

## Seasoned Greetings

Haikai verse (known better by its plural form, Haiku) is a traditional Japanese form of poetry. It has a structure of three non-rhyming metrical phrases consisting of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, respectively. The other day, I read a set of fifteen Haiku written by an American. The verses celebrate and, for the poet, I imagine, attempt to resolve a relationship with the love of his life. Evidently, they were written at a fragile emotional junction, one which might lead to new depths of togetherness and growth or separate paths of attachment and development. Aside from wishing the couple well, I discovered my own appreciation for the art form and its profound lessons about life. In a short string of well chosen words, Haiku must strike a chord of truth, expose a nerve, tickle a funny bone, reveal the meaning of a moment or the soul of a person. Usually, we travel too fast to be lifted up or leveled by anything as small as a phrase, or for that matter, a smile, a conversation, a seascape, a flavor or a fellow traveler along our road.

As I absorbed the gentle force of the poems, relishing the directness of their plain-spoken palette, I found myself reflecting upon what I love. Things like a piece of music that glorifies existence, especially one that starts humbly as a lovely little thread of melody, then slowly but surely builds, thickens, deepens, like life itself, as the melody travels back and forth, in variations, through all the instruments. Listen, sometime, to how Aaron Copeland spins the old Shaker folksong “Tis a Gift to be Simple, ‘tis a Gift to be Free” into a valedictory to eternal hope in the middle of his iconic suite, Appalachian Spring. Or the physics of wave mechanics, teaching us why and how a single wave of water can grow into an awesome wall of massive proportion as it flows across hundreds of miles of ocean, building on energy forces from the slope of the sea floor and the temperature of the layers of sea water encountered along the way. Or how a principled idea, like the intrinsic worth of all human beings, can lead, through the concerted will of citizen activists, to policies that promote equal opportunity and prohibit the practice of discrimination. Or even how, over time and devotion, an initial attraction can grow into a labor of love through which each individual in a committed relationship gives and gains a foundation of trust, openness, challenge and support for reaching their personal goals.

Haiku reminds me that a passion for someone’s personal qualities and spirit is both essential and insufficient for relationships to endure and grow. Love feeds on little morsels produced and shared each day. Things like good morning kisses, conversations that replay and reinterpret events of the day, decisions reached together, thoughts and feelings communicated, surprise calls to say hello I love you, favors volunteered, meals shared, even walks taken and hands held. Similarly, when it comes to striving to achieve big dreams like a healthy society in which all members contribute to and benefit from social, economic, environmental and educational assets, I am reminded to appreciate each day’s individual examples of the beneficence of human nature. Last week, I met Mr. Thirlun Jackson, a building contractor in Tampa. Jackson is a resident of one of Tampa’s most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods. Somehow, he has not only built a successful business in his community, he has done so by investing in the people who live there. When I met Mr. Jackson, he had just hired two gentlemen who had run out of luck. They were penniless, homeless and indebted. But they were committed to taking

responsibility for their children's well-being and welfare. They also had employable welding skills and were eager to earn steady jobs and gain financial self-sufficiency. Mr. Jackson believed in them and gave them a chance. Already, his simple kindness is rewarding the benefactor and the beneficiaries. The three men working together can take on more jobs than any could get alone and the school system, community development corporation and county government, eager to give contracts to local craftsmen, keep them busy. As their business thrives and expands, their neighborhoods also revitalize and their neighbors receive new opportunities to participate in the renewal process. Children and families benefit as the economic base rises and streets become safer, parks stay cleaner, schools improve and people come out and greet one another. As Mr. Jackson and his two associates demonstrate, communities are as healthy as the persons who care about each other.

These are stressful times for many people. As our economy falters and our government changes guard, we all feel as unsettled as my poet. At the same time, we all have a chance now to revisit the sources of our greatest satisfaction and strength, those anchors that hold us securely through a storm. For some of us, it may be our relationships with family and friends, for some our devotion to an ideal higher than self, for others our efforts to brighten the world as a place that values each child equally. Still others will find the soul of existence in the beauty of a sunset, a sea shell, a sonnet, or a song. I trust that few if any of us will continue to believe that it is right to work to amass personal fortune without regard and responsibility for the well-being of individuals and populations less advantaged. Personal greed, or at least self-interest, brought down the haves along with the have nots. As a result, we may truly understand, for the first time, that we are all in the same leaky boat. Life is precious and wondrous because the smallest being and the briefest experience have meaning, inspire hope, contain awe and share love. I suppose people who declare that God is great know and embrace this simple truth. Participate fully in the present if you wish to create a future. And decide to be happy. No oppressor can deny you that power. Indeed, that may be the best gift you can share and the most effective key you can use to help open the door to a healthy community.

*Emerson observed  
that when the sky is darkest  
you can see the stars.*

I wish you the blessings of love, peace, purpose and kindness as you create the magic of the holidays and as you encounter meaning and grace throughout the new year.