

# Mission Haiku: The Poetry of Mission Statements

by Christopher Finney

**W**HETHER YOU ARE A grassroots start-up or a generations-old foundation, your mission statement deserves your attention.

Mission statements are the cornerstone of both external communication and internal vision. And because mission statements represent the reduction of a complex vision into a few carefully chosen words, they are similar to Japanese haiku, poems that capture concrete images with metaphysical implications in just 17 syllables.

## Why Focus on Mission Statements?

Your organization's mission statement deserves to be elegant, precise, and even poetic because these words embody the reason your nonprofit exists. When sailing stormy boardroom seas, a mission statement is your North Star; when discussion gets contentious, you can turn to the mission statement for clarity. And these few words will guide future generations of organizational leaders. A strong mission statement also helps to communicate the core of our work in just a few lines to those external to an organization. But to serve these purposes, mission statements must be carefully crafted. History has seen few more exacting wordsmiths than the great haiku poets, and nonprofits can learn much from them.



## Using the Principles of Haiku

Poetry is reductionism at its most powerful, cutting away everything from an image except the content of a few words, but leaving its complexity intact. Haiku, which consists of only three short lines, exemplifies this reductionism. Consider the following haiku by Matsuo Basho, one of the form's preeminent authors, and translated by former U.S. poet laureate Robert Hass.<sup>1</sup>

The old pond—	<i>furuike ya</i>
a frog jumps in,	<i>kawazu tobikomu</i>
sound of water	<i>mizu no oto</i>

With remarkable precision (the original Japanese poem includes only seven words), Basho establishes not only a concrete image but also a sense of our fleeting impact before the immensity of the universe. Without diving too deeply into the pond of literary interpretation,

we can see that Basho uses his 17 syllables fully, presenting multiple meanings. In fact, in 1765 the Buddhist priest Moran wrote that this poem “is indescribably mysterious, anticipated, profound and delicate. One can understand it only with years of experience.”<sup>2</sup>

Basho's haiku is an excellent example of the multiple levels on which we must employ language to communicate effectively. On the surface, words have denotations; this haiku is about a particular frog that jumps into a particular pond. Poet Chijitsu an Tosai wrote that Basho's haiku “describes a scene exactly as the poet saw it. Not a single syllable is contrived.”<sup>3</sup> Your organization's mission statement must be similarly concrete. The first test of a poetic mission statement is whether it conveys the honest, uncontrived truth of an organization's purpose.

On another level, every word has connotations, or suggested meanings. Basho's frog has often been read as evocative of the ephemeral nature of human life. Similarly, every word in your mission statement carries connotations, and those connotations must be carefully managed in order to communicate everything you want (and nothing you don't). Basho's frog evokes solitude and a brief moment in the long course of time; what does your mission statement evoke?

## Creating Mission Statements

On a concrete level, how can we apply the craftsmanship of poetry to mission statements? Think carefully about each word of your mission statement, about the range of denotations and connotations it carries, and about its effect on readers. As you write or revise, consider your mission statement as a poem, where every word is at a premium and every syllable holds meaning. Interpreting an existing mission statement as a poem can provide meaningful insight into your organization's purpose and approach. The Nature Conservancy's mission statement is a good example:

"The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive."

First, the word *preserve* is powerfully precise; *preservation* (as opposed to *conservation*) refers specifically to maintaining natural lands intact, the Nature Conservancy's main mode of action. Second, the Nature Conservancy works to preserve *communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth*. This is an important phrase. Ecological communities consist of all the species that interact in a particular place and time, and communities, not species, are the basic unit of a functional ecosystem. Larger and more complex than individual species but still small enough to be readily preserved, communities are the ideal unit of science-based environmental protection. These communities are said to represent the diversity of life on Earth, because the Nature Conservancy works at a global scale, preserving representative places from diverse ecosystems. Further, life and diversity evoke powerful ethical concepts that are almost universally accepted. Finally, the Nature Conservancy addresses the lands and waters these communities need to survive, underscoring the importance of land preservation, the

## How to Start

As you use haiku to develop the language of your mission statement or use another organization's as a sample, have fun with the process. The mission of the American Library Association (ALA), for example, is as follows:

"The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all."

Two possible haiku to capture this mission statement are the following:

*Ensure access to  
Information and  
Library services*

*Develop, promote  
Improve library service  
To enhance learning*

The first haiku focuses more strongly on the inclusive nature of quality library services, one result of the ALA's work. The second haiku stresses the ALA's direct work on improving librarianship. Neither poem alone includes the full extent of the American Library Association's mission, but each captures a different understanding of its essence.

organization's main program. The Nature Conservancy's mission statement is powerful because its precise language distills the essence of the organization's wide-ranging work and vision into a few key phrases. In doing so, the mission statement provides a banner for environmental protection rooted in science and ethics. If it is well crafted and applied, your organization's mission

statement can provide a similar rallying point.

## Conclusion

If you are writing or rewriting your organization's mission statement, approach the process as if you were composing a purposeful poem, keeping each word's denotations and connotations in mind. If you are reading an existing mission statement, you may recognize imprecise language, and a revision might be in order. The process can even provide an opportunity to engage in a meaningful discussion of your mission. Even if your mission statement is already worded as you want it to read, examine the wording carefully, it will probably conjure the spirit of your organization more clearly than a decade of year-end reports.

Finally, once you have crafted your mission statement and understand it fully, give it life. Make sure everyone involved with your organization knows the mission statement by heart and can use it to describe your work and vision. Sometimes we have only a few seconds to capture the attention of a potential ally, and a poetic mission statement may be the exact vehicle necessary to capture your audience.

## ENDNOTES

1. Robert Hass, *The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa*. Hopewell: Ecco Press, 1994.
2. Makoto Ueda, *Basho and his Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
3. Ibid.

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Send us your favorite haiku at [feedback@npqmag.org](mailto:feedback@npqmag.org). Reprints of this article may be ordered from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org>, using code 150210.

In response to an online version of Chris Finney's article published earlier this year, readers of the *NPQ e-Newsletter* responded enthusiastically with haiku and other poetic mission statements of their own. Here are their responses:

*To make whole again  
humanity shattered by  
torture; to end it.*

—Ali Ghavari  
Center for Victims of Torture  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

?

*Financial guidance  
For visionary leaders  
Realize your goals*

—Ashley Schweitzer  
Nonprofits AssistanceFund  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

?

*Jungle discovery  
tree frog cures hypertension  
compassion profits*

—Bradford Kirkman-Liff  
School of Health Management and Policy  
WP Carrey School of Business, Tempe, Arizona

?

*Do good  
Support liberty,  
justice  
for all*

—Steven E. Mayer  
JustPhilanthropy.org  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

?

*Women and families  
Rebuilding, loving, learning  
In our safe refuge*

—Leslie R. Foster  
The Gathering Place: A Refuge  
for Rebuilding Lives  
Boulder, Colorado

*The best medicine  
is prevention of illness  
Immunizations!*

—Lydia McCoy  
Colorado Children's Immunization Coalition  
Aurora, Colorado

?

*Women on the streets  
with so little of their own  
Safe at Delores*

—Terrell Curtis  
The Delores Project  
Denver, Colorado

?

*Paint, ink and brushes  
Come alive and friendship blooms  
I can recover.*

—Nancy A. Harris  
Colorado Arts of Recovery  
Denver, Colorado

?

*Business benefits  
Environment benefits  
Waste becomes resource*

—Jenna Kunde  
WasteCap Wisconsin, Inc.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

?

*Discovery of maritime life  
All generations  
Educate!*

—Pete Helsell  
Northwest Maritime Center /  
Wooden Boat Foundation  
Port Townsend, Washington

*Communication,  
Building your capacity,  
Collaboration.*

—Patrick J. Rogers  
Institute for Human Services, Inc.  
Bath, New York

?

*Trembling in my hand  
The smallest monkey on Earth  
Exhales his last breath*

—Lucy Lerner Wormser  
Pacific Primate Sanctuary  
Haiku, Maui, Hawaii

?

*Feeling good,  
doing better,  
finding solutions*

—Mitch Bruski  
Kenneth Young Center  
Elk Grove Village, Illinois

?

*Each fatherless boy  
Who needs a mentor  
Shall have one*

—Richard Aston  
Big Buddy  
Waitakere City, New Zealand