

Wabi-Sabi: A Way for Science (and the World) to Rediscover Itself

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ABSTRACT

We have entered the age of chaos where technological advances are a fad today and outdated tomorrow, one day news, the next day forgotten. In this state of digital narcissism and ever-competitive market-driven capitalism, fueled by corruption in governance and banking, there is little to disprove that the same trends are taking place in science. At this cross-road we are left with only one alternative: to stop, reflect deeply, and induce radical and revolutionary change. But how to do so in a peaceful way? Under quotidian constraints, to stop is literally impossible, thus this paper deals with one possible way in which we, as scientists, and as a sub-set of the wider society and community within which we are integrated, can seek such change in the form of a change in life-style, and hence state of mind. *Wabi-sabi* is not a tangible concept that can be quantified or described in set parameters. It is as ephemeral as mist, and as elusive as outer space. Yet, in the folds of its understanding, lies a secret to a peaceful equilibrium with knowledge. To counter the current state of global chaos, inequalities and gross greed that have also come to characterize science and science publishing, *wabi-sabi* may be one of the last realistic solutions left to restore order and peace.

Keywords: equilibrium, peace, soul

MOLDING THE DEFINITION OF WABI-SABI

Each human, independent of race, creed, culture or religion, has two states of the soul when attempting to seek peace. The first relates to seeking peace with the surrounding exterior environment, outside influences and society. The other relates to seeking inner peace with oneself. These soulful states of soul-searching transcend the five tactile senses and are unrelated to the sixth sense of perceiving the paranormal. Every object, every person, every emotion and every situation is however, subject to the interaction of the six senses and the interdependence of these two states of the soul.

The Japanese soul, at least from my understanding over 15 years, is probably no different to that of a non-Japanese, but the level of sensitivity and the degree of perception may differ considerably. It is this sensibility and depth of the Japanese soul that is the target of my message herein. Like all things in life, from chaos to calm, light and dark, life and death, one formidable contrast that defines the Japanese soul is *wabi-sabi*¹ which contrasts to *iki*². At best we could probably categorize, at a rough scale, the former as cool soulful inner-directed energy and the latter as crisp, colourful outer-directed energy. In this paper, I focus on the former as a new means for the world to perceive its surroundings, assess itself and to reach a *nouveau* state of inward-peace, self-appreciation and outward humility.

Perhaps the *wabi* of *wabi-sabi* could be defined as *wabishisa* (literally the state of *wabi*) or deep internal loneliness (when referring to feelings) or a state of quiet and purity (when referring to objects) which emerges as we release ourselves from the bonds of worldly and material possessions. Closely related, but slightly distinct, is the *sabi* of *wabi-sabi*, which could be defined as sadness, *sabishisa* (literally the state of *sabi*), and a natural approach of death (when referring to feelings) or elegance with an old-fashioned tone (when referring to objects). *Sabi* originated in Japanese poetry, expressing the feeling in autumn when geese fly south to seek warmth and leaves senesce, embracing change, through the earthy changing of colours,

*momiji*³, in a gentle reminder of death. *Sabi* is a somber longing that is felt in the muted colours and earthy aroma of a forest preparing for winter. This melancholic ache is a sort of hopeful sadness that recognizes that nothing is perfect, nothing lasts, and nothing is finished, but that even so, life is full of meaning, similar to the soulful feel of the Portuguese *fado*, *saudade*. The loneliness and solitude of *sabi* lead to sensitivity of objects (*mono no aware*)⁴, acceptance and appreciation unlike the state of awareness that can lead only to sorrow. *Sabi* allows one to courageously accept life with all its trials and joys by willfully living in a simplistic way with memories and feelings without being driven by them.

Wabi-sabi is more than a concept, it is a state of sensitivity that is inherent, but can be acquired. It is not a state of curiosity or simple frugality⁵, nor is it modesty. It is, however, beauty that can be found in quietness and simplicity and the inner peaceful knowledge to know that the things we see and have are enough. It is a rustic beauty, a *patina*⁶ of the soul, and the appreciation of worn and rustic things (objects and other) that represent a cultured poverty. It is an essential appreciation of each significant moment of each day, living life fully in the changes of each season, and a connection with nature and the life forms around us (humans, plants, animals, rivers, sky and mountains) in meaningful and gentle ways that bring peace and happiness. But it is not *carpe diem*.

WHERE AND HOW CAN WE SEE, FEEL AND APPRECIATE WABI-SABI?

In the Middle Ages, the Japanese social and military aristocracy strengthened political alliances by holding elaborate tea parties characterized by expensive teapots and tea-making utensils and were an exclusive territory for the rich. In an alternative, balancing response, Zen monks developed a tea ceremony, *wabi tea*⁷, which used rustic hand-crafted Japanese pottery⁸ that focused on the natural elements used in making tea and on the pleasure of drinking tea within a tranquil space in which to appreciate natural beauty, often

isolated, or in the midst of a natural setting, *sappukei*⁹. The selfless attention devoted to the tea, to the guest, without the constraints of time, within a natural rustic setting, would come to define *wabi-sabi*.

It is not so much the object itself, but its state that would best describe *wabi-sabi*: to be aged or worn with deep patterns and etched individuality, being aware of and capturing the transient beauty and its abiding qualities through states of constancy and change (*fueki ryuko*¹⁰). Acceptance of an object, a state, for what it is – even its deficiencies – in a transcendence of the ordinary, *rizoku*¹¹, would lead to a *furyu*¹² lifestyle, literally in a manner similar to the natural movement of wind or a stream that would gradually expand one's sense of beauty, taste, and aesthetic appreciation. Take, for example, the gentle, bubbly trickling of water over rocks covered with moss¹³. The autumn breeze passing through the tall elegant black bamboo (*Bambusa nigra*)¹⁴ sharing its secrets with the wind, leaves slightly dry, making a rustling noise. The solitary green frog¹⁵ sitting, chameleon-like, amidst the green leaves of the rice in the peak heat of the rice harvest season, uttering a slightly shaky, nervous-like high-pitched, shrill but child-like croak, bouncing off the rice paddy and echoing off forested hills. Lingering low-lying clouds in spring warmth, hugging mountains that hide their crested secrets. A crystal-clear stream¹⁶ of ice-cold water trickling through ferns with a blue-tailed juvenile five-lined skink¹⁷ basking in the sun above a rock nearby, lazily, but cautiously eyeing the sky. A dribbled drop of green tea¹⁸ on the *tatami* mat just after being whipped up fresh using a bamboo tea beater¹⁹ during *sado*²⁰, the Japanese tea ceremony. A block of chilled tofu in summer, sprinkled with fish flakes and freshly-chopped *negi* and a dash of rich Shodoshima soy sauce, neatly placed in a hand-crafted Bizen bowl²¹ on top of a newly carved pine (*matsu*) table. The ebb-and-flow of the sea, as jet-black waves swirl around pine-speckled rock outcrops on a full moonlit night. A hand-pasted mud-walled²¹ tea room²² wrapped by thick bushes, topped by sub-baked wavy roof tiles²³, cool on the inside, with walls cracked like the skin of a 100-year old man, and as equally rich in secrets and stories, with crickets chirping in the background. Leading to the tea house, rough, uneven, and crudely round steps made of hand-chiseled stone²⁴, surrounded by *Ophiopogon japonicus* plants²⁵, like small green fire-works, *hanabi*²⁶. Surrounding the tea house, a sand-worked²⁷ garden²⁸ representing a perfect state of Zen²⁹. All images of peace, acceptance, silent understanding and profound depth of soul. This is, to me, *wabi-sabi*.

WHY THE WORLD AND SCIENCE NEEDS WABI-SABI

If there is anything that we have learnt from recent human history, is that life is fleeting, and nothing – except change – is naturally constant. With the devastating Fukushima *tsunami* in 2011, the continuously growing market crises, financial crashes and global insecurity, the human psyche is being tested to the limit, in Japan and abroad. Revolutionary states in Northern Africa and across the Middle East, instigated, or induced, religious intolerance and unethical behaviour in almost every sphere of work and life are driving humans to their limit. And humans, when they reach the edge, either jump over, or seek radical change to re-harmonize. Unlike the Chinese counter-part of *wabi-sabi*, *feng shui*, which is a technique for increasing wealth by tapping into some unseen mystical power, *wabi-sabi* is non-commercial and intuitive way of living that pays attention to the moments that enrich and encourage life while focusing on the simple pleasures that can easily be overshadowed by the noise and excess of our consumer-driven societies.

The rapid advance in technology, the perfection endowed through excellence in science and transferred to objects meant to glean the pockets of society, are all leading to a rapid erosion of culture, of individuality, of freedoms

and of intellectual and spiritual depth. Complexity is overshadowing simplicity and the clackety-clock – like a wooden Japanese clog³⁰ – of the local Kotoden train snaking slowly through the Sanuki valley is being substituted by the speed and silent efficiency of the bullet train, or *shinkansen*³¹. Letters are being lost for e-mails and SMS, *kanji* for *romaji*, family reunions for online web-cams, social meetings at town halls³² for Facebook[®]. Jute kimono³³ for jeans, baggy pants³⁴ and T-shirts. Languages are in risk of extinction due to the globalization of English, and cultural identity through science is being lost. Cultural acceptance and identity is threatened by conformity and the rule of law through Big Brother. Udon is losing its ranks to BigMac[®]. The greed for minerals and the pathetic dependence on oil is causing slavery of the masses who seek financial stability and a place they can call home, taxed of course. The world, including Japan, is rapidly losing its sense of *wabi-sabi* simply because there is no longer enough time for appreciation of what preceded where we are now. When we lose that sense, we risk becoming like the dried coconut, the parched lake, the salted inland sea, or the sky clouded brown with pollution. Worse yet, in this almost desperate search to quantify quality and predict everything in science as fast as possible, Wall Street-style, using tools that can improve and speed up our lives, our performance and our assessments, we fail to observe that even some things that cannot be measured, or should not be measured, are being grossly and incorrectly measured. The Thomson Reuters Impact Factor[®] would come to mind here, a measure that is used to in fact measure the number of times a manuscript is referenced, but which being falsely and fraudulently used to (mis)represent the quality of science.

In a constant search for the principle of *wabi-sabi*, which is itself transient like joy, we need to recognize that nothing is perfect, nothing lasts, and nothing is ever complete. People are not omnipresent (although the soul is) and money is not omnipotent (“money is only the different digital combinations of 0 and 1, nowadays. Today it is, tomorrow no more...”, Judit Dobránszki); they are as transient as the wind. The world needs a new state to bring it closer to its most fundamental feelings allowing it to achieve a sense of peace. It is our individual conscientious responsibility to identify, develop and cultivate our inner *wabi-sabi*, to seek inspiration and truth, to respect imperfectionism, to simplify, and to accept. When we do so, we will recognize the importance of Japan – and its cultural inheritance – in the international community. Scientists need to stop and refocus on what it is that brought them to science and what motivates them to continue, what drives them to achieve, and what prevents them from progressing. Those who cheat need to re-consider what their motivations are, and what the repercussions on their society and on science are. *Wabi-sabi* may serve this purpose to find our inner voices in harmony with what we have always strived to become.

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Three *wabi-sabi* haikus in the spirit of *fuga*³⁵

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- Haiku 1** bamboo
split voice, tears and pain
forming the fence
- Haiku 2** drip drop
hanging shiny on leaf tip
solitary
- Haiku 3** bright light
sweat trickles on muddy face
sun's red rays

Glossary of Japanese terms used

- 1 侘び寂
- 2 粹
- 3 紅葉
- 4 物の哀れ
- 5 質素
- 6 古色
- 7 侘び茶
- 8 焼き物
- 9 殺風景
- 10 不易流行
- 11 離俗
- 12 風流
- 13 藻
- 14 黒竹
- 15 日本雨蛙
- 16 清流
- 17 青い尻尾トカゲ
- 18 緑茶
- 19 茶筌
- 20 茶道
- 21 土塀
- 22 茶室
- 23 瓦
- 24 敷石
- 25 蛇の髭
- 26 花火
- 27 枯山水
- 28 日本庭園
- 29 禅
- 30 草履
- 31 新幹線
- 32 公民館
- 33 作務衣
- 34 ニッカポッカ
- 35 風雅