

**“THE UNDERGROUND AND THE GARDEN: ROOTS AND FLOWERS”**  
**A sermon by Mark Marnocha**

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This work was precipitated in some part by the confusion and emerging shadows of the gulf oil disaster, two months old now and continuing to write future history. This event speaks of the great natural powers residing underground, the tragedies arising from human pride and arrogance, and the great vulnerability of so much we take for granted. These same themes are at the invisible root of spirituality and of universal moral teachings. So underground, and at root, are the potential for great losses and for great appreciation of our nature as humans and survivors.

We seem to know a lot about some things, think we know everything about a few things, and always know enough to get us into trouble. We also know the most about things we have already decided are important, whether they ultimately prove that importance or not. And as our knowledge gets closer to the mysterious ground of our bodies and the spiritual, it requires greater translation, into the landscape of this body, this history, this family, this spiritual geology.

So what is “underground,” that may come forth in so many ways?  
So let’s sit down a bit and study what is under ground. Roots. Topsoil. Sand and clay. Residues of the ultimate plowing by glaciers here just centuries ago.

Underground :  
Is the home of the largest living thing, by some definitions, a colonial fungus spanning some 2200 acres of Oregon. It houses the archive of billions of years, partially legible and fully tangible. It will have tomorrow’s thirst slaked by water flowing in aquifers above and below rock layers. It conceals hundreds of miles of caverns known or undiscovered, 367 miles in the Mammoth Cave system alone, 110 miles underwater in the Yucatan, the deepest cavern nearly a mile and a half below.

Underground changes and forces take place when small quakes accompany tons of water settling behind the Three Gorges dam, when petty arguments continue as millions

of gallons of oil spring forth inexhaustible thus far, when a shallow shake or slosh is writ large as that holiday tsunami or as that shattering of Haiti.

Despite the absolute chill of space beyond the thin veneer of our atmosphere, there is still underground heat sufficient to melt and overthrow even the most powerful of rings forged by our technology. And the mystery of a spinning solid core surrounded by molten liquid - underground a molten sea on which floats the world as we know it, by which that world is remodeled and recycled, either imperceptibly when small quakes jiggle Canada or when the better parts of entire continents are buried by the raw materials of creation, dust, ash, rock.

Underground - contains the foundations of old parapets and remodeled additions to the world, spanning hundreds of miles. In our backyard this very year we celebrate the Niagara Escarpment along its graceful arc through the Great Lakes' basin, its ridges overlooking Winnebago's waters and the blue of Green Bay, and its continuation on into New York State.

So it may feel as if we are living in a world more magical not less, fraught with moral challenges as well as forces beyond control of technology or politics, a world at turns beautifully fair, and terrible to consider. We are brought around to some combination of awe, mystery, numbness and hope.

Underground also are the Caves of Lascaux, whose paintings make instant bonds with the eye and heart across thousands of years. Underground are the qualities of resilience that emerge over and over, whether the re-emergence of green plants on the slopes of Mount St. Helens, or via the passage of the underground railway as it conveyed the enslaved back to freedom, or the greening of June in Wisconsin each year.

Some of the outcomes of human intervention speak to our continuing need for resilience, and to unimagined changes to our natural order. Don't drive your boat fast or dare to water-ski on the Illinois River, for fear of a 60 lb carp jumping into you as a way to express his/her anxieties. Don't mess with dioxin, Agent Orange, depleted uranium, or crude oil. Don't carry firewood or foreign pallets for fear of unleashing the next deforestation, even as elms in our neighborhood decrease every year, and their graceful skeletons fall in the strong winds if they are not felled by saw.

We worked in our garden on a windy day this spring when we were brought to abrupt attention by the sound of a 60 foot elm on the neighbor's hillside cracking, cracking, and then plunging in a cloud of sound, all courtesy of Dutch Elm Disease. It is an insect-born fungal illness loosed a century ago upon a species without resistance to it. And that species has such grace and such a poetic shape that it is sad to lose each denizen elm that formerly shaded our hill.

After we labored to cultivate the garden that windy day, using gasoline refined from emanations from perhaps three miles below ground, we refreshed ourselves from water drawn from the St. Peter aquifer, as we sat upon rocks dropped by glaciers that just came through a few minutes ago (rock and mineral time), 13,000 years of human time. Our whole gardening event lasted the better part of a week in dog time.

Just as stately as elms, pines in Waupaca County over 100 feet tall are barely moving in 25mph winds thanks to roots tight and secure. The original high rise, and underneath dozens of young trees barely reaching ankle-high to the parents. Trees able to convey immune information and to exert the influence of farmers - subtle, inevitable, vulnerable. Rather like the couple who built Whispering Pines Park in Waupaca and maintained their rather kitschy and spiritually inspired garden under the pines there for 50 years. As young adults they knew the life of pines well, and in their old age released their garden back to the care of those pines.

Dirt-Soil-Humus is where you find it, and of course the life of plants and trees creates it, in collaboration with wind, rain, sun, and ice. Vertical limestone gives nests in which plants, then trees, can take a foothold and grow on to plant a young one. And we can take a lesson from that happy pine with footholds in the stone face, just as adapted and successful as the pine blown over nearly horizontal to the lake's surface as shore soil had yielded to wind, yet the small growing branches have turned to become vertical over six or seven seasons. Now again ascending above the lake. Very slow steering but architecturally just fine.

Rock, heat, pressure, clockworks, geologic time. At that old Waupaca Park the best experience, another channel of sound to accompany the sighing of the trees, was the ticking of clocks in the museum. Probably why I later enjoyed Pink Floyd's cacophony of clocks chiming. As one ages time changes in its duration and its flow. Usual time passes far more rapidly, while exceptional moments expand with meaning and import. Such moments are rich and entwined – retirement makes sense only because, as is the case with any good life-changing event, it allows exploration of all the criss-crossing patterns glimpsed askance from one's well-beaten paths of daily routine. Levels atop levels – suddenly grandchildren fly thru toddlerhood, when as parents it seemed it might last forever (an experience true of the worst and the best days of toddler parenthood.) Now we can see lengthening strides toward college attendance, a mere six years ahead for the eldest grandchild.

Plunge deeper – when I was a grade-schooler I wondered why I was intrigued with World War II, and apart from geekhood, it seemed a very long time ago, the Battle of Britain some 10 years before my birth, before jet planes for goodness sake, and obviously a Ford Falcon was far advanced over a 1939 Chrysler Airstream. For today's 10 year olds, Gulf War 1 occurred 10 years before they were born; Vietnam ending well over a

generation before their births – And 9/11 is similar to the Korean War in my time frame. Their ancient times are matters still alive, unresolved, and present in my time scale.

So now it is much easier to appreciate wondrous times and great blunders as only just yesterday, the excavations of older age –hmm – as we turn to or turn into fossils. Now the shortened view out ahead suggests that a day at a time is more than ever the most practical approach, as it is harder to bargain with the illusion of a do-over for the past. More importance on the rich moment present.

Mindfulness to the rich moment means close attention, to the transient world outside and the fleeting and powerful movements of thoughts and intentions. Where are the fossils of yesterday's clouds, where are the archives of how the shadows changed across our entire yard yesterday? Where are the snows of yesterday? Who has transcribed a grandson's first skillful use of a formal blessing: "May the force be with you." Where is it written precisely what we thought or felt when another grandson at three inquired "if God is up there, how does he move? Does he drive or fly? Where is he?"

Mindfulness surveys the moment, the only place that can contain past, future and present within its scope. Mindfulness skills, built via diverse meditative and spiritual practices, provide a path whereby one may rest quietly with pain, or with joy, or with intensity, whereby one may allow inner matters to surface, to flow, to refresh.

Builders of theories of mind sought to explore the underpinnings of "normal" conscious life, an underworld to the world of everyday automatic perception - Freud blended Victorian sexuality with 19<sup>th</sup> century neurology and mythic themes to chart a swampy narrow place of neuroses and wish-fulfillment; Jung moved both outward and inward to chart deep wells of the soul, and springs flowing unbidden from obscure sources. So – where is the HGTV channel for the soul? A show for those who are discovering many rooms in the mansion, for those who are examining the foundations, those who wish to excavate a bit of paradise in a the backyard.

Watching TV in itself is no channel for mindfulness, but rather a version of automatic and mindless consciousness. And change often comes via disorderly eruptions into our conventional patterns of living. In times of crisis we are brought up against the powers above and below – tornados in Minnesota spawn anxiety about storms for a hot and humid day in Wisconsin; the animated fantasy films of Miyazaki carry moral cautions about vices and excesses, and his recurrent images of evil in the form of a dark oily flow have now left fantasy films and play 24/7 on CNN.

When I witness stories of crisis and trauma, whether from 40 years ago in Southeast Asia, or 40 hours ago at a crash scene, I hear of the intense work of mindless compassionate action, within the duties of medic, infantry, or EMT. There is the witnessing of living and dying, and the work of the caregiver and warrior, those used to

the tragic as part of the routine. However, some events, as the death of a child or a friend, or the witnessing of the terrible, shatter the resolve and detachment necessary for such situations. The many young veterans with post-traumatic stress issues back here in the civilian neighborhood are also embedded still in a world of powerful memory and intense reactions of its own. We all seek some sense of closure and safety, though we all have a version of that large room in the basement of mind containing indelible memories, almost cinematic movies of moments, and patterns of re-living that can still emerge and disrupt the present world upstairs. Visiting and naming this area, whether old or fresh, appears to remove intensity and allow more calm and mindful living each day.

And ultimately, when a person is healing, they check to see if the children are okay, they confront the teen child about the dangers out there on the roads and the ice, they seek to share with people who also have been at those deeper edges, and they re-enlist to draw upon their earlier wars' experiences to protect young soldiers. Words do not do justice to the majesty and terror of these places in our depths, and psychological healing of necessity draws upon the spiritual powers and teaching of world religions.

So spirituality connects us with our own issues, automatic patterns, and sources of comfort and courage. Spirituality brings us to those lower rooms, to the basements of our lives. Deeper into emotional memory - Tears flowing, rather like the water thru the limestone passages. The basement hallway, some rooms with locks, giving way to rough stones, and a current of fresh air from a farther corner. Here is the hewn floor of the basement of what we call our identity – your symbols, your emotional tablets of stone – addictive memory, traumatic pictures, places of great comfort – the roots of poetry and mission – the spiritual rocks...

So let us visit a bit – here are some rooms where there are memories written in stone, taking up gigs of memory – the moment you heard of and then watched the tableau of 9/11/2001, or watched the first shuttle disaster over Florida, or heard that JFK was shot and deceased. Rooms in the mind basement where your own vivid events reside, fleeting newsreels perhaps, of childhood illness or storms, or accidents; or full-fledged re-enactments of birth, union, death, loss, or glory. Some are locked, some are difficult to live with, some are wondrous and cherished – all are important. In this part of the basement are the memories of cravings, the patterns of addictive self-defeat, but also the dreams of returning home, the images of earliest places of respite and peace, the seasonal returns and devotions. Here are shrines to the power of sensuality, to the dance of nurturing and being nurtured, to the ideals of intimacy.

As I write this sermon in June, I am aware of a quiet flaming red spreading amongst the black raspberries, moving among the canes as did the bees who visited the blossoms in May, as now one berry after another begins its transformation and its creation of sugars. This might draw bears, but most likely it will draw me and soon I'll experience the consequences and loss of control associated with being addicted to black raspberries.

But thank goodness it is a time-limited euphoria, else I'd plan a year or a decade to follow the movement of ripening. Inside, somewhere, I am unchanged since I'd ride in the back seat with my sister as our parents drove us "berry picking."

Lower – lower – stronger, supporting more, subtle and inexorable –the underwater flows that connect and revive. The subterranean channeling of your exposure to androgen or not during your first trimester of existence, changing your brain structure, your anatomy, your social blueprints. The turns of temperament – the precise caring of your grandmother, coupled with the eccentricity found in some uncles and other, along with the a whole tapestry of bits from the family parts box, the dowry of spiritual and psychological gifts as you were wedded to life and to the household of your existence. The immediate readiness to find a mentor – whether you as a two-week-old doing eye contact and facial imitations of those cooing adults, or you and fellow souls in recovery and in jeopardy, or moments at church, or in health-care, or on the road along which something deeper is visited, and doors, windows open. The eternal return to harmony, rhythm, music, verse – waves on an invisible sea, on which we are carried and then returned, more whole.

Chart this place in your being –descend and see how it all branches out. Somewhere and sometime this underworld always expands and expands – this happening is the moment of poetry or ecstasy (standing outside of) -being at once entirely "at home", despite life or death, pleasure or pain, and also entirely "outsider", not this nor that, not all good nor all bad, not well-known even to yourself, not ever completed, never just one being. So as you walk your walk, pay attention and wonder, as you look up, pay attention and wonder, as you suffer, pay attention and wonder. As you are certain, pay attention and wonder. As you are thrown into outer darkness, pay attention and wonder.

World religions all harness and incorporate spiritual paths to explore and secure, to visit the depths. To be entirely at home in one such faith is a gift and one part of a foundation – it is equally true that we live in a particular time as individuals, just as religions live in a point in history and during an era, and that we and religions evolve, transform. So to be never fully at home among the expanses of the world, inner and outer, is also a part of our foundation. And how you build a spiritual home depends on the underworld, how you appreciate it and how you find peace and enrichment in the connections between above and below. Visit your sacred places – the underground of your heart has many passages to the rocks and the roots around us. Be tolerant and be patient – we are all connected, but never fully aware of how. Namaste