A REVERENCE FOR STONE: WHY ROCK WALLS SURROUND THE SACRED GROUND OF NEW ENGLAND CEMETERIES

`Why are there so many stone walls around New England cemeteries?"

That was one of the most challenging questions I've ever been asked as a speaker. It wasn't that I couldn't come up with an answer. It was because six answers bubbled up into my consciousness, all at once.

Sacred ground is enclosed. Stone is abundant. Graves are dug. Livestock wander. Graveyards are protected. Finally, we Homo sapiens have a reverence for stone, especially primitive stone, rough and uncut, eminently useful. More often than not, we revere the stone marker more than the flesh-and-blood person it dignifies.

Each of these six answers bobbed upward like nestlings in a nest, each trying to be noticed first. The auditorium was as still as a stone as I sorted my answers out, deciding which to feed first to the silver-haired gentleman sitting in the back of the room. I sensed that he knew what I would say even before he asked the question.

My first answer was that sacred ground was often marked off. Cemeteries are almost always bordered with something: hedges, wooden fences, brick walls, adobe, or spiked iron bars. A low stone wall works as well as anything.

My second answer involved the material itself. Stone was widely used in historic New England because it was virtually free for the taking and using. Another advantage is that stone doesn't need paint, and requires very little maintenance.

My third answer was about the digging of graves. To bury somebody 6 feet under requires a considerable excavation. Most, but not all, of the back dirt is put back to surround the coffin. But before being shoveled back in, it's easier to pull the stones from the soil. That stone was then stacked around the graveyard.

The fourth reply was about fencing. The word "fence" is a modern spelling of "fense," which derives from "defense." Fences protect something by preventing either access or egress. In the case of a country graveyard, the fence wasn't there to keep the bodies from wandering away. Instead, it was there to prevent access. In early New England, the barriers were erected to keep out wandering livestock, which would knock over grave markers, root up dirt, or soil the plot with manure. More recently, cemetery walls deter trespassing and vandalism.

My fifth answer made a counterintuitive point. Stone walls surround cemeteries today because the stones haven't yet been removed to build something else.

There was a time when New England stone was principally used as a material resource, rather than a cultural one. Before the use of concrete, asphalt and steel as construction materials, thousands of stone walls were crushed for gravel, used to fill swamps, or hauled away to make things like dams, bridges and roadside retaining walls. Those around cemeteries were left in place so as not to disquiet the dead.

My final answer was that humans have developed an irrational reverence for stone. This sensation -- or is it an instinct? -- must have begun early in hominid evolution when the ax, cliff and cave were important parts of our ancestor's lives. This inherited feeling lies beneath modern thought,
manifesting itself more strongly with age. The older we get and the fewer years we have left, the more we think about the deep time. Stone is the clock and calendar for that kind of time.

The instinct for thinking in Earth time urges us to wear jewelry made of authentic crystals, rather than artificial ones. A factory-made gem is as beautiful as one cooked up in the Earth's crust. What it lacks, however, is a palpable sense of antiquity. Natural crystals hold the atoms of time in a mineral embrace.

A reverence for stone guides more than a few coastal tourists to wave-washed rock headlands and seaside boulders, rather than to smoother sandy shores. They are drawn to rock like iron filings to a magnet. They have lain on the sun-warmed, glacier-smoothed stone and felt something emanate from below.

The same feeling sends children scurrying for smooth pebbles on the beach, quartz crystals in crushed-rock driveways and curious bits of rubble in farmstead walls. Childhood rock collections, haphazardly gathered, often survive to become memory collections as they migrate in steps from a child's bedroom to a storage place, then perhaps to a meditation garden later in life. When we were young, before our careers, parenthood, and other life missions, we were childhood prospectors, searching for the mother lode of important things. Some of us would later become archaeologists, seeking stone in early tools, statues or art. Others became architects, who are more addicted to stone than any geologist I've met.

People in cars hear the call of the wild stone as well. It draws our attention away from the monotony of the centerline toward the jagged rock cuts on either side. As we drive, and at some risk, we indulge ourselves a high-velocity peek at these artificial canyons, which are painted with earth tones, and shaded by blocky fractures and layers.

"That's why there are many stone walls around New England cemeteries," I said, with some relief. "Thank you," he said. Then it was over.

Mother Earth lies within and surrounds each grave. Father Time lies there beside her. In pre-scientific cultures, he was sometimes referred to as the Old One. This he assuredly is, having had nearly 5 billion birthdays.

Together they stand watch over cemeteries everywhere. But their presence is felt most strongly in places surrounded by stone. As much as New Englanders complain about stone, they actually love the stuff.

This makes New England, land of the stone-worshipers, a wonderful place.