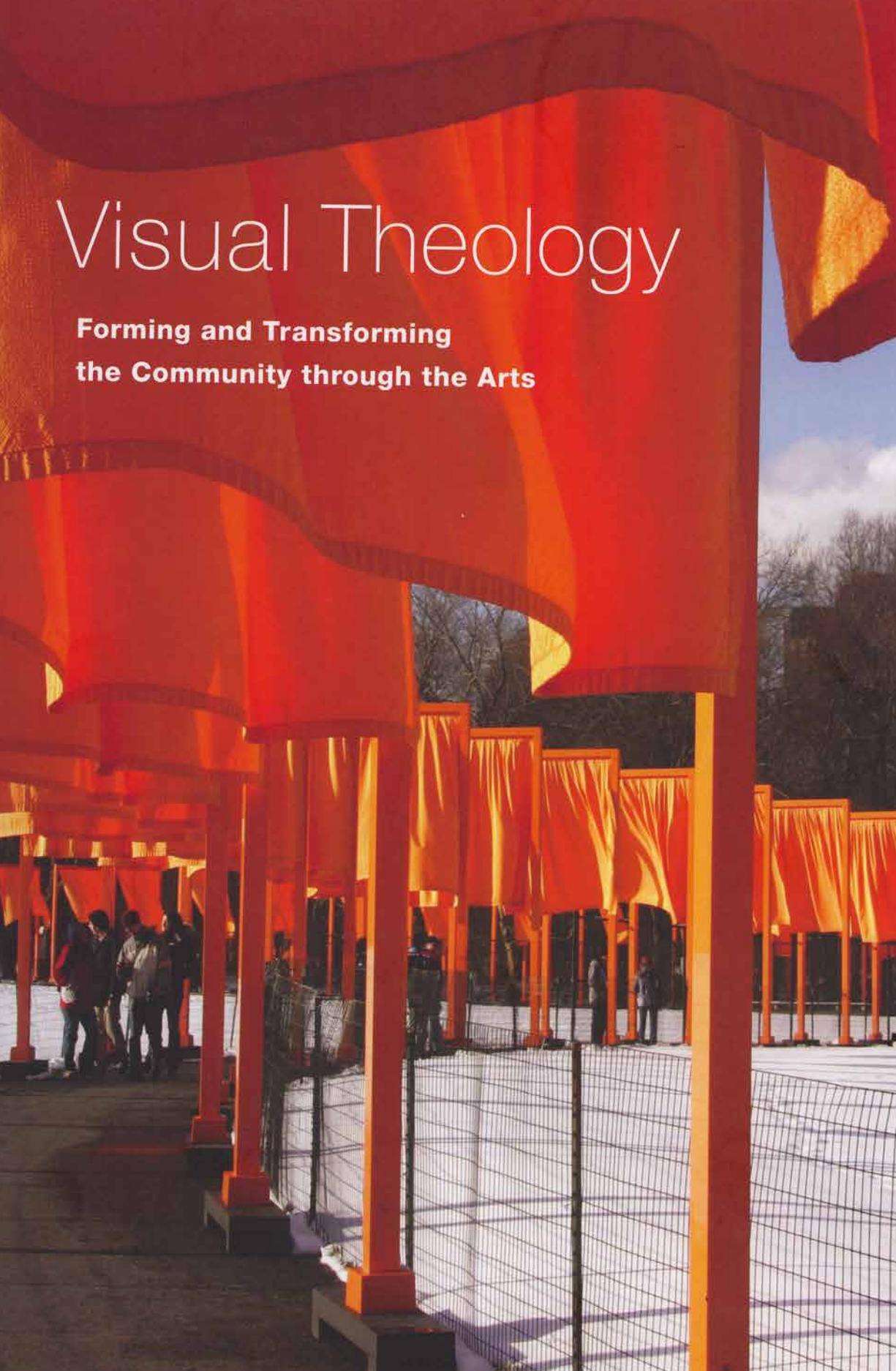
Visual Theology

Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts



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Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts

Edited by
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A Michael Glazier Book

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ABANDON
hope

Deborah J. Haynes

Theology in Stone

Introduction

In his book *The Arts in Theological Education*, Wilson Yates offered a comprehensive framework for understanding the interrelationship of the arts, theology, and religion. Though written from a theologian's perspective, his book offered me enormous insight about how to define my artistic aspirations. In other publications I have examined the usefulness of his interpretation of theology of the arts to artists.[1] In this essay I expand on Yates's brief discussion of "art as religion" to explore the meaning and significance of my visual art. Specifically, I explore how eight stone sculptures completed since 2000 express my religious and theological values.

In his reflections about art as religion, Yates acknowledges that art is idolatrous if and when it becomes an object of ultimate loyalty and concern. But when art-making and appreciation of art are the symbolic means for experiencing the holy, we might modestly and carefully speak of art *as* religion.[2] To speak of art as theology is somewhat more

[1] Deborah J. Haynes, *Art Lessons: Meditations on the Creative Life* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003), 167–76; eadem, "The Place of Art," in *Art, Theology & the Church: New Intersections*, ed. Kimberly Vrudny and Wilson Yates, 158–76 (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

[2] Wilson Yates, *The Arts in Theological Education: New Possibilities for Integration* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 136–37.

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"ABANDON HOPE," detail of *The Hope Stone*, 2004–2005
Jamestown, Colorado. Colorado Yule Marble, 5' tall, 2' x 2' at base, diameter varies. Photograph: Valari Jack.

difficult, except when a broad definition of theology such as Yates's is applied: "[Theology is] that aspect of religion that shapes and defines the heart of what is meant by religious experience, commitment and meaning."[3] Still, the shared ground of art and theology, or the convergence of studio practice and theological reflection, is hardest to articulate "when the artist expresses through acts of artistic creativity, deep religious passion that is unrelated to the orthodoxy of historical traditions."[4] This is precisely how I see my present work in marble.

Perhaps the most direct way to describe my studio art is this: I work at the intersection of the contemplative and the ecological. My contemplative practice includes yoga asana and pranayama, walking and sitting meditation, prayer, drawing, and stonecarving. My ecological values are strongly linked to what I would term a philosophy of place.[5] Place is an ontological category: it defines us, as I will try to show in what follows.

I am a thoroughly postmodern artist, yet my practice of carving words in marble is related to premodern work in historical sites from the Samothracian sanctuary to Sardis, where stone inscriptions provide us with knowledge about the ancient past. While contemporary artists such as Ian Hamilton Finlay, Jenny Holzer, and Maya Lin have used carved words in their work to express broadly religious values, they do not undertake the carving themselves. However, neither the past nor the work of such contemporary artists is my focus here. Rather, I am engaged in the present as it moves into the future.

In 1998, my longtime companion and I purchased a one-acre parcel of land adjacent to a creek in Jamestown, Colorado, located in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The site was known as Ivydell for many years because of a small wooden sign that hung over the cabin's front door, but I have come to identify it simply as "*[THIS]* Place." Besides the house, there are four other structures, as well as an underground space that was once a root cellar. Here I have planted gardens, created a circumambulation path, and established a stoneyard, where I work

[3] Ibid., 103.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Edward S. Casey's books provide the single best introduction to the philosophy of place. See especially *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); The *Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); *Representing Place: Landscape Painting and Maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); and *Earthmapping: Artists Reshaping Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

on large and small marble sculptures. In general I find my way intuitively. I have not laid out a plan for how the series of stones will evolve at Ivydell. Rather, I let the work evolve through musing, and through encountering particular stones in Marble, Colorado, which is the site of one of this country's major marble quarries.

Stone as Presence

Stone, with its massiveness and seeming imperviousness, is a bulwark against transience; it is perhaps the greatest symbol of permanence.[6] There are many precedents for stone in the landscape, both historical and contemporary. From the sixth century BCE the Celts erected various forms of stone structures. Ancient menhirs (from *maen* = stone and *hir* = long) stand in the landscape. Dolmens are megalithic tombs where three or four upright stones support a massive capstone. In the Burren, a rocky region of western Ireland, stands the famous Poulnabroune dolmen, with its thirteen-by-six-by-ten-foot capstone that rests on three stones, each five to seven feet high.

Other standing stones and stone circles had astronomical and topographical significance. For instance, the Standing Stones of Callanish on the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides have long puzzled archaeologists and astronomers, although there is now consensus that they seem to define lunar and solar alignments. The Greek historian Diodorus Siculus referred to these stones in a first-century BCE classical text. Callanish contains a small stone circle, which is impressive because of its tall central stone and well-preserved avenues.

Further examples can be seen in the Ring of Brodgar and the Stones of Stenness in the Orkney Islands. Originally erected in the early third millennium BCE, they have never been thoroughly excavated. However, archaeological research has shown that the site may have been used for ceremonial purposes as well as lunar observation. Mostly these stones are undecorated, but there are a few Norse runes. Elsewhere in the Orkneys, Pictish symbol stones and other stones containing the ogam alphabet, which is unintelligible, seem to have served a variety of functions—they are tombstones, personal memorial markers, land markers showing territorial boundaries, or public monuments commemorating important events.

[6] Peg Streep, *Sanctuaries of the Goddess: The Sacred Landscape and Objects* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994), 105.

Stones can mark the symbolic center, as in the omphalus, stupa, or chorten of various mythological and religious traditions. Stone forms the majority of the material of the earth, though some would say that stone is simply the densest form of spirit. And stone, unlike other materials such as wood, common sense tells us, will be here well into the foreseeable future. From my point of view the future will be shaped by our understanding of and engagement in particular communities and specific places, and stone offers an invitation to reflect intentionally about these matters.

[THIS] *PLACE*

[THIS] PLACE is a five-foot tall standing stone, a symbol for my decision to "become native to this place"—a term I learned from Wes Jackson, who runs the Land Institute in central Kansas. My ancestral family, like many other typically "American" families, suffers from a profoundly peripatetic background. We were immigrants from Ireland and England, Germany and the old Czechoslovakia, settling first in Vermont and California, then in South Dakota, Nebraska, and Washington. I have lived in three states in the Pacific Northwest and two in New England. Now I reside in Colorado, far from the Pacific Ocean that helped to define my understanding of landscape and place as a young person.

My effort to come home, to find and be in a place, is related to what Jean-François Lyotard called "the postmodern condition" in his 1984 book of that title. It is, by now, a truism to observe that most of our lives are fragmented and decentered, that many of us suffer from feelings of restlessness and displacement. The speed of our lives, with pervasive multitasking and continuously interrupted attention, has a tremendous impact on our ability to be present in a place, any place. Our lives are lived with "neon vision," because the light of modern life and modern consciousness is so severe and insistent.[7]

Ours is an intense and visually aggressive age in which everything is drawn outward toward the sensation of the image. As cultures become networked and homogenized, images can become, or at least seem to become, universal. Our incredibly subtle and powerfully calculating media industry fosters a sense of dislocation, ignoring what is deep and

[7] John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara, Soul Friend* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1997), 109.

silent in us. We suffer from stress not only because of what we do but because there is so little silence, solitude, and being in place.[8]

TEMENOS

One of the first stones I carved, TEMENOS is a large, wedge-shaped stone with an undulating surface. In Greek, *temenos* means sacred precinct, and it is linked to other English words such as temple and contemplation. In 1980 and 1981 I had used natural materials to create ritual spaces in two *temenos* gallery installations in Oregon and Idaho. At Ivydell, too, I seek to create a space for devotional ritual, including meditation and prayer. The TEMENOS stone sits at the entrance to the medicinal garden, which contains approximately fifty different plants. This garden is traversed by a section of the circumambulation path.

What do the elements of nature teach us? Patience, adaptability, and flowingness. They tell us about cycles, the role of dormancy, order, and, more than anything else, the paradox of opposites. Nature is predictable, but mutable. It is ordered, yet adaptable. We only learn its lessons through observation and contemplation; and for these we need solitude and silence.

Writing these words while sitting in the garden, I hear an unusual chirping. I look across the creek to an old dying willow just in time to see two red-naped sapsuckers mating. The male's wing feathers are fully expanded. The female flies off and the male pokes his head, then his whole body, into a hole in the dead trunk. Perhaps this will be their nest, but all I see are quavering tail-feathers.

Do such experiences matter? I think so. Carol Lee Sanchez describes the Navajo "Beauty Way," which is a philosophy of living in direct relationship to land and place.[9] The Beauty Way poses many questions for reflection, and the answers to these questions have consequences. Who lived here in the recent and distant past, and what is their history? From whence did those people migrate, and how did they get here? What are the prominent landmarks, and what was and is their significance? What plants and animals live in the bioregion? What has changed since human habitation had its effects? What are the spirits of the place? How is it possible to be in direct relation to both the physical

[8] Ibid., 141–42.

[9] Carol Lee Sanchez, "Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral: The Sacred Connection," in *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams, 226–27 (New York: Continuum, 1993).

place and its spirits? I consider such questions to be of deep religious and theological import.

The Vocation of the Artist Is the Reclamation of the Future

In my 1997 book *The Vocation of the Artist* I argued that "the artist is a self-critically engaged agent in particular situations, calling for reclamation of the sacred and the future in a world that seems in many ways to be dying."[10] Here at Ivydell I am trying to give this proposition life. This long phrase is carved onto a bench overlooking the medicinal garden. Reclaiming the future means, in part, becoming and being grounded in place, using the various knowledges—ecological, geological, geographical, historical, and environmental, as well as the study of color and form in the sky, the earth, the water—in order to get to know a place.

To speak of reclamation of the future is to speak of paradox. To me this phrase means thinking and acting, even in the face of profound challenges, *as if* there will be a future. Reclamation of the future is a multifaceted task involving prophetic criticism, visionary imagination, creativity, and hope. My basic assumption is that our planet is dying, at least as we know it.

I know such a claim is controversial, but I see this where I live. There is less biodiversity. For instance, the evening grosbeaks no longer return to Boulder, though I usually see a few in Jamestown. The trees are dying, or being stripped from mountainsides, or a favored few are farmed, as on the Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. Contamination of the earth, air, and water continues unabated. Climate change, including increasing drought in Colorado, is pervasive. As Elizabeth Kolbert wrote, "It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing."[11] In the face of these processes, reclaiming the future means acting as if the future mattered.

Dona nobis otium sanctum

"Give Us Holy Leisure." These words, in Latin, are carved on a thick slab of marble that lies beside the creek. It is a prayer, but I do not

[10] Deborah J. Haynes, *The Vocation of the Artist* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 20–29.

[11] Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Climate of Man—III: What Can Be Done," *The New Yorker* (9 May 2005), 63. The first two parts of the essay are in the April 25, 2005 and May 2, 2005 issues.

address a divine other here. Holy leisure, like the Jewish Shabbat, is not given by someone else but is actively chosen.

I first began thinking seriously about the Sabbath in 1994 when I lived for a year at Harvard University's Center for the Study of World Religions.[12] Down the hall was Immanuel Etkes, an eminent Israeli historian from whom I learned much about the struggles in Israel. Downstairs was an Orthodox rabbi, and I got to know another rabbi from New York quite well. All three shared the practice of the Sabbath, and I not only observed their habits but also was occasionally invited to participate in Saturday conviviality. I was working on *The Vocation of the Artist* at that time, and I began to read about the impact of new technologies and life under the influence of the ubiquitous screen, which have contributed to changes in the pace and speed of our lives. In the years since then I have published a number of articles exploring these themes. Through this process of reflection and writing I developed a profound sensitivity to and critical appraisal of the physical and social impacts of digital technology.

Simultaneously I have asked: Where is the stillness and outer silence that can aid us in developing awareness and mindfulness? How might we foster the virtues of kindness, compassion, and equanimity? Those qualities do not *arrive* in consciousness. They must be cultivated, stewarded carefully like the garden of medicinal plants I tend at 7000 feet.

Holy leisure provides the time and space for this process, in part because it allows time and space for profound seeing. For instance, I carved sans serif Roman letters on the DONA stone, but over the years the corners of the letters are developing serifs through the erosion caused by sun and water. The stone is alive, transforming practically before my eyes, just as ice that hugs the stones in the stream melts in the early morning sun.

THE SISTERS

Almost immediately after moving to Ivydell I began to gravitate toward a small grove of nine willow trees. The area seemed like a *fidmenid*, the Celtic word for a sacred place among the trees. I began clearing out the detritus and pulled over two ten-foot-long fallen tree limbs to demarcate a boundary. Over several years I have developed this area into an outdoor sanctuary. A bell, designed by Paolo Soleri, hangs

[12] See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Cleveland: World, 1963), and Emil L. Fackenheim, *What is Judaism? An Interpretation for the Present Age* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 200–204.

from a tree at the threshold, which is defined by a wedge of marble blackened by years of acid rain and pollen falling from aspen trees. This particular stone had lain under trees for decades near the marble quarry. The words, "THE SISTERS," now glisten white and bright against that dark gray background.

Besides the fact that they define a *fidmenid*, I was drawn to these trees because I saw one day that they resembled female bodies upside down in the earth. To be among them when the wind blows, when the leaves are falling, or during the first snow of late fall is magical. There I understand fully that nature is alive, and that life and death are a continuum.

The stump of one small tree has become a chair, and I created a seat against two other tree trunks from which to face directly into the rising sun on the winter solstice. A large marble slab resembles a low bed. I lie down there, communing with the trees. I undertake the ritual practice of loving-kindness with a simple prayer, called *metta* in the southeast Asian Theravadan Buddhist traditions and *maitri* in Tibetan practice. The text on the stone presses into my back:

> May you be filled with lovingkindness
> May you be well
> May you be peaceful and at ease
> May you be happy.

Eventually I want to build a stone enclosure around this space, which now has a red floor made from locally quarried sandstone.

WATER

Carved from a sixty-pound scrap of marble filled with churt, WATER rests on the creekbed, where it is under water part of the year and on dry ground for a few months. Often I sit at the edge of the James Creek, watching the play of light and form, listening to the sounds. I have sat on the DONA stone for hours, observing the actual movement of water over the stone, drawing. But the ice most captivates me. It grows and recedes with the rise and fall of autumn, winter, and early spring temperatures. I love spring ice the most: how it wraps around rocks or teeters on the tip of a stone outcropping. I have observed its formation and dissolution, learned of its hexagonal molecular structure, and tried to draw its ever-changing flow.

From Ivydell and around the town of Jamestown, I can see about 12,000 acres of our watershed, which flows down from Mitchell Lake, high in the Colorado Rockies. I have been concerned about overuse and

destruction of our precious non-renewable resources and about pollution of the water, from aquifers to mountain streams and the oceans, since the mid-1970s. Watching the seasonal rising and falling of the creek in Jamestown has caused heightened awareness of the fragile balance of precipitation and dryness. Climatologists now predict that this particular watershed is endangered by our present drought, which worries me. WATER is a constant reminder of the preciousness of this element for sustaining life.

HOPE

The HOPE stone is another five-foot-tall monolith. It has four irregular faces: two with text, two with etched surface drawings. On one of those faces, six-inch letters that read ABANDON HOPE have two literary references (see illustration 27, page 120). As a teenager, I memorized the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and especially loved his *Four Quartets*. Lines in "East Coker" about hope, love, and faith have stayed with me for years. These virtues must be cultivated through stillness rather than activity, through waiting rather than grasping.

Hope obviously implies a special relationship to and consciousness of time. Hope is visionary, not in the sense that it sees what will be. Hope affirms the future *as if* it sees what will be. Hope, as Gabriel Marcel wrote, "aims at reunion, at recollection, at reconciliation: in that way and in that way alone, it might be called a memory of the future."[13]

Another source for this text is the writing of Atisha, an eleventh-century Buddhist teacher whose slogans have been popularized by Pema Chodron, among others. One slogan states, "Abandon any hope of fruition."[14] As long as we want things to change, or as long as we are oriented toward the future, we can never relax with what is. Thinking about the past (wishing it had not happened in a particular way) or thinking about the future (hoping for something specific to happen) keeps us from experiencing the present moment. "ABANDON HOPE" means, to me, entering into an unconditional relationship with myself, the world, and other persons in the present.

The other face with text reads PRACTICE JOYFUL EXERTION AND PATIENCE (see illustration 28, page 130). This phrase alludes to

[13] Gabriel Marcel, "Sketch of a Phenomenology and Metaphysic of Hope," in idem, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1952), 53.

[14] Pema Chodron, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings* (Boston: Shambhala, 2002), 149.

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"PRACTICE JOYFUL EXERTION & PATIENCE," detail of *The Hope Stone*, 2004–2005
Jamestown, Colorado. Colorado Yule Marble, 5' tall, 2' x 2' at base, diameter varies. Photograph: Valari Jack.

the Buddhist *paramitas*, virtues that define six ways of compassionate living in both our daily and spiritual lives. They include generosity, discipline, patience, joyful exertion, meditation, and unconditional wisdom. *Paramita* is a Sanskrit word that means, literally, "gone to the other shore." While it is possible to treat them as a rigid code of ethics or list of rules, the power of these virtues lies in the way they challenge habits and habitual responses and help us to change.[15]

[15] Ibid., 129–30.

I always say that I have been impatient since I learned to walk. It has therefore been a part of my contemplative practice to learn patience in the midst of my and others' activity. As I was carving the ampersand and the word "patience," I had an experience that epitomized this idea. Using the pneumatic chisel to cut the curves of the "C," I suddenly ran into a grainy vein of stone that crumbled. Before I realized what had happened, I had cut an "O." Irritated beyond reason, I recognized immediately the irony that I was carving the word "patience."

PRACTICE JOYFUL EXERTION is more complex, as it instructs us to undertake all activities—from the mundane to the most profound—with the same equanimity. Zen Buddhists say, "you've had your dinner, now wash your dishes." I endeavor to maintain such a demeanor in all activities.

Path as Metaphor

If stone itself functions as a powerful presence in the landscape, then path is the dominant metaphor for my work at Ivydell. A circumambulation path that meanders around the boundaries of the site connects the stones I have just described, along with a number of others. I use the path and the stones that punctuate it as an integral part of my contemplative practice, aspiring to walk the path daily, stopping to speak the texts, imbibing their wisdom. I undertake this ritual as a form of meditation.

One of my goals over the past decades has been to understand, or at least to reflect about, the links between personal death and the social and planetary disintegration we are presently experiencing. According to the model of encountering death publicized widely by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her collaborators in the 1970s, people go through stages of denial and anger before arriving at acceptance of their condition. Many of us are clearly in a stage of planetary denial about what is happening around us. If we are dying as a species, then is the most appropriate response to inculcate acceptance? Does one deal with the issue of denial first, with a campaign of confrontation? Or does one rant angrily about our cultural necrophilia? An artist might present and re-present inner-city violence and environmental devastation, to name but two aspects of this death-loving and death-seeking compulsion. But a more creative approach would be to promote biophilia or love of life in all of its manifestations.

This is my religious and theological passion—my path—and this is what I am doing now, here, at *[THIS]* Place.