

Japan's Culture of Silence

by Madoka Mayuzumi

Haiku poet Madoka Mayuzumi presented the following lecture at the "[Kokoro: The Heart of Japan](#)" public symposium and choral concert, held at Merkin Concert Hall in New York on the first anniversary of the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake.

The symposium-concert was organized jointly by the Tokyo Foundation and the Weatherhead East Asian Institute of Columbia University with the support of the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture.

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INTRODUCTION

I was in Paris when I heard the news about the Great East Japan Earthquake.

I went to my computer that morning as usual, and there I found waiting for me an email from a young friend in Miyagi Prefecture. All it said was, "Madoka-san, the city is burning." It was so brief—almost like a cry. Reading it, I knew immediately that something horrible had happened.

Along with footage of the tsunami, the television stations showed the survivors lined up in the falling snow, waiting patiently in hopes of receiving a share of the meager supplies.

In the following days, the communication network was frequently down, but my friend and I continued to correspond as best we could. A few days after that first email, I received this message: "The stars are shining brightly over the rubble of the town. Of all the night skies I've ever seen in my life, this is the most beautiful."

Now, my friend is an ordinary young man who sees the world the way most young Japanese people these days do. Yet he takes the time to gaze up and notice the beauty of the night sky, even though he's not sure where his next meal is coming from. It occurred to me then this mindset somehow lay at the root of the behavior that people have admired among the earthquake's survivors.

I'm convinced that, at bottom, the Japanese view of nature is the ultimate source of that calm, patient, orderly behavior that won praise from all over the world in the wake of the earthquake. From earliest times, the Japanese have experienced earthquakes and other natural disasters time after time. These experiences instilled in them a feeling of awe toward nature and led them to choose the way of respectful coexistence. Witnessing the death and suffering of countless innocent people has driven home the understanding that human beings are helpless in the face of nature's upheavals.

The Japanese people have revered and coexisted with nature since ancient times,

and they continue to love and revere nature, whatever the circumstances.

JAPAN, THE "LAND OF LAUREATES"

They also continue to write poetry. After the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995, the people of the disaster area composed haiku by the hundreds. They may have lacked food, clothing, or shelter, but they never abandoned poetry.

Some years ago I received a visit from Nicholas Kristof, who was writing an article about poetry in Japan for the *New York Times*. The title of his article was "The Land of Laureates."

Japan's population of haiku poets is estimated at 8 million. Each week people all over Japan submit poems in the thousands to newspapers and weekly magazines, almost all of which have regular columns that print selected haiku or other short poems. Haiku are printed on plastic drink bottles and candy wrappers. Kristof described a level of popularity that is "unfathomable" to Westerners, especially given the decline in poetry worldwide.

Lafcadio Hearn, who emigrated to Japan in the 19th century, noticed something similar way back in the Meiji era. He writes, "You might wander—as I have done—into a settlement so poor that you could not obtain there, for love or money, even a cup of real tea; but I do not believe that you could discover a settlement in which there is nobody capable of making a poem." Even amid abject poverty, the Japanese have made poetry an integral part of the lives, like the air we breathe.

Haiku is the world's shortest literary form, consisting of just seventeen syllables. This is why it's sometimes called "the literature of silence." In fact, many of Japan's traditional art forms are built on an aesthetic of reduction, on the principle that less is more. We tend to find the greatest beauty on what is left unsaid, in the rich possibilities of blank space.

That said . . . in recent times, the constant pursuit of convenience, speed, and comfort has created a society inundated with *things*. We've become so accustomed to super-attentive service, over-packaging, and constant announcements that we can't do without them. We're beginning to forget our own values. In no time, Japan has transformed itself into the most comfortable, overprotective country in the world. It's become a nation of constant chatter, always adding more and more.

Experts would probably tell you that there's no connection between the nuclear accident caused by the March 2011 tsunami and the European debt crisis threatening the world economy. But to my perhaps simplistic way of thinking, both stem from the same problem. We have to ask ourselves some basic questions—such as why we felt nuclear power was necessary in the first place—and consider what the constant pursuit of *more* has brought us. It seems to me that by pursuing this obsession with economic growth and efficiency, the whole world has driven itself into a corner.

WHAT IS HAIKU?

Hanagoromo/ nuguya matsuwaru/ himo iroiro.

The spring kimono,
Unfastening the cords around me
One by one.

What image does this haiku conjure up for you?

The poet is a woman named Hisajo Sugita, born in 1890, during the Meiji era. The *hanagoromo* of the title is a kimono made especially for cherry-blossom viewing. Returning at night from such an outing, a woman stands alone in her room, unfastening her kimono. Quite a few cords are used to secure a woman's kimono, including undergarments. As the woman undresses, the colorful silk cords drop one by one onto the tatami mat and coil about her feet, still imbued with the warmth of her skin. Finally, she stands undressed, still and erect, in the midst of the coils. Outside, in the dark, the cherry trees are in full bloom.

It's a lovely, sensuous image. But there's more to it than that.

Hisajo was an extremely talented poet, and she distinguished herself in haiku almost as soon as she began writing. But society then was still bound by feudalistic notions, and it was very hard for creative women to find an outlet for their talents. People said it was unseemly for a woman to throw herself into poetry. And because Hisajo's husband cared about what other people thought, she became estranged from her husband as well. In the end, she suffered a nervous breakdown, and when she died at the age of 56, not one anthology of her works had been published, even though today she is regarded as one of Japan's great haiku poets.

The cords of the haiku stand for social shackles that limited women in her time. In the space between the lines of her poem, one can sense the grief and frustration of a woman whose gifts have gone unrecognized. But instead of baring her feelings, she channeled them into the imagery of a spring kimono and its beautiful silk cords and allows the reader to discover the emotion between the lines.

By her reticence, Hisajo distills her emotions and transforms them into something pure and beautiful. And by investing her emotion in the beauty of the physical world, rather than loudly pleading her case, she draws a deeper response from the reader than she could by saying it directly.

This is the essence of haiku.

The seventeen-syllable haiku, the shortest poetry form in the world, manages to sum up the heart and soul of the Japanese people—their sense of beauty, their view of nature, their philosophy, their feelings, their sensibilities. The deepest emotions and sensations of the poet are not in the seventeen syllables themselves but in the blank spaces, the things left unspoken. The words of the poem are no more than hints that the reader uses to fill in the blanks, so as to recreate the feelings of the poet and reveal the truth at the heart of the poem.

Traditional haiku follows a convention referred to as *yuuki teikei*. This means that it must contain a reference to the season in the form of a *kigo*, or seasonal word, and consist of three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. These simple rules reflect two key elements of the Japanese sensibility, namely, our love of nature—including our sensitivity to the changing seasons—and our respect for form. As we'll see, these elements are consistent features of traditional Japanese culture.

THE JAPANESE VIEW OF NATURE (YUUKI)

The Changing Seasons

I lived in Paris for a year, and one thing that really struck me as different was the transition between the seasons. Of course, Europe has four seasons just like Japan, but in Paris, the transitions between the seasons were always very dramatic. One day you would have scorching heat, and the next day it would be so cool you had to wear a sweater. Or else, it could be bitterly cold one day, and then the next day would be so warm that we seemed to have skipped spring and gone straight to summer. The temperature would jump back and forth like that until, bit by bit, winter turned into spring. The way I think of it is that the transition between seasons has a digital feeling.

In Japan, seasons change in an analogue fashion, by subtle gradations. And this, I believe, has given rise to an analogue aesthetic that finds beauty and poetry in each subtle change. This is the basis for the subtle nuances of the *kigo* and other poetic expressions found in haiku.

[Cherry blossoms] For example, there are dozens of *kigo* relating to cherry blossoms: first bloom, cherry-blossom drifts, cherry-blossom confetti, rafts of blossoms, and so on—covering every phase, from the time the first buds begin opening to after the last blossoms have fallen.

[Moon] The same is true for the moon. *Meigetsu* is an autumn *kigo* referring to the harvest moon *chūshū no meigetsu*. The custom of gathering in the middle of the eighth lunar month to write poetry under the full moon originated in China. But while the Chinese limited their moon viewing to the fifteenth day, when the moon was full, the Japanese also enjoyed viewing the waxing and waning moon, so they gathered not only on the fifteenth day but also on the fourteenth, sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth day. Each of these moons was given its own name—*tachimachizuki*, or "stand-and-wait moon" for the seventeenth day, *imachizuki*, or "sit-and-wait moon" for the eighteenth day, *nemachizuki*, or "recline-and-wait moon" for the nineteenth day, and *fukemachizuki*, or "wait-until-dawn moon" for the twentieth day.

In fact, to the Japanese sensibility, the slightly less-than-full moon is more interesting. This is part and parcel of the traditional Japanese aesthetic, which finds beauty in emptiness and asymmetry.

This highly observant, subtle appreciation of nature has given rise to a rich

vocabulary to describe all the many varieties of wind, clouds, rain, and other natural phenomena. The Japanese language itself bears witness to the people's deep and abiding love for nature in all its ever-changing aspects.

In Japan, this emphasis on the seasons and the weather can be seen not only in art but also in various aspects of daily life-.

[Conversation] Just as a haiku is expected to include a reference to the seasons, a conversation almost always begins with a remark about the weather or the season. When two neighbors run into each other on the street, they begin by trading observations like "My, the mornings and evenings have gotten chilly," or "Another rainy day!"

[Letters] A formal letter always opens with a reference to the time of year, whether it's "the plum blossoms are beginning to open," or "here we are at the height of the rainy season." You can skip that, but you're supposed to announce your intention by writing, "Forgive me for omitting the opening."

[Wagashi] Traditional Japanese confectionery, or *wagashi*, is a magnificent composite art that reflects the holidays and events of the traditional Japanese calendar, together with the natural beauty unique to each season. Almost every variety of *wagashi* is named after a season or some seasonal ceremony or activity.

[Kimono] The patterns on kimono are almost always matched to the seasons: camellias and cherry blossoms in the spring, fireflies and water motifs in the summer, maple leaves and moon motifs in the autumn, snow in the winter.

Another way the Japanese reveal their love of nature is by treating it as if it were human. You can see this tendency in some of the *kigo* used to describe the mountainside at various times of year. *Yama warau*, or "smiling hills," is a spring *kigo* that conveys the downy look of the hillside when the trees are budding. In the summer, the hills "drip" with their lush greenery; in the fall, they are "adorned" in their autumn foliage; and in winter, when the leaves have fallen and everything is still, they sleep. This is the language of a people living in close communion with nature. That sense of kinship comes through especially in the phrase "smiling hills," which conveys the idea of people and mountains rejoicing together at the arrival of spring.

[Shimoyoke] In the winter, the Japanese go to great pains to protect their ornamental shrubs and trees from the cold and snow. The sight of a peony wrapped in a straw "frost cover" calls to mind the image of a young girl trudging through the snow in a straw mantle. Some people go further and erect little umbrellas over their shrubs. It's a charming sight that causes passers-by to stop and smile.

[Yukizuri] A similar custom is *yukizuri*. Here the gardener erects a supporting pole along the trunk, with ropes and wires being used to support the tree's boughs and keep them from breaking under the weight of the snow. The famous French poet Paul Claudel (1868–1955), who was ambassador to Japan in the 1920s, was deeply impressed by the elaborate framework that had been built just

to prop up an old pine tree in a Kyoto garden. For him, it spoke of a deeply spiritual love of nature.

In addition to protecting trees and shrubs from the cold and snow, *shimoyoke* and *shimozuri* are objects of appreciation in their own right, works of art that blend beautifully with the winter landscape. In all, they beautifully reflect the Japanese people's abiding love and respect for nature.

By contrast, here's a verse that was submitted to a haiku contest in Paris that I attended.

*Neige sur mes gants
Reverrais-je à Kyoto
Notre cerisier?*

Snow on my gloves—
Will I see again in Kyoto
Our old cherry tree?

Whatever language this had been written in, I would have known immediately that it was submitted by a French poet. The giveaway is the phrase *notre cerisier*, "our cherry tree." The French regard nature as part of the *human* world. From the poet's viewpoint the cherry tree in Kyoto belonged to a particular chapter in her and someone else's life, so she thought of it as "our cherry tree."

This is quite different from the way the Japanese view their relationship with nature. To us, nature is a vast, ongoing river of life, of which we human beings are just one small part, sharing our brief moment of existence with the cherry blossoms.

Affection for Small Creatures

[Painting] A Japanese scholar who has spent ten years doing research at the Louvre told me that insects and other small creatures rarely turn up in Western painting. S/he said, "With all that vast expanse of water in Monet's *Waterlilies*, you would think there would be a frog or a mayfly at least, but there's not a single living creature." I went to see the Musée de l'Orangerie myself to see the wall-to-wall Monet paintings there, and sure enough, there wasn't a frog or insect to be found. In Japan, frogs, insects, and other small creatures figure prominently in art, from the twelfth-century *Scroll of Frolicking Animals* to the Edo-period works of Ogata Korin and his followers.

From that point on, I made a point of looking for insects and small creatures every time I went to an art museum. But apart from a handful of butterflies in art nouveau and Flemish flower painting, or some motifs inserted for their religious symbolism, I rarely encountered any.

It seems odd to me that not even the Impressionists, who were so inspired by Japan's *ukiyo-e*, included insects or small animals in their own paintings. This is what Vincent van Gogh wrote in a letter to his brother Theo: "If we study Japanese art, we see a man who is undoubtedly wise, philosophic and intelligent, who spends his time how? . . . He studies a single blade of grass. . . . Isn't it

almost a religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?"

And yet even Van Gogh, who was so taken with the way Japanese observed and lived with nature, never included any tiny creatures in his paintings.

[Poetry] What about poetry, then? Western poems depict the occasional butterfly or bee visiting the flowers, but other than that they hardly ever mention insects, frogs, or other small animals. When such creatures do appear, they function only as metaphors, symbols, or background elements—almost never the subject of a poem. Searching through the poetry of Paul Verlaine, I eventually came across frogs in his poem *Dusk*, but as I read on, I realized they were just sound effects for a gloomy landscape: "frogs bellow in green reeds through which *frissons* run."

Compare that with the affectionate, close-up treatment of tiny creatures in Japanese haiku:

Furu ike ya/ kawazu tobikomu/ mizu no oto

A still, quiet pond
A frog leaps in
The sound of the water.—Matsuo Bashō

Suzume no ko/ soko noke soko noke/ ouma ga tōru

Young sparrows get out of the way!
Get out of the way!
A great horse is coming!—Kobayashi Issa

Fuyubachi no/ shinidokoro naku/ arukikeri

The winter bee
Crawls along the ground
With no place to die.—Murakami Kijo

Tiny creatures figure prominently in Japanese art and poetry, not just as background or landscape accents but as full-fledged subject matter. In his essay "The Lyric Epigrams of Japan," Paul-Louis Couchoud explained it like this. "To the Japanese a sketch of an animal necessarily evokes more than it does for us. Whether Buddhist or Shintoist, he believes himself to be created of the same essence as beasts. . . . Not that he for a moment attempts to liken it to the human world; he tries, on the contrary, to penetrate these rudimentary beings with a regard for the integrity of their minute dreaming souls."

At least when it comes to painting and haiku, the Japanese erect no boundaries between humanity and nature.

FORM (TEIKI)

The other essential convention of haiku, as I mentioned, is its five-seven-five form. That form is what makes haiku haiku. And this emphasis on form is typical of Japanese traditional culture.

Form is what makes ikebana *kado*—the way of flowers—as opposed to just flower arrangement. Form is what makes the tea ceremony *sadō*—the way of tea—as opposed to just a tea party. And form is what makes a haiku haiku, instead of just a short poem.

I met a French *haikiste*—that's what French haiku poets call themselves—who said to me, "Poetry is supposed to encourage free expression. Doesn't the form of haiku go counter to that spirit?" My answer was, "The form is what frees you." Of course, it depends in part on your definition of freedom. At the early stages, the form feels like a constraint. At that stage, free verse feels much freer than haiku. But once you've mastered and internalized the form, you gain a freedom far beyond that of free verse. Not too many *haikistes* have experienced that.

[Floor exercises] For me, the easiest way to explain the function of form in haiku is by analogy with floor exercises in gymnastics. In floor exercises, the gymnast has to stay within the perimeter of an area 12 meters square. If you step outside the boundary, points are deducted. On the other hand, if you avoid the perimeter for fear of stepping outside, then your exercise becomes tight and constricted, and you can't give truly beautiful, dynamic performance. The idea is to use every bit of the floor area, up to the very edge. The effect of doing a series of handsprings from one corner of the floor to another and landing with your feet just inside the line is exhilarating precisely because of the tension between the dynamic movement and the limits imposed by the floor perimeter. That effect would be diminished if there were no boundaries to stay inside. The gymnasts make maximum use of those boundaries to enhance the impact of their performance.

In haiku, the boundaries are established by the five-seven-five form. The haiku poet tries to make the words leap and soar within those boundaries. And a poet who does that successfully produces the same sort of effect that a gymnast does by executing a series of back flips and nailing the landing just inside the far corner.

[Tea ceremony] Tea ceremony is also based on form—the tightly prescribed ritual of preparing, serving, and drinking the tea. You can't just move the implements about any way that suits you; they all have to be placed in the correct spot. And all the steps have to be carried out exactly in the correct order. For a beginner, these rules seem very restrictive, but people who have mastered the art say that once you've internalized the process, you realize that that's the most efficiently natural way you can prepare and serve tea.

[Zen training] Another *haikiste* told me, "I don't necessarily follow the *form* of haiku, but I do respect the *spirit*." It seems to me, though, that the spirit of haiku resides in its form. By observing the limit on syllables and the rules about *kigo*, you gradually acquire a haiku mentality—just as strict Zen training opens the way to enlightenment. Zen monks adhere to form in everything they do, from the time they wake up in the morning to the time they go to sleep at night, whether they're sweeping, washing up, and eating their meals. Zen training means following those rules unconditionally. This is the path to enlightenment. You can't

think your way to *satori*. By the same token, practicing the *form* of haiku is the way to develop the *spirit* of haiku. You don't intellectualize it; you just do it.

Blank Space

Adhering to form causes one to abbreviate expression to the utmost. This creates blank space, or emptiness, which is another characteristic feature of Japanese art and culture.

[Ikebana] An ikebana master I met in Paris told me, "When I arrange flowers, I don't look at the flowers." What she's looking at is the negative space between the flowers. You could almost say that in ikebana the flowers are the means, while the negative space is the end.

[Japanese cuisine] Japanese chef Hiroyuki Kanda, who has a famous Michelin three-star restaurant in Tokyo, says that the appeal of Japanese cuisine is that it doesn't try to overwhelm you with flavors. It only goes halfway, and the diner has to fill in the missing half, exploring nuances hidden deep within. You see the same aesthetic in the Noh theater. The viewer enjoys what is not actually there, extracting from the stillness and words unspoken something that is only suggested by the actors' movements.

[Calligraphy] The same holds true for calligraphy. I asked a calligrapher at an exhibition what makes for good writing. She told me, "You can tell a good piece of calligraphy by looking at the blank space on the paper."

The goal in haiku is not to fill up the void with words any more than the goal in ikebana is to fill up the empty space with flowers. You weave your poem not only with words but also with the silence between them. And the richness of the silence is more important than the fertility of the words. From the silence, the reader or listener senses the poem's mood and ambience, its subtle emotional resonance. As the reader, you recreate the poet's emotional state from your own experience and relive it. By the same token, the poet entrusts his or her feelings to the audience instead of trying to explain those feelings or impose them on the listener. Just as each haiku is limited by the wealth of experience of the poet, its effect on the reader is likewise limited by the experience of the audience.

Paul Claudel wrote, "In Japan, on any page of writing or drawing, the most important part is always entrusted to the blank space."

The modern sculptor Brancusi [1876–1957], known for his highly simplified, abstracted forms, wrote, "Simplicity is not an end in art, but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves as we approach the real sense of things."

For Brancusi, simplicity was the outcome of trying to penetrate to the inner truth of things. But for the Japanese artist, simplicity—or form—is the *means* of penetrating the inner truth of things. By constant discipline and adherence to form, one eventually internalizes the technique and arrives at the true essence of things.

TRUSTING TO A HIGHER POWER

The Power of Ambiguity

One of the things people often say about the Japanese is that we don't assert ourselves or express our views clearly. Maybe some of you have had that impression in your dealings with Japanese people.

Let's say someone invites me to a picnic tomorrow. Even if I'm tired and don't really feel like going out, I may well decide that it's better to push myself a little and go, than to disrupt other people's plans. Besides, once I'm there, I might find I'm not so tired after all, and perhaps the wonderful scenery or a chance encounter will rejuvenate me.

This isn't just a passive ambiguity. It's based on the knowledge that sometimes, even if you have an issue with something, the issue may resolve itself if you just give it a chance, instead of immediately taking a stand. We human beings are not in complete control. There are unseen forces at work in the world. Sometimes, by trusting to powers beyond ourselves, we arrive at a better resolution than we would by rushing to judgment.

The tendency to accept instead of deny, to accommodate instead of resist, is basic to the Japanese mentality. Instead of asserting our own individual preference, we tend to go with the flow of that particular time and place and the people around us. I would call it an *active* ambiguity.

There's a story about the famous rock garden at Ryōanji temple. The story goes that when the garden was finished, the designer showed it to the priest and asked him what he thought. The priest was delighted. "It's magnificent!" he said. "Especially that rock there!" The garden designer immediately removed the rock. For him, the harmony of the whole was paramount.

In her book *Nihon no aimairyoku*, or *The Power of Ambiguity*, O Seonhwa explores the use of the passive voice in the Japanese language. In Japanese, we have something called the adversative passive. For example, a man might say, "Nyōbo ni nigerareta"—literally, "I was run out on by my wife." If a burglar broke into your house, you might say, "Dorobō ni hairareta," or "I was broken into by a burglar." O's theory is that the passive voice reflects an underlying sense that the victim is at least partly responsible. When people make statements like "Nyōbo ni nigerareta" and "Dorobō ni hairareta," there's a subtle nuance of accepting part of the responsibility.

No man is an island. We get by each day with the aid of invisible forces all around us, forces transcending the individual. In traditional Japanese culture, the basic source of transcendent power is the deities, or *kami*, that reside in nature. A sense of gratitude toward the *kami*, the Buddha, our ancestors, the people around us, is what underlies such Japanese expressions as *mottainai*, which conveys our aversion to waste, or *okagesama de*, expressing gratitude to others for our good fortune, not to mention the custom of saying *itadakimasu*, "I gratefully receive," before eating.

These expressions arise from a deep-seated, subconscious understanding that we share the world with other living beings and are part of a great circle of life. At some level, we're always conscious of all the other beings and forces that make up the whole. So, even while we strive to do our best from day to day, we also trust to unseen powers.

The Japanese arts are not meant to be appreciated logically or analytically.

Logic is almost built into European culture through language. French, like most European languages, has a clear, logical structure in which the subject and the object are clearly stated. In Japanese, the subject and object are often left out. Living in Paris, I became very aware of the importance the French attach to logic, even in everyday conversation. I got the feeling the French looked on the ability to analyze and explain things logically as an important sign of education and maturity. People who can't explain themselves logically are apt to be treated with disdain. The French look for meaning in everything.

Haiku doesn't attempt to express the poet's thoughts or feelings logically. It doesn't address cause-and-effect relationships, rationales, or processes. In haiku, language isn't a tool for logical explanation or analysis. Its purpose is to evoke images and feelings, to help the reader enter into the poet's world and share the poet's viewpoint.

The French philosopher Roland Barthes (1915–1980) hit on this difference when he called Japan the "empire of signs" and the West the "empire of meaning." As he put it, Westerners find it hard to "give up on words."

But Japanese culture places little value on explanation. In fact, in many cases we actively prefer the absence of explanation. This is what the great haiku poet Matsuo Bashō meant when he said, "What's the good of saying everything?" By leaving things unsaid, one gives the imagery room in which to blossom. And in that way, one also distills one's experience and transforms it into something pure.

The Power of Verse

The *Manyōshū*, Japan's oldest poetry anthology, is compiled from poems written from the fourth to the eighth century. Its 4,516 poems—written by emperors, aristocrats, civil servants, soldiers, and commoners—attest to the important role poetry played in ancient Japan, helping people face the countless hardships and challenges to survival in a harsh environment. Whether farming or fishing, praying for rain or waiting for the sun, euphoric with love or heartbroken by its loss, mourning for the dead, missing their families, living in dread of earthquakes and typhoons, enduring hunger and cold . . . through all of this, people used poetry to distill and purify their emotional experience.

The *Manyōshū* is also rich in humor. Whether at work or play, happy or sad in love, the poets of the *Manyōshū*, whatever their rank in society, were never too proud to laugh. If your lover doesn't appear, you can sit there and cry over it, or you can laugh it off by writing an acidly comic verse at your lover's expense. They knew the art of using laughter to dispel feelings of dejections and persevere through life's trials. Besides, life was too short—much shorter than today—to

spend day after day moping and lamenting. Being able to laugh at misfortune is a sign of maturity.

Haiku carries on the ancient Japanese tradition of finding the silver lining to every cloud. The art of "not saying everything" is the key to this transformation. It comes from trusting to something outside oneself, namely, nature and the spirits that reside therein. Trusting means sharing and believing. And the result is peace of mind.

In trading comments about the seasons, incorporating the seasons in our clothing and cuisine, and, at various junctures in our lives, taking a deep breath and composing haiku, we are maintaining an ongoing dialogue with nature. By trusting to the greater powers embodied in nature and "letting go," we eventually discover that silver lining. The brevity and seasonality of haiku are both tied up in that capacity to trust to greater powers, from which spring the best qualities of the Japanese people.

Gege no gege/ gege no gekoku no/ suzushisa yo

In the lowest of the lowest
Of the lowest places on Earth . . .
Such refreshing coolness.

The author of this verse was the great haiku poet Kobayashi Issa. From his childhood, Issa's life was a series of misfortunes, but he learned to laugh off his troubles by writing haiku. His hometown of Kashiwabara was a particularly poor village in a famously poor province, and his childhood memories were further soured by a tense relationship with his stepmother and stepbrother. And yet, even so, there was no place like home. His ambivalence toward his hometown is almost palpable, as he repeats the word *gege* over and over, only to conclude by evoking a cool breeze in summer. At the end, one can almost hear Issa laughing in the background.

Here's another example:

Hana matsu ni/ mune no yamai to/ iu wa yoki.

An ailing chest
Makes waiting for cherry blossoms
All the better.

This is by the twentieth-century poet Kado Nagasaku. Nagasaku had lung cancer, but instead of brooding over his illness, he focused on the heightened pleasure and poignancy of waiting for the cherry blossoms to open. The emotional impact is all the stronger when one realizes that he died of a few years later. But by approaching his illness as an opportunity to enjoy the season, the poet distills and transforms his experience and invests his very life with a spiritual purity. The spirit has triumphed over the disease.

The Japanese approach to life and culture has been an inspiration not only for the hardcore Western Japanophiles but also for many of the world's greatest artists, poets, and musicians in the past century, including Van Gogh, Picasso, Rilke,

Stravinsky, and many more. In it they saw the basic truth that less is more, and that real beauty and fulfillment are achieved not by adding on but by taking away. I believe that these values, and the view of nature from which they spring, have a validity that extends beyond Japanese culture. In fact, I believe they embody a universal wisdom that today's world would do well to embrace. The world is searching desperately for something, and it seems to me that that something is to be found in Japan.

I'd like to conclude this lecture with a haiku composed by tsunami survivor Isao Sato. It seems to me that this one verse sums up everything I've been trying to convey with all this talk.

Mi hitotsu to/ narite kunpū/ arishi kana

Bereft of belongings
Yet blessed by the touch of the
Early summer breeze.

The author is a resident of Iwate Prefecture that was devastated by the March 2011 tsunami. He comments: "From out of the blue, a huge tsunami came and washed away my home and all the material possessions I had worked for my whole life. But when I finally came to myself, I looked around and realized that I still had my family, and that this year, once again, the world was filled with the sweet, fresh breeze of early summer."

The *kigo* used in this haiku is *kunpū*, literally, "fragrant breeze." It refers to the time of year the Japanese call "early summer"—generally around May—when the fresh, mild breeze carries the fragrance of new foliage.

Having lost everything to the tsunami, the poet lapses into a stupor, overwhelmed with his loss. And yet all during that time, the seasons continue changing, and nature's life cycle goes on, just as before. Returning to his senses, he feels the sweet May breeze, just like every year, and that puff of air tells him that he has survived the tragedy, he is alive. By the act of building his poem around that breeze, instead of his raw feelings of hopelessness or anguish, he alters his own outlook and discovers the will to live. Precisely because he never lays bare his feelings, he is able to distill and transform his experience to the level of spiritual purity.

The poem also attests to the enduring Japanese faith in nature that not even a tragedy like the tsunami can shake. In an uncertain world, where people can find themselves bereft of possessions for any number of reasons, this haiku has been a source of courage and inspiration not only for the victims but for people all over the country.

Bereft of belongings
Yet blessed by the touch of the
Early summer breeze.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience.