

Japanese Wisdom for Writers

Robert Paul Weston



I'll begin with a caveat. Although I lived in Japan briefly in my mid-twenties, although I speak Japanese (poorly) and have a fair deal of knowledge about the country's history and customs, I am not a formal scholar of Japan. My experience of the country is filtered almost entirely through my relationship with

my wife, whom I met in London, but is originally from Kanazawa, on the west coast of Honshu.

I may not be a scholar of Japanese, but I am a writer, author of several novels for children and young adults, and a teacher of creative writing. My work is immensely pleasurable and fulfilling, but it can also be lonely and, especially with respect to my novels-in-verse for children, quite labour intensive. Through my travels and experiences in Japan, however, I've found that country's traditional folk wisdom—notably Japanese proverbs or *kotowaza*—offer elegant and interesting ways of approaching the craft of writing, as well as the battle of the blank page.

Certain themes recur often in the *kotowaza*: calmness, diligence, quiet observation, and a subtle appreciation of beauty, which can all be applied to writing projects. What follows are a handful of proverbs that reflect this, followed by my own ideas of why I believe they are pertinent, interesting, or inspirational.

I haven't put these in any particular order. Let's say they are arranged in the Japanese *zuihitsu* style of rhetoric, presented as a series of disparate vignettes meant to achieve a cohesive whole more in the mind of the reader

than on the page itself. I hope you'll find something approaching that effect by the time you finish.

数を言うまい羽織の紐

Too many knots spoil the braid

This one is a tricky saying. It is written with a vagueness common to many Japanese proverbs, then further obscured with wordplay. The braid here refers to the weaved belt worn around a *haori*, the outer coat of a formal kimono, but the verb "to braid" (結う, *iu*, pronounced *ee-yoo*) has been replaced with a homophone, the verb "to speak" (言う, also pronounced *ee-yoo*).

When the proverb is spoken, you hear "Many knots are bad for the haori's belt". When you read it, however, you see "Many words are bad for the haori's belt". The first meaning is straightforward. A haori tied with too many knots in repeated succession is ugly. The pun implies the same holds true for words. Unnecessary repetition sullies your speech—and indeed your prose.

It is hardly coincidence that an idiom like this originated in Japan, a country whose most famous poetic forms, the haiku and tanka, are exercises in brevity. The British translator, Duncan Mackenzie MacFarlane, wrote that Japanese poetry invites the reader "to draw conclusions or supply what is unexpressed, somewhat in the manner in which the eye and the mind follow a silhouette or stencilled drawing."

Like a silhouette, the finest poetry from Japan—as well as some of the best writing from beyond its shores—employs nothing more than a shadow, a discretely telling detail, yet manages to plant far more in the reader's mind.

伝聞は親しく見るに如かず

Hearsay cannot substitute for intimate observation

Write what you know. For some writers, it's daunting to hear. The American novelist Nathan Englander described his terror this way: "I was in suburbia, in my house, dreaming of being a writer and I thought, what am I going to do with 'Write what you know?'...What I know from childhood is, I was on the couch watching TV, so I should simply rewrite a whole series of sitcoms."

But this proverb is about observation rather than knowledge, implying there is always more to discover. This idea jives well with Graham Greene's conception of writing as espionage, a surreptitious way of expanding what you know: "The great advantage of being a writer is that you can spy on people. You're there, listening to every word, but part of you is observing. Everything is useful to a writer, you see, every scrap, even the longest and most boring of luncheon parties."

喧嘩両成敗

In a quarrel, both parties are to blame

In a broad sense, Japanese Buddhist tranquility is derived from objectivity, a freedom from desire. To avoid it, monks advise jettisoning the things that lead to it: suppositions, comparisons, opinions. At one level, that's what this proverb is about, stepping away from the fray.

It explains why zen monks are known for shaving their heads, wearing ragged robes, and cloistering themselves on mountaintops. Zen-like detachment doesn't mix well with a society brimming with opinions and suppositions—just the things that make good drama.

For fiction writers, a less austere detachment could be a valuable tool. The ability to understand and write from multiple sides of the same idea or point of view can distinguish a rich, sincere scene from a trite potboiler. Put another way, conflict works best when it's laden with insight from all sides.

案ずるより生むが易し

Giving birth is easier than worrying about it

Writers often talk about their books the way parents talk about their children. I was in the audience the night Emma Donoghue won the Writer's Trust Award for her novel, *Room*, and I remember how she raised this same idea in her acceptance speech. Some writers, she explained, believe that for each real child they produce, two books are lost. She was quick to add that in her case the reverse was true. *Room* was directly inspired by the birth of her daughter.

Elsewhere, the November 2013 issue of *New Scientist* magazine mentioned research showing that a mother's stress levels have an adverse effect on bacteria in the womb (bare with me for a moment). The bacteria, which are passed to the child as it exits through the birth canal, protect newborns from disease and continue to do so throughout life. Researchers found that a stressful pregnancy can lead to a reduction of these bacteria, which are particularly active in safeguarding the child's brain and intestines.

If books are really like children, then no matter how painful it may be to "give birth" to your opus, worrying about it (Will it be published? Will I find an agent? Will anyone read this?) is an unnecessary bother and perhaps, like those stress-sensitive bacteria in a mother's womb, your worry may damage the brains and guts of whatever you're writing.

継続は力なり

Continuance is strength

I was eating at a restaurant on the outskirts of Kanazawa when I noticed a plain wooden sign on the wall. My reading of Japanese is far from literate, and worse when it comes to sophisticated compound words. I did, however, know the character for strength, 力 (*chikara*).

"What does that mean?" I asked my wife. "Strength is... what?"

"*Keizoku*", she told me. "It means working hard, little by little, but consistently, every day." She explained the word emphasizes continuous, unruffled repetition. According to the proverb, calmly doing something again

and again is its own brand of power.

This saying is often compared with the English idiom, “Slow and steady wins the race”. The comparison is sound, but with a crucial difference. There’s no winning in the Japanese version, no race and no finish line. There is merely the continuation of what came before, and therein lies strength.

Writing a book of any length can sometimes seem like an endless project. Typing that last sentence can feel so far away, you may as well be trying to scratch it out in the sands of Mars. As such, dwelling on that ultimate goal can become an intolerable distraction, perhaps intolerable enough for you to give up. If you believe in this old saying, however, the only thing to do is forget that the end even exists. Just keep going.

八百万の神

The myriad of gods

Anthropologists tend to associate animism with pre-industrial societies. Japan, however, among the most technologically advanced nations on Earth, remains to some extent an animistic civilization. In Shinto, the country’s official religion, animism and ancestor worship govern much of the faith. It is the animism of Shinto that is expressed in this proverb, in the concept of an infinite myriad of gods.

Beyond the idea that plants and animals have spirits, the Shintoist accepts the possibility that all things, animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, can have spirits or *kami*. These *kami* vary from place to place and person to person. For a mathematician, the spirits of numbers and computers might represent the most important *kami*; for a doctor, medicine.

It is also interesting to note that the word for divine spirit has the same pronunciation as the word for paper. They are written differently (神 for spirit and 紙 for paper) but both are pronounced *kami*. This isn’t unusual for Japanese, a language full of homophones, and to be honest no Japanese would find this fact remarkable. That said, it’s certainly a connection that sticks in the head of a writer.

In fact, when I have trouble motivating myself to write, I

reinvigorate myself with the idea that my paper, my pencil, and even the unfinished tale itself are all spirits to be honoured, perhaps even gods to be worshipped (or at least demons to be appeased!).

Robert Paul Weston is the author of several internationally award-winning novels for children and young adults, including Prince Puggly of Spud and the Kingdom of Spiff, Zorgamazoo, and Blues For Zoey. His short fiction has appeared in literary journals in the UK, the USA, and Canada. He lives with his wife in London and can be found on the web at www.robertpaulweston.com.

Some of this information was presented at the NAWA Annual Conference in Bristol, in November 2014, and is expanded upon at the website, www.jpwisdom.com.