

**Dispatch from the Pandemic #3:
What Rocks Tell Us
by Barbara Lyghtel Rohrer**

APRIL 24, 2020 — “I have been thinking about how when you were out in the wilderness alone, how you let the others know you were okay by moving your rock,” a friend recently wrote to me. “It seems like that is something people should be doing now.”

She is recalling a practice I shared with her that my wilderness mates and I enacted to assure each other that we were safe during our solo fasts.

In 2005, I traveled to Death Valley to participate in a vision quest with a small group of like-minded souls. After going through several days of preparation, our guides set us free to begin a three-day fast alone at individual sites that each of us had chosen earlier. I was grouped with two others who had set up camps near mine. While we could not see each other’s camp, we were close enough to serve as a safeguard for each other.

That first morning we climbed up to that vast rock-strewn plateau together and then selected a site that was away from but near enough to each of our camps. We made a circle on the ground out of stone, dividing the circle with more stone set in a straight line. We then each selected a rock. We put all three rocks on one side inside the circle. That afternoon, I returned to the site and moved my rock to the other side. In the evening, Robert did the same. Fire Bird followed suit the next morning. We continued this practice for the next three days, going to the circle at our appointed time, moving our rock to the other side. If one of us were to see that a rock had not been moved, we would know there was a problem, that the person scheduled before us was in trouble, and we were to immediately go for help.

Can we use rocks today, as my friend suggests in her email, to send a message?

I have always been drawn to rocks. I collect ones that catch my eye when wandering in nature. None of these rocks have any value in the monetary sense of today’s world. I don’t even know the mineral content of most of them. But I find each beautiful because of its shape or colorization or stratification. Most are very small and fit in the palm of my hand. Some are larger. The largest sit outside in my flower beds. The others line windowsills, rest in a basket, or, for those at least fist-sized, serve as a bookend.

Because we are in the season of Easter, my mind turns to a much larger stone that was moved some two thousand years ago. The stone revealed an empty tomb.

Much of this time of isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic is in many ways like staring into an empty tomb. We can sink into despair, or boredom, or we can look deeply into the darkness. If we do, perhaps we will see a young man all in white telling us that what we seek is not to be found in an empty tomb. Instead we need to turn around, to turn from our own preoccupations, and see what else is before us.

Charles Garfield, author of *The Wisdom Years: Growing Older with Joy, Fulfillment, Resilience, and No Regrets* (Central Recovery Press, 2020), notes how life has a way of giving us "... marching orders. There are lists to check off and goals to be attained. We *should* do this. We *should* do that. It's a tyranny of the should. What gets lost are the serendipitous encounters with grace, the serendipitous encounters with beauty, the serendipitous encounters with that which is greater than ourselves."¹

While Garfield's book is focused on the aging process, its message could speak to any adult in our society of doing, doing, doing. And therein lies the gift of this time of being homebound. The gift of the serendipitous, the opportunities that we too often miss in our rush to check off our list of shoulds.

Just as I did not know what truths my solo fast would bring to me, we often don't know what is to come when turning from our emptiness.

But as we turn, we begin to see the ways in which our needs can be served and the ways in which we can serve the needs of others.

I think of members of my church collecting food items not only for the local food pantry but for ourselves. A few of our members are taking some of these food stuffs to cook into soups and stews for our congregation. At first, I refused to accept this offering. After all, I had plenty of frozen vegetables and canned goods to tide me over for at least another month. Then I realized by denying myself a break from my own cooking and enjoying a friend's fresh soup, made with love and a commitment to service, was to deny her the pleasure of serving me. Just as I took delight in helping a neighbor deadhead her field of daffodils or giving another neighbor a book that I thought might help her with some of her current struggles, I needed to allow others to do the same for me. And within that circle of giving and receiving, a circle that rotates outside our monetized system in which we normally operate, we find a new life, a life of community.

None of this would have been visible without stepping into the empty tomb of the pandemic.

Although we can move a rock from one side of our front door to the other to say all is well, it is more important that we hold the rocks that make up the foundation of our world, treasure them, serve them and allow them to serve us, until that time when we can see the glory beyond the empty tomb, the message the stone rolled away reveals: we are loved.

¹Stephen Kiesling, "The Shift at Sixty: An Interview with Charles Garfield, PhD," *Spirituality & Health*. June 2020, 62.