

Essays

A Disarmingly Simple Challenge: The Buson One Hundred

J. Zimmerman, Santa Cruz, CA
Gregory Longenecker, Pasadena, CA

Yosa Buson (1716–1783) twice began the daily practice of writing ten haiku for a hundred days. He started one series on Buddha’s birthday in 1777 and another in his final year.^{1,2}

Intrigued by Buson’s intention, J. (Joan) Zimmerman started her first Buson One Hundred writing practice on America’s birthday, July 4th, 2013. Finding this practice to be of benefit, Joan presented it to the Yuki Teikei Haiku Society (YTHS) at their annual retreat in November 2013. That led to Gregory (Greg) Longenecker beginning a similar practice, quickly joined by three other haiku poets: Eleanor Carolan, Patricia J. Machmiller, and Phillip Kennedy. The five poets were all experienced in writing haiku. They represented a cross-section from less-known, less-published poets up to well-known and widely published poets. Haiku written by each poet in this practice have been published or accepted for publication.

This article summarizes the benefits and obstacles to the haiku poet of completing a Buson One Hundred. We invite readers to try the practice themselves.

When and Where to Write

paragraph
after paragraph
winter fly

Patricia J. Machmiller³

The strength of the Buson One Hundred writing practice turned out to lie in its simplicity: write ten haiku a day. Keep doing it till a hundred days have passed.

When Joan shared her experiences initially, she gave no other requirements. Therefore the results came from the poets themselves. Each individual had to sort out how, when, and where they would write ten haiku a day, interpreting what Joan told them in their own way and following their own path of self-discovery in writing haiku. By doing this, they found and developed the exercises that allowed them to best complete their daily goal.

Writing ten haiku took less and less time as the days passed. On the initial day it varied from about 40 minutes to about 5 hours for the five poets. Towards the end it usually took closer to 20 to 30 minutes. Each poet missed one or more days, catching up by writing more than ten haiku on subsequent days.

Time and again, the poets expressed the need for dedication:

The important part is showing up each morning at my front window, as the sun rises, and writing. (Eleanor)⁴

The writing could of course be done any time of day. It did not have to be completed in a single session, although that was usually the intent. Some preferred to write first thing in the morning, pondering the previous day's material in conjunction with the opening day. Some used the body of the day. And some preferred to write in the evening. Most of us varied our initial plan for writing:

In the beginning I started out writing just before going to bed[,] in my easy chair in the family room. But I soon realized that I was going to have some very long nights. Sometimes I was so tired I just had to go to bed with the task unfinished. In that case if I had written only five haiku, say, I promised myself that I would write fifteen haiku the next day making the next day's task even harder. . . . I needed a new strategy. (Patricia)⁵

Increasingly we each thought about the Buson One Hundred all through the day, often making notes for later completion as poems. One poet found her cell phone to be a great alternative to a traditional notebook:

I really hit my stride when I started carrying my cell phone with me on my daily walk. I used the notepad app on the cell phone to record whatever struck me as being interesting. Sometimes it was a *kigo*—camellia, iris, fallen leaves, sometimes not. Sometimes I'd only capture a word or two, sometimes a line, sometimes two lines. Once in a while I'd get a whole poem. The important thing was that I regarded this time as my material-gathering phase. And the evening hour before bed became the forming-the-poem phase. (Patricia)⁶

The regular push to get out the first few haiku each day was key to success in the Buson One Hundred. Often there was an intensity and sense of closure on completing a day's set.

Inspiration and the Making of Sense

in spite of the cold
I walk barefoot into the
moonlit garden

Eleanor Carolan⁷

The real world offered the primary sources of inspiration to help us write haiku:

The daily practice of writing ten haiku enriches my experience of the rhythms of nature in my garden and neighborhood. . . . All my senses are expanded and honed. (Eleanor)⁸

New areas of emphasis were found by writing in different places: cafés, restaurants, the beach, the mountains, a doctor's waiting room, concert halls, and so on:

evening concert drawing the drapery to hold the light inside

J. Zimmerman⁹

All of us referred to *saijiki* and other seasonal reference works for inspiration. Writing ten haiku a day provided opportunities to study *kigo* (season words) in depth:

I'm finding that this process is really good for *kigo* practice. Some days . . . I pick a *kigo* and write ten verses with that word. (Phillip)¹⁰

I use the YTHS *Kigo* List, years of saved *GEPPOs*, and on-line essential seasonal words. (Eleanor)¹¹

This has . . . taught me a lot about how season words affect the tone of a haiku. (Phillip)¹²

The go-to strategy for Greg when he couldn't write was to put down one image: a leaf, a snail, a bird. Then he would consider what it reminded him of: perhaps a broken relationship, his children, or his wife. Then he would juxtapose the two images. Sometimes gibberish was good if it kept him moving forward in writing.

Some of us resorted to a “keep the pen moving” approach:

I began to experiment with something rather like automatic writing (especially if I had to catch up). . . . I would set a time (anything from half an hour to ten minutes), sit down, and try to write however many haiku I needed to write for that day without thinking much about what I produced. (Phillip)¹³

However, on the whole we were concerned to write meaningful poems, and not descend into gibberish because of haste or exhaustion. Joan was willing to allow such poems to be candidate *gendai* haiku, although most were not:

This was a real challenge and I'm not sure I can say that I completely avoided the gibberish part. For me trying to fit the writing in here or there just did not work. I definitely needed a block of time to form the poems and to make that block of time the most efficient, I needed to be gathering material throughout the day. (Patricia)¹⁴

Reviewing past work often revealed ideas that had yet to be developed in a haiku. The haiku of other poets also inspired new haiku. We tried but could not always succeed in keeping the work fresh:

I decided it was more important to keep going and so I know I sometimes sacrificed freshness. I did find that my best and freshest poems came out of material gathered on my walk each day. Everything else seemed flat or artificial. (Patricia)¹⁵

Squelching the Inner Critic

inchworm
his careful explanation
of why I am wrong

J. Zimmerman¹⁶

One of the biggest obstacles was the inner critic. Most of us had long and strong discussions with this would-be saboteur. Sometimes the critic even found its way into a poem like that above. Self-criticism included:

I found it dispiriting to put words on paper that seem dull and flat and have no *umpph*. After a number of consecutive days with similar results, I was ready to quit . . . at one point I felt I was in a dark valley and nothing I wrote had any hint of promise. (Patricia)¹⁷

Often a poet actively blocked the critic while writing a first draft, postponing it to surface later during revision:

To make it work I have to take my own advice and squelch the critic and accept some pretty awful writing. I'm trying to withhold judgment until it's all over. (Patricia)¹⁸

A poet's commitment to writing a large number of haiku could be a big help, keeping the poet busy:

I have to trust the process, and put pen to paper, whether I feel like it or not. (Eleanor)¹⁹

To lower the barrier to writing, Joan wrote with slashes instead of linebreaks in order to make the poems look less "poetic" and more ordinary, such as:

inchworm / his careful explanation / of why I am wrong

which was later submitted and published with line breaks as above.

Drafting in other forms or layouts also seemed helpful, in part because these formats were not as familiar and did not elicit

harshness from the inner critic. Another method of camouflaging a haiku from the critic was to write it in the simple and direct language of diary or journal entries.

For Greg some days of greatest difficulty took two or three hard-fought battles to get his poetic self in gear. Then suddenly, a stream of haiku would flow. It could be a struggle to get past the inner critic that wanted to judge and comment on each haiku, but once he passed that stage he was free to write.

Sometimes the inner critic was excessively insistent, yet eventually overcome:

As the process went on, I felt I hit a dry spell so that writing ten haiku in a day became a burdensome task. . . . And I found myself being critical which was even more discouraging. But I kept hearing what I tell everyone else: no matter what your critic says, write it down! And now that I've worked through that period, I'm glad I did. The material I find is something I can work with and that is very confirming. (Patricia)²⁰

Experimentation

knocking
on my own door
Hogmanay

Phillip Kennedy²¹

Most poets experimented with different forms and techniques. As noted earlier and in the haiku above, Phillip thrived by exploring timed or automatic writing.

Many explored the single-line haiku and the way it can lend itself to multiple readings. For Joan that was especially fruitful as it led to twenty-eight of her single-line haiku appearing at *DailyHaiku*, including:

mouth organ lamentations drifting down the coast road fog²²

Paul Miller's article "Haiku Toolbox: Synesthesia"²³ inspired Greg to mix senses and explore synesthesia:

morning
the slow silence
of a snail²⁴

Greg in particular was motivated to explore concrete haiku with varieties of layout, as with this poem appearing here for the first time:

our
patchwork death
his
after conversation²⁵

Greg's format and subject leave the reader with several possible readings of this haiku. They include: our patchwork death / after his conversation; our patchwork / after his death / conversation; his patchwork death / after our conversation; and, after his death / our patchwork conversation.

The mundane was not just allowed to creep in but welcomed, as in this example also by Greg:

Swiss cheese
the way she knows me
inside and out²⁶

Other sources of inspiration included supplementing the real with the not-quite-understood, exploring various poetic styles such as mixing metaphors, and delving relentlessly deeper into a single topic, be it music or darker materials.

Revision

fumigating
the memory palace
winter solstice

Phillip Kennedy²⁷

We tended not to look back at poems or attempt revision for many weeks after writing them. When reviewing, we typically considered less than a quarter worth possible revision.

Eventually only five-to-ten percent of the total were given significant further work and considered for submission:

The later editing and refining may find only one daily poem worth keeping. Still, I love every word and every attempt, all the crossed out ones, as well as the perfect match. (Eleanor)²⁸

Conclusion

almost dawn
the last pillow talk
of towhees

Gregory Longenecker²⁹

We have no information on why Yosa Buson decided to write ten haiku a day, only that he started twice. Even though he did not complete either of his hundred-day plans (the second one being interrupted by his death), his intention was enough to inspire Joan and then four others to try writing ten haiku a day for a hundred days. The results from this disarmingly simple challenge were significant and manifold.

These writers were all skilled in writing haiku at the outset. They each had the freedom to experiment with how, where, and when they would devote themselves to the work. Additionally, they had to find sources of inspiration to help them achieve their daily goal. The challenge of writing so much material forced them to face and sidestep their own inner critics, becoming liberated to explore new ways for them to write haiku.

This experience can be compared to attending a writing course where the teacher assigns a series of exercises in order to help the attendees become better writers. The difference in the Buson One Hundred was that the participants were given only one assignment, to write ten haiku a day, and through this task they achieved something comparable to a writing course. The achievements made were based on each individual's orientation as to how they would face the challenge. They determined what the syllabus would be and which exercises would

lead to success. In other words, through their personal journeys of self-discovery they shared in the experience Buson began over two centuries ago.

To join us in this practice, you might begin by writing ten haiku one day and ten the next. Continue this for a week. Then decide whether to continue for a hundred days. We invite you.

Acknowledgements

blue sky
the cookie's
advice

J. Zimmerman³⁰

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Notes

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J. Zimmerman writes widely published haiku, tanka, and haibun. In summer 2014 she was the Poet in Residence at the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music. She was a 2013 New Resonance poet. Recently her haiku were featured at Daily Haiku. She writes articles on the Japanese forms and teaches workshops on tanka. Her poems have been translated into Japanese, Chinese, and German.

Gregory Longenecker is currently editor of the Southern California Haiku Study Group's annual anthology and has published in Acorn, Atlas Poetica, Bones, bottle rockets, Frogpond, Mariposa, Notes from the Gean, Prune Juice, and tinywords. He has been a prizewinner in the 2013 Haiku Poets of Northern California Haiku Contest, 2012 Tokutomi Haiku Contest, and in the online Shiki Monthly Kukai.