

Tales from Underground

Life Inside the Earth

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Let me tell you a fabulous tale about the underground. It all happened in a dream. I was standing amidst a clump of hoary old beech trees on the edge of Avebury stone circle in Wiltshire, England, a place I have visited many times and always remember fondly. There was a gnome—Germanic cultures call this earth spirit, clad in breeches, leather vest, red cap, and sporting a puffy, wrinkled, genial face, a “dwarf,” *Zwerge, Erdmänlein, Stille Volk, or Kleine Volk*—beckoning me to follow him.

The gnome leads me into what resembles a huge white golfball embedded in the landscape like a pockmarked egg. It must be 50 yards wide and 75 yards high. Inside the egg are innumerable chambers or cells within which a multitude of gnomes are busy with activities. The whole thing reminds me of a rabbit warren or a college dormitory. Then the gnome leads me down a tunnel into the Earth.

This being a dream and not “real” life, I readily follow him. Gnomes, I must confess, are no strangers to my dream life and they have never done me wrong. The tunnel winds long and fast like a bobsled run down deep into the bowels of the Earth. Gnomes, after all, are the elemental spirits of the mineral kingdom; mines, caves, stones, tectonic plates, crystals, jewels, all the treasures of the interior Earth are their rightful domain. Now it gets suddenly *very* interesting, *very mythological*.

I find myself with this guide gnome inside a multicolored spherical palace of huge dimensions. Gnome kings in regal robes occupy privileged seats within individual concave niches as if in a gallery of ancients. I walk respectfully through this hall of gnome royalty not sure if the gnome kings are lifelike statues or real but sleeping gnomes—a paradox within a paradox because I don’t even understand in what way gnomes are alive or real.

This gnome palace is the kind of long mead-hall the *Beowulf* poet had in mind, whose walls are decorated with the gnome king niches. A gnome king in ruby robes speaks to me, projecting into my mind the images of dragons, jewels, and precious crystals. He takes a large glittering emerald stone and instantly transforms it into a heart-shaped sword and hands it to me. Then I woke up, empty-handed. I must have left the sword underground, in the gnome palace.

The underground gnome palace is a recurrent motif in world mythology, especially in the old Germanic sagas. I remembered the story of Siegfried who slew the two princes of the Nibelungs then claimed their treasure horde of precious stones which had been borne out of a deep cavern. Siegfried also won the cloak of invisibility from the dwarf (gnome) Alberich, who was Lord Treasurer first to the Nibelung dynasty, then to Siegfried. In J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy epic, the dwarves had their own kingdom, history, heroes, sacrifices, and folk destiny within the *Lord of the Rings* mythos. In the Brothers Grimm fairy tales, there is the infamous and irritable *Rumpelstiltskin* who has to be nearly coerced and cornered before he agrees to help out. And in C.S. Lewis’ marvellous *Chronicles of Narnia* series, the nasty Ice Queen presides over a vast “factory of evil” deep underground where she and her minions holds Prince Caspian captive.

Can there be any reality to these fantasies of myth? Some of the wilder claims from esoteric writers suggest there might be. In the 1930s, German traveller Theodore Illion claimed to have stumbled upon an “underground city of initiates” somewhere in Tibet, except when he found out more about this subterranean settlement, he discovered they were all black magicians, as he reported in *Darkness Over Tibet* (1937).

George Hunt Williamson, the American psychic adventurer, claimed in *The Chronicle of Akakor* (1977) that long ago there were 13 cities deeply hidden inside the Andes Mountains of South America and that they were linked by a series of underground tunnels, large enough to accommodate five men walking upright. Except they weren't "men" as we take human males to be these days; rather these original inhabitants and tunnel-builders were the *Els*, or Cyclops, humanity's primordial mentors ("EL-ders") from afar. Elizabeth van Buren, another American esotericist now living in Rennes le Chateau in France, suggests in *Land of White Waters* (1984) that there are, even today, secret underground links (presumably tunnels) between the Andes and the Himalayas. And let's not overlook the wild claims from the fringes of the esoteric world that the Earth is actually hollow, inhabited by paradisaical communities almost completely unknown to humanity.

These are by all measures fantastic assertions, yet the idea of underground human (and superhuman) life doesn't end here. The cosmology of the Hopi, one of North America's oldest native peoples, says that *Goyeng Sowuhti*, Spider Grandmother, led all the native peoples from out of the Earth into the Upper World, or the surface of the planet, up a long bamboo road. Finally they reached the *sipapuni*, or doorway out into the sunlit world which they called *Tuwaqachi*, the Fourth World, the Complete World.

Once there, Spider Grandmother divided all the people into the different Indian tribes such as Hopi, Apache, Navajo, Zunis, Comanches, and others. But the important point here is that according to this myth, the First People were created deep inside the Earth, in *Tokpela*, the First World. They were all, literally, Children of the Earth, presumably living down there amidst all the tunnels, subterranean cities, and walkways of the gods.

If you read through the ancient Irish myths, you find the gods themselves had a preference for living underground, or at least inside simulated subterranean environments. The megalithic mound near Dublin known as Newgrange (in Gaelic, *Bru na Boinne*) was once inhabited (so say the myths) by the *Tuatha de Danann*, the earliest of Irish gods, known as "Lords of Light." The narrow doorway to this *Bru* was specially oriented to the winter solstice sunrise which suggests, at least symbolically, the idea of the Sun penetrating into the densest level of matter, like a crack of light entering the darkest recess of a cave.

The landscape of the British Isles is studded with similar earth-mounds or barrows lined with thick standing stones. Many of these caves-above-ground have an uncanny resemblance to the outline of the human head and spinal column. Some researchers suggest that the design of the barrows and the mineral composition of the stones themselves may produce a stronger electromagnetic field that in turn has a beneficial effect on consciousness and human health. IN this case, the shape of the stone chamber and its energy-enhancing effects are thought to somehow accelerate human consciousness, inducing states of psychic perception.

In other words, if you want to meditate in a cave without, technically, going underground, perhaps these barrows are the ideal place. Archeologists still mistakenly regard these *bru* as burial chambers for megalithic royalty, yet in a strange way they may be on the right track. In Nikolai Tolstoy's Celtic epic *The Coming of the King* (1988), Merlin sits inside Wayland's Smithy, an enigmatic stone chamber in Wiltshire, England.

Suddenly he finds himself inside the palatial house of *Gofannon mab Don*. Wayland's Smith was but a stone doorway into this other, highly magical geography. I suppose Merlin was "buried" in the sense that he had an out-of-the-body experience, thanks to the energy field of the cave. Here was Merlin meditating in a cave-above-ground and he finds it miraculously opens out into what is in effect an otherworldly underground palace.

I say *underground* because you have to remember the sense in which the Greeks sexplained that in the beginning of Creation, there was Heaven (*Ouranus*) and Earth (*Gaia*). Most typically, Gaia is taken to be literally the planet Earth, but I think if you ponder this clue, you find that Gaia refers instead to the entire space in which material creation can occur, namely, the solar

system and the space inhabited by all the fixed stars. All of this is “Earth,” and it existed well before our planet was fashioned.

Remember the poignant tale of Orpheus and Eurydice? Orpheus was the master musician god who fell in love with the “mortal” woman, Eurydice, but failed in his quest to bring her out of Hades up into the world of light. Read Hades as another name for Gaia, the “cave” of the materializing cosmos, and you suddenly have a radically different way of thinking about what is underground. All of Earth is, cosmically speaking, underground; hence we all live inside the Earth and underground.

I was once deeply underground, about 156 feet down in Howes Caverns, a famous set of caves in New York State. I didn’t get there by following a gnome down a bobsled tunnel; they have an express elevator and it takes about 10 seconds to descend into this utterly other mineral world. There is at least a mile of walkways down here and a subterranean stream down which you can take a brief guided boat ride. Down here it is silent, moist, dark where the spotlights don’t penetrate, and stonily adamant. You are completely embedded in the densest, most compact expression of matter. Not a welcome place if you’re vulnerable to claustrophobia, but a great place for gnomes.

I spent quite a while catching my breath (as much as I like tunneling with gnomes, being here in the physical body is a different matter than being conveyed airily in dreams) and not panicking about being (if it weren’t for the elevator) trapped inside the Earth. Yet despite these thoughts, I knew my body and aura were actually energetically thrilled to be in this new environment. The electromagnetic atmosphere, if you can stay down here at least an hour, begins to invigorate you and fill you, paradoxically, with uplifting thoughts, despite your literal depth underground.

This is the second womb, the all-embracing cavernous realm of Mother Earth. Living underground, you live inside the Mother once again. As C. G. Jung would say, this is the primordial unconscious cthonically embodied; this is the mother-ground of human consciousness, the “devouring” whale-like stone-bodied mother from which we, as individual selves striving to realize our individuality, must wrest free. Yet for the brief time I was unescapably inside this great mother of stone, I tried to align myself with the poetic values of being underground. I tried to have what Gaston Bachelard, the great French poet-scholar of the elements, would call a “material reverie,” taking my cues from what he wrote in *Earth and Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Power*.

Earth. Here we have the domain of rocks, crystals, metals, minerals, mud, paste, bone, wood, images of refuge such as the cave, womb, and house, the interior of substances. In earth we have the dialectic of hardness and softness, of volition and repose, the immediate and consistent hostility of resistance of this densest of matter. With earth, we encounter the power of the working hand, whether it’s the blacksmith’s or the potter’s, seeking to overcome, even defeat, the resisting substance. Imagination always dreams of dominating, so any reverie of earth strengthens our will power, our volition to change, modify, even exaggerate the earthy substance which is “the first dynamic form of existence of the resisting world.”

Through the word *hard*, the world “tells its hostility and in response the reveries of volition begin.” Rocks are hard, they are hardness embodied. Hardness is a waker, an activity, an object of insomnia; do not muse on hard objects if you wish to fall asleep at night. All objects possess psychic energy, derived from our own mind, and through dynamic images this imaginal energy returns to us. Rocks impart reveries of solidity, resistance, courage, steadfastness, permanence; they make us forget our weakness, show us how to fight, how to withstand the blows and injuries of life.

Salt shows us the principle of concentration; precious gems invoke the stars; miners are underground astronomers; minerals germinate and mature deep within the Earth. In the bowels of the planet, “gold ripens like a truffle.” In fact, in crystals you dream of all four elements; were you to classify all the crystals, you would have charted a general psychology of the material

imagination, Bachelard suggests. Deep in his cavern, the miner sees “the very substance of celestial influences” hidden within matter; with the element of earth as his scrying glass, the miner is the most lucid seer.

The miner may be a lucid seer, yet the underground has traditionally been relegated as a place of punishment, even torture. In Dante’s classic formulation of medieval religious belief, the 9 Circles of Hell lie even definitely underground. That little stream with the boat ride I didn’t take in Howes Caverns was a noncommittal reminder of the real stream you’re in no rush to take—the River Styx bearing souls into the Land of the Dead. It is the spectral world into which heroes like Aeneas and Odysseus must journey as part of their initiations. According to Dante in *The Inferno*, in the deepest part of Hell, far underground, stands Satan, bound in ice, his wings frozen immobile in the icy wind of Cocytus, the exhalation of all evil. Evil lives underground in the core of the Earth, says Dante.

Living underground is a kind of signature of non-identity, as Fyodor Dostoevsky implied in his *noir* novel, *Notes from the Underground*. It is about the outsider, the outcast, the unwanted, the pariah, the man you don’t want to know. “I am sick. I am full of spleen and repellent,” Dostoevsky’s antihero writes. He considers himself a beetle and hates himself. “No hunchback, no dwarf, could be more prone to resentment and offence than I.” He’s living underground, socially, because profoundly he does not fit in; as a subterranean, he is even more irritable than gnomes. Yet perhaps he has a touch of that miner’s cavern-seership; perhaps Dostoevsky’s repellent antihero is an outsider only because he is ahead of his times and thus out of step with the conventions of the ordinary.

Remember the 1960s? Many of us now in our 40s and 50s were at that time proud members of a large political and cultural underground. In the case of America, we were underground on account of our opposition to the Vietnam War; in the case of an entire generation, we were underground on account of our mind-expanding experiences with psychedelics, sexual experimentation, and icon-breaking. The British writer, Colin Wilson, described this state of mind in his first book, *The Outsider* (1956): The Outsider’s case against society is very clear because he stands for Truth, Wilson says. The outsider lives underground, and thus inside the Earth.

“All men and women have these dangerous, unnamable impulses, yet they keep up a pretence, to themselves, to others; their respectability, their philosophy, their religion, are all attempts to gloss over, to make look civilized an rational something that is savage, unorganized, irrational.” Those who live underground are the bearers of dangerous, destructive impulses; they are chaos attractors, reorganizing large energy fields. They carry the contagion of social upheaval because they live the truth that society represses and sends back into the deeps of the psyche.

But like the First People in the Hopi Creation myth, this generational cohort of underground outsiders has now emerged in the upper world. We have climbed up the bamboo road, thrown open the *sipapuni* door, and stormed the sunlit world. What better example of this emergence from underground than the fact that the President of the U.S., Bill Clinton, was once part of this anti-Vietnam underground.

The generation—many now call it the precocious Baby Boomers—that was once deliberately on the margins of society is now, increasingly, deeply in the mainstream, at the highest realms of power, business, and culture. The treasure of the Nibelungs—whether it be a ring, a cloak, or the earthy secrets of the planetary Mother—once so assiduously guarded by the gnome Alberich and his colleagues and so fleetingly revealed to me in my fabulous dream, is now on the surface as we live above-ground yet inside the Earth, in an underground world turned inside out.