ego, exposes her poems to criticism, and also works to become a mentor herself by providing constructive feedback to her peers (and, technically, the audience reading this book).

Teaching Haiku

Aware of her audience, Goldberg provides a lesson plan at the back of the text. However, there are other ways that this book can inform instruction. Keywords for activities below may be helpful:

- Buddhism's tenets: the core of existence is suffering; suffering has causes; suffering has an end; there are causes to bring about suffering's end
- Haibun: a prose description (e.g., prose poem, memoir, diary) followed by a haiku
- Haiga: in its most basic, art accompanying a haiku
- Haiku: a Japanese poem of seventeen syllables, in English following the pattern of three lines with the syllabic pattern of 5-7-5; it evokes often contrasting, natural images surrounding an insight or truth
- Jibun: the concept of *self*, but it is more of an awareness of the self in relation to others and society, a *self-us/we*
- Zen: meditation and awareness of outside nature informs the inside self

Haiku and American Transcendentalism

When one considers how all of these pieces fit together, introducing haiku and ideas from Goldberg alongside a unit in American literature on transcendentalism is a fitting connection point; it is common knowledge that the transcendentalists, especially Emerson, borrowed philosophical elements from these same tenants of Buddhism, Zen, and Eastern cultural values and blended them with those of Western Protestantism. Too often, teachers wax as philosophical as Emerson and Thoreau, boring students to tears with *Walden* and excerpts from *Nature*. Discussions about Japanese culture, values, mores, and haiku can ease students into what might otherwise be inaccessible.

Scaffolding and Differentiating Haiku

Goldberg acknowledges that there is value in both nature and syllables to haiku; however, despite the tensions, it is important more to focus on the Zen and the experience of haiku, and one can break the rules. When teaching haiku, it may be beneficial to focus on grade level and grades of scaffolding: for example, younger writers could focus on syllables and imagery and punctuation, but more advanced students can loosen rules on the haiku and delve further into the experience of the haiku and Zen.

Social Emotional Learning

Take a class on a nature walk (leaving cellphones inside), and walk in silence. Encourage them to notice what's around and outside of themselves and what it reveals to them (meditation). The longer the silence and observation, the better. Upon returning to the classroom:

- have students write a *haibun*: a prose description of the experience followed by a haiku;

- have students write a haiku and cross-collaborate with art students to create *haiga*: artistic illustration around a haiku. Alternatively, students could write haiku and create *haiga* themselves. One could even create a modern *haiga* via Instagram (or other social media) pictures accompanying haiku descriptions;
- or, have students write a haiku about the experience.

Virtual Field Trips

Continue to develop understanding of Japanese poetry and have a virtual field trip to the Niiyama Poetic Japanese Pottery exhibit (see references).

Final Thoughts

Regardless of how one decides to approach Goldberg's text, its value is evident. Haiku is more than a poem or a simple lesson; it is a means of living, teaching, and seeing that all should consider:

What is the Way of haiku? Bare attention, no distractions, pure awareness, noticing only what is in the moment. Being connected to seasons, unconnected to self-clinging. And then, out of that, composing your experience in three lines that go beyond logic, that make the mind leap. In the center, a taste of emptiness. A frog, a crow, a turnip – the ordinary right in front of you is the realm of awakening. Pure Zen but not Zen. (Goldberg, 2021, p. 5-6)

References

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Author Biographies

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Lori Muntz (she/her), Ph.D. English, has been a KATE member for two years and presented at the 2021 KATE Conference. She has been an English instructor at Seward County Community College in Liberal, KS, for three years, where she taught first year composition, creative writing, and American Literature. Muntz moved from Kansas to Iowa in summer of 2022 to teach at Southeastern Community College in Burlington. She is a reader for the *Little Patuxent Review*.



Mary Harrison's classroom library at Wichita West High School