DEAD DESERVE REVENGE THEFTS, VANDALISM DESPOIL Bolton RESTING PLACE:

Halloween makes me nervous, though not for the reason you might expect.

Of course I'm concerned about kids being run over in the dark, juvenile sugar overdose, and the license for youthful mayhem. But my biggest issue with Oct. 31 is personal. This is the time of year when I come closest to believing in spirits.

In spite of my preference for rationalism, I really, really, really, want the dead to rise from their graves and haunt the people who desecrate them.

I recently discovered a really sad case of graveyard vandalism, one that thousands of commuters drive by each day, but probably never notice. Someone had removed a large, heavy capstone from the retaining wall of an ancient burying ground in Bolton, presumably for use in a private home. This likely theft -- a crime in itself -- set in motion a chain of events that helped rupture the wall, which then spilled its stony guts toward the road.

Let's back up a bit. It was a dark and stormy morning. I was driving along, minding my own business, chauffeuring kids to school. Traffic stalled momentarily, giving me a chance to look sideways. Something didn't seem quite right.

On my return trip, and with no children to fuss with, I pulled off the road, stepped out into the rain, popped open my umbrella, and became a graveyard detective. I sleuthed about for a few minutes to confirm my suspicions, that a mini-landslide had sheared the wall running along the front of the Quarryville Cemetery in half, right where a capstone had gone missing. It was then that I got so mad that I went back to my car, did a quick-draw from my laptop holster, pulled the trigger on my frustrations, and blasted this column into existence.

Removal of the capstone, I speculated, led to three separate problems, which summed up to slope failure. First, the capstone was no longer there to act as dead weight to help press the lower, smaller stones together. Second, the stone was no longer there to act as an umbrella to shield the wall's interior from the rain. Third, the stone (which had been tilted back toward the soil), could no longer act like a gutter to channel surface runoff away from the backside of the wall. Apparently, the rain-soaked soil being supported by the retaining wall pushed forward hard enough to break it in half.

I can't prove that this specific set of processes actually happened, because I didn't stay long enough to map the site, collect samples and perform engineering tests. But my interpretation is consistent with the soil mechanics I learned in college.

Several other capstones were missing as well, though in places that didn't lead to slope failure. In one of these places, the keepers of the cemetery had used previously pulled headstones to make up for missing capstones. How sad is that?

Imagine being respectfully buried by loved ones. Next, imagine some frustrated adolescent yanking your stone from the ground. Next, imagine that your headstone is used as a bandage to help protect the graves of others, instead of being put back where it belonged. Finally, imagine yourself as a ghost, able to travel forward and backward through time. Wouldn't you, under these circumstances, want to haunt the selfish and destructive people who wouldn't allow the dead to rest in peace?

The night of Oct. 31 has become an annual litmus test of my scientific sanity. I go to bed knowing in my conscious mind that ghosts and evil spirits don't really rise from old graveyards to haunt the
living. While asleep, a different part of my mind is quite open to the possibility that cemetery vandals and stone rustlers are being made to atone for their misdeeds. When I wake up on Nov. 1, however, I always resume my rational frame of mind.

Earth, life and time are full of hidden connections. All Hallows Eve is a good time to think about how we change the earth, and how it changes us.