

Haiku and Healing—Creating Connections

Brian Stork, MD¹

Perm J 2020;24:19.176

E-pub: 01/24/2020

<https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/19.176>

OUTER AND INNER DARKNESS

I practice urology along the shores of Lake Michigan. In summer, it's arguably one of the most beautiful places on earth. The winters, however, are long, overcast, and cloudy. Every year, when the seasons in Michigan transition from fall to winter, I struggle. My mind becomes anxious and irritable. I feel more fatigued. As the days grow shorter, it becomes more difficult to concentrate. By mid-December, I find myself wanting to spend less time with family and friends, and I start to become disconnected, both intellectually and emotionally.

In an effort to address this malady, I've tried medications, talk therapy, bright lights, and high-intensity exercise.¹ Each of these remedies helps in its own way. Recently, however, I discovered a therapy that originates from within. A therapy that helps me view my negative thoughts and emotions in a different kind of light—haiku.

DARK TIMES

But first, let me share a bit of history. The maternal side of my family emigrated from Denmark, where, for as far back as we have records, they labored as farmers. Recently, while visiting Denmark and touring the National Museum in Copenhagen, I learned the story about a series of sixth-century volcanic eruptions that darkened the skies over Europe.²

As the sun faded away, crops failed, families starved, and violence ensued. Those living at that time must have wondered if the darkness and suffering would ever end. As the darkness persisted, the situation became increasingly dire. The ancient Danes believed the bogs were portals to their gods. In an apparent act of desperation, they sacrificed some of their most valued possessions into the bogs, in hopes the sun would return. Metaphorically speaking, this was a story to which I could truly relate.

AN INTRODUCTION TO HAIKU

*A veil of darkness
Lands clouded in misery
Cursed, mental fog.*

Haiku originated in Japan.³ Perhaps, that is why it seems so mysterious and foreign to writers in the West. An English-language haiku is typically written in 3 short lines. The first line is 5 syllables; the second, 7 syllables; and the third, 5 syllables. A haiku, when read out loud, takes about 6 seconds⁴—a poem in 3 short breaths.

In the first and second lines of the haiku above, I imagine what the victims of those ancient volcanic eruptions might have seen or felt. In the third, I share how I feel in the days leading up to the winter solstice.



Volcanic Ash Blotting Out the Sun.
Source: Photograph by Ásgeir Kröyer.

SKÍNFAXI AND THE SUN CHARIOT

Just down the hall in the museum in Copenhagen is a display—the Trundholm Sun Chariot, a Bronze Age statue discovered by a modern farmer plowing up a bog. It is believed the chariot depicts the relationship between the movement of the sun in relationship to the earth. According to the story, a great horse, named Skínfaxi, translated as “Shining Mane,” pulls the sun on its chariot from east to west, during the day. Another horse, Hrímfaxi, or “Frost Mane,” then pulls the chariot under, or around, the far side of the world at night.⁵

It wasn't completely clear from the tour presentation if, like Sisyphus from Greek mythology, Shining Mane bore the responsibility of pulling the chariot for all eternity, or if the horse died and was reborn each year. For purposes of discussion, I imagine the latter.

I am not exactly sure why, perhaps it was because of my Danish roots or a result of the simplicity and beauty of Shining Mane and the Sun Chariot, but this sculpture spoke to me. It did something I have never been able to do myself—it gave a personality to the natural cycles of light and darkness that so powerfully affect me.

I can imagine in the spring, when Shining Mane is young, she struggles to pull the chariot from east to west. In summer, as she grows stronger, she can pull it longer. In the autumn, as she ages, the Sun Chariot becomes heavier and heavier. As winter arrives, and as the end of her own time approaches, Shining Mane can hardly pull the chariot at all. When I stop and think about my seasonal mood changes and compare them with the journey of Shining Mane, suddenly things don't seem quite so bad!

Author Affiliations

¹ Department of Urology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor

Corresponding Author

Brian R Stork, MD (bstork@med.umich.edu)

Keywords: Danish National Museum, depression, haiku, Loki, Mjöllnir, Norse mythology, recurrent winter depression, SAD, seasonal depression, Seasonal Affective Disorder, seasonal imbalance of neurotransmitters, Skínfaxi, Thor, winter blues, winter depression



Trundholm Sun Chariot.
Source: Photograph courtesy of John Lee and The National Museum of Denmark.

COMING TO MY SENSES

Beth Trembley, PhD, (personal communication, 2019 September)^a explains that haiku is a great way to help fix in our minds events and experiences that hold meaning. Memories are encoded and preserved in our brains via the input of our senses: Sight, smell, taste, touch, and feel.⁶

In her class, Trembley challenges students to write 20 haikus about an impactful experience in only 30 minutes. For example, reflecting simultaneously on my sense of smell, the labors of Shining Mane in autumn, and the way I feel as the days get shorter, I composed the following haiku:

*Smell of autumn leaves
Gallop, canter, trot then walk
Slowly falling down.*

In each subsequent haiku, Trembley recommends focusing on a different sensory experience. In the following haiku, I compare how Shining Mane and I might both look and feel towards the end of the year.

*The weight of the yolk
A chariot stuck in mud
Draft horse labors on.*

Personally, I find these exercises to be intellectually stimulating. Composing 20 haikus in 30 minutes is a great way to explore and connect with an emotion or an experience.

QUESTIONING THE SADNESS

The combination of symptoms I experience during the darkest months

of the year go by many labels, including Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), recurrent winter depression, and the winter blues. To me, however, these diagnostic labels aren't very helpful. Who wants to be labelled SAD, depressed, or told they have a seasonal imbalance of neurotransmitters?⁷ Personally, I find the SAD acronym only makes me feel worse.

It's more helpful to question where the feelings and emotions I experience in wintertime are coming from. Is it possible these emotions are fueled by energy-conserving genes that helped my ancestors survive the long, cold winters of the North? Or, because I grew up on a farm myself, is the sadness an expression of mourning for the end of the growing season? As I have gotten older, I've started to realize my feelings and emotions are not so much begging to be explained, they are pleading to be explored.

Writing haiku has been shown to increase creativity and sensitivity.⁸ The discipline of composing a daily haiku has helped me get a better handle on the seasonal events that trigger and intensify my SAD symptoms—the waxy texture of grasshoppers in autumn, the sight of migrating geese, the smell of snow, the taste of nutmeg, and the sounds of Christmas before Thanksgiving. Having a better understanding of these triggers helps me better manage their effects.

MJÖLNIR—DISCOVERING STRENGTH IN IMPERFECTION

For many years, I was frustrated with my thinking and, not infrequently, embarrassed by my demeanor as winter approached. Recently, I found comfort in the story of Mjöltnir, the mythical hammer of Thor. Many are familiar with the antics and actions of the Norse god Thor from the Marvel Comics movie series. In Norse mythology, Thor is the god of weather, crops, and the fields. But Thor doesn't spend his time among the crops and fields. Rather, he spends his days in the killing fields where, atop his goat-drawn chariot, he wages war on the Giants with his mighty hammer Mjöltnir.

Mjöltnir was created by dwarfs, the metal workers of the gods. Legend has it that as the hammer was being forged, a horse fly—or more precisely, the trickster god Loki

in the form of a horse fly—bit and harassed its maker. As a result, the handle of the hammer came out of the forge shorter than intended and a little less than perfect.⁹

*From dwarfs to Giants
Embracing imperfection
Hammer of the Gods.*

The daily practice of writing haiku forces us to be intentional and to reevaluate ourselves within a larger context. The story of Thor's hammer reminds us that even one of mythology's most famous and powerful weapons was not without its flaws. As humans, even as physicians, we are forged with imperfections. Yet, we remain a mighty instrument of God. Medicine itself is not a perfect science, but an imperfect art.¹⁰ I wonder if, rather than wishing our flaws away, perhaps our time would be better spent putting them into context and connecting with them?

CREATING CONNECTIONS—THE LIGHT FROM WITHIN

Light and darkness, health and illness—as humans, we seem to have difficulty



The dwarven sons of Sons of Ivaldi forge the hammer Mjöltnir for the god Thor, while Loki watches on. Source: Illustration by E Boyd Smith.⁹

appreciating and comprehending these opposites in our lives. Our instinct is to light up the night sky, rather than take the time to stand in awe of the Milky Way. We treat illness as something that must be battled and conquered rather than reflected on. What might illness teach us about the natural cycle of life, death, and rebirth if we have the courage, and take the time, to open ourselves to reflection?

*God's light within us
An antidote to darkness
Open heart and mind.*

Haiku gives us an opportunity to think about our experiences within the natural order of things and to view our position in the world differently. As a result, our minds have the opportunity to move from a position of fear and weakness to freedom and strength. From this improved position, the discipline of haiku offers an opportunity to not only better understand and connect with ourselves, but also with one another.

As humans, we tend to fear darkness, and as the story of the ancient volcanos reminds us, probably for good reason. But even in the darkest days of winter, the Trundholm Sun Chariot reminds us the sun will return again. Haiku, while not a standalone treatment for SAD, can be a complementary tool¹¹—a poetic Mjöltnir.¹²

At the very least, in the words of Robert Epstein, PhD, licensed psychologist at Harvard University and author of *The Sacred in Contemporary Haiku*, “A good haiku can work wonders on a tired soul.”¹³



^a Associate Professor Emeritus at Hope College in Holland, MI.

Disclosure Statement

Dr Stork is an investor in Greater Michigan Lithotripsy, Columbus, OH; Muskegon Surgery Center, Muskegon, MI; Theralogix IV, Rockville, MD; Michigan Mobile Urology Services, Austin, TX; and a partner in MED5 (StomaCloak), Muskegon, MI.

Acknowledgements

For his assistance with research and photographs, the author wishes to thank Zakarias Gårdsvoll, Student Assistant, National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen.

How to Cite this Article

Stork B. Haiku and healing – creating connections. *Perm J* 2020;24:19.176. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7812/TPP/19.176>

References

1. Seasonal affective disorder [Internet]. Bethesda, MD: National Institute of Mental Health; [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/seasonal-affective-disorder/index.shtml
2. Zielenski S. Sixth-century misery tied to not one, but two, volcanic eruptions [Internet]. Washington, DC: Smithsonian.com; 2015 Jul 8 [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/sixth-century-misery-tied-not-one-two-volcanic-eruptions-180955858/
3. Burleson P. The history and artistry of haiku [Internet]. Stanford, CA: Stanford University; 1998 Oct [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: https://spice.fsi.stanford.edu/docs/the_history_and_artistry_of_haiku
4. Summers A. What is haiku and where does it come from? [Internet]. Nagoya, Japan: The IAFOR Vladimir Devidé Award; 2016 Feb 16 [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: <https://iaforhaikyaward.org/what-is-haiku>
5. Larrington C. The Norse myths: A guide to the gods and heroes. London, UK: Thames & Hudson; 2017.
6. Quak M, London RE, Talsma D. A multisensory perspective of working memory. *Front in Hum Neurosci*. 2015;9:197. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2015.00197> PMID:25954176
7. Lam RW, Levitan RD. Pathophysiology of seasonal affective disorder: A review. *J Psychiatry Neurosci* 2000 Nov;25(5):469-80. PMID:11109298
8. Stephenson K, Rosen DH. Haiku and healing: An empirical study of poetry writing as a therapeutic and creative intervention. *Empir Stud Arts* 2015 Jan;33(1):36-60. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0276237415569981>
9. Brown AF. In the days of giants: A book of Norse tales. Illustrations by E Boyd Smith. Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co; 1902.
10. Vento S, Cainelli F, Vallone A. Defensive medicine: It is time to finally slow down an epidemic. *World J Clin Cases* 2018 Oct 6;6(11):406-9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12998/wjcc.v6.i11.406> PMID:30294604
11. Rosenthal NE. Winter blues: Everything you need to know to beat seasonal affective disorder. 4th ed. New York, NY: Guilford Press; 2013. p 314.
12. Finn L. Haiku inspired by my seasonal affective disorder [Internet]. San Francisco, CA: McSweeney's Publishing; 2012 Nov 19 [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/haiku-inspired-by-my-seasonal-affective-disorder
13. Haiku to free your emotions [Internet]. Exploring Your Mind; 2017 Nov 15 [cited 2019 Nov 15]. Available from: <https://exploringyourmind.com/haiku-free-emotions/>