Mary's Stones

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My daughter brings me a handful of rocks and says, "Which one do you want, Mommy? This one is red and sparkles in the sunshine and this one is white, but it sparkles too. This one is shaped like a heart--No, you have to turn it around the other way, see? And this one looks like a diamond shape, but this one just looks like a bean."

I'm reading on the couch. I'm not sure what she's saying at first, surfacing from the depths of my studies too quickly--not enough oxygen to my brain, I muse. Can a person get 'mental' bends? I stare at her chubby little hand which shows clearly that she's been digging in the earth and I'm tempted to tell her to run along and wash. I'm struggling with Meir Sternberg's defense for a more intricate and highly developed theory and methodology of biblical narrative analysis than has presently been expounded by Robert Alter and others. I'm too tired to make decisions about rocks; yet, here she stands with her out-stretched palm full of precious stones.

"You can have whatever one you want, Mommy," she continues. "Or you can have all of them if you'd like." May, not can, I think mechanically, still dazed, but I reply aloud, "I'll take the one that looks like a bean." She's disappointed. I think maybe I've taken her favorite after all, although I chose the bean because it seemed less lovable. "How would it be if I choose the red-sparkly one instead?" I venture. "All right, Mommy," she complies, but I can tell she's just trying to be nice. Finally, I ask, "What's wrong, Honey?" Looking at me with large expectant eyes she responds quietly, "It's just that I hoped you would take them all."

The reading is difficult for me. Dense. I'm going over a particular paragraph once again to try to find what's hidden there, mining for what's valuable amidst the rubble of words. It's quieter now in the house; the children and John have gone to bed. Prayers and hugs and quiet. This time the assigned reading seems to come together. I reach for my ink pen to outline key ideas I've discovered and notice for the first time that I've been holding one of Mary's rocks. Firm, angular, black--the diamond. I set it down and finish my notes.

The telephone rings. It's awfully late and I rush to answer it before everyone else is awakened. It's my neighbor. Can I meet her for coffee in the morning? Please. She needs to talk. Bob came home drunk again. No, she's okay for now; he's asleep. But she just doesn't know how long she can go on like this. I think of my exegetical paper due Thursday. I think I've heard this same story over and over for the past six years. I remember my husband John saying
I should confront her with her avoidance and excuses for inaction rather than just listen sympathetically--that perhaps I'm just a place to let off steam so she can tolerate the pressure cooker a bit longer. I had said, "Have a heart, John. She's gone through so much already." "I do have a heart," he had replied unthreatened. "I just look at this from a different perspective." Gazing, now, at the stone Mary has left for me on the desk, I slowly and deliberately turn it around to look at it from another angle. It does look like a heart. "Tomorrow?" I ask into the phone, "Sure, how about ten o'clock?"

So I go to bed too late and plan to get up early. If I can find an extra hour to type, I still might be able to fit everything in. "Today's my Bake Sale, Mom!" Anne's alarmed voice awakens me with a start. "I have to have brownies or cookies or something by second recess." Brownies? I repeat to myself, still dazed. I try to focus on the possibility that I have enough eggs and baking chocolate in the house to bake brownies. "Mom, why didn't you wake me up early like you promised?" wails Lisa. "I told you I needed to go over social studies one more time for my test today." So I read the social studies questions to her as I wipe up the milk Mary has spilled around her cereal bowl. I give them all hugs and kisses and, to Anne, the promise of brownies, as they slam the screen door and race the rumbling school bus to its stop at the end of our driveway. But the door opens once again. Mary has come back. "Where do I go today?" she asks simply. "Home or Aunt Sue's?" She looks so small to have such scheduling problems. "Home, honey." I'm glad I can say it this time. "Okay, thanks Mom," she calls over her shoulder. I automatically step forward to catch the screen door before it can bang a second time and I wince. I've found Mary's bean-stone with my bare foot. It looks like a small, everyday sort of bean.

I arrive at seminary early. Dropping off my book bag in the foyer, I slip into Mulder Chapel for some moments alone with God. "I'm frustrated, Lord," I begin. "I'm concerned about the controversy surrounding women in leadership at the church. The elder nomination, should I accept it? What is edifying? How do I know?"

"It's more than the church, God. My life is such a collection of odd-sized and odd-shaped worlds. Family, neighbors, seminary, teaching, committees, volunteering, writing... the red stone, the white stone--how do I decide when there is brightness in each of them. How can I carry them? Some days any stone seems too heavy."

And there in the chapel, I see again Mary's hands--hands that had sifted the earth and selected, especially for me, five very different, very precious stones. They are the hands of God. And I hear and receive the redeeming words, "I had hoped you would take them all. You can, you know."