

Not everybody must get stoned

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Mountains teach many things, one of which is that nothing lasts, not even stone.

Some mountain ranges -- like the Himalayas -- are still getting higher as the tectonic plates beneath them work against each other. But the Appalachians outside my window are done with that adolescent growth spurt.

These mountains have been getting smaller for millennia. Some geologists think the very old Appalachians were once higher than the very young Himalayas. Today, only a handful of Appalachian peaks poke above 6,000 feet.

Geologists seem to agree that when all the continents were one mass, the Appalachians were the central segment of a single range that connected Morocco's Atlas Mountains and the Caledonians in Scotland and Norway. I'll go along with this crowd.

Several hundred million years of wind, rain, ice and gravity have weathered the Appalachians down to their current size.

I forget that erosion works all the time on even impervious surfaces...until I can't remember where I parked.

Still, stone is our choice for marking graves, and those we consider heroes get a statue of marble or granite.

I began writing this column on the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., because I was disgusted with the new scowling, arms-crossed statue of him that now looms in West Potomac Park in Washington, D.C.

Hulking, it is, 30 feet tall, and tubby as the Michelin Man. But it's much smaller than his life.

Sculptor Lei Yixin has made his living carving memorials for the government of the People's Republic of China. It shows.

Those, like King, who live and practice non-violent civil disobedience are optimists. They trust that sufficient sacrifice will eventually appeal to the better nature of their opponents and convince those sitting on the sidelines. They have no other way of winning.

Impatience motivates them; it doesn't define them.

I find no optimism, no confidence in the future, no hope in this chunk of rock called "The Stone of Hope."

King is now fixed in stone forever as a frowning scold when once he was stoned for walking down a Chicago street.

Rock, I think, is a poor medium to celebrate a life, particularly one that both stayed a course and broadened in direction. It's not easy to capture King's humanity in white granite—his complexity, contradictions, mistakes, wisdom, inspiration, evolution and sustained courage.

I can't think of another stone monument that gets its subject so not quite right. It's worse than the lifeless Mount Rushmore --Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt -- which is no more than what it is—massive.

(This hunk of South Dakota granite, incidentally, was named as an off-hand joke for Charles Edward Rushmore, a young lawyer representing New York and English investors in the mid-1880s, who had been sent to tramp the Black Hills to buy options on tin deposits for the short-lived Harney Tin Company.)

Stone statues can convey emotion. The seated Lincoln made of Georgia white marble shows more than contemplation. The Confederate *bas-relief* at Stone Mountain, Ga., finds inspiration in mounted movement.

Not to be left out, Highland County has its own stone statute. A Confederate soldier in Italian marble stands on a pedestal in front of our courthouse facing North, his left hand at his hat brim, watching alertly for Yankees. Our Monument was dedicated in 1919, which may explain why he holds a WWI rifle. He frowns every time I say hello.

The thing about stone is that once something is set in it, change is hard.

In the Lincoln Memorial, "WITH HIGH HOPE FOR THE FUTURE" was cut and still stands as "WITH HIGH HOPE FOR THE EUTURE." Ooops.

The only guys I know who erect themselves as statues are dictators. Americans prefer to do up our presidents as libraries.

I'm glad that we are stingy when it comes to statues, because they suit so few of us. And then there are times when we forget a person who should not be forgotten.

Jonas Salk, whose killed-virus vaccine stopped polio, never received a Nobel Prize or even elected membership in the National Academy of Sciences. His work saved countless lives and spared even more from crippling paralysis.

The Jonas Salk Institute for Biological Studies, which continues basic medical and scientific research into human diseases, is a far better monument to him than a statue.

Salk, incidentally, thought it unseemly to make money from doing good work well. When asked who held the patent on his polio vaccine, he said: “There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?”

Words carry more weight than stone.

Words and deeds outlast rock, though all three are subject to erosion.

Words and deeds—that’s why King is remembered.

I don’t think I’d like to be cast in either granite or marble. But if anyone’s thinking seriously about this, I prefer to be stoned out with more hair and fewer pounds. Just a suggestion.

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