"My father devised a unique form of punishment for boys who defied his paternal authority ..."

INFLATING THE STONE

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Money is a thing, an abstraction, and a symbol. According to general semantics, which is concerned with use of symbols, we can describe money as any of the above, depending on our purpose.

This story involves a curious practice in my family. In certain circumstances, our "money" was the stone.

When I was a boy, we moved from Massachusetts to the Bahamas. We sailed among the islands and built a home on wild and remote windblown scrub beside the sea. To help provide materials, my brothers and I carried large stones from the ocean beach up a sand dune to the building site. In burning sun and sweltering humidity, hauling heavy stones was hard and sweaty toil. The dune was steep, we sank to our ankles in sand, and sometimes slid down a step for each step up. We worked with enthusiasm, as we vied for who could carry the heaviest stone. Arriving at the top of the ridge, gasping with exertion, tired but gratified, we threw down our stones and faced the ocean to savor the cooling breeze. Then we ran down the dune for another load. Later, our labor done, we hacked open green coconuts, collapsed in the shade of a palm tree and drank the sweet coconut juice. Overhead, palm fronds click-click-clicked in the wind.

We came to dread what had been fun. We also enjoyed spasms of hate for the source of our misery — our father. The joy of hating was compromised by

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guilt. An ardent artist who reveled in his genius for eccentric inventions, my father devised a unique form of punishment for boys who defied his paternal authority: the stone fine.

I can’t recall what crime led to this newfangled form of retribution or who committed it. Perhaps it was a minor mutiny by my teenage brother Bill. As eldest, he often bore the brunt of my father’s efforts to discipline his unruly crew. The short drama probably went like this:

Father: “Do what I say.”
Son: “Do it yourself.”
Father: “That’s a one-stone fine.”
Son (incredulously): “What?”
Father (sternly): “Go to the ocean beach and carry one of those big stones up to the house site.”
Son (stubbornly): “I won’t.”
Father (with satisfaction): “You’re fined another two stones!”

My father seemed pleased with his brainchild. I imagine it appealed to his appetite for getting something for nothing. He needed stones for building our house. On this isolated island, materials and labor were hard to get. As he studied our reactions, his wild hair was splayed out like seaweed in a hurricane, and a foxy smile lurked behind his graying beard.

None of us anticipated the tortuous consequences of my father’s magisterial decree.

My father loved to boast, “We live on a desert island.”

Even after I grew up, I took exception to this assertion. Our island wasn’t absolutely deserted. Near us lived the lighthouse family, although there was no one else for miles. The island also had several faraway settlements, one of which we sailed to for food, supplies, and mail. Admittedly, we lived on a neck of land called Little Harbour that was separated from the nearest habitation by almost impenetrable jungle and mangrove swamp, and it took nearly a day to sail to the village where we obtained basic necessities. However, I craved verbal certainty. I knew my father was bending the truth.

A sculptor of the romantic persuasion, my father created his life as if he were sculpting his own personal work of art. He lived, for the most part happily, in a world of his own, perhaps a useful strategy when you consider the negative worlds some want us to embrace. However, the consequences of his choices sometimes upset wife and children, especially when his artistic renderings approached the surreal.

My father grew up in the early 1900s in the city of Toronto and in the wilds of Midwestern Canada. His father homesteaded land in Alberta that had “never
seen the plow.” The winters were bitterly cold. My father had a card game with pictures of pirates in tropical settings. From these images, he developed a dream of sailing tropical seas and living on a desert island, a dream that he actually fulfilled. Unlike Gauguin, he took his family with him. My mother, an artist also, cherished her own unique slice of rebellion against bourgeois restrictions, but when it was decided we would move to the tropics, she bought an evening dress to wear for cocktails on deck. She imagined a much grander life-style than my father’s back-to-nature ideal would provide.

In the early 1950s my father bought a three-masted schooner. He took a sabbatical from his post as Art Professor at Smith College. Our family would sail our schooner to the south seas. Before we could depart, a hurricane swept north and sank our schooner, which was moored in Essex, Connecticut. Considering that my father’s boating experience was limited to sailing small craft or canoeing on Lake Ontario, and that the rest of us landlubbers had no sailing experience at all, the hurricane may have saved our lives.

The sinking of our schooner was followed by serious dinnertime discussions in our converted New England farmhouse. We filled up shipping crates and the family car, tied on top a battered dinghy that had survived the hurricane, and drove to Florida. We took a plane and then a cargo boat to the Abaco Islands in the Bahamas. In those days, this area was undeveloped. Most outer islands had no electricity, no running water, no motor vehicles, no doctors, no television, no supermarkets, and no telephones. Mail and supplies arrived once a week by boat from Nassau, weather permitting.

Soon after we arrived, my mother got polio, and spent months in the hospital in Nassau. When she rejoined us, she couldn’t walk, but my parents decided not to give up their search for a new life. They felt the warm climate and the swimming would help her recover.

My father bought a 47-foot wooden boat and converted her to a “schooner,” guided by his beautiful drawing of a romantic-looking craft with tall masts and gaff-rigged red sails. He carved a bas-relief scrolled nameplate for the stern, which had taffrails much like the rococo balustrades on the poop deck of a pirate ship. Out in a dinghy, learning to scull, I’d hear his cheerful whistling across the water: Gilbert and Sullivan songs, accompanied by the knock of mallet and chisel as he carved a wooden figurehead to go beneath Langosta’s long high bowsprit. He liked to sing, “For I am a Pirate King. Hurrah for our Pirate King. And it is, it is a glorious thing, to be a Pirate King.”

Our boat’s name, Langosta, is Spanish for lobster. She’d been built by William H. Albury, a master-boat builder much respected among wooden boat aficionados. Before we bought Langosta, a local family had used her as a motor vessel to export crawfish, warm-water lobsters that have no claws, to Florida.
We moved aboard before conversion was completed and living conditions were primitive. Our isolation from boat-building suppliers caused problems. As the shipwrights worked their adzes on a native pine tree intended for the mainmast, they discovered rotten wood. My father watched them continue their exploratory surgery, his face dark with worry. By the time the bad wood was cut away, the log was shorter than the existing forward mast. We wound up with a ketch rig, which has the shorter of two masts toward the stern.

The ketch *Langosta*, before conversion to a “schooner.”

We failed to build a *schooner*, which was far more desirable because of its romantic associations with clippers and tall ships, at least in my father’s eyes.

Eventually, unhappy at owning a mere ketch, my father added a topmast to the aft mast, technically called the mizzen mast. He then renamed the mizzen mast the “mainmast” (which we pronounced “mainmust”) and he declared that the real mainmast was now the “foremast.” Therefore, we now had a schooner.

I felt this was cheating, another artistic distortion of the truth, a habit of my father’s that often left me embarrassed, suspicious, or scared. To me, a thing was or it wasn’t, and *Langosta* wasn’t a schooner.
Looking back, I wonder if my father’s tendency to remake the world into what he wanted by changing our descriptions of it (and the occasional ill-effects of this) has encouraged my enthusiasm for general semantics. This discipline cautions us that words alone don’t change the external world. It has helped me deal with my own misevaluations and dysfunctions. Just because Hamlet claimed, “... there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” doesn’t mean the universe works that way. My father would quote Keats: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” We might have added, “Truth is what I say it is.” I still struggle with my homegrown habit of re-categorizing the world in a way I find more comfortable, rather than trying to understand the territory through rigorous, and possibly unpleasant, maps.

My brothers and I also manipulated symbols, especially in response to the snowballing family institution of the stone fine, which seemed a better deterrent than cutting allowances, or getting mad and yelling like hell, also known as “the Old Man’s blown his top again.” We honed the art of verbal skullduggery to weasel out of chores or escape a predecessor of the stone fine, the captain’s corporeal punishment called “the rope’s end,” a knotted rope applied vigorously to the outstretched hand. Despite our evasions, the supply of stones below our house site was shrinking rapidly, and we had blisters and aching muscles for our sins.

Our parents taught us to call them by their first names, “Margot” and “Ran,” not “Mom” or “Dad.” Perhaps this was another expression of their Bohemian rejection of what they saw as oppressive social norms. They wanted us to be individualists, but we still had to wash the dishes. Sometimes I wonder if our failure to verbally formalize the relationship between parent and child had a negative effect on intimacy. The question is unanswerable, I suspect.

At sea, a ship’s captain is sometimes called the “Old Man,” usually with a certain respect for his experience and rank. We occasionally used this nickname in our father’s absence, with inflections that expressed something other than admiration.

We brothers continued to run up heavy fines. There were failures to do things we should do, and the doing of things we shouldn’t do: rudeness, laziness, rebellion, swearing, inattention, etc. Orders from the Old Man such as “Wash down the deck,” “Paint that stanchion,” “Chip the rust off the kedge anchor,” “Take the garbage ashore,” “Clean up the galley,” “Furl the mainsail neatly,” “Bail out the dinghy,” were not always completed cheerfully, or at all. Such captain’s commands as “Stop fighting,” “Don’t argue with me,” or “Shut up, I’m trying to be creative,” were not necessarily followed with nautical discipline. My parents’ endeavors to cultivate free thinkers ashore in rural Massa-
chusetts did not translate well to life aboard a sailing craft, where good or bad discipline could mean life or death. We brothers could be a pretty wild bunch.

One skirmish between father and son was, perhaps, the beginning of the end for the stone fine. My younger brother Pete, who was nine or ten, had said or done something my father considered objectionable. As I remember it, we were standing on the deck of Langosta, at anchor at Little Harbour. The water, as smooth as glass, reflected an overcast sky. With no wind to keep away the vicious sand flies and mosquitoes, we’d stopped our house-building toil and fled to the Langosta, where there were somewhat fewer insects than ashore.

“That’s a one stone fine,” my father pronounced irritably, pulling on his beard.

Pete glared and swore. He swatted a mosquito.

“Another stone fine,” cried my father angrily.

Pete responded with several more colorful epithets.

“Five stones,” yelled the Old Man, tugging his beard again.

Pete shot back a volley of foul oaths explosive enough to blast a battle-hardened pirate’s parrot off its perch, feathers flying.

“Ten stones,” screamed my father, rigid with rage. “If you swear again, it’ll be another twenty.”

Pete, not one to be intimidated, slapped at a sand fly and shouted a series of profane and obscene insults that gave credit to his imagination and his vocabulary skills. Another fine was handed down. The war of wills continued. Penalties escalated. I watched, horrified by the terrible sentence my younger brother was racking up.

Eventually hostilities came to a halt, though hardly a truce, but not before Pete had run up a debt of some hundred stones. Everyone was subdued for the rest of the day, even after the wind came up and blew away the insects. Pete and I were close. We slept in Langosta’s fo’castle, where anchor chain rattled down dripping with rusty seawater when we hauled up the hook. In the fo’castle, my father would tell us complicated bedtime stories, which usually ended in a cliffhanger that required continuing the tale the next night. It depressed me to see Pete receive such cruel and horrendous punishment.

Later, Pete went beachcombing on the ocean beach. He returned with valuable flotsam. He’d found pieces of rare carnauba wax and ordinary paraffin wax. The artist in my father could not resist wax. He used mixtures of it for modeling, and to make polishes for his wood carvings. The boat owner and inventor in my father couldn’t resist wax for making his various odious and gelatinous witch’s brews for preserving canvas, rope, wire rigging, wood, and just about anything else, concoctions that often failed to dry, leaving a dirt-catching sticky residue.
On the afterdeck, tough negotiations proceeded between father and son. At their conclusion, Pete had traded his beachcombing loot for payment of his fine, plus a small credit. He was a hero. People rarely got the better of the Old Man when it came to argument or haggling over trade.

We soon capitalized on this new wheeze. We’d scour the beaches for treasures to trade for stone credits. We’d bring back cork, glass balls, hunks of asphalt, more wax, planks, rope, fishnet floats, blocks of Styrofoam, a sprouting coconut.

We hoarded stone credits against future fines. We’d argue about who owned the most credits.

“I’ve got twenty stone credits.”

“I’ve got thirty stone credits.”

“No you haven’t, yesterday you only had nineteen.”

“This morning I found a metal mooring buoy.”

My father let us keep track of our stone credits, perhaps as part of his belief in encouraging us to develop a sense of responsibility. As far as I know, we did not betray his trust in this regard.

As we each built up enormous stone credits, the effectiveness of stone fines diminished as a deterrent. We no longer feared having to carry big stones up the dune. With such wealth, we could even afford to be deliberately disobedient. The amount of individual fines rose and kept on rising. Inflation ran wild.

The system of stone fines lost its momentum. The supply of suitable stones on the beach ran out. Our house was built. Perhaps we boys developed more self discipline. Our parents let us take Langosta on trips for mail and supplies while they stayed ashore. We took this duty seriously. The voyage required negotiating treacherous inlets, reefs, and the occasional dangerous storm. Returning to harbor brought a sense of accomplishment and relief. We felt proud to be captain and crew of a big two-masted sailing craft, even if she wasn’t really a schooner.

One by one, we boys left the island to seek experience in the wider world. Later, as adults, my brothers would return.

My mother slowly recovered from polio and was able to walk again, although she had difficulty with stairs. My parents swam almost every day, before returning to their studios near the beach. On their isolated island, my parents began selling their bronzes and ceramics to visiting yachters. Over the years, my father produced a vast collection of sculpture, as he achieved the success that had eluded him on the mainland. He sold to individual patrons, he created life-size statues and a memorial for the Bahamas Government, a memorial to a benefactor of Texas Christian University, and a large group called “Saint Peter as Fisher of Men,” which was presented to Pope John Paul II.
Although many pieces were lyrical and uplifting, his anti-war sculptures were dark, pessimistic, and frightening. His book, *Artist on His Island: A Study in Self-Reliance*, was published by Noyes Press in 1975. An article about him by Anne Fadiman, “Randolph Johnston: Cellini Meets Crusoe,” appeared in the June 1986 *Life*.

In this tale, I have discussed two types of symbol inflation. One was the inflation of the stone fine, which resulted from exchanging the toil of hauling stones for the pleasure of beachcombing. The other was a more subtle inflation that arose from the practice of re-mapping the territory in ways we found more comfortable, for example, my father’s use of the words “schooner” and “desert island,” and my own struggles to avoid what we might call *comfort re-mapping*. As inflation eroded the stone fine, it no longer functioned as a symbol of parental authority and the hated drudgery that parents could inflict on us, and this rendered the fine virtually useless. The manipulation of descriptions for our own purposes created false views of the world that sometimes lead to illusions, misevaluations, or dangerous errors.

I won’t project our adventure in an alternative penal system onto a broader canvas, such as the effectiveness of fines as a deterrent for white-collar crime. I’ll leave further analysis to others, who might also explore the effects on our lives of re-mapping the territory to suit our own comfort or needs. Perhaps future investigations will help us reduce those mistakes that are analogous to inflating the stone.