

THE ROCKS IN OUR HEADS

Conclusion



It's Not About the Stones

Sure, understanding today's complex World of the Future is a little like having bees live in your head. But, there they are.
—The Firesign Theater, I Think We're All Bozos on This Bus

A while ago, Loie and I were, as we often do, reminiscing about our travels and how much fun it is to go traveling. One or the other of us said, “But you know, it's not about the stones, it's about the people.” Truer words were never spoke.

Way back in 2002, I wrote, “Loie and I were looking for megalithic monuments—ancient stone rings and standing stones. What we found were Places.” What I wasn't thinking about was that Places, Civilization, Society, Progress, Art, even the D*mn Wires are just stuff people do. But why do we do all that stuff?

Everything We Know Is Wrong

We have only the faintest idea of how we've come to be in this—what I consider to be—rocks-driven situation. I'm certainly not the expert on neuro-plasticity, evolution, sociobiology and all the other disciplines and sciences that have been dragged into this long exploration of the past. So I have at least a faint excuse for *my* ignorance.

There is certainly enough news packed into this essay to show how often *ideas about* beginnings, progress and processes have changed, and still are changing all the time. But a work in progress, is, by definition, not completed.

The issue

That's mostly because, the more we look, the more we learn. But overall, as a society, we barely bother to look. Imagine what might happen if we devoted, say, all the money spent on junk food and pro

sports to archaeology and brain research. Whoa! And let's throw in advertising budgets worldwide while we're at it. The mind boggles.

So it's not the scientist's fault they have to re-figure things all the time. It's amazing they get as much done as they do: It's a massively under-funded labor of love, sadly mostly ignored.

Perhaps my agonizing over it is foolish. The wires are there; they do good things for lots of people. They brought me the electricity I needed to accomplish this crazy Travel Diary project!

But I can't help thinking a lot more good could be done with not a whole lot more rocks.

What's the Problem?

Our ignorance* is the blind assumption the rocks—technology—will provide some kind of perfected system. But a system for what? What is all this technology—all these rocks—supposed to be doing?

When I was a teenager back in the nineteen sixties, all the magazines were telling me that by the turn of the century, which is now long past, no one would have to work. “Atomic” energy would be providing so much electricity it wouldn't be worth trying to measure: it would just be free. Robots would be doing all the factory work, people wouldn't have to do it anymore.

We would be living in some kind of Star Trek universe where all

* And here, as a footnote, I will record that the original, rejected title of my essay was *Why You're Ignorant*. Mea culpa. It's been *me* who was, and continues to be, ignorant.



people would be free to live lives of personal satisfaction, getting education, participating in the arts or making stuff to their heart's content. Well, obviously, *that* hasn't happened. All that stuff was, perhaps, depending on the particular author, well-meaning, or self-serving. All authors have always had patrons.

Oh well, the rocks might not have turned out to be all they seemed to be. Yet we go on pushing them, hoping for better and better. Which we sometimes achieve, and sometimes don't.

Tool Using Animals

And there were also, back in the sixties, alongside the folks singing paeans to Science and Technology, others wondering about it, rather more sceptically.

*The quote "We become what we behold. We shape our tools and then our tools shape us." is often mistakenly attributed to Marshall McLuhan. It does NOT appear in Understanding Media, as Wilson Miner confidently asserts in the presentation below, indeed it does not appear in any published work by McLuhan at all. The quote was actually written by Father John Culkin, SJ, a Professor of Communication at Fordham University in New York and friend of McLuhan. But though the quote is Culkin's, I would argue that the idea is McLuhan's, as it comes up in an article by Culkin about McLuhan: Culkin, J.M. . "A schoolman's guide to Marshall McLuhan," Saturday Review, March 18, 1967; pp. 51-53, 71-72. The idea presented in the quote is entirely consistent with McLuhan's thinking on technology in general.**

Back then I was underwhelmed by Marshall McLuhan's writings on media and technology: the hot media, the cold media, their sup-

* <https://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/we-shape-our-tools-and-thereafter-our-tools-shape-us/>

posed effects. Obviously there was a plethora of media competing for attention. Some of them were gee-whiz new, some a bit old, and some so ancient they were older than I am now. We have friends who get together to sing around a campfire, much the same way the Neanderthals probably did a hundred thousand years ago. Except that we expect to have guitars and harmonicas added to the mix.

And at that rate, we expect to have a fire. When did that *expectation* arise? A **million years** ago?

There's no way to analyze, to really demonstrate, with any kind of certainty, what of all these media—rocks—might have been doing what to whom. People are arguing about whether the Internet and video games are dumbing us down or making us smarter. But the individual effects (if any) of any particular media aren't the point.

It's Always Been Us

As far as I can tell, the media/technology/rocks stuff has *always* pretty much been in charge; it's the way our most distant proto-human ancestors behaved and survived: by banging the rocks together; singing, dancing; holding their kids up to make marks in the clay on the cave walls. *We can't help* doing the techno-stuff, nor can we really analyze and critique it. It's just the way we began and the way we've ended up, given some bizarrely weird and wonderful neuro-plasticity that happened a very long time ago. The more techno-stuff there is, the less we *can* think about anything *but* it. Because, as I didn't really appreciate, and Marshall McLuhan never went deep and far enough to elucidate fully, we are *both* the medium *and* the message.

I was going to say we became the Human Culture Medium, but on second thought that seems a perhaps **infelicitous phrase**.



We Did Find Something

Loie and I went out searching for the meaning of the Stones, wondering if we could find out what they meant for our—what we thought of as—modern lives. And we *did* find out.

Painted caves, petroglyphs, monoliths plain and carved, dolmens, mandorlas, mosaics, gargoyles, radiant colored glass—all fascinating—were all open to a myriad of confusing and conflicting interpretations; unless, of course, there were no interpretations we could make at all.

Well, OK

All of these things were shown to us and enjoyed by us with wonderful people: friends, family and strangers, many of whom have become friends and—God help them—honorary family. The people who *made* all those things have been gone long time, but we feel a kinship, feel that if we *had* known them, we *could* have been friends and family, just as our many guides and companions have become.

Don't Get Distracted

So Driving the Stone Age wasn't, it isn't, it never really will be—and don't try to kid yourself here, don't get all Marshall McLuhan distracted—about the stones; the media.

It's been about the people: then, and now.

It's been about us: with, for better or worse, Rocks in Our Heads. But, “there they are,” and we will always cherish the friends who helped us find them, perhaps particularly by throwing my crystals in the canal.

“It's not about the Stones, it's about the People.”

