

Alignment

I am walking along a pipeline right of way in a hard-hat, a blindingly yellow safety vest and steel-toed boots. I am part of a strange band made up of warriors on opposite sides of a battle who today are all dressed alike and walk as one.

The leaders on my side are Indigenous American Tribal Historic Preservation Officers – elders from Tribal Nations who over the centuries have cooperated and warred with each other depending on their shared or competing goals in the north-eastern part of what is now called North America. Today they are cooperating. Their shared goal is to identify and negotiate for the preservation of their traditional cultural properties endangered by the widening of this pipeline. Their traditional cultural properties are stones – stone structures, stone groupings, stones stacked on stones and natural stones aligned along important angles relative to solstice, equinox and various star positions. It's a complicated array of possibilities, and takes a great deal of experience to recognize them. We walk very slowly.

On the opposing team, whose colours we are forced to wear today, is a project leader and his entourage of surveyors, right of way agents, archaeologists, safety officers and several miscellaneous keepers whose function is unclear, and whose demeanor suggests they'd be happily seated behind a desk if it wasn't for our meddling.

The Tribal elders set the pace, and they are elders in every sense of the word. Mile after mile, walking the mostly barren, mostly cleared and cropped existing right of way. And then, off to the edge, we find something: a short stone row ending at a large boulder – going nowhere, enclosing nothing. 'Useless' as a stone wall – not

colonial. Where the other team sees a dearth, we see instead an expression of purpose, of harmony. The row meanders along the top of a hillside, just an edge before it descends into the chaos of a wetland spring. The boulder's stately shape its head, the last few stones – upright – its tail. I love serpent rows for how their scintillating shapes knit together their surroundings, coursing you, your sightline and the water, weaving the shape of the land.

Maps are pulled out and consulted; surveying equipment is deployed. Yes, it's in the study corridor. Yes, it's in the right of way. Yes, it's in danger. A documenting session begins.

Out come flags, north arrows, cameras, clip boards and compasses. Photography. GPS points. Technical labels on little pink flags, and the row that has blended so well with the landscape for a thousand years now stands out electronically and physically as "XP-001".¹

I have to believe this work matters. As a Pagan whose volunteer work with the Tribes has morphed into this paid contracting gig, I believe I am here in service to the nature and culture that is this Indigenous ceremonial stone landscape. If I document it, there is a chance it can be saved. If not, no chance. One by one I review the features in my mind. It matters. But in a larger sense, this work does not. The pipeline will still be widened. The professional politeness of the surveyors does not make up for the fact that they are our keepers. "You're at the line – a little to my left please." When we work with them in this way, we have entered their world. My mind, so accustomed to wandering in the tangled underbrush, freezes up in the glare of

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reflective safety tape, resists the virtual and actual drawing of straight lines through a forested whole.

My fear is that in entering this world, we reinforce its legitimacy. On a personal level, I feel it educating my youthful self, the judgmental young woman who graduated as a civil engineer a quarter century ago. In this right of way I am devolving to that simplistic idealist who believed in dualities, in meritocracies, in the possibility that we could quantify everything that mattered. Those are the skills I'm using now, in service of the Earth, my Tribe now.

Driving home from the pipeline work, I admire the infrastructure of the interstate highway – the way the trusses (the only basic engineering shape not found in nature) support long spans of concrete and steel, the smoothness of the exit ramps' layout. I contemplate buying a new vehicle, one with a little more cargo space that doesn't handle quite so sluggishly. I recognize I've been coopted by their culture, a mild Stockholm syndrome that will fade by the time my worn old vehicle and I crunch the gravel of my dirt driveway and comfortably enter home.

But what will not fade is my creeping suspicion that by walking with the enemy I have been bought and brought into their version of the world. When we walk in landholders' back yards, on an easement taken by eminent domain, against their wishes, on grass or in forest they steward, in their eyes there is no difference between me and our similarly steel-toed, eye-protected keepers. And while the use they make of 'their' land rarely resonates with me, it always seems better than the highly engineered trench full of fossil fuels it will become. I can barely raise my head under the weight of my hard-hat. I square my shoulders under my reflective vest, and walk as close to the Tribal Historic Preservation Officers as possible. I am ashamed to be here in this endeavour that separates culture from nature, and counts the latter as naught. The Earth bears the scars of those who deny it is sacred – the fracking fields, the nuclear

dead zones, the pipelines. What would it take to imagine a different way?

In the field, secretly, I offer a strand of my thinning grey hair to the serpent, by way of introduction, by way of making peace, but still I will be haunted by the enchantment and power found in stones. The human-made structures and the natural ones – the stones themselves – have the right to exist unmolested without discrimination as to how they came to be where they are at this moment. But they will be molested, unless we get it together. It is up to us engineers to remember what the stones, and we, are here for. We are co-creators with the Earth, we are part of this natural web that holds us all. Engineering is nothing less than how we as ephemeral beings interact concretely with the land and with our gods.

Back at my desk, safe in my forested home, I am told that the living entity now reduced to number XP-001, along with two dozen other sacred stone structures, is to be disassembled – a casualty in a war we are not winning. The sacred, by definition, cannot be reassembled from parts.

Tribes, environmental activists, Pagans – we spend too much time trying to convince each other to speak only in our own terms, in our own set of ideas. We step carefully. We are respectful. But in so doing, our argument for the protection of the ceremonial stone landscape and the nature that surrounds it is like a field of boulders who are each viewed individually, as glacial erratics dropped at random – instead of as a stone arrangement, carefully aligned. We cannot see the alignments because our system fragments the sacred whole. Stone structures are liminal nodes where the material and spiritual worlds meet – where those worlds, in a literal sense, *cooperate*. We need to do more than just protect them; we need to learn from them. Grouped together, in alignment, we are stronger. ■

Notes

- 1 The exact description and location of this sacred stone structure have been somewhat obscured in deference to its individual identity.