

**Reading**

Lesson in the Stones  
By Elizabeth Lerner

Pam Fodor - reader

The beach was far too stony and crowded, the water far too cold and full of surf, for perfection. Wincing on our bare feet, we spent a long afternoon picking stones.

A lot of them looked like Jelly beans – that same rounded shape with the slight curve, even with fairly creamy and uniform colors. Glistening with the sea, they made you want to pop them in your mouth.

Others were speckled or swirled, layered with bands of color. Or pale translucent gray with strands of white meandering through. Some were triangles. Some were so flat and round you could roll them on their edges like a coin on a table. We spent hours picking over them, seeking the most beautiful, the most unusual, the most uniform, the most strange. We planned displays: all the “jelly beans” in a clear candy jar. All the green ones on a small ceramic dish with one brick red stone among them.

We laid them out on our blankets in the sun. Dry and flecked with sea salt, they were gritty and unremarkable. But dipped in the sea again, or in our mouths, they became small miracles of compelling surprise and beauty.

We sorted that beauty into plastic sandwich bags and for months they moved around our house while our summer ambitions for them became subsumed in other concerns. But every so often we would advance our plan a bit; eventually we got a stone polisher and many kinds of grit for polishing, and we learned how to use them.

It took more months. Belts on the polisher kept breaking. Each phase of polishing took at least a week of steady operating. Each phase required mixes and measurements of new grits, ever finer. Each week, like the grit, they were finer.

Finally, after working with grit as delicate as powder, they were done. Now the green ones shine their various shades and textures of color on a ceramic dish with a red one among them. The creamy yellow ones sit in another dish. A saucer holds a stunning mélange of the smallest and most multifarious stones, each one a world. Not every stone came out as we hoped, and some exceeded our hopes. It took a year and a half to realize the beauty in these small handfuls of beach stones.

I held a polished stone in my hand yesterday and curled my fingers around it. I thought of all I have before me in my own life, and also in our congregation. I was filled with awareness of how much there is to do, and how much I don't even know yet, that will also need my doing. I looked at the gleaming stone in my hand, and remembered how long it takes to work with things that are hard, and how much joy and beauty comes from exactly that long work. **Thus ends the reading.**

**Musical Reflection**

Celebration Singers

Welcome back to the flow of the church year – Water communion Sunday is the official start of real church time. Vacations are mostly done, routines are beginning again – and we gather together bringing water which tells something about our lives, to share a ritual of our ingathering.

Water was the backdrop of our lesson from stones. The author talked about how water revealed the beauty – the deeper truth of the stones they found. While lying in the sea, they could see all the myriad colors, the variations, the depth and beauty. But when brought out to dry on land, that richness was obscured by the impurities of salt and dirt. Of course, the colors are still there. The interior of the stones doesn't change – only our ability to observe and appreciate that truth.

As you may well expect, there's a metaphor hiding in that story. Any guesses? What are the stones? The sand and grit? The water?

I see each and every one of us as the beautiful stones – each person unique, beautiful, complex. Beneath our crusty layers are colors and aspects, dreams and ideas, that folks around us might never guess at. All of us – every being – has a truth that is obscured in some way by the challenges of being human. And yet our call, our deepest yearning, is to see and be seen, to know and be known. That's where all of our religious impulses come from - finding some truth hidden below the craziness of life that feels real. Finding our own connection to the whole of life and revealing the secret compartments of our complicated hearts.

That's why every faith tradition has developed spiritual practice - ways to cut through the dirt and salt of life and reveal what's true. When I studied with a Sufi teacher I learned the practice of Wazifa – chanting one of the 99 beautiful names of God in meditation. You repeated one name – the first one he gave me was “Ya Fattah” which means “Opener” over 99 times while brushing your head back and forth with the image of polishing the heart. That polishing was to help reveal the love which lives within each of us and make it visible to the world around us.

Another very ancient way of exploring this landscape, Hinduism, has 5 yogic paths which help us get to the heart of life – or enlightenment. These are:

1. Karma yoga – path of action or activity
2. Bhakti yoga – path of devotion – deep love
3. Jnana yoga – path of enquiry - wisdom
4. Raja yoga – path of introspection - meditation
5. Hatha yoga – path of balancing the physical, mental, and emotional in the body.

Because we are all different, we tend to lean toward one or the other and have a go to path, but they all work together. Using our stone metaphor, Karma yoga would be the activity, the gathering and sorting, the tumbling in polishers, the work involved in teasing out the truth of the stones.

The finer and finer grit which was used represented Raja yoga – or meditation. In meditation, the task is to practice, little by little, clearing away the noise and distractions in our minds, eventually finding a place of pure consciousness. Within that space, we can let go of all the things which distract us from truth – all those things are egos tell us are so important, but which block our ability to know deeper truth.

Which path do you think water represents? Water seems the easy path, just splash it on and the truth is revealed – right? Well, yes and no.

I think water represents love. The yogic path of devotion invites us to see the world through the lens of love & compassion – to see through the accumulations of dirt and salt, of ego and pain, to the reality hiding below.

We've experienced this in our lives if we're lucky, when we love another being. Imagine a beloved toddler, they can be covered with dirt, sticky from ice cream, smelly, or grubby – and we can see through all of that to the beautiful little person inside. It's easy. But imagine a grown person we don't know covered in the same layers of filth and it might be much harder to find our love lens. When we see with the eyes of love we can see past hurtful actions or bad moods, through all those temporary distractions to the real beauty inside.

It's a nice thought isn't it? If we could just splash love on the world around us we could see the beauty present in every moment. Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Like water, love is the basis of life, and like water, it evaporates easily and has to be carried with us if we are going to be able to use it to see the world. We have to have a container to carry it with us – like those ubiquitous water bottles that people carry everywhere these days. And so we're back to spiritual practice again – not to create love – it always there – but to create pathways so that we can access it whenever we need it.

Practices that polish the heart and open our connection – like meditation, or prayer are ways to splash love on the world. Like Tai Chi or yoga; like dancing or painting; like singing or playing music. Anything which opens us to the deep source of love and allows us to recognize it and splash love onto the seemingly ugly parts of life – to see the depth and beauty hidden there.

You can read more about this in the new Touchstone online, but this year we are going to focus on deepening our spiritual practices. Once a month we will offer a sample of a different spiritual practice, this month it will be a class on Yoga nidra offered by Deepti Singh.

We're also going to be offering once a month conversations on what it means to live out our Seven principles. But we're going to begin today, with a ritual that invites each of us to share some water that has special meaning in your life. I invite you to begin lining up on this side, come forward and share your water.

I will begin by pouring in water representing the long history of this congregation – of water communions going back through the decades; of ancestors and relatives, of people known and unknown.

## **Water Communion Ceremony**

Jamie Pastman

These words are by Gary Kowalski:

We draw from many wells,  
From oceans and rivers,  
From lakes and streams,  
From the muddy Mississippi to the roaring Rio Grande,  
From faraway places and from the ponds and puddles in our own backyards.  
Yet all are refreshing, each rivulet is cleansing, each capable of nurturing and sustaining life.