DYLAN DOESN'T KNOW HIS ROLLING STONE

The Swedish Academy's Announcement was stunning: "The Nobel Prize in Literature for 2016 is awarded to Bob Dylan 'for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition.'" I was delighted because the award was for his bardic poetry, rather than for his vocals, which sound like doggerel to me.

Unfortunately, Dylan's success has confused two generations of listeners about the fate of rolling stones in our streams.

I refer to the haunting chorus of his breakthrough song, "Like a Rolling Stone." He writes: "How does it feel / How does it feel / To be on your own / With no direction home / Like a complete unknown / Like a rolling stone?"

That 1965 song transformed Dylan from being one of many 1960s folk singers to a worldwide rock star. That song is at or near the top of many greatest hits lists, most notably No. 1 on Rolling Stone magazine's "500 Greatest Songs of All Time." Reminiscing about that song brings me back to the mid-1960s, when I was a pubescent adolescent buying 7-inch vinyl singles and trying to understand American culture.

Growing up as a scientist, however, made me question the chorus, which distorts and misinterprets the ancient metaphor, "a rolling stone gathers no moss."

Actual rolling stones don't gather moss because they intermittently tumble downstream in river channels, which doesn't give the moss time to grow. Secondly, they're rounded and smooth, which doesn't give the moss a good grip. Third, gatherings of rounded stones are dry places because the drainage is excessive.

Metaphorical rolling stones also make sense because they're people who can't stay in one place long enough to accumulate the residues of life and become bogged down. Being bogged down is the metaphorical antithesis of being a rolling stone. Indeed, large bogs are shrouds of dead matter covering stones that once moved at a lively pace.

Musically, I love Dylan's question "How does it feel?" My response is to sing that it's pure geo-gibberish. Rolling stones are never on "on your own" in nature. When was the last time you saw a solitary stone rolling along? Instead, they travel by the thousands or millions, whether in channels or on beaches.

Rolling stones are never with "no direction home." In nature, they occur most commonly in stream channels. As such, they're being guided with certainty to the channel's mouth. Yes, there's some meandering and lateral dispersion, but the inevitable path is straight down the gravitational gradient to the nearest shoreline, where they are fated to come to rest. Once there, they may roll again, but only in the direction of net wave transport. Yes, there's some zigzag motion on the beach face, but the net down-current direction is as inevitable as that of a stream channel.

Rolling stones are never "a complete unknown." They have highly predictable compositions, sizes and shapes. Fellow travelers resemble each other in strength, mass and roundness.

Dylan scrambled a perfectly good proverb whose origin is lost in antiquity. A "rolling stone gathers no moss" is one of thousands compiled by the Dutch Renaissance scholar Erasmus in the 1508 edition
of his "Adagia." Others include "leaving no stone unturned" and "caught between a rock and a hard place."

Since then, the proverb about rolling stones has become wildly popular in literature and music. In 1950, the American musician Muddy Waters featured it in his delta blues song "Rollin' Stone." Unlike those of Dylan, his lyrics made sense: "Well my mother told my father just before I was born / 'I got a boy child comin', gonna be, gonna be a rollin' stone' / Sho' enough he's a rollin' stone." In 1962, a British band named themselves "The Rolling Stones" after Muddy's song. In 1965, Rolling Stone Magazine hit the press. Its name tracks back through Dylan, the Stones, Waters, Erasmus, and antiquity.

For me, Dylan's Nobel Prize is a clear winner, despite the fact that his most famous lyric is a loser, geologically speaking.