

James A. Michener Art Museum
Bucks County, Pennsylvania

Tell Me Press
New Haven, Connecticut

The Smile at the Heart of Things

... .. Essays and Life Stories ...

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DEPTH

Some people grow up with baseball, or Saturday-morning cartoons, or sci-fi novels, or classical music. I grew up with rocks.

There were file cabinets full of rocks in the basement. The garage had bags and boxes of rocks lining the walls, and many of these rocks had strange number combinations neatly printed on them in white paint. As a kid I looked at the numbers as if they were an alien code that was too complicated for me to understand, but if I ever figured it out I would know all the secrets of the universe.

Every paperweight was a rock, as were most of the knickknacks on the mantel above the fireplace. Even the refrigerator magnets were rocks—shiny pieces of polished quartz that I loved to rub with my thumb, or tiny bits of black lava that had been expelled from an ancient volcano, or Dad’s favorite souvenir: stringy little blobs of brown rock called coprolites, which is the technical name for fossilized turds.

My father was a geologist—a petroleum geologist, to be precise—and I grew up not only with rocks but with time, measured not in days or weeks but millions of years. Geologists are historians. Instead of dynasties and empires, their raw material is found in the seemingly endless layers that run deeper and deeper into the earth, layers with colorful, hard-to-pronounce names that were always part of our household lingo: Ordovician. Permian. Cambrian. Pleistocene.

Dad had a geological map of the entire American West in his head. Driving down a highway was like a perpetual stream-of-consciousness monologue on the story of the earth. “See that cliff over there? That’s the Permian limestone—almost 300 million years old.” Or “The big rock that looks like an upside-down sailboat—it’s a volcanic plug—the inside of a volcano.”

“Where’s the rest of the volcano, Dad?”

“Weathered away.”

I tried to imagine how long it would take to wear down a volcano, but the idea was too big for me. Not for Dad. As he pointed at some nondescript

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outcrop zipping by our windshield and said, “That rock is over 800 million years old,” I could hear the excitement in his voice, and I was convinced that he really understood where that Precambrian granite had been in its life and where it would end up after another 800 million years.

Meanwhile our brown Buick station wagon had started to drift, and the tires were kicking up dust as they edged off the asphalt. Mom’s job was to keep this guy in the here and now instead of roaming the ancient seas with the trilobites. “Dad!” she hissed, and he would give the steering wheel a little jerk. I appreciated her concern, but for some reason I was never worried. He always seemed to know where interesting things were located, and that included the car.

I especially loved fossil hunting. My father knew all the best places—not just where you could see fossils, but where the wind and rain had started to wear away the rock and you could actually pick up the shells and run your fingers over the ridges. We would drive down some bumpy dirt road, park the car under a tree, then spread out and wander aimlessly around, eyes focused on the ground, with those white “sample bags” in our pockets ready to be filled.

“Hey Dad—found a crinoid—a big one!” Crinoids were some kind of primeval underwater plant with a long stem and a giant flower on the top. Stems were easy—there were tons of them lying around. I always dreamed of finding a flower, but they were extremely rare.

My favorite fossils were the brachiopods. They were an ancestor of clams, I guess—they almost looked like shells you could pick up on a beach. Except they had lived so long ago that their bodies had changed into rock. I tried to imagine one of these elegant sea creatures as living flesh, scuttling around the ocean floor, living and then dying, its skeleton slowly being replaced by sediment, the sediment piling up, layer after layer, gradually turning to stone, sinking deep into the earth, then pushing upward with some ancient tectonic regurgitation, finally reaching the surface in this obscure place in Utah, where I could hold its lovely remains in my hand and wonder about its story.

The truth is, I never cared much about the taxonomic details. Even the fossils themselves started to look the same after a while. Mainly I liked the idea that there was more to the earth than what I could see—that where I was standing was just the surface, and there were mysteries in the dark depths beneath my feet.

There’s something about the earth that invites you to dig. I really used to think that if I could just dig hard enough and long enough, I would surely get to China. And if I didn’t make it that far, I’d run into some long-lost realm of dinosaurs or a forgotten civilization of aliens. Whatever was down there, it had to be prehistoric, foreign, and dangerous. At least that’s what the heroes in all those novels and movies on the subject always discovered.

When I got a bit older, I learned that none of that stuff was real. Basically, the farther down you go, the hotter it gets. What we live on is like a thin layer of cooled-down foam that floats on all these much bigger layers made up of slow-moving currents of molten rock, with a core of solid iron the size of the moon. That was the truth about the mysteries down below. But my imagination wasn’t satisfied with the geological truth. For a while I considered being a geologist like my dad, until I realized that the digging I wanted to do couldn’t be done with a shovel.

My fascination with geology came from a feeling that not only was there more to the earth than could be seen on the surface, there was more to me. As a teenager I began to have strange dreams that bubbled up from unknown places inside me. I had no control over these dreams—they just happened—and they were full of insights and images that were way beyond my own puny experience. I was drawn to music, not only playing it but writing it, and I was shocked when musical ideas would occasionally just appear, from nowhere, ideas that had their own life and expressed thoughts and feelings that were more *me* than anything I could think up on my own.

A geologist like my father looks beneath the surface, trying to make the invisible visible. But there was something going on beneath the surface of me that was more interesting than any Precambrian granite. Maybe those primeval dinosaurs and ancient civilizations were really part of my own psyche, a part that I needed to dig into if I were to have any hope of being more than a shallow and embryonic teenager. Maybe what I really wanted to be was a geologist of the soul.

Depth. That which is below—below the surface. Why do we value the invisible depths over the visible surface? Why is below better than above?

Is it because you can’t trust the surface, but the depths never lie? What if Psalm 130 said, “From the surface I cry to you—hear my voice”? Most likely that cry would be rather feeble and wouldn’t end up on the divine “to do” list. But—“Out of the depths I cry to you”—or, the Latin version that rolls off the tongue with such authority, that poets and composers have been drawn to for centuries—“*De profundis clamavi*”—now *that* is an honest cry, coming from the very center of one’s soul, a place of desperation where there is no uncertainty, no ambiguity, only hunger and loneliness.

Surface is the sand along the beach that drifts here and there with the wind currents. Depth is the granite underneath.

Surface is easy—not much effort needed to find it, and not very rewarding when you do. Depth is more difficult. Sometimes it emerges on its own, but usually you have to look for it. You have to dig.

Surface is static. Sterile. Frozen. Plant a seed in it and the seed never grows. Depth evolves. Depth is turning toward something, looking for something.

Depth is a process—a voyage from the outside to the inside. So it becomes a story. I'm not there now, but I want to get there. How do I get where I need to go? Am I digging in the right place?

The more you think about depth, the bigger the idea becomes, and the harder it is to talk about. So we resort to metaphors. The *I Ching* turns depth into a kind of poetic topography, suggesting that an entire mountain range might be lurking beneath a smooth plain: "The wealth of the earth in which a mountain is hidden is not visible to the eye." The Hebrew Bible often uses agricultural metaphors to describe a life lived on the surface, calling it "chaff swirling from a threshing floor" and "chaff that the wind blows away."

A more contemporary metaphor is "still waters run deep," an expression so stale that you'd hardly dare utter it in everyday conversation. But it's a potent image that says there are slow currents of thought flowing quietly beneath a serene surface. With depth comes tranquility.

If I say something stupid that has an aura of profundity, someone nearby will inevitably reply, "Wow, that's deep!" "Deep thoughts, dude." Or simply, "Deep!" The idea of depth is apparently so overused and abused that the word has become its own parody! But the fact that we poke fun at what only pretends to be "deep" suggests that we have an awareness of, a need for, *depth*. By mocking the false, we acknowledge our hunger for the true.

One of my music teachers, in the middle of a composition lesson, suddenly turned to me and said, "Do you want to know how I learned to write music?" He proceeded to tell me a story. He had been a composer for years, gone to the right schools, built up his career, and thought he was doing pretty well. But he was never quite satisfied, never quite sure he was doing what he was meant to do. Then the music started to dry up. He kept writing the notes down, but they were dead on the page, and eventually he stopped trying. Perhaps a year or two went by, and he was increasingly desperate. He'd begun to think that it was all over, that he'd have to find another path. Finally one night he sat up in bed, startled, sweating, in a panic, and said to no one in particular, "I've been writing someone else's music!" That's when he began to write his own music.

Something changed in this man's life. It was as though he'd unknowingly been living out another person's story and suddenly began to live his own story. Except it wasn't sudden—he had to spend years doing the wrong thing, living the wrong way, before he finally "hit bottom" and, in that moment of desperation and desire, began to see clearly.

That's usually the way it works. Depth doesn't just happen. We have to make mistakes. We have to go on a journey. Sometimes we travel in exactly

the opposite direction we should be taking, but this ends up being the fastest way to find what we're looking for.

Helen and I took her younger son out to dinner not long after he'd entered college. The subject of women came up, and we tried to draw him out about what he'd already experienced and what he hoped to experience. He'd been in love before, but nothing had lasted, and he had a feeling that something important was missing. "How will you know when you've found it?" I asked. He stared at his plate silently for a few seconds, then said, "Because it will have substance." We knew he would be okay when we heard that word—*substance*—because he wasn't going to settle for the surface. He was digging.

Geologists may be historians. They may be explorers who search for hidden treasure in the deepest layers of the earth. But they're also riverboat gamblers. I learned this from my father.

I used to watch him poring over maps in his basement office—not road maps, but the elaborate, colorful maps of underground rock formations that tell geologists what other geologists have discovered. Nowadays the maps are all done with computers. But Dad's generation of geologists made them by hand, using ink and colored pencils, compasses and T squares, and reams of data. They often acquired this data by hiking up and down rattlesnake-infested hills while identifying rock formations and measuring the placement and thickness of the layers. Dad never needed a treadmill or a Stairmaster to stay in shape. Well into his eighties, he could walk for miles up steep, rocky trails with a heavy pack on his back, and those tough geologist legs never seemed to wear out.

Geologists have to discern what's happening thousands of feet beneath the surface, based on spotty observations of what's happening aboveground, plus whatever they can learn when they explode some dynamite and watch the sound waves bounce around belowground. In other words, geologists theorize. They guess. And they're often wrong, spectacularly wrong, as demonstrated by all the oil wells that produce nothing but prehistoric sludge.

When they get it right, people get rich. That never mattered much to my father. We used to tease him about all the oil he discovered for other people: "Hey Dad, couldn't you have found a barrel or two for us?" But he liked the hunt more than the quarry.

My favorite snapshot of my father was taken during a camping trip in southern Utah. For me the trip was a chance to make a few more photographs. For him it was the culmination of half a lifetime of work. As I understood it, he had theorized that a certain oil-rich layer of rock would appear somewhere in the vicinity—a layer that shouldn't be there, based on what everybody else had predicted. If he was right, it would be big news in the geology world.