

"Touchstone"

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Basaltic Moon Hill, as seen from Shaw Butte, looking northwest, in, Phoenix, Arizona

Rocks arouse feelings. All we have to consider are gemstones to realize that. Though they are small, the power they exert on the wearer, or even the bestower, is legendary. You can make the case that a stone's power is constructed by advertising, using diamond as an example. Or you can look at an ancient stone like turquoise, for instance, and mull over the probable connections the ancient Hohokam people in our Valley made between it and the sky, water, or coolness.

Big rocks elicit feelings, too, I think, and I mean *big rocks* that form things like cliffs, hills, and mountains. One of my favorites is the rock known as *basalt*.

Not long ago, I was trying to "get a feel" myself for what basalt evokes. I was driving around Moon Hill (pictured, from Shaw Butte), that little ridge that lies just north of Thunderbird Road, on the east side of I-17 and 19th Avenue. My attempts to go up onto it were to no avail, however, as every road was gated. I probably could have waited at a gate, and slipped through behind someone else's car. But then if asked, how would I explain what I was doing there? "Yes, sir. Who? Me? Oh, I'm just here feeling the rocks."

"Rrrright," would undoubtedly be going through the mind of my inquisitor.

Melancholy, mild foreboding, and loneliness are some of the feelings I've seen in myself around basalt in other places. I had really wanted to go door to door on Moon Hill, from home to home (and I could see some nice ones up on top), and ask people what they feel living there. Maybe someday I will get that chance. It has got to be different from what people living on Camelback Mountain (mostly granite) feel, for example, or from what people around Squaw Peak (mostly schist) sense. That feeling would have nothing to do with the view, or the facing direction.

This kind of thinking is, by the way, off the scale for most geologists. But not all. There are those of us of a scientific bent that are open to the subtleties of nature. As one old saying goes, "the devil is in the details." So are the good spirits, I think, and much of the beauty. Illustrating this view of nature, the Japanese have ways of classifying rocks that are unheard of in our Western culture, and I will pursue this subject in a future column.

Basalt (say buh-SALT, not BAY-salt) is a very dark, heavy rock. When molten, it flows easily. It covers many of the hills along what we call the Black Canyon Freeway (I-17) between Phoenix

and Black Canyon City. Along the road you can see black rock, sort of "dripping" off the edges of the hills. That look is simply the result of the basalt breaking up into chunks and fragments that roll and slide downslope because of erosion. The solid rock itself forms very resistant flat caps or layers on much of the higher ground north of the metro area, creating scenic backdrops such as New River Mesa and Skull Mesa (*mesa* means "table" in Spanish).

Around fifteen million years ago, deep fractures opened the crust of the Earth in the area north of Phoenix, and from within erupted the fiery liquid that then cooled and now covers Moon Hill. The basalt flows in central Arizona are some of the youngest rocks around us. I know, fifteen million years sounds like a long time ago, but it is not, really. Earth is 4.6 *billion* years old. Fifteen million years represents just a *third of one percent* of its history!

I was curious as to the origins of the rock's name, which was not an easy subject to track down. Apparently the Romans took the name

basaltes from the Greeks, who in turn got it from the Egyptians, and it seems to have meant "touchstone". Another source I saw attributed the word to unknown African sources. But then, Egypt *is* in Africa.

The Hawaiian Islands (not an easy place to feel melancholic, I admit) are made mostly of basalt, as are the plains of eastern Washington State (an easier place to be depressed), the Snake River Plain that runs across southern Idaho, and the dark splotches that we see on our moon overhead. It covers the seafloors, and if you drive north from Flagstaff towards Page, you can see great long tongues of basalt, now mostly covered by brush, emanating northwards from the San Francisco Peaks, running for miles along Highway 89. In the backcountry on the way to Puerto Peñasco (Rocky Point), in Mexico, are some of the most amazingly picturesque basalt flows I have ever seen.

Next time you see some, get out of your car, approach it, spend some time, and see what you think. Or more importantly, what you *feel*.

--- Richard Allen

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