

Rock of Ages - A short story

Michael P. Downey
July 16, 2017



A long time ago, in fact a long long time ago or even a long long long time ago, Ah-Damn (not his real name. In fact he had no name real or otherwise) stepped out of the tall savanna grass and leaned against the rock and looked around. He liked this rock and came here often. It was gray and rough hewn and a little taller than Ah-Damn himself. It would take three or more of his arm spans to reach around its girth at the widest point. It came to an almost razor sharp ridge at the top. It was deeply embedded in the dark earth and was neither moved nor perceptibly altered by wind, rain, sun or other forces of nature. It was cool to the touch after dark and reflected the sun's heat in the day time. At certain times it cast a dark shadow that sheltered him from the harsh sunlight. He had been coming here his whole life. No matter how long or how far he roamed, he always returned to this place.

Now Ah-Damn was a man, a prolific hunter and a fierce fighter. Because of these things he was able to survive in the harsh chaotic world and to acquire three or more women and their off-spring. He also kept his old father and several other old bulls. In addition three other family groups related by blood stayed close and followed his lead in most things. They were what later folks would refer to as hunter gatherers. His band lived a hard dangerous existence with no time to waste on anything that did not directly contribute to getting the next meal or avoiding sudden death from the jaws, claws or clubs of their co-creatures. Ah-Damn's small band

was always on the move but when nature smiled on them they stayed in the same general area. This often brought them back to the rock. It was not a place where they slept or cooked but was Ah-Damn's own place. He first came to the rock as a cub with his old man. His father had a special feeling about the rock and conveyed that feeling to Ah-Damn wordlessly by bringing him to the rock to mark special days such as critical hunts, battles and deaths. When the boy was in his mid-teens he began to first catch up to and then by his late teens to surpass the older man in both hunting and combat. Ah-Damn began to come to the rock by himself. Little by little the younger man took over the old man's role but kept him around for his value as a transmitter of skills and lore that had made his band successful in the daily competition to survive. The rock was a big part of it. Although the old man never said as much, there was some power, some magic in that rock. Over time, Ah-Damn came to know that the power and magic of that rock was in some mysterious way related to his own magic and power as a hunter and warrior. He began to relate to the rock as the source of his magic, power and, vitality. His confidence in this mysterious power grew and gave him an edge in the daily struggle and he came to depend on it. Whenever things went down, good, bad or ugly, he wondered why and looked to the rock for answers. Of course, he was no existentialist but "why?" often bubbled up to the surface of his consciousness. Who are you he asked and the rock seemed to answer and the answer was "I Am Who I Am." Next he asked himself "Who am I?" The answer was "I Am I, different and separate from all other creatures." It became the core of himself and he believed it. This consciousness was the one thing that set him apart from not only the other creatures around him but also made him something new on the face of the earth. At that very moment, when "why?" had appeared, God had created a human and it could be said that that a human had created God. It was all predicated on his relationship with I Am Who I Am.

Over the years he sought to deepen and secure his relationship with I Am Who I Am. In the early years he felt the rock was his and guarded it jealously. Once he came upon a stranger creature sleeping next to the rock. In a rage he immediately crushed the creature's skull with a rock. Later he came to understand that he belonged to the I Am Who I Am and felt elated that the powerful rock had chosen him among all creatures. On another day, after being away for sometime he returned to find a curious sight. Someone had built a small fire in front of the rock and apparently roasted a small animal and had left them as if to offer them to I Am Who I Am. Ah-Damn thought about this strange occurrence. What was it about? Was I Am Who I Am hungry? Did I Am Who I Am require food like other creatures? Was he, the chosen one, neglecting a duty? It left him with an uneasy feeling. He had, for awhile now, made it a point to have one of the women prepare food for and even chew meat for the now toothless old man. He didn't have to. At the old one's advanced age he was more than useless, he was a burden and could be simply left behind.

He did it because he could and because Ah-Damn recalled how the old man had been and felt no ill will towards him. There was a connection between them that was beyond today. There was an ongoing relationship. He knew he wanted, no needed the security of an ongoing relationship with the powerful rock. He remembered the food offering he had found and knew what the rock was asking him to do. At first he collected scrapes and leftovers from meals and brought them to the rock. Something felt wrong and he felt the dissatisfaction of the rock. He suspected the rock wanted the best of what he had and not the leftovers. He began to reserve the prime cuts of the game such as the hearts and back straps. He also prepared the first fruits and grains the band picked up and offered them. He also felt there must be a right way and a wrong way to make the offerings. He took great care in the preparation and manner of offering. His mind was content and he felt the rock was pleased with him. He made the offering in the same way each time incorporating what he had learned and after awhile it became ritual.

As Ah-Damn's confidence in himself as the chosen one increased his magic in the hunt and in war increased. The struggle went on unchanging in both prosperity and famine. Ah-Damn knew he was the chosen one and persevered. Over time he was able to, with his band and clan, to drive off enemies and control wider hunting grounds. Through both the force of his personality and with his fast and hard hands and feet he secured the future day by day.

This was not yet the age of women and the male of all species dominated life. That is not to say that women had no role, in fact they played critical roles as fire tenders, food gatherers, food preparers and child bearers. In the primitive society survival depended first on the ability to hunt large wild animals and fight other competitors. Physical strength and a sure fierceness were essential and nature had given a disproportionate advantage to the males. Women were prized first for robust health and the ability to give birth to lots of kids especially male cubs. As the alpha male of his band, Ah-Damn had the pick of the women. Over his lifetime he mated with and produced kids with many many women. Of course women in the band were most valuable during their child bearing years and were left on their own if they had no man willing to take care of them or protect them. Ah-Damn took care of his own mother for many years until she succumbed to a common disease. His camp also had lots of woman, as many as he could or wanted to protect. There were some women that were more pleasing to Ah-Damn than others. He never considered why, they just were. One woman from his youth had been his favorite. They had been put together by his old man before either had reached puberty. They had been childhood friends and the memory of her sweetness stayed with him for most of his life. He remembered her as Ewa or simply woman. When Ewa came into her puberty she was very desirable to males who saw her. Although Ah-Damn's old man intended her for his son, one day a buck from a nearby band saw her and took her. The old man upon hearing what happened immediately killed the young buck but the deed was done and Ewa bore twins sons. The old man out of deep regret kept Ewa and the two boys with the band and protected them. Later when Ah-Damn had ascended to the prime position in the he band he took her into his camp and he remembered their youth and he valued her as a companion.

Together with Ah-Damn's many other progeny, Ewa's twin boys grew into adolescents and then manhood. Both were strong and quick but the elder, often known as Hey-yoo, had a fierceness and directness that made him a natural leader among his peers. He made his first kill on a boar hunt in his early teens and dispatched a rival who had challenged him with a single blow of a club a short time later. Ah-Damn kept a careful eye on him. On the other hand Yoo-to, as the younger brother was called, was more hesitant in most things. He seemed to think longer before acting. Thinking more, he became more sensitive and perceptive than others. Once he swung into action he was more often successful and thus earned the respect of his fellows. Under primitive conditions the way of direct brute force of the elder usually held sway. The wise counsel of the younger twin kept the wheels from coming off. They became rivals.

As Ah-Damn came into a sort of middle age his daily existence was more assured and he had thoughts for the future of the clan. Among the clan's young bucks there were more than a couple who had the vitality, skills and force of personality to take over when Ah-Damn shuffled off. Ah-Damn wondered who it might be. The makeup of the clan was not static with bands and family groups splitting off and sometimes returning as conditions warranted. Fresh blood always came from females captured in warfare with neighbors near and far. Death through combat, disease and old age culled the herd. In all things Ah-Damn continued to rule with an iron fist. His inner vitality sustained him even when his physical prowess began to slip.

One day without warning the grand old man, having decided it was his time, stood up, gathered up his few skins and shuffled naked into the forest never to be seen again. The next morning Ah-Damn went to the place of I Am Who I Am and sat thinking for many hours. Having aligned himself with the natural flow of all things he stood up and resolved to carry on. Soon after, he began to bring various young men of the clan to the rock as the old man had brought him long ago. Without words he observed the young men. He was looking for the spark of perception that signaled an elevated consciousness Most of the guys followed the new old man but displayed little sensitivity to the importance of the holy place. Instead they would usually take their ease in the warm sunshine and some even took the opportunity to catch forty winks. Ah-Damn was not disappointed. These were men of the earth, skilled hunters and brave warriors and they were entitled to take their leisure when they could.

He paid particular attention the day he brought Hey-Yoo. The truth was he fully expected the youth to be the one to take the reins of power. He was a natural born killer and this made him a successful hunter and a feared warrior. These qualities made him the first choice to lead the tribe. The young buck had long showed such ambitions and was already making moves. On that day the younger man simply glanced around the clearing, sat down and nodded off with his war club held loosely in his right hand and one eye open for threats. Ah-well, there was no sign of a spark.

It was quite a different story when he brought Yoo-to to the holy ground. Right off the bat the older man could see that the younger twin understood the significance of the moment and place. As they entered the clearing, Yoo-to slowed his pace and stepped in almost reverently. His face was open and clear. His eyes were bright and shining. As was his habit Ah-Damn put his open hand against the flinty surface of the rock that was I Am Who I Am. The man bowed his head slightly and attempted to know the mood of his god. The lad took a respectful position distance behind and watched. After some time the new old man spread a skin on the ground and sat facing the deity. The novice likewise sat down cross legged and kept his spine straight. Ah-Damn sat in this way for several hours. Sometimes thinking, sometimes listening and sometimes just waiting. Finally he knew his gut was right and he had found the new one. He stood up, grunted and gestured to Yoo-To indicating where and how to build a small fire. When the blaze was ready he removed two small ground squirrels from his satchel, deftly skinned them and cut them in half. Using some charred sticks that were nearby he suspended them in the flames. Yoo-To continuously feed fuel into the fire. The flesh sizzled and then burned giving off a greasy black smoke. Both men watched the smoke rise in silence. Once the game had been completely consumed Ah-Damn grunted instructions to clean up the site and bury the charred bones and ashes a distance away. From this day on it was clear that leadership of the clan, in time, would be handed over to both brothers jointly. Hey-Yoo would be the war and hunt chief and Yoo-To would tend I Am Who I Am and raise up the people into the new consciousness of who they were. Before leaving the old warrior-priest took a prized sable skin out and presented it to the new chosen one as a sign of this investment. He changed the man's name to Sable. Later he presented Hey-Yoo a bone war club and changed his name to Gain which may have meant prosper. The deal was sealed. Or so it seemed.

It was a good plan and for years the old man nurtured the dual leadership of the warrior priest leadership. The clan prospered, expanded the hunting grounds they controlled and grew into a tribe. There were problems. More than once tension between the two leaders threatened to splinter and destroy the tribe. Ah-Damn continued to hold things together with his inner power and the growing soft power of the women. In particular he often encouraged Ewa to bridge the gap between her boys. The women of the tribe as guardians of the home fires were more interested in avoiding warfare if possible but the men tended to glory in the warrior culture that had served them well for as far back as they could remember. The new conciseness was more readily embraced by the women.

This strategy seemed to be working until Ewa fell ill and died. Her death marked a resurgence for the way of the warrior. Then the day finally came and Ah-Damn knew his time had come. After the evening meal he picked up the antelope skin he was sitting on, turned his back to the fire and walked off and never returned. Once it was sure he was really gone Gain went immediately to the camp of Sable. Silently he walked up behind his younger brother and split his skull open with his war club. He did it because he could. He took the women and all the things that had belonged to his brother including the sable skin. He was now the undisputed head of the tribe.

No one could openly challenge his authority but that didn't mean some folks didn't grumble. In time a faction formed that opposed Gains every move. Any setback in battle, the hunt or even disease was laid at Gain's feet. Three years after the death of the old man disease swept through the tribe and in a short time over one third of the people had died. Shortly after, a fierce tribe out of the south began to steadily encroach on the hunting grounds. When repeated military action failed to dislodge them the people knew famine again after more than a generation. The opposition rose up and attempted to drive Gain out. Although Gain was able to put down the uprising the tribe was split and eventually Gain gathered up his supporters and wandered off to the east.

The remnant of the people sought to survive and revived the tending of I Am Who I Am. They raised-up a direct grandson of Ah-Damn and Ewa and set him to tending the rock again. Much of Ah-Damn's original feeling was forgotten but they remembered and recreated the ritual. More important the conciseness of 'I' remained and spread among the people. They never regained the stature of the golden age under the warrior priest Ah-Damn but they remembered, created stories and survived. A long time later the decedents of these people also wandered to the east and right out of Africa. They carried with them the new conciseness that set them apart from all other creatures and made them human. They couldn't carry the rock with them but they carried I Am Who I Am with them in many forms. They populated the whole world, raised up great nations, established world level religions, built cities, temples and cathedrals. Among them appeared prophets, messiahs and warriors-kings. And every generation continued to ask why? Who am I? What is my destiny?