Hidden Treasures

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Note: Dana delivered this sacrament meeting talk, a welcome to new students, in the University Ward of the Bloomington Indiana Stake, on August 17, 2008.

Shortly after my family and I moved to Bloomington, Indiana, three years ago, my six-year-old son invited a neighbor boy over to play. The neighbor asked if they could go geode hunting in the wooded creek behind our house. I did not know what geodes were or what kind of artillery might be required to hunt them, but I sent the boys out with my blessing, hoping they could not get into too much trouble. A little while later, I saw them staggering out of the woods, splattered with mud and clay. They were carrying a heavy rounded rock, which they dumped unceremoniously on the porch.

"It's a geode," our neighbor said. "See the crystals?"

Sure enough. The rough, dull-colored rock had been split, perhaps by the freeze-thaw cycle of too many Midwest winters, and in the hollow were beautiful crystal formations. Before coming to Indiana, I had never seen anything quite like it. It was a hidden treasure, and it was right in my backyard.

As we settled in, I began finding my way around town and locating the services that my family wanted and needed. One of the resources we discovered was the Monroe County Public Library bookmobile. This outreach van has its own books, and I can request materials online from the main library, then pick them up at a stop within walking distance of my house. I have requested all kinds of books: fiction, history, and biography, but also physical and mental health, parenting, and psychology.

The librarian who helps me every week has never speculated on why I might want to read a particular book or what circumstance in my life prompted this interest. Like a good butler, he is

impeccably discreet and refrains from comment, but he knows a lot—and not just about me. He overhears travel plans, layoff news, homework woes, and school gossip. When I said to the elderly mother of one of my neighbors, "It's so good that you can be here to help after the surgery," the librarian stopped scanning bar codes momentarily. Then he gave the woman her books, a bag to carry them, and help out the door. A librarian is a witness to life, and this one makes eye contact and nods empathically. Best of all, he no longer asks me to produce an actual library card, which makes me feel like some kind of VIP patron.

After the library, I needed to find the post office. An older gentleman with a dapper white moustache often waits on me there. One morning as he weighed my packages, he said, "I'm in a good mood; I have meatloaf for lunch today." I smiled and said something affirming. He took this as encouragement and said, "I love meatloaf. My wife doesn't like it, so she makes it just for me. And the next day, I get the leftovers for lunch." From that moment, he was endeared to me as one who appreciates small pleasures—like cold meatloaf—and the bigger ones, like a wife who cooks for him and sometimes fills his wishes at the expense of her own. How often are we served by a truly happy employee, especially at the post office? I let other people go ahead of me in line just so I can go to his window. When I hand him the money I owe, I feel I have brushed against deep contentment, and I carry some of that gold dust away on my fingertips.

These are a few of the people in my neighborhood. They have foibles, I'm sure, but they are regularly friendly and helpful to me. (As an aside, not everyone in Bloomington is. I am thinking of the allergist who said that my husband Kyle's asthma would be greatly relieved if our house were thoroughly vacuumed at least twice a week, but—and this is the kicker—never by Kyle. Now what kind of medicine is that?)

All of us are probably familiar with the story in Genesis 18 of Sodom and Gomorrah. After the Lord threatened to destroy these cities for wickedness and general recalcitrance, Abraham negotiated for a reprieve if he could find fifty or thirty or even ten righteous people. When he could not, the Lord rained fire and brimstone upon them.

In Jewish lore, there is a similar story but with a twist. In this

version, the Lord promises that he will allow the fallen world to continue as long as there are at least thirty-six good people in it, people who brighten their corner of the world with kindness and compassion and cheer. If that number ever drops below thirty-six, the world will end. But here's the rub: only the Lord knows who these thirty-six people are. None of us knows. They do not even know themselves that the world's survival hangs on their behavior. So they cannot act with compassion in order to fulfill a duty or meet someone's expectations. They act with compassion only because they are moved to it by someone's suffering or loneliness or loss.[1]

As the story goes, since we have no way of recognizing these thirty-six people, each of us must act as if we might be numbered among them, because we might be. Further, we must treat all the people we meet as if they might be among them. Whether they are or we are, strictly speaking, among the all-important thirty-six good people, does not really matter in the end. If we act as if we are, we make ourselves into human treasures, people for whom the world could more justly be preserved. That, of course, is the point. A merciful and somewhat cagey God holds his mysteries close, not disclosing relevant information about our identities in hopes that each of us will be motivated to be our best selves without artificial ceilings on what we can or will do.

I believe I have met some of these thirty-six people. I figure there should be about six of them per continent, if you exclude Antarctica. Given this distribution, a surprising number of them live and work in south-central Indiana. On good days, I aspire to be one of them; and on not-so-good days, I just hope to cross their paths. In Bloomington, I often do.

For three seasons, a firefighter named Paul has helped to coach my younger son's baseball team. Paul praises every player, even when the errors outnumber the hits. Since his shifts at the fire station are twenty-four hours on duty, and then forty-eight hours off, he inevitably cannot attend every game. But he tries. I often volunteer to operate the scoreboard so I can sit in the tower where it is shady and where there are ceiling fans. From up high, I sometimes see a shiny red hook-and-ladder drive into the parking lot. Paul and three colleagues hop out in their crisp blue uniforms with pagers on their belts. They hustle in, as if they were late to

the World Series, to see a bunch of seven- and eight-year-olds play coach-pitch baseball.

Last May, my older son's sixth-grade class did a physics activity. The students were to design a container in which a raw egg could be dropped to the ground and not break. They made prototypes and practiced standing on chairs and dropping eggs. The final event in this unit was an egg drop from the top of a fire truck. Paul happened to be the firefighter who stood on top of the fully extended hook-and-ladder, seven stories above the parking lot, and dropped the eggs. He carefully released each one as if it were a baby bird. My son had placed his egg inside a box stuffed with crumpled tissue and attached to a plastic grocery sack parachute. It was a good design, rendered excellent by Paul, who from the top of the ladder made certain the all-important parachute deployed. He is a human geode, ordinary in every way but one: his core is full of hidden treasure, unexpected and without price. I always cheer loudly for his son at baseball games.

In the Gospel of John, we can read a story about a man who was blind from his birth. When Jesus passed by, his disciples queried:

> Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?
>
> Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him . . .
>
> When [Jesus] had thus spoken, he spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and he anointed the eyes of the blind man with clay,
>
> And said unto him, Go, wash in the pool of Siloam. . . . [The blind man] went his way therefore, and washed, and came [back] seeing. (John 9:2–3, 6–7)

Common clay, perhaps not unlike the kind in my garden, is the medium of this miracle. Surely Jesus did not need clay to restore this man's sight. So why the theatrics of spitting and making a paste and washing it away? I am sure he wanted the man to exercise some faith, to invest himself in his own healing, to be a participant in the miracle. The clay—ordinary dirt Jesus would later wash off the disciples' feet at the Last Supper—is an unlikely ointment. There is nothing special, nothing holy, about it. Its treasure is hidden until called forth by the Savior.

Moses learned a thing or two about treasure hidden in rocks while he traveled in the wilderness with the children of Israel. When they were hungry, the Lord provided manna. When they were thirsty, the Lord gave them water, but not in bottles. Instead, Moses struck a rock in Horeb, and drinkable water gushed out. It must have been more precious than rubies in that dusty, dry climate.

Then there is the story of the brother of Jared, who built barges to carry his people to the promised land. The barges had no source of light, and the brother of Jared knew that the journey would be frightening and oppressive in such a close, dark space. So he gathered sixteen small stones, that were "white and clear, even as transparent glass" (Ether 3:1) and asked the Lord to touch them so that they would shine forth in the darkness. When the finger of the Lord did, the ordinary stones were illuminated, preventing the Jaredites from having to make this journey in the dark. These glass stones were not geodes, but they certainly carried the treasure and comfort of light within them.

The finger of the Lord might touch the stones in our lives, too, bringing us comfort on the sometimes dimly lit journey of mortality. More likely, his finger might touch the shoulder of one of those good people who keep the world from imploding. His touch might prompt them to compassion on the bookmobile, appreciation at the post office, encouragement at the baseball diamond, or exquisite care at the sixth-grade egg drop. His touch might remind us to be one of those people for someone else. It might split the rock of our lives so that the unexpected inner sparkle becomes visible.

Some of us might be like the brother of Jared's glass stones, illuminating and comforting in a dark time and place. Some of us might be like the rock in Horeb, helping someone obtain the thing she needs most, like water in the desert. Some of us might be like the common clay that, when mixed with holy spittle, becomes a healing salve. Some of us might be like the geodes that are native to these parts, with an ancient void inside that we fill with hidden treasure of forgiveness and hope rather than bitterness or gall. As Isaiah noted, "We are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand" (Isa. 64:8).

I think Isaiah must have liked geology, as he also recorded these words:

> I will lay thy stones with fair colors, and lay thy foundations with sapphires.
>
> And I will make thy windows of agates, and thy gates of carbuncles, and thy borders of pleasant stones.
>
> And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children. (Isa. 54:11–13)

This scripture calls to my mind a great rock garden full of an endless variety of geologic treasures, no two alike. It is a place of order and beauty and peace. It is a place where people can learn to sing the songs of Zion, even in a foreign land of geodes and limestone and clay. It is place where the finger of the Lord may tap us on the shoulder, where we might serve one another and strive to be among those for whom the world might more justly be renewed. It is a place of hidden treasures, of quartz crystals tucked inside rough-hewn rocks like you and me.

Note

1. Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2000), 8–9.