From the Desk of the Editor

Occupation: On the Rocks

In April, I traveled for the first time to the Republic of Ireland. The ancient monuments of European countries have always fascinated me, so we headed to the western Irish counties to explore the Dingle Peninsula and County Clare. Our movement about the countryside was somewhat restricted because of the outbreak of hoof and mouth disease, but we could see much from the road—Neolithic stone portal tombs; Bronze Age stone circles, standing stones, and acres of artfully crafted stone walls outlining what must have been farmlands and households; Iron Age stone forts and Ogham stones with the earliest forms of Irish writing; early beehive stone huts; cross slabs; and the ruins of a 12th century abbey.

In County Clare, I stood by the roadside and used the zoom lens to photograph a portal tomb. I thought about these ancient objects that people thousands of years ago made, and I realized that these objects echoed back to me the skills and intentions of the people of so long ago. The portal tomb was not just an underground burial, but also a carefully constructed rock superstructure created purposefully by a person in Neolithic times or early Bronze Age; someone made that.

As I stood at these sites, I became more and more aware of the stones and rocks around me and of their importance and utility to people across the ages. Memories of my own experiences with stones and rocks then came to mind:

- I remembered that I had a collection of rocks as a young girl.
- I remembered that behind the house where I grew up, the yard had a row of various-sized boulders along the back lot line, not so very different from the stone walls built in the Bronze Age on the Dingle Peninsula.
- I remembered spending long summer hours at my grandparents’ cottage on a lake searching for nice flat stones to skip across the water.
- I thought about how every year for Memorial Day my husband and I visit the cemeteries that have family burials. Of course, each site has a stone marker, not unlike the portal tomb so carefully constructed in Neolithic times.
- I remembered the time I attended a 1-day workshop on grief and mourning. In a closing ceremony, each attendee lit a candle in memory of a loved one and stepped forward to receive a small, smooth stone as a symbol of remembrance of the workshop experience. That workshop occurred 6 years ago; I still have my stone on the desk in my campus office.

something about stones and rocks conveys a sense of permanence. The granite and marble markers in the cemeteries of modern times are chosen with care and placed as eternal identifiers of the person buried beneath. No name appears on the portal tomb in County Clare, but the stone structure assuredly marks the exact spot of the burial, and its existence today after some 5,000 years is a powerful testament to the “permanence” of the rocks.

Stones and rocks are objects in our material world. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) explored the relationship between people and objects, asking basic questions about the role of objects in people’s definitions of who they are, about the reasons for attachment to objects, and about the ways in which objects become part of actual experiences. These authors stated that the material environment that surrounds us contributes to the creation of order within ourselves. As we “attend” to a certain object in our world, we channel our attention and energy into the thing. In this way, an order and structure is created where none existed previously because the decision to attend to one thing means, at the same time, the exclusion of attending to another. The things that surround us “constitute the framework of experience that gives order to our otherwise shapeless selves” (p. 16). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton refer to the relationship between the self and an object in the environment as a transaction. We might call the relationship occupation. The meaning of objects is realized in the transaction between person and object, that is, in occupation.

Someone in the early Bronze Age invested his (probably) attention and energy into painstakingly selecting certain rocks with which to create the portal tomb and then built the structure that we can see today. That energy...
invested in the tomb so long ago reaches me as I gaze on the structure from the roadside. Even from the distance, I feel the presence of the person who constructed it. So too I feel the energy of my childhood play when I once again walk along the rocks at the back of the yard of the home where I grew up.

In much of occupational therapy, what we are doing is facilitating a transaction between our clients and the objects of their worlds and of our professional craft—splints, stocking aids, hook-and-loop fasteners, suspended swings, grab bars, positioning devices, even stacking cones! We know intuitively that from the transaction between person and object may come meaningfulness, and meaningful occupation is what we seek to bring about.

Perhaps surprisingly, stones and rocks are objects that sometimes have their place in our therapeutic milieu. Attending to rocks may be what brings order and direction to an otherwise directionless life, even today. The following story, told by a psychiatric occupational therapist in a research study conducted by Virginia Dickie and me, is a compelling illustration of this idea.

I remember one patient in particular who stated that he was not interested in "this kindergarten stuff" on his first visit to the clinic where he saw a lot of table crafts in process. From his therapy order and my interview with him, I found out he was a tree trimmer and used to heavy outdoor work. I introduced him to my "rock pile" and he became intrigued by the slabbing machine, which cuts rocks into slices to be worked into stones to set into jewelry findings. He stated he had always wanted to see what was inside some of the rocks he picked up in the forest, and later he did bring in some of his own rocks. He was in the hospital as an alternative to jail due to the fact he had broken a restraining order to keep away from his ex-wife. He was very bitter about his marriage breakup and not being able to see his children.

Once he learned how to use the saw, he continued to slab rocks daily for several weeks, maintaining a good supply for the clinic. I introduced him to my volunteer who took care of the lapidary equipment for me and who also had become quite skilled at all aspects of lapidary/jewelry making. The two worked together well and taught other patients these skills as well.

When the patient left the hospital, he bought equipment to continue this craft and a stationwagon to transport it all back to where he was going. By this time, he had become much calmer and able to discuss the deterioration of the marriage and start to plan for his future. He wrote to me periodically over the next few years, and the last time I heard from him, he was going to be married.

I believe I utilized lapidary for a very specific purpose with great results. By utilizing his negative energy in a creative and productive outlet, this patient was able to build socially acceptable behaviors and relationships and feel better about himself. I felt good about his progress, and the unit staff gave me much credit for helping him turn his life around.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) said, "To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things" (p. 1). Even the lowly rock can provide access to this kind of understanding, whether it be the portal tomb from Neolithic times, the rocks I played on as a child in my backyard, the granite markers at the cemetery, or the polished stone necklace made in the occupational therapy clinic. Occupation forms the link between people and objects, and the meaning of objects arises from the occupation. "What goes on between people and things" is occupation, and occupation is ageless. 🔶

Reference