FOR MAD HUMANIST, LIFE’S TRIALS WRITTEN IN STONE:

The "mad scientist" is a staple of American culture. Brilliant, driven and wielding great power, he works in secret laboratories until he launches various nightmares: Dr. Frankenstein's stitched-together monster; Dr. Strangelove's atomic bomb; and, as some would argue, Dr. Jerry Yang's three generations of cloned cows, which could have a family reunion without the rest of the family.

Mad humanists deserve more attention. They are the ones most likely to counteract the effects of mad scientists and mad politicians. There are plenty of poets, musicians and religious leaders who could qualify as mad humanists. But what I have in mind is someone with professional training in the humanities, completely sane, brilliant in a quirky sort of way and driven to write. My candidate for the archetype mad humanist is my colleague Sam Pickering.

Pickering was, as readers may know, the model for Robin Williams' character in "Dead Poets Society." He wields bombs of wisdom, rather than technology. His latest is a land mine in his new book of rambling essays, "The Best of Pickering" (University of Michigan Press, 2004). There, buried on Page 222, Sam gives us the perfect metaphor for an honest appraisal of human life.

To Erma Bombeck, life is like a bowl of cherries. To Forrest Gump, life is like a box of chocolates. To Sam Pickering, life is like a deposit of glacial hardpan, "pebbles, stones, clay, and boulders ... in the yard," the stuff that makes up the subsoil beneath his home. Hardpan -- properly known as till, a Scottish word for coarse, obdurate land -- is the material residue of the ice age that was carried, crushed, scraped and then finally plastered onto the bedrock. On the trails of our lives, there aren't many cherries underfoot. There are even fewer chocolates. But there is certainly plenty of hardpan hidden by lawns, woodlands and pavements. When digging exposes the till, we are sure to "hit some kind of rock," Sam's metaphor within a metaphor for the hard things in life that are entombed by our personal pasts.

When I began writing a regular op-ed column, it never occurred to me that I would write one about a colleague I might bump into at work, giving him the chance to skewer me with his rapier-sharp rhetoric, or distancing myself from those who see him as an odd-duck academic or worse. Most surprisingly, I never expected to get a geology lesson from a mad humanist.

The fictional mad scientist might tinker with Earth's climate, inadvertently prompting a glacier to invade our land with the power to scrape it deeply before withdrawing, leaving a potpourri of muddy stones in its wake. In the mad-humanist scenario, there would be no tinkering, only thinking.

The mad humanist would say that the power of life -- from infancy to death; from Stone Age to information age -- scrapes across our homes and communities before withdrawing, leaving material residue in attics, basements, purses, desk drawers, car glove compartments, jewelry cases, spice boxes. Life accumulates piece by piece, very much the way glacial till does. In the case of geology, the resistant lumps are boulders and stones. In our lives, the resistant lumps are the old photos and mementos of personal tragedy, unnecessary wars and ruined places.

Sam qualifies the equality between till and memorabilia with the phrase "almost accidental." He's right about that too. The way stones move beneath a glacier and the places they come to rest are utterly random. Never did the stones communicate with each other, rise up and vote to halt the advance of the ice. But humans do have that power. They can rise up to stem political policies that sweep us up like so many stones, bruising us along the way and plastering us together on the local landscapes of our lives, forcing us to hunker down as if we were a layer of human till.
Sam avoids politics, preferring to write and teach without much fanfare. And though Sam and I are on friendly terms, I wouldn't want you to think my opinions are his. (In fact, he might think of himself more as a mad humorist than a mad humanist.) Nevertheless, I invoke his book as an example of the quirky wisdom that runs as deep in his mind as do the stones in his backyard. He thinks; therefore I think better.