

# Introduction

We find only the world we look for.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Yes I think to myself what a wonderful world

LOUIS ARMSTRONG

Fifty years ago Americans heard two iconic songs for the first time. Best known from the cover version performed by Peggy Lee, *Is That All There Is?* recounted moments of disappointment in a young woman's life, each time leading her to the rhetorical question of the song's title. Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful World* took a different tack, rejoicing in the manifest wonders of nature and the natural goodwill of ordinary people going about their everyday lives.

Disenchantment vs. Wonder . . . a starker contrast in worldviews would be hard to conjure!

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Sometimes the very things we dream about and strive for, when we actually succeed in getting them, fail to deliver lasting joy or satisfaction. In those moments we too might be tempted to ask: *Is that all there is?* This book's answer to that question is an emphatic *Of course not!* Wonder abounds. What's more, it can be experienced by anyone, anywhere, and at any given moment. The question to ask—if we truly seek more balance and happiness in our lives—is how to tap into the wonder around us. The method I propose in these pages is to learn to see the world anew through “haiku eyes.”

It may seem unreasonable or even absurd to suggest that the humble haiku, a tiny poem of Japanese origin, could somehow alter one's view of the world. Yet mid-last-century the British scholar R. H. Blyth went even further: “Haiku is the final flower of all Eastern culture; it is also a way of living.”

Our own conception of “living the good life,” and our continual striving for that state, has by and large expunged wonder from how we experience each day. Each chapter in this book responds to one of the subtle ways in which our culture and times estrange us from wonder. In each case I will suggest how the practice of

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haiku poetry—especially the attentive reading and *assimilation* of haiku poems—can start to act as a corrective and even an antidote to wonder deprivation. Every chapter title in this book states an imperative; collectively they formulate what I call The Wonder Code.

But can non-Eastern readers hope to even “get” haiku?

As Blyth observed, haiku poetry is the unmistakable product of Eastern culture, a flower with proximate roots in Buddhism (especially Zen Buddhism) and Japan’s native Shinto religion. Haiku emerged from these traditions as a welcome vessel for direct personal responses to everyday moments, a reverence for all facets of the natural world, and other reflections of Eastern spirituality and thought. Yet such spiritual insights and modes of thought have proven well within the grasp of original thinkers in the West. The epigraphs that appear throughout this book—all by Western men and women, many of them unaware of haiku—each convey something of the haiku spirit, particularly in their recognition and embrace of everyday wonder.

But what better evidence can be found for the understanding and value of haiku outside of Japan than

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its present flowering all around the globe? Quality haiku poems are now being written by individuals in every walk of life in scores of nations worldwide. This book serves as vivid testimony to that fact: the capacious “galleries” that end its chapters display the haiku poems of nearly three hundred ordinary men and women from dozens of countries on six continents. All were first published over the last two decades in the online journal *The Heron’s Nest*, where I serve as an editor. The poems in these galleries relate to the imperative declared in the title of their respective chapters. A “solo exhibition” of some of my own haiku poems follows the Afterword.

In his seminal essay *Nature* (1836), Ralph Waldo Emerson argued for “a poetry and philosophy of insight” that could restore us to “an original relation to the universe.” As I intend to show in this volume, Emerson’s challenge more than finds its match in haiku. Indeed I suspect that the burgeoning appeal of haiku poetry in the West has far less to do with the exoticism of its “Oriental” origins than with a basic human yearning for our original orientation of wonder at the world.

A casual glance through this book’s haiku galler-

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ies will reveal that almost all of their poems depart from the 5-7-5 syllabic structure you might have expected to find. While haiku poems in the original Japanese traditionally conform to that tripartite structure with its total of seventeen *on* or Japanese sound units, those units are not comparable to English syllables: they're shorter. Consequently, nearly all respected contemporary haiku poets who write in English tend to use *fewer* than seventeen syllables to produce poems of comparable duration. There is simply no hard and fast syllabic rule for an English-language haiku today. (Sorry!) Furthermore, quality haiku poems can be found in one, two or occasionally more than the conventional three lines. (Is *nothing* sacred?!) More important than a haiku poem's syllable or line count is the presence of two constituent parts—sometimes called the “fragment” and the “phrase”—with a perceptible pause or an actual line break between them. The significance of this structure will be seen and discussed as the book unfolds.

So far I have spoken of “haiku poems” when referring to more than one haiku. However, the Japanese word *haiku* is plural as well as singular, so hereafter I'll employ “haiku” in place of “haiku poems” and trust that

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you will recognize the plural usage based on context and subject-verb agreement. (Don't feel too chagrined if you have referred to "haikus" up to now: no less estimable a writer than Jack Kerouac used that term in *The Dharma Bums* and elsewhere; it even appears in the title of his own collection of haiku.)

Reading, reflecting upon and writing haiku have enriched my life beyond all measure. So the book before you is both a thank-you note and a gentle manifesto. If you enter these pages with a sense of discovery and consider these poems with a spirit of openness . . . what a wonderful world you will see!

