

## Haiku for Happiness

Jeffery Durand

Last May I stayed on campus to sing with the choirs and seniors at commencement. It was wonderful, but there was also an uneasy sense that Harvard was over. The bubble was about to burst.

As we walked through the Yard, a senior friend told me: “dude, this is our memento mori.” Oh... remember death. The preview of my own commencement was staring at me like a skull on a bookshelf, warning me that time was running out.

So I really needed to savor every second of senior year. But as the year progressed, I failed to live up to my expectations, and started feeling the weight of things not done.

I always had dreams of writing songs; I've wanted to invent crazy machines that would save nature from pollution. But here I have not composed a single song; not done anything for the environment.

It's not just childhood dreams that taunt me. I wonder: why am I not wittier, not a better person? Why didn't I tell that girl that I liked her? Why have I not gotten to know you guys better — before we disperse to the four corners of the world, like a bag of marbles dropped on the floor?

The weight of things not done distracts me. It whispers that my time is better spent with friends, but then makes those times in good company taste sour with the guilt of work left unfinished. Not quite satisfied with anything I'd do, sometimes I would be paralyzed, able to do nothing as precious time flew.

But then I met this girl, and everything changed. During a Facebook Messenger conversation, on a whim, I wrote her a haiku. It was about the first thing I saw:

The recycling bin,  
Stoically standing, stiff,  
Eats away our trash.

It was over so quickly that I immediately had to write another one, then another. I was hooked. Because haiku are so simple: Three lines. Five - seven - five syllables. But with those few words, haiku:

Catch a glimpse of light,  
Wonders of nature's landscapes,  
The fleeting moment.

Stir the five senses,

Call forth four seasons and more,  
Subtle emotion.

OK, my haiku about the trashcan doesn't "call forth subtle emotion." Still, I've realized that writing haiku is more than just fun; it has shown me a way to ease my fear of graduation and death.

Writing poetry was another unfulfilled dream. Yet it took the smallest of poems to make me start. Before I even begin worrying about what to say, the haiku is already written. Then soon it expands to become free verse, sonnets, or a villanelle. The small step grows into something big.

And if, writing the last stanza of a longer poem, I get stuck again, paralyzed by expectations made too large, I go back to making a haiku. It's too small for second thoughts. Now I know that I can pursue any dream. I simply need to start with something like a haiku.

And if the big project fails, if I never get my sonnets to rhyme or never finish my villanelles, I still have my haiku for happiness.

Yes, even when things do not go as planned, that happiness is rooted in the haiku worldview. Brevity means I focus on what matters;

Notice the beauty

In a teardrop, mountaintop,

Sunlight, midnight air.

Haiku invite me to breathe in deeply and contemplate the stunning world around. This mindset, full of awe and mindfulness, can almost be flipped on like a switch.

I felt that switch flip last winter. I was traveling with the Glee Club to Japan, birthplace of haiku. One night, we were to sing a concert in Kyoto. I had forgotten my concert shoes, and was walking back to the hotel to retrieve them. It started to snow. Bundled up in my scarf, I was nagged by noisy thoughts of things I could have done better; the travel diary I had not written, the places I had not visited, the people in my choir who had things figured out much better than me.

But suddenly I realized: this moment is so wonderful. *Snap out of it!* I walked more slowly and focused on the cold evening air,

A distant ochre shrine,

A bridge over calm canals

Falling night and snow

I remembered the time I'd had with this choir, the wonderful people waiting for me nearby; I recalled college and the friendships from my time here with you.

So here's a haiku for you:

Lowellians and Friends

I'll miss you when we go

And never forget.