**How to Survive Picking Stones**

“We’re going to have a rock festival!” Dad calls. Everyone groans. In my house, a rock festival has nothing to do with music; it, along with “field trip” and “gym class,” is one of Dad’s terms for picking stones, which, for the non-farmers out there, is an annual spring-through-summer activity which consists of walking up and down a field in the hot sunlight with a tractor and wagon, wearing the skin off one’s feet, breathing exhaust, and nearly dying of boredom while collecting any rocks about fist size or larger to prevent them from getting into machinery and breaking expensive things. Surprisingly, it’s not as fun as it sounds. However, there are some tricks to surviving these field trips.

First of all, drink a lot of water before leaving. This is obvious but important advice. If you’re smarter than we usually are, you’ll bring water with you as well.

Also, dress for walking in the sun. Wear light clothes through which a breeze can blow if you’re lucky enough to get one (and ignore the dust it kicks up in your face). Socks without holes decrease the likelihood of the skin being stripped off your ankles by your boots. Unfortunately, this doesn’t prevent blisters forming between the toes, a situation best dealt with by serene acceptance since there’s nothing much to be done about it. I’ve picked stones barefoot, but that comes with its own problems, like the pain of walking on lumpy ground and stubbing your toes.

It is also vital to pick your position carefully. Avoid walking downwind from the tractor to minimize the amount of exhaust you have to breathe. If picking stones with little brothers, stay clear of them to reduce the possibility of being struck by a flying rock on its way to the wagon. And even if you’re not picking with little boys, it’s a good idea to keep your eyes open.

More than anything else, the boredom takes the real survival skill. There are many ways to beat it, however. Working with family is probably the best. Enjoyable companionship and conversation could even make the onerous task “more fun than a barrel of monkeys,” in my uncle’s words. Just think of it as a family bonding activity.

Alternatively, you could regard it as an educational opportunity. There will probably never be a better chance to become acquainted with your area’s geological treasures. Imagine the countless compositions, shapes, and colors of rock just lying out there in the field for you to discover. It’s like a scavenger hunt. In finding the troublesome rocks, you may also find pretty ones to keep. All kinds of treasures could be lurking in the fields: buttons, hooks, harness pieces, shards of pottery and glass, little plastic people or the remains of porcelain ones, even arrowheads and other Indian artifacts. You could find long lost possessions of your own as well, from pieces of tractors to the walkie-talkie you dropped in the barnyard. Really, picking stones could be quite rewarding. You just have to keep thinking positively.

Also, walking for hours on end is a good opportunity to think. You could write out your homework in your head or make up stories. Sort out the problems you don’t have time to deal with otherwise. Figure out Einstein’s theory of relativity. Find the meaning of life. Probe the deepest mysteries of the universe.

And so, there are really many benefits to spending hours upon hours walking your feet off under the hot sun. The boredom and dreadfulness of it is all in your mind. Just keep away the negative thoughts and think of all the good that’s coming out of your efforts. You’ll feel that all the suffering was worth it.