Sermons In Stones

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Sermons In Stones

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes. It appeared as if the stones had been set in their places purposely. The new owner first removed the stones, then seeded and manured his fields. The yield was scanty, so the following year he scattered the stones about the fields again. The yield was adequate. He repeated the experiment, with the same results. He concluded that either the stones acted as a wind-break for the grain, or the stones contributed some fertile clement to the soil, or else the sun's genial heat (reflected from the stones) raised the soil temperature a few critical degrees. In all probability, the three acted in concert. and the stony field perversely proved superior to the smooth."

Cover Page Footnote
Appeared in the issue: 1968.

This prose is available in The Angle: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/angle/vol1968/iss1/25
There was once a man who bought a farm in Scotland. The farm was located in a region of poor soil and severe weather. Scattered all over the fields of oats and barley were stones of various sizes that were being abandoned as if the stones had been set in their places purposely. The new owner first removed the stones, then seeded and maneuvered his fields. The yield was scanty, so the following year he scattered the stones all over the fields again. The yield was adequate. His repeated experiment, with the same result, made him conclude that either the stones acted as a wind-break for the grain, or the stones contributed some fertile element to the soil, or else the grain's genial heat (reflected from the stones) raised the soil temperature a few critical degrees. In all probability, the three acted in concert, and the stone field apparently proved superior with others; something was found.

There was once a man who wanted to live a perfect life-free not only of sin, but from temptation as well. So he took a knife, and with a swift surgical movement he relieved his body of its "stones." His wish was granted—and then some. All lust was gone, but so were the benefits that the stones provided. Soon his body became flabby, his hair lost its strength and lustre, his voice piped shrilly where once it had boomed vigorously, and the world no longer took him seriously (there is no place in the world for a crank, it seems.) He worked so hard to be, quarrelled with his colleagues, he found fault with his church's doctrine, and he died embittered and rejected.

There was once a religion, some of whose adherents noted too closely how many stones were strewn in the church's structure. There were bad priests, sales of things sacred, superstitious levity in the churches during the liturgy, casual additions to the liturgy itself, too many saints and angels, and indeed too many gods. The church and the people, they concluded, needed to be purified and made perfect in conformity with their ideals. So they began to gather up the stones and form neat fences (which they called logic), and soon the clergy and the people lost their smiles, exchanging their frivolous garments for decent black. The churches were stripped to the bare walls. The liturgy was reduced to some prayers only hymns, and an extremely dull and lengthy sermon. The Trinity was purged. Even the Christ who loved sinners was transformed into a Christ who hated all mankind. Indeed, Christ was no longer Christ, the instrument of God's mercy he was metamorphosed into Satan, the instrument of God's injustice. With all the stones removed, the church should have been perfect; and perhaps it was. Outward sin certainly disappeared in this joyful church; and when sin did rear its ugly head, the sinner was punished forthwith. The church founded on a stone, had become thoroughly petrified. Freedom became a forgotten word; there was no longer free will, freedom of conscience, free speech, free anything. The totally repurposed Saints began to turn uglier and uglier. One day the first innocent old bag was slain to death by a mob returning from a longer-than-usual sermon.

There was once a teacher who was extremely well educated. He was revered by many, in fact, as a great philosopher. One day while philosophizing, he glanced back over the path he had trod in life and saw it had been studded with stones (and a constant uphill climb, at that.) He also began to recall the bruises he'd received, and wept afresh at the memory. His father had sternly demanded he read and study when his childhood body yearned for play. His tutors had beaten him, often unmercifully, and most of his teachers had been harsh and demanding. True, he had once become the world's best-educated man; but had he been worth it, after all? He began on the instant to devise a system of his own that would remove the stones, and all would be sweetness, light, and freedom of the human spirit. He would, of course, be the perfect system. First he attacked the teachers in school, and compelling them, he spread and said he reserved his harshest anathemas for the teachers who opposed him (many did at first.) He attacked the entire educational system as outmoded and old fashioned, with petrified notions and ideas; as indeed it was. He outlined his plan to others who had had as much schooling as those who were raising every where, and in each he was sated and satisfied. He and his disciples began to prance the schools' curricula of any subject matter that was not clearly practical: what need of classics, languages, sciences? who ever used them, really. "Useless" courses were eliminated and replaced by more "useful" courses such as "taught-wearing" and "Here we go Loopy Lou." Of course a roaring slogan went along with the system: "We teach the student, not the subject." The educational Jargon was limited and un-vital, but it sufficed, and was very, very quotable. The system was called "progressive" to contrast it with the old, conventionalized system. They started with the children, naturally, who were taught only the heretofore minimum, but in bright, cheerful surroundings where the children could do or not, as they pleased. When the elementary grades had been thoroughly liberalized, the secondary schools were de-mystified, de-symbolized, and de-emphasized. Even the parochial schools finally buckled under as more and more of their teachers saw the light in many schools of education. Finally, the colleges and universities gave in, and in no time at all (the students fought tooth and nail of their shackles, rounded the campuses at will), expanding their minds as they rounded. Success was so complete, in fact, that even the sharpest-eyed observer couldn't tell a student from a non-student. And of course everyone from K through 16 was very, very happy. Oh, there are still a few stray stones left on the hill a slight hill ours the view from time to time, but eventually all the valleys will be filled and all the ways made smooth, and all will be universal happiness and dulness.

There was once a thriving civilization that began to change under the restrictions imposed by prosperity. The laws were much too harsh: criminals, for example, were being imprisoned; murderers were being eliminated; criminals were purged. The unruly were soon tightly suppressed in the law courts, and their victims were deprived of the fruits of their honest-toil (the law, for a fee, even collected for the clients); lawyers knew no law, but had all the loopholes memorized, and could punch one out at sound, things like that. Tax collectors were empowered to harass and bully taxpayers and strip them of everything. Tenants were given triumphal processions; patriots became an obscure word; foreigners held their heads high and even formed unions; the country's enemies were even aid and encouragement to kill her soldiers; things like that. Education was all but eliminated though the forms were, painstakingly retained; honest labor was demeasured; children were neither supervised nor controlled; honesty became a vice; things like that. The pursuit of normal pleasures had paled, and extreme pleasures were sought with wilder avidity than before; the rage, male coupled with male, female with female—and why not, males dressed and acted like females, women dressed and acted like men, where once one could find rugged warriors and athletes, there were now poorly discontented, heavily scented boys; deploring made-people dross; gangs of children and young adults roamed the countryside to beat and gouge and stamps and terrify; things like that? Protest became fashionable; riots were in; burning and looting was the normal order of the day; hatred was bestialized; things like that. People were no longer content with their surroundings, some common sense people applied on the scene, each with a stone grouped in either hand "like a stone-age savage armed," and the civilization petrified. One thinks of Jane Austin who looked stonily at her own offspring, reticent times and summoned up the Regency Period. "No stones," said the—something to that effect.

Stones have many virtues, and are the most magical single element on earth. In a sense, then, they are the jewels par excellence. The stones of life are the faults and hardships we suffer as we progress through this life. The stones bruise us, true, but they provide a grinal warmth as well; and the colder life threatens to be, the more necessary their warmth. Like a man's own "stones," their presence exerts a reassuring (rather than an extreme) pressure, reminding us that we are still vital and potent and whole. When the stones are gone, all is smoothness and coldness and sterility. When life becomes smooth, cold, and sterile, then it is truly absurd. We absolutely require a few faults to balance our fatal urge to perfection.

The ultimate in irony, however, is a certain cathedral that has taken forever to build, may never be completed, and was intended to last forever. It is constructed almost entirely of stone, and embedded in the walls are stones from every corner of the globe. In this case, there are altogether too many stones; the builders sought stones they may have stone and they must have needed. There is a lack of warmth, a chill in that pile. There hasn't been a scandal in that cathedral since the first stone was put in place, and there it stands: fashionable, cold, and empty. So very, very empty.