

CREATIVE SPACE

Pandemic haiku

JAMES DWYER

As a small spiritual practice, I write one haiku every day. I don't try to imitate classical Japanese haiku, with 17 syllables, a word that divides the poem, and a word that indicates the season. But I do use this practice to cultivate a Zen spirit: mindfulness of the moment, responsiveness to the concrete situation, and a sense of the impermanence of life. Because the Covid-19 pandemic requires those qualities – and a lot more – I kept up my practice during the pandemic.

My situation is both privileged and disadvantaged. I'm privileged to be a faculty member at a medical university in a high-income country, and to do ethics consults at a university hospital that is equipped and staffed relatively well. But I am disadvantaged to live in a country that is not well-governed, with a healthcare system that is unjust, and some politicians who lie without shame and dismiss expert advice. Both the privileges and the disadvantages work to condition the perspective from which I write.

But I discovered that I don't write from one perspective. Like many people, I have several perspectives because I have several roles. I am a human being in various relationships with other human beings. I am a citizen in a flawed democracy. I am an ethics teacher and consultant. And I am a biological organism, vulnerable to pathogens, with thoughts about how this might end. Here are a few haiku, grouped under these roles:

Human being

<i>warm wood stove</i>	<i>dead quiet</i>
<i>a conversation</i>	<i>accrues new meaning –</i>
<i>we need to have</i>	<i>I check on neighbours</i>
<i>almost spring</i>	<i>unclaimed</i>
<i>we walk together</i>	<i>packages in the lobby</i>
<i>two metres apart</i>	<i>bodies in the hospital</i>

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To cite: Dwyer J. Pandemic haiku. *Indian J Med Ethics*. 2020 Apr-Jun; 5(2) NS:156. DOI:10.20529/IJME.2020.044.

Manuscript Editor: Rakhi Ghoshal

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Citizen

<i>snow falling</i>	<i>1. Wash your hands.</i>
<i>up and sideways –</i>	<i>2. Stay two metres apart.</i>
<i>tweets too</i>	<i>3. Ignore Trump.</i>
<i>still open</i>	<i>welcome sight:</i>
<i>hospitals, groceries,</i>	<i>hospital tents</i>
<i>liquor stores</i>	<i>in Central Park</i>
<i>pandemic shopper</i>	
<i>cart overfull</i>	
<i>heart empty</i>	

Ethics teacher and consultant

<i>the system reminds me</i>	<i>hospital parking</i>
<i>that grades are late –</i>	<i>a refrigerated truck</i>
<i>I remind it ...</i>	<i>for bodies</i>
<i>still-dark morning –</i>	<i>treat people equally:</i>
<i>walk to the hospital with</i>	<i>give them an equal chance</i>
<i>equanimity</i>	<i>to grow old</i>
<i>ear-loop mask –</i>	
<i>a piece of blue litter</i>	
<i>on the wet street</i>	

How this might end

<i>need to allocate</i>	<i>tell me</i>
<i>ventilators</i>	<i>I got it from a patient</i>
<i>not kindness</i>	<i>not a doorknob</i>
<i>Say it now:</i>	
<i>If we don't</i>	
<i>make it ...</i>	

Competing interests and funding support: None