

Humble Haiku's Mighty Lessons for Risk Leaders



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This Saturday is [International Haiku Poetry Day](#), leading me to reflect on the lessons I've learned from this simple form of poetry—the humble haiku. If you're wondering how this pint-sized poem has the potential to teach risk leaders important lessons about evolving organizational risk practices, I invite you to read on!

Recently, the NRMC team has been reflecting how works like *Essentialism* and *The One Thing* encourage risk leaders to narrow the focus of their risk programs to a short list of critical risks or strategies, or even a singular risk or initiative. Having a diminutive file of risks reminds me of the succinct three lines in a haiku. Like an artfully crafted haiku, a short list of risks or initiatives has the power to inspire teams throughout your organization.

A heavily annotated copy of *Seeds from a Birch Tree* by Clark Strand sits on my nightstand among a stack of future reads. I've read and reread this book and always draw new inspiration from it. Reflecting today, I was struck by Strand's description of the haiku. He tells us that the haiku is "balanced on a pause..." Immediately, I thought of how effective risk-aware decision-making requires teams to live in a pause and to use this contemplation to make sound judgement calls that can create a lasting effect on an organization's mission.

The Elastic Moment

The author describes a situation that many risk leaders can relate to – the act of being "distrustful of inspiration." When you're operating at the speed of risk, it's tempting to want fast answers to critical questions. How often do we race to capture risk mitigation strategies or jump to quick decisions rather than letting ideas and inspiration marinate?

Strand reminds us that, "In the absence of that desire, however, the frantic, grasping quality of the mind disappears, and inspiration is free to do its work at somewhat more leisure." It's this free, natural quality that allows the most productive answers to surface.

*Resist a risk race –
Cultivate a measured calm,
marinate on risk*

Restrain from Self and Complexity

Haiku does two things exceptionally well. First, the petite poem is plainly simple. And second, it illustrates without being consumed by emotions. To achieve these objectives, haiku masters strive to “come unwrapped.” Strand explains that it requires haiku authors to refrain from projecting personal thoughts and emotions onto the subject of their haiku. He reminds readers that infusing a situation with too much subjectivity hinders clarity and reduces impact. He writes, “these thoughts become like a film of dust covering a pair of eyeglasses—only when we clean the lenses do we realize how dirty they had become.”

Risk leaders can apply the same principles to lead their teams through risk identification and risk strategy exercises. Ask:

- Have we come unwrapped?
- Are we examining risks and their potential outcomes without personal subjectivity?
- What past experiences and emotions might be clouding the lens of possibility?

*Create clarity
Challenge teams to come unwrapped,
revealing real risks.*

Make Risk Social

Throughout *Seeds*, Strand continually returns to the theme that haiku are both accessible and openly shared in groups. He also notes that haiku are often composed in small groups collaborating and using a process that is not unlike “write storming.” The social aspect of this poetry form reiterates to risk leaders the value of diverse perspectives even when attempting to capture something essential and straightforward.

Consider trying this social routine inspired by group haiku composition:

- Collect a small group of risk champion volunteers from different areas in your organization.
- Provide index cards for team members to anonymously compose 3-4 risks. Keeping with the inspiration of the haiku, risk statements should be concise and clear.
- Shuffle and then read aloud the deck of index cards.
- Ask each team member to select 5 cards that resonate with them and explain why.
- The five risks that have the most votes are the team’s top risks.
- Repeat this exercise to develop risk mitigation strategies for the team’s top risks.

*Welcome perspectives,
candid conversation, and
Encourage risk talks*

Praise for *Seeds* on the flyleaf tells readers this book is an engaging read and instructional on the form of haiku, but it is also about “letting go” and urges the reader to “drop our expectations, look around us, and begin.” This is sage wisdom for any risk leader grappling with perennial or unexpected challenges facing your mission.

Whitney Thomey is a Project Manager at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes questions about reducing your risk practice to the essentials and would love to read your risk-inspired haiku! Reach out to Whitney at 703.777.3504 or Whitney@nonprofitrisk.org.