Did you know that rocks *have* memories? Certain types of rock hold onto magnetic influences for thousands of years regardless of the geologic changes happening around them. Some mineral deposits retain permanent evidence of force depending on their location in the earth while others do not. Scientists refer to these characteristics as memories. Even though I think of rocks as essentially inanimate and never imagined them having what I think of as memory, I do think they can serve as part of our memory.

My awareness of history, not as an assortment of isolated events, but as the memories of generations of human lives grows deeper in the presence of stone. I lived in New England for the past three years, sometimes worshiping in churches or meeting in buildings which were already filled with people at a time in history when there were no towns, few people who looked like me, and no Unitarians or Universalists that I know of, where I come from. Knowing I was standing in the same spot, seeing the same walls, feeling the same cold as so many others before me, made it easier to imagine the discussions and disagreements, the lives and voices, that gradually built and changed Universalist and.

Rocks are a potent symbol of memory because when we take stone and make things from it, those things tend to endure, barring cataclysmic events or deliberation demolition. Stone structures are also a strong symbol of power because excavating, moving, and compiling large amounts of stone is incredibly hard work. You have to have a certain amount of power to be able to *direct* the creation of this type of construction.

These structures are a good way to explore history. They are less easily revised than oral or written accounts. Changes in human knowledge can also add new chapters over time. Sometimes the people who ordered their creation *intended* to portray certain aspects of their culture and their accomplishments. Sometimes they thought they were just solving a simple problem. The rocks can tell stories of good, evil, and unintended consequences for millennia after their designers dissolve into dust.

I got how growth in scientific knowledge can reveal greater complexity in these stories when I researched the rock walls of the northeastern United States. I already knew the walls were built from stones which farmers pulled from their fields every spring at plowing time. What I learned was that the stones did not appear for the first years the Europeans farmed here and that it was their earlier actions which *caused* those rocks to be present. The stones had existed deep underground since the last ice age. Only after the invaders took the land from the indigenous people and clear cut the forests, did the soil begin to freeze at a much lower level and movement from freezing and thawing caused the rocks to work their way to the surface.

And they were a nuisance. Some farmers just piled them in the least productive area on their property and let pumpkin vines grow over them. Some were made into walls. But most of those walls were not needed. They weren't very tall because it was difficult to lift the rocks very high. People did sometimes build wooden barriers on top of the walls to keep animals in or out but mostly they were just a visual reminder of ownership, of power. This is MY property.

Except for those deliberately torn down, many of those walls still stand, but we can't see most of them. When the farmers moved west and the land was no longer plowed the trees grew back. A study by University of Connecticut geographers using laser mapping found remnants of a vast network of roads and stone walls, with a total length of maybe as long as

250,000 miles, that have been hidden for more than a century beneath the dense cover of oak and spruce trees.

On one hand it seems appropriate that forests have grown back around the walls, making patterns of freezing more like they once were, allowing rocks still underground to linger where nature put them. But the walls endure, making it impossible for humans or animals to live the way they did before the Europeans, those which most of us call ancestors, took this land.

Like many others, I find the walls picturesque, especially in the autumn, with multi-colored leaves falling around them. In a kindred manner, some stone buildings that have endured more than a century, a few for more than two, portray beauty of design, materials, craftsmanship. But I wonder if any of that beauty is more valuable than what existed before. My current morning walk takes me up West Adams Street, on ambitious days all the way to Ostrom. Part of the reward for traversing those two really steep blocks on Adams is turning around to go home and seeing the panorama below. But it is mostly buildings and roads, things that are made at least partly from mineral, stones, rocks. And I'm not completely sure that I should call it a panorama because that means an unobstructed or complete view of an area in every direction. I can't see the streams, the animals, the dwellings which once covered that ground.

There are nice rock walls within a few miles of where we are right now. There are beautiful stone buildings just as near. Some of most impressive stone structures I've seen lately are *very* close to us. I never spent much time in cemeteries until I found Mount Auburn in Cambridge and I first went only because of the number of famous Unitarians and Universalists buried there. That type of garden cemetery is a wonderful place to meander. So, when I moved to Syracuse, one of the things I asked about were old cemeteries and I learned about Oakwood. It is every bit as beautiful as Mount Auburn, maybe more so.

What I found intriguing as I wandered through Oakwood was the mix of well-preserved monuments, sites which show significant deterioration, and a few which have essentially fallen apart. It was my curiosity about why *some* of these sites had fallen into disrepair, especially considering the evident prominence and prosperity of those who were originally interred there, that led me to do some reading about the cemetery's history. One source was the book Picturesque Oakwood edited by Annie Maltbie in 1894. She wrote this "Our hearts throb and swell over the story of what stout hearts and strong hands have accomplished in this "happy valley" during the just closed century, since the first attempted settlement by the whites. We have heard the story of the aborigines in song and legend. The historian's pen has informed us how they lived and fought and toiled and dwindled from once powerful races into a mere handful compared to their former greatness: how their graves were made among our hills and vales, where they lie unwept and unhonored. The record of the early settlers – brave men and noble women – has been recalled in its completeness. Therefore, the wise and good, the thoughtful of the early days took pains to set apart a burial place for *their* dead.

As the book then presented brief histories of the benefactors of the most impressive monuments in Oakwood, I read how the various white men became wealthy. One man's life was a series of services to his country – in Indian campaigns,…and in the Mexican war. She wrote about another man: "He and Mr. Danforth located the salt springs and made the first salt."

There were a few positive references to abolitionists, but what stood out for me after finishing the book, were that Europeans and their progeny: –

Permanently altered the landscape

Forced indigenous people off of land they had inhabited for millennia

Believed *they* discovered the salt springs and made salt from them for the first time

Served their country by waging war against the original peoples of the land and apparently did not see any relationship between those wars and the diminished population of those people.

And that as wise and good people they set apart a burial place for their dead – an act which distinguished them from savages

The landscape, locally and throughout this continent, is filled with creations – walls, buildings, statues, tombs - made from rock, that can last far beyond the lifetimes of everyone in this room, continuing testimony to a culture which judged some people, arbitrarily labeled with the social construct of whiteness, as more worthy than anyone or anything which stood in the way of their growing power.

And we have precious few monuments recognizing those who were victims.

These rocks *are* memories – and we can't just put them in a memory box, to look at only when we want to.

What should we do about them? Theoretically, we could tear them down. Leveling the stone walls, especially getting rid of the rocks, would probably do as much environmental damage as was done in their creation. Knocking down buildings which contain space for schools, medical care, and livelihoods for a diverse population, including many from marginalized communities, simply isn't going to happen.

What about the grave monuments? What about the ones that are already lying in pieces? Should we put them back together? What about mausoleums which were sealed up, never to be used for any future burials? Why not tear down at least those which are not structurally sound and use the space for to make life better for people today? Maybe something as basic as low-cost burial spaces for people, regardless of their ability to pay.

My initial answer as to why we should *not* casually tear any of these things down, is to avoid a characteristic inherently present in power and privilege – that of arrogance. The arrogance of thinking we are at the center of all existence, of believing our culture is superior. The arrogance of othering. It is an easy trap for people in power to fall into and something that can be very difficult to recognize in ourselves.

A few minutes ago, we sang a song with some good-sounding stuff like justice rolling down like waters and everflowing streams of peace.

And then we sang:

We'll build a land where sisters and brothers <u>anointed</u> <u>by</u> <u>God</u> -------

may then create peace.

Those are dangerous words.

The people who took this land, who created white supremacy, who fueled a culture of toxic masculinity, who believed in manifest destiny and the doctrine of discovery, believed in the core of their being that they were anointed by God. They believed they were doing the right thing. Like Mississippi Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, they didn't mean any ill will. It sanctifies every decision and absolves people of moral responsibility.

It – was – never – our – land – to - build. And simply destroying the physical remains of the arrogance of the past creates the risk that we might forget that the arrogance existed and how much harm it caused and still causes.

But there is work for us to do.

We can do the hard work of memory – especially the work of context.

The inaugural event at the Lender Center for Social Justice at Syracuse University was the first time I heard a speaker open their remarks by acknowledging that the building we were meeting in is on land of the Onondaga people. Several participants that day began their remarks in that manner. I have heard similar statements at a handful of other events, including a presentation by Starhawk two weeks ago in this sanctuary.

Doing the work of memory in such a public manner is important. Although the first word you find when you look up antonyms of arrogance is the word humility, I would like to suggest that integrity – the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles – is, if not an antonym for arrogance, at least a strong antidote to it. We should acknowledge historical arrogance regularly, publicly, and whenever possible under the leadership of people from the communities oppressed by the arrogance.

The people responsible for the walls, the buildings, the grave monuments also did good in their lives. They contributed to charity. Some worked tirelessly and at great risk to end slavery. We can regularly tell the *entire* story as we live out our principles as a community.

We can also do the work of memory and context personally.

When we express thanks for what we have - as many of us did last week - safe warm homes, educational achievement, good health, adequate pay or pensions, do we preface our thoughts or statements with the acknowledgement that there are many who have less than us? Do we acknowledge that those who have less are primarily in communities which always had less than *our* ancestors did?

We are good people.

Most of us are also, by virtue of the culture we grew in, racist, classist, sexist, ableist, and ageist. We don't have to remain like the past and we can appreciate the beauty and goodness that were there in their full context, including destruction and oppression. What has been once so interwoven cannot be raveled. What has been plaited cannot be unplaited. The practice of acknowledging the *fullness* of who we are is vital for building a future that is different.

It's a simple thing. Reminding ourselves that while we cannot undo the past and should not try to erase it, we are responsible for it by how we try to shape the future. We can work to grow integrity. May the permanent things *we* leave behind proclaim that work.

May it be so. Amen.