

THE ROCKS IN OUR HEADS



Places



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Loie and I were looking for megalithic monuments—ancient stone rings and standing stones. What we found were Places.

Yes, Places with a capital “P.” Places aren’t just places, and we’ve realized that we live in a place, not a Place. Nowadays, a lot of people, especially here in America, no longer live in a Place.

We’ve been to many places in Europe and the United States visiting old stone structures: megaliths and stone rings of course, but also smaller standing stones, cairns and dolmens, pueblos and ancient villages.

Most of these old things are in fairly out of the way places, so in the course of our travels we’ve also been enjoying little towns and wildernesses. It was when we were talking about our latest trip—to southern France—that I began to get an inkling of what the old stones might mean to us. What follows is a kind of story about how things dawned on me.

The landscape in the south of France is very different from ours. Of course the plants and geology were different, but so were the human aspects. There were no suburbs! There was a bit of urban sprawl around the larger cities, and there were many small towns. But between the towns, the land was rural, with thousands of little vineyard fields; or wild. We never expected to see so much wilderness in such a small area, especially one that has been settled for over 400,000 years! At night, from our house in a tiny hill town, we could see clusters of light marking other little towns. Between these spots of light, it was dark. Totally dark, with not one speck of light marking houses or shopping centers or gas stations sprawling across the land. There weren’t any.

The prehistoric village of Cambous is a cluster of clusters of stone house foundations, much like Scara Brae in Scotland. Each cluster

had four or five long huts built with common walls, as if there were rooms hooked together. But there was no evidence that the rooms connected: each hut had its own front door, and no connecting ones. Was each of the huts a house? A room? Probably impossible to know now. The clusters of huts were close together, with only a few dozen yards of space between. The ancient people *could* have spread out. So could the modern French villagers. They didn’t back then, and they don’t today.

Today, each little village has its wine cooperative, a tiny gas station and a church with a public square. Most have a grocery and bakery. You could easily live in such a little town without ever leaving it, and without ever having to walk more than a few blocks to buy anything you needed from day to day. You might have to travel a few miles, or maybe more, to buy a new television. But you could go by bus, and have it delivered.

Every village has a name and a history. There is never any confusion as to where you are. You are in Peret, or Gignac, or Aniane. Signs mark your entry into, and your exit from, every town, on every road.* In the south of France, in Italy, and I think in Scotland as well, you are always either in a particular place, or between some.

The landscape in southern France, as in Scotland, was also dotted with ancient structures: dolmens and standing stones. None that we saw were huge, although there are some pretty big stone rings that we didn’t see. Many were so small you would never notice them tucked away in scrubby woods or standing at a

* This has a very practical side. The signs designate the point at which speed limits change from those of the approach road to those of in-town. But the signs don’t say so. There’s a metaphor for you.



crossroads looking like natural stones. Some were more obvious, but most could have taken a good team of a half dozen people more than a few days to create.

“These are signs,” Loie said. “Like billboards or signs. They say ‘Marie’s Restaurant.’”

“Or the town, sure,” I said. “Like all the signs we see going in and out of every little town.”

We didn’t realize it right away, but Loie had expressed the basic idea that would grow into this essay. Perhaps it was just that we had finally seen enough old stones and stone age villages and little towns and road signs. We might well be reading too much, or too little, into the old stones. And we hadn’t yet come to a full understanding of just what Places were, but Loie had begun: the old stones were *markers*. In retrospect, this seems kind of obvious. But of course we had, on past trips, seen big stones in rings that were called “temples” and “ritual spaces;” we had seen burial mounds; little stones arranged over graves and lots of different kinds of stones.

Finding the common thread was an important beginning. It helped that not long before we had left for France, Loie and I read a book about a new discovery in England, called Seahenge. In it, the author described his mapping of the tracks between farm fields in the Iron Age settlement near Seahenge.* He was sure the pattern of the tracks matched the pattern of earlier barrows. He concluded the Bronze Age barrows marked property divisions that were maintained into the Iron Age, and respected by the farm tracks. So, even the cairns and dolmens we were seeing might be markers, too, not just burial sites.

* See *The Rocks in Our Heads; Driving the Stone Age XII*, “Art for Something’s Sake” for our trip to Seahenge!

Property divisions were an important clue, but we hadn’t quite yet realized just *what kind* of property was being marked. We had seen the curious resemblances between the ancient village of Cambous and the modern French towns. We were reminded, too, of how the Stone Age village of Scara Brae, in Scotland, was a row of rooms or houses with common walls. We had been struck by the difference between the tight little French villages—and the similar towns we saw in Italy and Scotland, and the ancient settlements—and the sprawl of our American towns and suburbs. The stone age signs and towns; the modern towns with their signs surrounded by farms and vineyards...

For most of human history, people needed the resources of their immediate landscapes—the game, fish, plants, natural shelter; the geography and ecology—to survive. They needed to know their territory: where the ground was slippery and might spill them over the cliff; where it was easiest to come by the best resources, when it was time to gather or hunt or plant.

They needed to know how to use the resources of their landscapes: how to dress game, cook gathered plants, grind the grain they grew. They needed *skills*.

They also needed to work together, as a pretty close group, sharing their resources and their skills. Someone was best at making stone tools, and those good tools made everyone’s work easier. Someone else was the best cook. Their good cooking made everyone’s life more pleasant. The cook and the tool maker hadn’t time to go out and hunt or forage, but they needed to eat. The hunters and gatherers had to share food, and the tool maker and the cook had to share their skills.

I’d like to invent a bit of shorthand, and call this knowledge—of resources, skills and cooperation that pertain to a certain geography and ecology—Rules, to emphasize the idea that people *had* to



live by their Rules. Capital “R” Rules aren’t just “a way of life.” In ancient times, if you didn’t live by the Rules, someone would die: starve or freeze or fall off a cliff. Then you’d all have been out a cook.

The people in the forests of Europe didn’t need to know how to live thousands of miles away on a tropical island. They might, if they had known about it, have *liked* to live there. But they didn’t. They needed to pay attention to their own landscape; to live by *their* Rules that suited them to *their* territory. Thus were born Places.

Let’s remember that the original groups of Rule Makers were probably pretty thinly scattered. They didn’t need to defend territory from invaders or robbers. Marking a territory with “No Trespassing” signs doesn’t make it a Place. It’s only when people live by Rules that pertain to a certain area that what we might think of as a territory becomes a Place.

A Place is understood by the people living by Rules to be different from other parts of the countryside or the world, where those Rules *don’t* pertain.

Old Stone Age people probably had Places. They had their tracks between these Places, and I’m sure had particular trees, stones or mountain peaks they used to help recognize paths and Places. They may well have had gods or spirits that lived in the trees and stones and peaks. We can’t recognize those markers, and so, with the possible exception of the decorated caves—fascinating in their own right—we know little or nothing about the Places of the Old Stone Age.

The attraction of the New Stone Age stones, be they large or small, is that they are the first easily recognized examples of humanly created—and Marked—Places. Just like the European towns that are still—some of them after being there for thousands of years—Places. Loie and I began by looking for stones, and we found Places.

Let me digress for a moment. Please don’t think that I’m envisioning some golden age of eco-peace when I talk about Places. Loie and I are aware of the arguments about whether or not Stone Age people killed off the mastodons and aurochs. We know that those ancient old European towns fouled their water and piled up their garbage. People in the little French villages drive cars that pollute the air, although they don’t drive nearly as much as we do in America. (And they drive *tiny* little cars!)

No Place has ever been a Utopia. What I want to emphasize is that Rules that make Places have *some* consideration of the landscape. Rules may have been, at different times in different Places, more or less exploitative of resources, or more or less respectful. But all Rules, by definition, attempt to suit life in a Place to the landscape of that Place. That’s why it *is* a Place.

Loie and I don’t pretend we know the purpose of every ancient stone we’ve ever seen. The Ring of Brogar is magnificent, and listening to a lone bagpiper, standing between two of its towering stones, pipe the sun down a limpidly clear evening sky while the biggest full moon we’ve ever seen rose behind him was impressive, even awesome. It was easy to imagine the Ring as a sacred site. But what Brogar’s *builders* did there we don’t know. Was it a church or temple? A grange hall? An auction house? A public market? All of these, at different times of the year?

Nor do we really think that the statue menhirs of southern France were *necessarily* signs for towns or restaurants. What’s important to us is that people were taking the time and expending the effort to put up some structure—even if it was a stone no bigger than a few feet across and a few inches thick—that was not purely food-clothing-shelter functional; to Mark a Place.

Joseph Campbell (following an idea of Ananda Coomaraswamy’s) talks about *lánd-nama*. Speaking about groups of people moving



to new places, he says “The new land, and all the features of the new land, are linked back as securely as possible to the archetypes—the spiritually, psychologically and socially significant archetypes—of whatever mythological system the people carry in their hearts. And through this process the land is spiritually validated, sanctified and assimilated to the image of the destiny that is the fashioning dynamism of the people’s lives.”

Which I think is at least partially a way of saying that those people were adapting their old Rules to a new Place.

We know from reading about the societies studied by anthropologists and ethnographers that many traditional peoples have some pretty harsh and scary initiation ceremonies for young adults. These ceremonies are intended to convince the kids that they are now adults, with the responsibilities and the privileges of adulthood. It’s not clear that modern societies are necessarily good models for imaging what ancient life was like. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most traditional people were living in marginal lands that may well not have been their homelands. We can’t assume that they were living the same way their ancestors had always lived. But so much of their material culture—tools, clothes, pottery, art—seems so similar to that of Stone Age peoples that it’s difficult not to at least consider that some elements of their Rules may be holdovers from an ancient past.

After all, we have initiations today into clubs and service organizations, and high school graduations. Our modern rites are but pale imitations of those held by “primitive” peoples, but we still have them.

Learning to live by Rules has that explicit, formally taught side, but it’s probably learned as much just by growing up with them. The Rules are just the way things are.

In Europe, there are myriads of Rules for when to eat, what to

eat or drink with what, how to drive, what to wear, how to greet strangers you pass in the street or meet in a shop. And people follow them. I’m sure that if we stayed long enough in any Place, we’d get to know the people and many more of the Rules. I’m also sure that ignorance of the Rules is what has given Americans such a bad reputation abroad. It’s uncivilized to break the Rules. If you don’t greet everyone you pass in the little towns with “Bonjour, madame,” or “Buongiorno,” you’re scowled at! Uncivilized tourists—pugh—breaking the Rules Of Meeting Strangers.

But just greet someone properly, and they’re all smiles and so happy you’re visiting their town. You’ve proved that you’re a civilized person who Knows The Rules. One drawback to living in Places must certainly be xenophobia: fear of strangers. It’s a cliché that newcomers to small towns are never accepted as natives, even though it may have been their grandparents who were the true newcomers. Part of living by Rules in Places is having gone through the proper initiations to prove that you are a member of the local group; part of it is following the Rules; part of it is having a history in a Place; part of it is trusting that other people will live by the Rules. How long does it take to earn that trust?

On a superficial level, no longer than it takes to follow the Rules Of Meeting Strangers. On the deepest, trust-you-with-the-family-secrets level, perhaps generations.

This implicit, learned-by-living aspect of Rules leads us to the realization that Rules are not laws. They aren’t codified into written regulations. Rules are ways that people behave. They’re learned like language, by participating in the life of a Place. In fact, people who live in modern Places seem to consider it more civilized to break the regulations—the written laws—than to break the Rules.

Traveling to the kinds of Places we do entails a lot of driving. There aren’t any “Twelve Megalithic Monuments of Southern



France In Ten Days” package tours! We’ve found that in Europe, there is very little enforcement of traffic regulations. Hardly anyone in France or Italy or Scotland obeyed the posted legal speed limits when they were driving. But everyone obeyed the Rules For Driving, which apparently state that one drives as far to the right as possible, except when passing. This system works wonderfully well. Everyone drives the speed with which they’re comfortable and traffic zips along. We’ve driven thousands of miles in Europe on every kind of road from multilane highways to dirt tracks and never seen an accident or a traffic jam.

For a system like this to work, everyone must obey the Rules. It takes only one left lane grogger to screw up The Rules For Driving. There certainly could be regulations—laws—that forbade left lane grogging. But how are they going to be enforced? It would take armies of police driving day and night, making traffic worse than the very occasional grogger might. Living by Rules involves a lot of self restraint, and trust in each other. But when this system works, and the trust is mutual, it works more efficiently than law enforcement ever could.

Encounters on the back roads of Europe can be hair raising for Americans. Two cars barrel toward each other at sixty miles an hour down a narrow lane in the Scottish Highlands. Even in their compact cars, there’s no way these two maniacs are going to have enough room to pass each other. You grip your wheel white-knuckled as visions of flaming wreckage erupting flood your brain, when, at the last possible moment, both drivers slow, each pulls over onto a little bit of gravel shoulder and they nod as they pass. After a few such scenes, Loie coined the term Scottish Driving for such daredevil feats.

Not long ago, we were driving on a narrow road not far from where we live in Maryland. We’d been on narrower before. As

Loie saw a car approach, she slowed and pulled over a bit. The other driver came to a halt beside us, and naturally Loie stopped too, thinking perhaps he needed directions. He rolled down his window and said, “Please slow down. This is a one lane road.” Apparently he didn’t *trust* us, or *himself*, to negotiate the passage safely. But of course he grew up in a place of regulations and laws, not Rules. A place where no one trusts anyone to behave decently and safely; a place where you trust that police will prevent trouble by arresting trouble makers.

When America had more Places, there must have been many more Rules. There wasn’t any Unwritten Code of the North. It was “of the West.” You’ve never heard of Northern Gentlemen, only Southern. So, at least in our mythology, the West and the South had Places, with at least some Rules. I bet a lot of northern and eastern places had their Rules, except that we just don’t hear about them.

But as we lose the differences in Rules that help make Places, we lose our Places, too. Our culture turns into a big mush. Of course this was supposed to happen in the great Melting Pot of America.

Our American Founding Fathers imagined a country of law, in contrast to a country of hereditary privilege. That sounds like a good idea. But they didn’t imagine a place where technology had so divorced people from their Places that Rules were breaking down, and regulations were expected to replace them. Thomas Jefferson was sure that the “yeoman farmer” would always be the backbone of American society. How many yeoman farmers do you know?

When the energy needed to perform most work comes from fossil fuels and not human muscle, when a farm of tens of thousands of acres can be run by a few people, when clothes can be churned out in huge factories, when those of us privileged to live in post-industrial societies enjoy huge surpluses of food and everything else there is to have, it seems we can break the old Rules with some



impunity. Hmmm.

The people who live in a Place know that they depend on each other. That's part of what it means to live by Rules, and the dependence is obvious. For our first trip to France, Loie and I rented a house in Peret, a little town of five hundred inhabitants. Each morning we walked up the steps of our street—that's all our "street" was, a broad stairway—across the village square, and bought croissants at the bake shop: a little room not ten feet by ten feet on the street level of a corner house. We were never sure whether the two ladies who ran the bake shop actually baked the bread and croissants they sold. The croissants were always displayed in a low sided box like the ones bread is delivered in.

If the ladies who run Peret's bake shop don't put out the croissants and bread one morning, no one in town can eat their breakfast according to the Rules For Eating Breakfast. If the grocer doesn't open his shop in the evening, you can't buy anything to eat for supper. Of course, many folks in Peret have cars, and could drive to another town to get their croissants or groceries. Would that be *breaking* the Rules, or *stretching* them? How far can the Rules *be* stretched?

The people in Peret depend on each other less than did the people who lived in neolithic Cambous. But they depend on each other much more so than do the people who live in Glyndon, where I grew up. The Glyndonians never expected to buy their groceries from each other.

The Glyndonians were recently up in arms at the proposal to close their post office, and merge it with Reisterstown's, the town right next to Glyndon, but literally on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. They were so upset at the thought of losing their relatively prestigious Glyndon addresses that they bought the old train station that housed the post office and now lease it to the Postal

Service for a dollar a year. They went to a lot of effort and expense to maintain their sense of living in a Place. But how *is* Glyndon different from Reisterstown? The railroad tracks divide the two; Glyndon is greener and smaller than its neighbor. Other than that, if you walk or drive across the railroad tracks from one to the other, you'd hardly know you were in a supposedly different Place.

There is a small grocery in Glyndon, but there are larger ones in Reisterstown. No one in Glyndon *depends* on the little grocery. They regularly shop elsewhere. They clubbed together to save their Post Office because it gave them a *sense* of living in a Place, and that's nice. But here's another Glyndon story...

When my family first moved to Bellview Avenue in Glyndon, we had a septic tank, and was the grass green over that old thing! Everyone in Glyndon had a septic tank, or a drain field. I can remember how, after a hard or prolonged rain, the water in the little stream across the railroad tracks got pretty smelly. It made no particular impression on us when we played in it. That's just the way it was. It didn't happen often, and no adults ever said anything about it.

We had been in Glyndon a few years when the county government offered to hook up the houses in Glyndon to sewage treatment. Most of the Glyndonians turned down the offer. At \$600 a house, it was considered by most to be too expensive. Ten years later, the federal Congress passed the Clean Air and Water Act, mandating (among other things) that all watercourses in the country must be made "fishable and swimmable" by, I think, 1990. (That goal remains to be met.) But, as part of this effort, the Environmental Protection Agency forbade all new building in the Gwynns Falls watershed until sewage treatment was installed throughout it. Guess what? The little stream across the railroad tracks turned out to be the headwaters of the Gwynns Falls. Uh oh.



The Glyndonians were then required to spend thousands of dollars apiece to do what they could have done voluntarily for hundreds, because the people living downstream from Glyndon depended on the Glyndonians to keep the public water clean. And the Glyndonians didn't. If we in Glyndon had been living by Rules, if Glyndon had truly been a Place, we would have been paying some attention to the state of the Gwynns Falls, and no one would have needed to impose regulations.

As technology divorces skills from the resources of a Place, Rules degenerate into regulations. Regulations can be ignored, Rules cannot. Peret is still surrounded by farms and vineyards. At least some of the local produce is sold locally at the wine co-op and big local farmer's markets. Peret has a fairly solid basis for maintaining Rules. Glyndon doesn't.

Glyndon, though, is a little town that's just eccentric enough to be bucking the trend. The Glyndonians saved their Post Office, and you should see their Fourth of July Parade. The architecture of Glyndon is a mix of Victorian, ranch houses and modern colonial. The streets are still lined with trees. When the county proposed widening Central Avenue to accommodate through traffic from Reisterstown, which would have meant chopping down all the trees and shortening front yards, the Glyndonians put the kibosh on *that*. They like their town just the way it is, and to their credit they realize that they have something many other towns lack: a sense of being a Place.

Reisterstown, though, could be anywhere. Shopping malls, cookie cutter housing and chain restaurants make it indistinguishable from towns we've seen in Massachusetts, Arizona and California. The suburbanites in Phoenix, who live in a desert, are draining ancient aquifers dry to create lawns and grow trees just like those on the green east coast. That won't last long, but in the

meantime they'll have destroyed a resource that may never be replenished. On the other hand, the Stone Age peoples of Europe wiped out their big game, just the way the denizens of Phoenix are wiping out their water. The ancient Europeans went on to create an agricultural economy that, on the whole, did very nicely. It still does.

But those ancient people were still living by Rules. The Rules had to be changed, and the new Rules had to respect a new environment that became, in many ways, richer and more productive as the glaciers retreated and the climate warmed. When the suburbanites of Phoenix have no water to drink, what are they going to do?

It's not always easy to live by Rules. I never eat on any kind of schedule. If I notice that I'm hungry, I eat. This wreaks havoc with our traveling in Places. Loie has decided that she has to be in charge of scheduling when we're traveling, at least in Europe. Because if she doesn't remind me constantly that restaurants are closing in an hour, we won't get to eat. The Rule in France, and it was true in Italy and somewhat in Scotland, is that one eats lunch at noon, and supper at eight or nine. And this Rule is followed so rigorously by so many people, that restaurants close at two, and don't reopen until seven thirty. Period, the end. If I'm hungry at five, I'm out of luck. You can't break this Rule. It isn't possible. They won't even answer the door if you try to knock them up at six to make a reservation. They might answer the phone, but then again they might not. Life is much more regimented by Rules than it is by regulations.

It's another cliché that in small towns, there's no privacy. That may well be true in the Places we've visited, but I don't really know. Loie and I have never spent enough time in any of the Places of Europe to get to know the people well. I know there wasn't much privacy in Glyndon when I was young. People walked into each other's houses, calling out "Yoo hoo," and asking if the coffee was



on. How much gossiping went on I don't really know. It's easy to imagine that many of the people who left Europe for America were just sick and tired of having people poke their noses in where they weren't welcome, and saw the wide open spaces of America as an escape.

But in my youth, the Glyndonians, hanging on to Rules that were on the way out, knew when someone was in trouble. A death in the family brought help from all over town. A kitchen could fill up with casseroles and roast chickens in an afternoon.

They regularly traded things, borrowed and distributed the outgrown or no longer needed to those who did. No child in Glyndon escaped hand-me-down clothes, and parents took great pride in their thrift and helpfulness. Kids hated it.

We've seen that there's a greater sense of dependence in Places. In America we take pride in independence. In some fairly trivial ways we *are* more independent. Restaurants are open longer hours, sure, so here I can go out to eat whenever I want to. In an odd way, though, I wonder if losing our Places doesn't lead to *more* dependence.

When the people in Peret go to the co-op to buy their wine, they depend on the co-op's being there and being open and on the wine being fit to drink. Well, they know it's there; they go by it every day. They grew up knowing when it's going to be open; they don't have to think about it. And if the wine isn't fit, the people running the co-op are going to be in a lot of trouble with their friends, relations and neighbors. I bet the wine is always reasonably good.

When I go to the store to buy a bottle of wine, I'm depending on the store owner not to fob me off with something terrible, on mass marketers to not have fobbed off the store owner, and on a lot of bureaucrats and inspectors to ensure that the wine isn't poisonous or contaminated. I know, from experience, that the wine's not

always good. Of course if I don't like that store, I can go to another. Or another or another, all of which are pretty much the same, their owners having been convinced by the mass marketers that I will accept what the big businesses for whom the marketers work are selling.

In Places, you do depend more directly on your neighbors, but you can trust them. Here at home, we depend on multinational corporations, mass marketers and bureaucrats, whom I *don't* trust because they've so often offered me stuff that was...not very good.

The big businesses on which we depend are trying to make the world over into one big mush, living by regulations instead of Rules. Who benefits from this? The theory is that we all do: that if businesses are free to locate their factories where ever is cheapest, and free to ship goods to whomever will pay the most, everyone wins. The reality is that shoddy goods are manufactured in sweatshops for slave wages; food becomes plastic junk; environments all over the world are destroyed and that no one lives in a nice Place. This is not a solution to anyone's problems.

We don't need to make the world a mush to solve the problems we see around us. What we need to do is make the world a bunch of better Places.

