

Changing Places

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Retirement, I suppose, may be thought of as being like any other change. Today is the twenty-seventh day of May 2005. Since the last day of March I have been officially, or I should say statutorily, “retired” from the prefectural college. In fact, my teaching hours, as of this following semester, are not now fewer than before. I am not yet quite retired, and thus cannot say much about what the changes of “retirement” are. So, to talk or write now about change, recollection of changes I am able to see in some perspective will have to do.

The October I came to teach at Kagoshima Prefectural College, I moved to another house, in an older section of the city, Take. The name refers to the samurai town it was. Historic maps show it west of the old Kagoshima castle, Tsurumaru-Jo.

Fifteen minutes’ drive north lies the KPC campus, a place I have always enjoyed, not only for the pleasant people there, students and faculty and staff, but also for the pleasant surroundings: the towering camphor tree by the main gate, from which another, a great spreading camphor, is in view; variegated azaleas and camellias, rich red Okinawan deigo, white yucca, tiny yellow and pink and blue wildflowers, wisteria, Japanese maples, all colorful in their seasons; longleaf and shortleaf pine, cedars, tall water-firs; and, not least, the change from green to gold the ginkgoes show nearing Christmastime; and, of course, occasional mascots, feline friends, the most famous of them one Yasu, who became the Campus Cat until his recent relocation to a new ‘mansion’ home.

Among campus buildings several long low hedges of pruned azalea grow. Just now here and there they are in flower, red and pink and white.

changing places

here, there, sparrows

landing on the hedge

Change is also taking place back in my own neighborhood. Located on the west side of Nishi Eki, the old “West Station,” the area used to be quieter. During the past few years, the old Nishi Eki, name and building, gradually disappeared. Streamlined,

efficient, the new Central Station, Chuo Eki, has taken its place. Basically a series of friendly, shabby sheds, weatherworn and well-used, that old Nishi Eki had an earlier lifestyle's wabi-sabi quality, owing to signs of age and experience new things cannot have.

The old station stood as a sign of something slower-paced, more connected to older ways of life. One could see this in the relation of things and people: in the less-hurried way people might pause at kiosks, for instance, buying sundries; or chat at small open-walled shops, selling or buying foodstuffs and souvenirs; or heading for a train, or taking a meal at one of the restaurants. In that different time, I remember glimpsing, maybe ten years ago, rows of seats where passersby as well as travelers stopped for moments' rest in a spacious old waiting hall.

station, early spring...
old folks sit, taking a break
on sturdy benches

A change of two or three words, a change of what a point of view takes in, and the whole tone changes. But is there something constant when one compares the haiku just above with the one just below?

station, early spring...
between trains travelers perch
on old log benches

Streamlined and rationalized spaces of the new Central Station offer fewer perching spots, there are few seats for those who wait or are passing by. The new arrangements keep people on the move.

Forming an L, connecting to the northeast end of the new Central Station, the new AMU (probably an acronym, I don't know for what) shopping-mall building presents a long façade. Extending north, the long side of the AMU building faces east toward a large open space where buses stop and wait and go, where streaming vehicles pass alongside city trams, merge, get jammed up, divide, move on, and where pedestrians ponder the best way to cross. Pedestrians who wish to cross this space to the big Daiei Department store on the other side have the choice of walking an interrupted and

circuitous aboveground route, or making their way underground through the new network--concourse, tunnel, down and up escalator... that leads eventually to open air on the Daiei side or directly into the basement food market in Daiei itself.

Spring weather brings wonderful variety to the sights one sees in and around such stores:

a day in May...
suddenly mothers, babies
in strollers all over

Basho said haiku is what is happening at the moment.

I am writing here about things present, past, and future, which seems a consistent thing to do in the haiku context that haibun attends.

Broadly applied, what is happening at the moment may be what we know by our senses of sight and hearing, smell, touch, taste, around us, right now. Or, what is happening at the moment can be our memory, now, of what we have sensed of things that have happened at an earlier time, minutes or weeks or years before. Or, likewise, what is happening in a present time can be a future-in-the-present created to our senses by our power of imagination, in present time.

What unifies, in such contexts, is memory.

Even with regard to what we usually consider to be the present, memory is key. Memory is bound up with our power to visualize images. Memory enables imagination: imagination enables memory. Are activities of memory and imagination entirely discrete or separate activities? Acting with our five bodily senses, memory of the present, together with visualizations—internal pictures or images--registers in our consciousness an event as something happening now. And in this connection it is of interest that traditional Eastern psychologies (Vedic, Buddhist) rather than five speak of six senses, the sixth of which is mind.

Basho's saying that haiku is what is happening at the moment (as one may contemplate the matter) may be thought elaborated by terms one of the Western world's great thinkers St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) set out in a famous passage of his *Confessions*, where he expounds on the nature of time. In chapter 11 of *Confessions* Augustine says our experience is always a present moment. Whether experience is

something of past or present or future, Augustine understands that we experience presently. In this eleventh chapter he says, what is the past, but the past-in-the-present, which is memory. And also, he says, there exists future-in-the-present: we have memory of the future; for what is the future but the future-in-the-present, which is expectation. And what is the present, but time passing.... Even as we say or register a present moment, it is passing, passing, gone: matter for memory, material of memory.

Basho's haiku, indeed any actual haiku, are brief testaments to the subjectivity of time. Augustine extends his analysis of the subjectivity of time, to show his idea of the relation of all temporal process to the abiding eternity of God. (The relations time/eternity and microcosm/macrocosm are analogues: haiku's *ki-go* or season-words showing relation between a microcosmic local event and the larger universe: while this rose is blooming on this spring day, sun moon and planets are in a certain relation; it is all particular, neither the rose nor the planetary relations will be the same tomorrow.) While there are differences, therefore, between the two writer's ideas of time, it is nevertheless observable that Basho's instruction about what haiku is—that haiku is what is happening now—may reveal a depth that is plumbed when we consider him and the bishop of Hippo in the one and the same context of memory and time and the passing moment.

As to Chuo Kagoshima Eki: not only because everything is what it is and not something else, the new station can't be said to replace the old. It is something other than the old. It runs counter to the old. Approaching the new station, the new high-speed-train shinkansen tracks run east/west. Rather than running north/south beside the tracks for local slower trains as the old station did, the new station is elevated over the local-train tracks. The new Central Station running east/west hooks up to the new trestle bridge thirty or forty feet above ground, a considerable narrow length. This extended building is like a long covered bridge. It passes over the old north/south-running local tracks, and then extends west of the old north/south-running tracks.

This brings the new station all but into my neighborhood.

The old Nishi Eki was entirely east of the tracks. No pedestrian bridge passing over or under them, people who live where I live had to walk around, to one of the rail crossings: at least ten or twelve minutes. It would take longer if one of the local trains were using a track and the barriers were down and pedestrians and cars had to wait until the slow commuter local passed.

Now the walk to the station from my house takes four or five minutes. And now also, the long new east/west Chuo Kagoshima Eki extends closer to abrupt hillside, a cliff further west, behind my neighborhood.

For months, from tunnels bored in the steep face of that hill an elevated bridge gradually moved east toward spaces where the old station had been. The structure passed close to the small Saigo Takamori Residence Park, where a statue of the Meiji-period hero commemorates the house and school he held there after resigning from the Cabinet over disagreement about Korea. From late 1873 to 1876, a samurai turning his energies to farming and teaching, he lived a simple country life on that ground, part now of my neighborhood, then an area of rice fields and farmland, and called Take no Mura, "Samurai Village." In 1876 or 1877, answering pleas of former students, Saigo took up arms. The recent film "The Last Samurai" fictionalizes his leadership of the fight against the central government's abolition of the samurai class and its rights, as commanding general of the rebels, in the Seinan Civil War. Defeated in a hopeless struggle against social change, he was indeed the last samurai. And now, somehow ambiguous (perhaps ironic and counter-historical, perhaps redemptive), fact and symbol of another stage of social change, when the western sun is low enough the shinkansen bridge casts twilight shadow on Saigo's briefly-held ground.

Anyhow, the new railroad bridge grew past the Saigo Residence Park. And then the bridge, the entire structure to hold the new high-speed-train tracks, plunged through airspace over Josei Dori ("Castle-west Street") to connect with the new, elevated, elongated Central Kagoshima Station building.

The months when the new high-speed train system was being tested, neighborhood TVs flickered oddly and little side streets were sometimes blocked off. By early spring 2004, just over a year ago, the concrete trestle bridge growing eastward out of the hills was accommodating test-runs of the new train. Sometime in late February last year, walking along Josei Dori, passing underneath the new tracks, I heard a sound of low thunder, the new train crossing overhead. That test run and a scent of plum from a neighboring garden composed into a haiku I sent to the Mainichi newspaper.

On March 13th, 2004, the new train's first official run took place. Eventually, neighborhood TVs and telephones worked as they had before. As to a line of thought linking Basho and Augustine, two persons separated by centuries, continents, cultural traditions, it seems possible that haiku might have arisen in the West except for accidents of history, a comment the editor of *Modern Haiku* Robert

Spieß once made in a letter to me, citing reader-responses to an article he had published, my “Haiku ‘Seeds’: Blyth’s ‘Hens and Eggs’ with regard to Augustine’s “Rationes Seminales” (Heffernan). Curiously enough, this past week I came across a Xerox copy of that article the same day I happened upon a comment that had previously escaped me, in one of Blyth’s books, that relates to this theme.

R. H. Blyth (1898-1964) was one of the great interpreters of the East to the West, and West to East; his contributions deserve a wider appreciation than they currently receive, I believe. Dating from the year 2000, for example, an on-line discussion pro and contra his merits on the web site

<<http://www.meijigakuin.ac.jp/~pmjs/archive/2000/blyth.html>> seems representative of how his reputation is currently constructed: there, a well-informed proponent supports favorable opinion with ample fact; detracting opinion appears less fact- than ideology-based. But since the debate includes issues of taste, perhaps one had better avoid contention and remember that counsel to observe courtesy, *de gustibus non est disputandum*, while not neglecting to advance facts that justify one’s opinion. Proponents’ founding of an R. H. Blyth Award in 2002 declares appreciation of his remarkable achievements. Among them, as several advocates have testified, are readable and convincing translations that draw the reader in, to want to read more, something I too have experienced when reading his books. To acknowledge this one of his gifts to receptive readers, may also be to imply a sort of excellence in the contexts he provides, in which the translations are set, and may also suggest degrees of contextual misreading on the part of his detractors.

Anyhow, in the comment I refer to, Blyth says, “The fact is that haiku would have come into being even if Bashô had never been born. We cannot say, however, that somebody would have written Shakespeare’s play even if Shakespeare (or Bacon or Marlowe or the Earl of Oxford or Queen Elizabeth) had not. What Thoreau said, that ‘Man, not Shakespeare or Homer, is the great poet,’ is truer of Japan than of any other country, where custom and tradition are stronger, and where the poetry was not a romantic or classical solo, but a democratic trio or quartet [referring to the fact that traditional linked “renga”—from which haiku descend-- are typically composed by two, three or more persons]. Onitsura, Gonsui, and many lesser men were composing good haiku at the same time as Bashô. However, they did not have the modesty, the generosity, the ambitionlessness of Bashô. Onitsura loved sincerity and truth and made them his object, but Bashô just loved” (Blyth, 270).

Change endures. Consider, for instance, that China's oldest book is all about Change—a record of observations proposing Change, underlying everything, to be the constant that doesn't change. Some things change; some things don't seem to, at least not right away. What people are used to calling "retirement" is no doubt like that, a mix of speeds of change and changes of speed and seeming no-change, much as happens in any department of life, much as happens with everything.

On the campus at the Prefectural College are two disused garden-ponds. The authorities keep them dry for (I have heard) insurance reasons. Half-hidden, in shrubbery a short distance east of the Library, the more elaborate of the two is edged with matched, mortared rock, its floor a compound of limestone and clay. A day in May a passerby may notice

spring light flooding
the old pond... silver lichen
where koi have swum

or, simply, another day in May,

silver lichen
the empty pond awash
with spring light

Works Cited

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