

Smashed Pots

This is a tale about restitution. From a moral perspective, I think most of us would agree that we ought to return things that we've stolen to their rightful owner. But what if the objects at issue have no aesthetic or economic value, and the people you took them from have been dead for several hundred years? Let me pose the question more precisely: Is it morally required to return pottery fragments that you've taken from an ancient garbage heap? And if, in fact, such a duty exists, just how much effort does a good conscience require of us?

For 25 years, in the back of our bedroom closet, my wife, Anne, and I kept a cardboard box stuffed with shards of old pottery. We had stolen them in 1973 when we were living in Lower Greasewood, a Navajo settlement in northeastern Arizona, where I was a doctor at a U.S. Public Health Service clinic. Despite the undependability of our Jeep, we loved to spend weekends exploring the beautiful high desert and canyon country. We often spent our evenings poring over U.S. Geological Survey maps and planning our next trip. Ruins off the beaten track were among our most enticing destinations. One day we discovered that the abandoned Hopi village of Awatovi was very close to Lower Greasewood.

But to make any sense of this story, you need to know something about Hopi history. The Hopi and their ancestors have lived on the high steppe of the Colorado Plateau for more than 2000 years, while their Navajo neighbors arrived in the area only 100 or so years before the Spanish. Because their country lay far to the west of the Rio Grande River, the Hopi managed to avoid Spanish domination much longer than most of the other pueblo peoples. In fact, it wasn't until the 1690s that a couple of wandering priests stumbled upon Awatovi, the easternmost Hopi village. Apparently, the priests were quite successful in Awatovi. Its people were so receptive to the Christian message that many accepted baptism, even in the absence of the military threat that usually accompanied it. The Hopi willingly constructed a church in their ancient village. In fact, so many people in Awatovi converted to Christianity that the kiva societies were depleted, and there was no one left to perform the cycle of ceremonies that kept the rains coming and the land fertile. Thus, the old religion died. Unfortunately, this religious lapse occurred at exactly the same time that a major drought began, and the Hopi faced several years without life-giving rain.

In the spring of 1700, leaders from the other Hopi villages met to discuss the drought. They believed that, by abandoning the traditional ceremonies, the people in Awatovi had disrupted the delicate balance of the universe. The Awatovi villagers had angered the rain and fertility deities who, in turn, had withheld their favor. This was an emergency that called for drastic action. They could get rid of the priests and tear down the church, but that might not

be enough to restore harmony. The leaders decided that it would be better to err on the safe side by destroying the entire village and eliminating the source of further imbalance. Consequently, on an appointed night, warriors gathered outside of Awatovi and staged a surprise attack. They killed the men, kidnapped the women and children, and set the village on fire.

This murderous treatment was evidently effective. The deities were propitiated, and the long drought ended. The cautionary tale of Awatovi circulated, *sotto voce*, within Hopi secret societies from one generation to the next. The ruined pueblo was not reestablished, and its land was not cultivated. It remained at the back of Hopi consciousness, a desolate and morally ambiguous site. And for 200 years, Christian missionaries were told to stay out of Hopi territory.

In midsummer 1973, the country was dry and endlessly dusty. Anne and I turned off the main road at Antelope Mesa, which at that time was part of a "joint-use area," or buffer zone, between the Navajo and Hopi reservations. We had little trouble following the tracks indicated on our map and we arrived at Awatovi, sited on a rocky outcrop overlooking the Painted Desert, in time to eat lunch. Physically, the ruin was disappointing: scattered remnants of houses, collapsed walls, and 2 or 3 suggestions of kivas. Not a single lintel remained standing. But Anne and I saw Awatovi as far more than low stacks of mud bricks—for us, the place set off emotional fireworks. We fantasized that we were discovering a genuine lost city! Or at least a lost village. In a peculiar sense, this was a sacred site, an outpost where Christianity and the Hopi religion had met in unfortunate and fatal conflict.

At the base of a slope below the ruin, we discovered thousands of fragments of burnt sienna-colored pottery, many with patterns of characteristic black lines. A few were substantial segments, but most of the shards were small, faded, and indistinct. At first we thought they were debris from Awatovi's destruction, but in a few minutes we realized that we were actually poking around in Awatovi's midden, or trash heap. Our treasures were rubbish. Nonetheless, we gathered as many of the best-looking shards as we were able to fit into our empty lunch sack.

Flash forward to 1998. The shards lay undisturbed in their cardboard box for 25 years. Their presence occasionally popped into my consciousness or Anne's. We'd say things like, *You know, I feel badly about having taking those shards. What thoughtless kids we were! Do you think it's given us bad karma?* But then the thoughts promptly disappeared.

However, we jumped at a chance to make amends when I received an invitation to lecture at Sage Memorial Hospital, a small health care facility in Ganado, Arizona, some 20 miles north of our old home in Lower Grease-

wood and about the same distance east of where the paved road crosses Antelope Mesa. Anne and I agreed that we'd both take the trip and, after my talks, return the shards to the scene of the crime. It shouldn't be difficult, we told ourselves, because we still had the many-folded U.S. Geological Survey map with the site marked in red ink. Thus, we flew to Albuquerque, rented a car, and drove for 4 hours to Ganado, a lovely little community nestled amid an explosion of late-spring wildflowers. Originally a Presbyterian mission, the hospital was now owned and operated by the Navajo people.

When liberation day arrived, we set out shortly after dawn into the pinyon and juniper forest. Once on the mesa, we turned south on the first dirt track that looked feasible for our rented sedan, which had that standard restriction that it shouldn't be driven on any unpaved roads. Antelope Mesa is like a hand partially flexed into a fist with its knuckles facing the Painted Desert. Much of the mesa is covered by scruffy forest that thins and peters out along the edges. I had a clear image of the outcrop where Awatovi had commanded a view to the south. On the map it sat on the first "knuckle." No problem, I thought. The maze of dotted tracks were interconnected and could eventually take us anywhere on the mesa. All we had to do was drive slowly, stop often, and cross off each track that didn't work out.

Driving slowly wasn't a problem because the car's undercarriage frequently spragged in deep ruts. We lurched and scraped all day, stopping every few minutes to get our bearings and later, to argue: *Didn't we drive across this cattle guard a couple of hours ago? I remember that dead tree beside the arroyo. No, it was a different arroyo. Rockier, I think, and deeper. No, this is the same place; we're just approaching from a different direction. But the map says . . . well, the map is wrong.*

Fortunately, we had apples and granola bars and a good supply of water. No other vehicles appeared. Some of the tracks led to Navajo camps, where we might have asked for directions, but every camp we came upon seemed to be abandoned. We reached the "exact location" of Awatovi at least 2 or 3 times. *The ruins must be off to the left . . . right there . . . no, there.* But on closer inspection, the "exact location" was wrong. As sunset approached, we were desperate to get back to the highway before it became so dark that we would be stuck until morning. Eventually Anne and I, 2 dust-covered figures, maneuvered the spragged and dented Ford into the parking lot at Cactus Café in Ganado, still carrying a box of shards in the back seat. Over meat loaf sandwiches, we discussed the situation.

"Well, we can't take them home," I said.

"But we can't leave them here," Anne insisted, in response to my suggestion that we scatter them behind the hospital.

"Look, Ganado is close enough. It's almost the same as returning them to Awatovi."

"No," she said. "This isn't where they belong."

That evening we devised a new plan. First, we found the Hopi Tribal Chairman's name and address in the telephone directory. Then we purchased cord and packing paper at the trading post and prepared the box for mailing. The next morning, we mailed it to the chairman, along with a handwritten note, confessing that we had taken the shards from the trash heap at Awatovi in 1973. We had attempted to return them, but managed to get ourselves hopelessly lost. Because we were sure the Hopi Tribal Chairman "would know what to do with them," we had decided to entrust the shards to his care.

In the years since that trip, I've imagined various scenes that might have taken place in the chairman's office when the box arrived. My favorite is the one in which the chairman is dumbstruck. Our gesture restores his faith in humanity. The next day he delivers the shards back to the midden at Awatovi in a tribal truck, taking along a Hopi medicine man to bless the occasion and a photographer to record it. In another scenario, the authorities are so touched by our story that they use the shards as part of a new exhibit at the Hopi Cultural Center. The exhibit is labeled "Honor Our Heritage" and tells the tale of 2 young Anglos who vandalized Awatovi, but many years later restored balance in their lives by confessing their crime and making amends.

Unfortunately, another, less inspiring scenario nags at the back of my mind: When the office manager reads the note, she breaks out in uncontrollable laughter. The tribal chairman is attending a meeting in Phoenix, so his executive secretary takes charge. She decides the whole thing must be some kind of political joke, which she has no intention of falling for, so she instructs *her* secretary to toss the shards, box and all, into the Dumpster behind the building.

My mother used to say, "What you don't know won't hurt you," a sentiment that doesn't make sense, although I'm sure she genuinely believed it. However, I think this aphorism is, in fact, appropriate for the Hopi-shard caper. It doesn't matter that Anne and I never learned what happened to the shards or that we were unable to find the track to Awatovi. The important thing is that whatever guilt I had has disappeared. It's been 10 years, and things have been going pretty well. To be honest, I haven't advanced much in insight or self-knowledge, but I'm optimistic. The key, I think, is giving back.

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