

As seen in

your address AUSTIN
shaping a house into your home

Transitions

BY ANN DALY

WHEN I WAS 11, my family moved from Long Island to New Jersey. The neighborhood was brand-new, and our yard was a sloping corner lot consisting of mostly dirt and rock. Before the sod was laid that first spring, we kids were enlisted to help remove the rocks. The larger stones were used by my father and older brother to build a retaining wall at the lower end of the property. Where the smaller ones were moved, I don't recall.

I do remember how much I hated that chore. It was boring, and tedious. And I didn't like being in the dirt. In a photograph my father took that weekend, I'm sitting on a dry sea of brown, next to my younger brother, with the plastic bucket between us. I'm wearing yellow and a sulking scowl.

That was before I discovered the joys of dirt and rock.

Two years ago my husband and I purchased nine acres of an old ranch in the Hill Country. Our property is a long sloping lot consisting of mostly dirt and rock. (And overgrown cedars.) Some rocks were used to outline the civilizing boundaries of a "backyard." Some serve as a faint, overgrown reminder of an underground water pipe. Some were assembled and abandoned in heaps. Most remain lodged in their original habitats above, below, and at the soil line. And in the springtime, a new crop erupts if there have been any winter freezes. We came to truly understand the caliche when we rented a rototiller to dig a garden bed. You do that only once in the Hill Country.

The folly of rototilling isn't the only lesson that I've learned from the caliche.

For one thing, I have gained patience with my Sisyphus-like fate. I rather enjoy the meditative rhythm of loosening the stone from its setting, tossing it into the cart, eventually pulling the full cart to the gully and upending it. What was tedious, and boring, when I was 11 has become calming and restorative decades later. If I can be present, clearing the land also clears the mind.

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For another thing, I have renewed respect for the infinite capacity of human creativity. Soon after we moved onto the ranch, I began collecting a library of large, glossy-paged books illustrating stonework from around the world. I keep the one documenting artist Andy Goldsworthy's "Wall" opened on a display shelf. The fact that a nuisance material like fieldstone, unloved and unglamorous, can be transformed into art is a testament to imagination and to our innate need for beauty. A lot of folks around here go for monumental stone gates, as if a ranch were to the manor born. My deepest desire is for two mortarless stone walls winding alongside our entry drive under the live oak

trees. But for the time being, I'm delighted with a pair of stele-like sculptures--made by our local stone carver--that welcome visitors at our front walkway.

From time immemorial, rocks have served as the *tabula rasa*, literally, where people have inscribed their laws, their creeds, their souls. Rocks have been hewn into the heroic and the prosaic. Stonehenge and fire pits. I spent a breathtaking interlude in Sausalito last summer watching an artist balance rocks one atop each other at the edge of the ocean. And the summer before that I was moved by the dozens and dozens of cairns built by visitors to a temple in South Korea.

Rock exists in a time frame that dwarfs our own human lifespan. That's why we stand in awe of the Grand Canyon. We are humbled by the natural forces of time, water, and gravity. I will manage the rocks here on the ranch from year to year, and I will have my stone wall. I will even build a few cairns along the trail down to the creek. But these rocks will easily outlast my efforts and intentions. They will crumble and heave, and they will be rebuilt (hopefully) according to the creative vision of its future owners. In the meantime, I keep a few favorite stones arranged here and there, on my desk or at the front door. Each one reminds me to remain patient, creative, and humble.



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