

Endless Open Heart: Collaborative Poetry and Image as Contemplative and Restorative Practice

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Abstract: In this article, we share how during a time of retreat from our academic careers we engaged in a shared contemplative arts process that included two practices, the first being renga, or linked verse poetry, and the second being Miksang, or contemplative photography. Through our particular collaboration, we sought to co-create a space where healthy habits of mind and open-hearted awareness were nurtured through practices of spaciousness, restfulness, curiosity, and compassion. In this way, we manifested a process that has been restorative for ourselves and that is potentially helpful for other artists, teachers and researchers.

Keywords: poetry; photography; contemplative arts; collaboration; healing.

In this article, we explore collaborative poetry writing and Miksang (contemplative photography) as a way of inquiring into our lives compassionately and kindly: a form of restorative practice. As women who worked for years in precariously contingent and part-time positions in postsecondary Faculties of Education (Richardson, 2015), and who both, at the time of writing this article, were employed full-time at small Canadian universities on opposite sides of the country, we are attentive to how the shifting conditions of our work life affect our well-being in the academy and the quality of our lives overall. Here, we share the collaborative poetic and contemplative process that we developed while we were in a period of transition and retreat from our usual academic roles and labour. Finding ourselves in unexpected and disconcerting terrain with destabilized identities and a need to relax expectations, we sought to trust and feel our way and relate to our experiences with compassion, gentleness, and kindness. As our creative and healing process deepened, we discovered renga or linked verse, a form of collaborative poetry writing that felt like a perfect form of expression for our collaborative work. Later, we also expanded the scope of our work through integrating Miksang photographs with our poetry.

Throughout our adult lives, we have both been students within various spiritual and contemplative traditions, including Shambhala Buddhism. Also, we are both writers/poets who engage with meditation and other contemplative practices as ways of living in the world. We draw inspiration from contemplative practices and collaborative writing as creative inquiry (Jordan, Richardson, Fisher, Bickel, & Walsh, 2016; Walsh & Bai, 2015, 2017; Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015). And, as teacher educators, we have also integrated artful, narrative, and contemplative practices into our personal and professional development and into our work with students (Schnellert & Richardson, 2016). We place our work alongside those who work within various arts disciplines and/or spiritual traditions as they inquire into their lives as artists and educators in caring, creative, and collaborative ways both within and beyond the academy

(Allegranti & Wyatt, 2014; Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Bickel & Snowber, 2015; Gale et al, 2013; Litovitz & Wolff, 2008). We also align ourselves with researchers and artists who specifically foreground contemplative practice in the inquiry process (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2016; Franklin, 1999, 2012; Gradle, 2012; Jordan, 2013; Neilsen, 2004). Through artful and contemplative process in research, teaching, and everyday life, we broaden and deepen work we have explored previously, particularly in terms of our aspirations for healing and restoration (Jordan, Richardson, Fisher, Bickel, & Walsh, 2016; Richardson, 2015; Walsh, 2018; Walsh & Bai, 2015, 2017; Walsh, Bickel, & Leggo, 2015). Our inquiry has taught us ways in which compassion, gentleness, and kindness can be nurtured through a creative and collaborative process. While neither of us had intended a retreat from academic labour at the time it transpired, we realized that it was an opportunity to deepen our understanding of non-attachment and compassion with regards to our work lives and academic identities. Through our processing, we came to *renga*, or linked verse,¹ as a poetic form that both embodies and advances these ways of being.

Our contemplative inquiry and collaborative writing process has had three phases thus far. First, we met monthly by Skype to meditate, write, and discuss our writing and meditation experience. We framed these meetings as contemplative retreats with each session lasting about two hours. Typically, we would sit in silence for 30 minutes, then write for 15-20 minutes, then share and discuss, which generated more notes and writing. We met monthly for five months. The next phase involved working with the accumulated reflective writing that we had done during these sessions and composing *renga*, which we will describe below. To compose *renga*, we drew both on the reflective writing accumulated over five monthly retreats (in the tradition of found poetry²) while also integrating our immediate perceptions and experiences through fresh images. In this way the *renga* verse evolved with both our past and immediate perceptions included. The third phase, which we discuss below, involved integrating Miksang images with the poetry as a visual dimension.

Renga is a form of poetry that arose in medieval Japan. Although it was written by poets, it was also practiced by “low-ranking monks,” who “would often compose their linked verses under the cherry trees ... at Buddhist temples” (Barnhill, n.d.). *Renga* was also written by members of the royal court and of the general population whose subject matter might include “a host of different events—everything from births to deaths to political successes to even impending battles, not to mention *renga* gatherings themselves” (Carter, 2011, p. 2).³ The *renga* began with an initial verse of three lines, called a *hokku*, which was written by a poet of “skill and experience who could produce verses of true excellence” (Carter, 2011, p. 2); others would then join the writing process. The three lines of the *hokku*, like *haiku*, were comprised of 5-7-5 syllables. In fact, *haiku* as a poetic form was originally derived from the *hokku* that were written as the initial verse in a *renga* (see Carter, 2011).

Renga, then, has a relatively set structure of lines and syllables. A *renga* verse consists of five lines: a tercet of 5-7-5 syllables and a couplet of 7-7 syllables. *Renga* is composed collaboratively by two or more poets through a process of linking verses. For example, author A composes a verse comprised of a tercet and couplet, then author B writes a subsequent tercet-couplet verse. Author B’s initial tercet must link with the couplet above it written by author A. In this way, the couplet by author A and tercet by author B create a distinct five-line *renga* verse on its own. The challenge and gift of the *renga* form is that each stanza must relate equally well with both the preceding and following stanza. As we wrote our *renga*, we read the verse that the other had written, contemplated the verse, and then wrote a new tercet and couplet that was responsive—and that also brought fresh perceptions, images, and ideas to the poem.

While renga can continue up to a 1000 lines through an ongoing poetic collaboration,⁴ it is not to be read as an uninterrupted flow of verse. For example, the first tercet is only to be read in relation to the second couplet and not in relation to the third tercet. The second couplet can be read both in relation to the first and third tercet but not both at the same time. The first tercet disappears from the text and each subsequent stanza is embedded solely within a meaning structure created by its immediately adjoining stanzas. As the renga unfolds, various topics emerge and dissolve; there is no attempt to create a unified whole. Rather, the renga is like a cascade of images and feelings. This creates an experience of shifting meanings and relational movement through the apprehension, appreciation, and release of words and images. In this way, renga embodies Buddhist notions of impermanence and interdependence through its composition and structure (see Barnhill, n.d.).

In accordance with our initial aspiration to co-create a space of care, restoration, and healing, we consciously worked with kindness and gentleness towards ourselves and one another throughout the various phases of our process. Exchanging these short verses several times a week, we stretched a thin but steady poetic thread across the country through which vitality and engagement could be communicated. We resonate with poet Melca Litovitz who, in a duologue with Elena Wolff about their renga writing process, says: “It’s giving me life. It’s the momentum that’s carrying me through life because writing is so important to me and right now the renga line is a lifeline” (Litovitz & Wolff, 2008, Duologue section, last page). And, “collaborating intensified the creative power to enliven and gratify, touch and transform, soothe and heal.” (Forward section, last page). As the writing of the renga progressed over weeks, months and multiple pages, we found that we often could not remember or distinguish who authored which verse. Our identification with our words came to matter less than our experience of the creative process and the shifting flow of experience. Our intrinsically interconnected and empathetic natures surfaced. Through poetic exchange, we engaged in a form of the Buddhist practice of Tonglen, the exchanging of self for other (Chödrön, 1994). Tonglen teaches us how to compassionately open our heart to the suffering of another and extend wellbeing in exchange, thus growing in our awareness that we are not and never could be separate from each other. Of their collaborative writing, Elena Wolff (2008) likewise says:

[a]t the beginning I really did feel that we were two separate voices, but by the third or fourth renga, I felt a coming together. We became more attuned to the other, more empathic. There was even an emergent ‘third voice’.... An embracing voice that included both of us. (Duologue section, 4 pages before the end)

The third phase of our writing process involved integrating Miksang photographs into the renga; this phase took place when we were revising our poetry. Although we had not originally planned to include a visual dimension to our creative work, the possibility arose unexpectedly. When Pamela arranged to have our renga exhibited in the gallery space of a local meditation centre,⁵ we discussed how to display the poetry in the physical space--and were inspired to include the visual dimension of Miksang. Miksang is a contemplative photography practice in which the practitioner attunes with the phenomenal world through the use of her camera; she attends to visual “flashes of perception” from a place of tender open-heartedness (McQuade & Hall, 2015). As such, like the renga process we outline above, Miksang is a practice of consciously noticing the concrete details of experience and also of working with impermanence: of fully experiencing whatever arises, and then being willing to let it go. (In Miksang, the technical aspects of the photograph are less important than the intent of being present and in-the-world.) We aspired to juxtapose renga and Miksang in ways that evoked more and more interpretive and responsive possibilities: beyond what the poetry on its own might do. We chose

photographs from Susan's Miksang collection⁶ with the intent of breathing spaciousness into the renga display.

endless open heart
what feelings want to be felt?
sharp smell of coffee

where is my vitality?
what sustains, energizes?



workplace anguish—sending love
to those who show me my pain

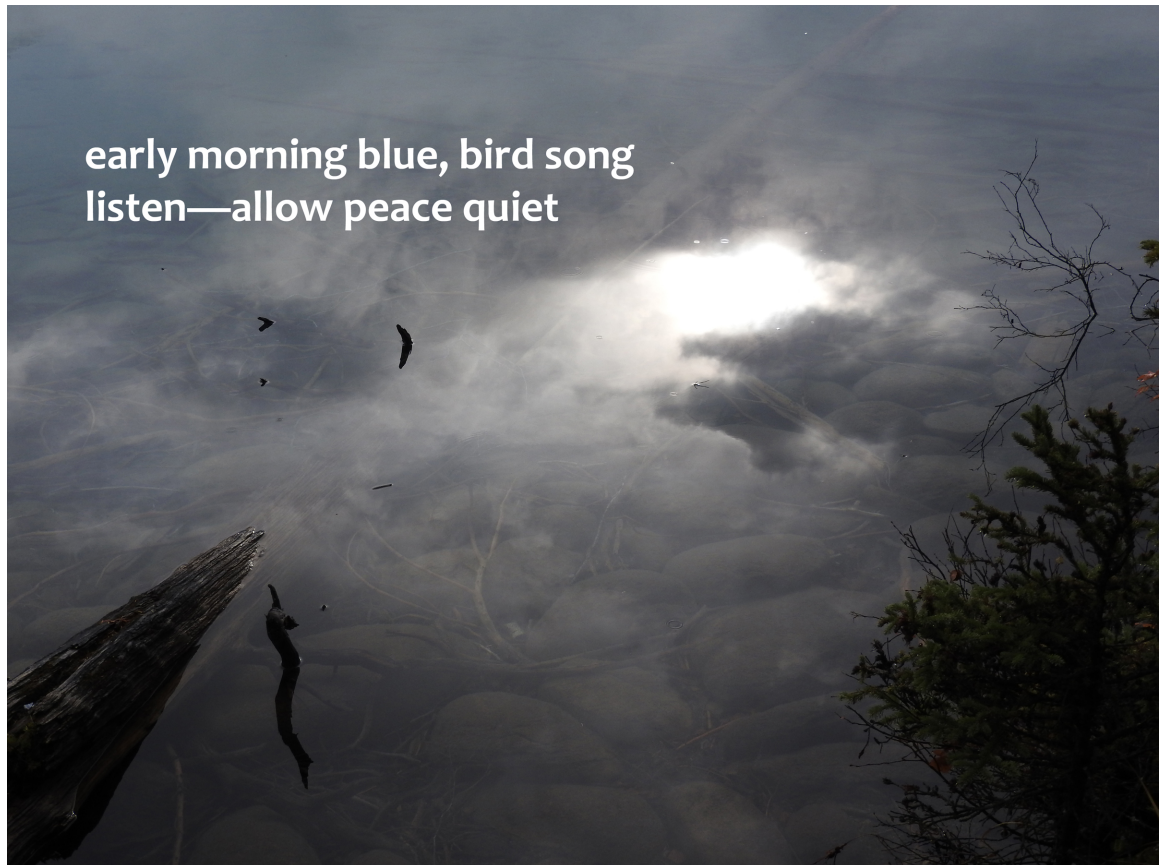
radical self care
a ground for serving others
and hearing earth's sobs

imagining spaciousness
search for right ways of being

with-hold judging mind
on black cushion an inner
journey waking dream

I touch old fear lovingly
I don't feel like a teacher

still like a mountain
gently, gently breathe in, out
compassion love care



a kind self moment
disrupts rapid thought stream
river wends seaward

I lost my office key again
a gate swings open inside

body sobs today
feeling disrespect at work
another dark bruise

soft sounds of crow's wings in flight
may I send myself love care

what do I practice?

mothering energy held
accept all as is

pour mind gently into heart
lift gaze to the horizon



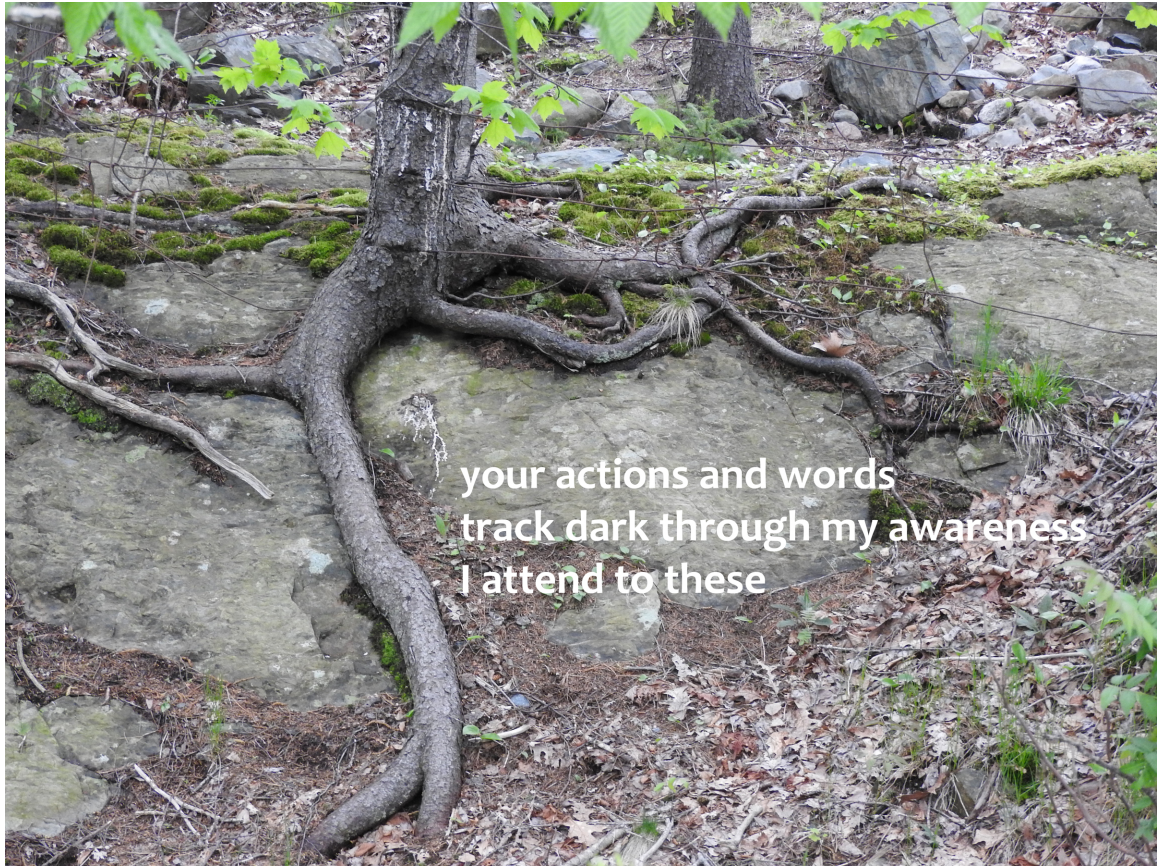
healing warmth of July sun
afternoon rest on the deck

sky bright awareness
light shines on glistening waves
my self-sense lightens

non-conceptual being
who is witnessing this play?

early morning drive
silver fox across the highway
two crows and a hawk

deep bright cadmium orange
calling from today's shadows



your actions and words
track dark through my awareness
I attend to these

scattered points, anger between
discontent forms and dissolves

a wobbly landing
no ground: still searching for peace
or something to hold

deep breath: a pause. letting go
vast openness of being

rain wakes me, drought ends
quiet heart knows what is true
blessings fill my gaze

shifting patterns, transition
the sound of geese: I look up

in the ebb of night
morning eyes adjust widen
warmth of dog's body



pain: shoulder aching
the taste of buttery toast
breath goes in and out

soft, tender, a bit tired
can I be this way at work?

spaciousness is there
but I lose track noisy noise
cell phone rings in the forest

I sink into, feel inside
tender sadness, a glimmer

opening channels
lift each other up, up: breathe
red leaf with dew drops



Through our particular collaboration, we sought to co-create a space where healthy habits of mind and open-hearted awareness were nurtured through practices of spaciousness, restfulness, curiosity, and compassion. In this way, we manifested a process that has been restorative for ourselves and that is potentially useful for other artist-teachers-researchers.

We have experimented with renga in a workshop context, and found the process of beginning with free writes to be useful (ex. What brings me joy? What do I appreciate?). Similar to the way in which we based some of our renga on free writes we did after meditating together, the texts of the free writes then served for participants as the starting place for the writing of haiku. Participants then passed their haiku to another person, received a haiku from someone else, and contemplated the latter silently. Each person then wrote a couplet from associations, images, words and/or feelings that arose from their contemplation of another's haiku. This passing along/receiving/contemplating/writing process can continue indefinitely—and over time—through the alternating of haiku (tercet) and couplets, as we have described above. A visual dimension might also be introduced at any phase of the process. For us, the juxtaposition of Miksang photographs with our renga verse came towards the end of our creative process. Doing so opened generative gaps, at times disjunctive, between the words and images: a multi-dimensionality that created new insights, connections, and possibilities.

Contemplative arts practices such as renga poetry and Miksang can teach us about living with awareness and appreciation for ourselves and our conditions—such sensibilities are enhanced when working collaboratively with intentions about compassion and kindness and healing/restoration. Our offering here is an invitation into ways of being that help us to live well together in and with the world through contemplative and artful practices.

Educators need to be well in order to serve others. Collaborative contemplation and art-making increased our self-awareness beyond what we could achieve on our own. Mindfulness meditation, collaborative writing and the sharing and reshaping of our inner-landscapes are means of enlivening our relationship with the phenomena of our lives and enhancing our reflective capacities. We offer our own process and renga as a structured approach for creating conscious and articulate experiences with a healing intent. May all teachers be well.

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¹ See Higginson (2000) for a discussion about the use of the terms “renga” and “linked verse” for the poetic form we engage in our inquiry process. Briefly, Higginson states that, in Japan, “renga” is a term used mainly to describe linked poetry that adheres to classical forms and content. “Renku” is a term that emerged in Japan to describe the innovations that Bashō and others brought to the writing of renga: for example, a shortened form (normally 36 stanzas rather than 100 or more), and a tendency to link verses intuitively and through emotions. Higginson also states that in North America, the term “renga” is used quite broadly to describe a range of experimentation with writing linked verse. He writes, “Perhaps a ... solution would be to use simply ‘linked poem’ or ‘linked verse’ for our collaborative poems loosely based on Japanese models, as Jane Reichhold and others have suggested. ... ‘Linked poetry’ has already been used in English-language scholarly writing to mean the whole range of renga and renku in Japanese, and might easily be used by us to include our somewhat broader-still range” (n.p.). (See also Reichhold, 2011 for a discussion about terminology.) In this paper, we use the terms “renga” and “linked verse” interchangeably.

² The writing of found poetry has become increasingly accepted as an inquiry process; it is created from existing text (such as, for example, transcripts of research meetings and/or field notes) (see Prendergast 2009). In our work, as we note above, some found poems emerged from the reflective writing we did during our retreats in phase one of our process.

³ See Carter (2011), Higginson (2000), and Reichhold (2011) for more information about who wrote renga and also distinctions in subject matter, tone, diction, and so on and how this evolved over time. In this article, we offer only a cursory glimpse of the complexities of this poetic form and how it has evolved and changed over time.

⁴ Traditionally, a shorter form of renga with 36 stanzas was initiated by Bashō to honour the 36 immortal poets and poetesses of Japan (Reichhold, 2011). This was known as kasen renga. Our renga has 36 stanzas in this style.

⁵ We exhibited our renga Miksang art at the Shambhala Centre in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (January 14 to February 28, 2018). Thank you to the Centre, and to curator Barbara Sobon.

⁶ Susan has been studying and practicing Miksang for four years. All Miksang images in this text are her original work.