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The entrance to the sacred cave at Tundo Poglo

Reflections from a Cave at Tundo Poglo

by Michael Tappan

The villagers in the high Andes of Ecuador say the cave at Tundo Poglo has existed *para siempre*—forever. I asked an old man living in a nearby village about the cave, and with a sternly bemused expression, he raised his fist and with it pumped the air above his head and then pounded his sternum with his open hand. The cave is volcanic. Its rumblings shake the sky and rattle your chest.

To get to the cave, I hiked down the mountain ravine with a small group of shaman's apprentices. We were led there by four shamans, all Quechua, descendents of an ancient culture that predates the Incas. Like shamans the world over, they sense a deep kinship with nature. Indeed, because of their felt alliance with the flying creatures of the Andes, they are called "Birdpeople Yachaks," *yachak* being their word for a shaman or healer.

The mountainside was lush with green foliage and a proliferation of bright yellow, purple, and blue wildflowers. With every footfall, the volcanic booming from the cave could be heard more loudly. Jorge, one of the *yachaks*, cupped his hand to his ear and then turned and smiled.

"That's the heartbeat of Pachamama!"

he said, using the word *Pachamama* for Mother Earth, or Mother Universe, the giver of life, the womb of all, and the fierce and benevolent life force of creation.

People in the nearby town had told me that at least seven persons in the last five years have been pulled dead from the cave at Tundo Poglo. Most probably, they were asphyxiated by the gaseous fumes that bubble up from the earth's depths into the cave. I asked Jorge about this, and he confirmed the stories as true but added, "Don't worry, Miguelito. Those people didn't have the right intention and didn't have any shamans along with them."

We stopped at a small grassy clearing, while the *yachaks* alone descended the last thirty yards through the brush to reach the cave's entrance. Unseen by us, they prepared for the ceremony.

We had been told that when the *yachaks* called to us, we were to strip naked and, two by two, descend the narrow dirt trail to the cave, where a ritual would be performed. When Jorge shouted to us from below, I found myself standing at the trailhead, next to Linda, a counselor from Florida who a year earlier had studied with don Estabon, the oldest shaman with

us that day. Linda's experience with don Estabon and his family, the Tamayos, had been so powerful that she had returned to be with them again this year. She seemed as surprised as I was to find the two of us first at the trailhead. We looked at each other and smiled uneasily.

"Well," I said. "It looks like we'll be first." Linda nodded "yes," and we peeled off our clothes and placed them in a neat pile in the grass where we stood.

Rain had pelted the mountain valley that morning, and though the sun was shining brightly, the short and steep trail down to the cave was slick. We both grabbed onto vines, tree branches, and brush to steady ourselves as we carefully made our way down the path. The trail suddenly opened into a clearing. In that open area were the shamans—don Estabon, his sons Jorge and José, and don Carlos—each facing us and standing ankle deep in a saffron-colored pool at the cave's entrance. They stood shirtless and barefoot, their traditional wide-legged, white cotton pants rolled up to their knees. Their traditional porkpie hats were gone, and their long black hair was tied into thick ponytails. During ceremonies, these sha-



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ABOVE: *The family of don Estabon Tamayo shares a moment of laughter on the grassy slope near the cave of Tundo Poglo.*
 BELOW: *Jorge and José, the sons of don Estabon, prepare an offering of eggs and pink and white carnations.*



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The author and some companions enjoy a hike along a road near Otavalo, in Ecuador.

mans often wear headdresses of bright, almost fluorescent yellow, blue, and red bird feathers, but they did not wear them now. As I gazed around the area in which they stood, I was struck by the simple majesty of the scene.

The shamans had lit candles and placed them on rock outcroppings near the cave and on a small shelf-like rock just inside the cave's opening. Then they sprinkled pink and red carnation petals on the water's surface. Don Carlos reached his hand toward us, and we slowly stepped into the pool's warm volcanic water. Each of our footfalls disturbed the sulfur-laden sediment and caused what appeared to be languid clouds of yellow ink to rise up from the pool's floor.

As we stood in the warm water at the mouth of the cave, its volcanic rumble was surprisingly loud. The water bubbled from its mouth and cascaded into the pool at our feet. Don Carlos motioned to us to cup our hands in front of our bodies. As we did so, he placed a handful of carnation petals in our opened palms and sprinkled them with scented water. He gestured that we should quickly rub the flower petals into our hair, and over our faces and bodies. We followed his signal and, as we did so, the crushed flowers fell from our bodies into the water at our feet. José lit a cigarette and handed it to don Carlos. Don Carlos put the cigarette to his lips, inhaled, and blew the smoke into our again cupped hands. He took another drag on the cigarette and blew more smoke onto our foreheads and over our heads. He explained that we should enter the cave singly and sit within its darkness. Just inside the cave's entrance, he had

placed a ceremonial bowl we were to use as a kind of baptismal vessel. We were to scoop the water from the cave's floor and pour it over our heads and bodies.

He stepped a few feet away from us, motioned with his outstretched hand to Linda, and then waved his hand toward the cave. Linda walked slowly toward the cave's entrance, stepping gently over the cascading water flowing over two ankle-high rocks. She stooped to pass through the chest-high entrance of the cave. Once Linda was inside, don Carlos shouted to her to sit and use the bowl to pour water over herself. She sat inside the cave and faced its darkness. Then she dipped the bowl into the flowing water and poured it over her body.

From where I stood, I could see her body's outline in the cave's muted light. The back of her chest rose and fell with her breathing. I could see her occasionally shudder. A few minutes passed before I heard José shout, "*Finito* (finished)," to call Linda back from the cave. As she turned to walk out, her face beamed and seemed flushed. She looked like an alabaster goddess with her short hair falling in small ringlets at the sides of her face. Bright flower petals still clung to her body. She moved gracefully out of the cave and up the embankment.

Don Carlos now motioned for me to enter the cave. The water pouring from its entrance felt warmer on my feet than the water in the pool. At the entrance, I noticed how delicately the candles had been placed on the rock shelf near me. Colored wax candle drippings from years of ceremony hung frozen from the blue-green rock shelf. I ducked my head and walked

in a crouched position into the cave. I faced the back of the cave, sat down, reached behind me to pick up the bowl, and then scooped warm water from the cave's floor and poured it over my head.

The vision came immediately. Whether I opened my eyes or closed them, gray images rushed at me with what seemed like limitless power, able to wash away anything in their path. I was unprepared for the intensity of the fear I felt. For some unknown reason, I began to pour more water over my head, first one bowl, then another and another. Each immersion made me take a deeper breath—and each breath came more quickly. I was hyperventilating, and I couldn't slow my breathing. I became frightened of the gasses I might have been breathing. I thought of those who had died in the cave.

I realize now that even if I had passed out, the shamans would have quickly pulled me into the open air. But, at the time, I was beyond rationality. Only trust held me, and the faith that there was a reason I was there. I had come too far to go bolting from the cave like a madman. But inside me, a battle raged. Some power that I didn't understand seemed ready to annihilate what I thought was my life.

It was as though a scene was being projected into the moist, dark air in the cave. The world seemed to disassemble into gray images of unfathomable power. I was a speck in the immensity of it all. I felt as if I was being thrown forward into a rushing cosmic wind. At any moment, I was certain, I could dissolve in its force. My chest heaved! My heart beat wildly! I seemed tied to this earth by the most delicate of threads.

My first thought was of the Greek myth of Pandora. Something of great power, something baneful, seemed to have been unleashed. But as time passed, I realized that what I was seeing was being shaped by my own fear. What at first had seemed like images of shrieking demons were, in fact, amorphous shapes of incredible power. The power and energy I faced *were* frightening, but it was I who put meaning and form to those images. My fear was of the unknown, my proximity to unfathomable force, and the knowing it could sweep me away like a piece of dust. To my comprehension, I was face to face with the absolute fundament of the cosmos, some unmanifested potential that explodes into life and then swallows it. I could succumb to either opposing force. Yet the volcanic heartbeat seemed to pulse life and hold me together.

I must not have heard don Carlos call

me, for by the time I did hear voices penetrating the roar, he and the younger Tamayos were all shouting for me to leave the cave. As I turned toward their voices, the sudden flood of light disoriented me. The sky seemed to open and bathe everything in intense and joyful bright light. It was as if the earth was shouting its aliveness in color—azure sky, yellow lupine, and purple delphinium. I could faintly hear the sound of children talking in the clearing above me. At the same time, the thunderous heartbeat of the cave seemed to beat through my body. With each beat, it seemed to me, was the sound of creation everywhere manifesting out of what I had earlier seen as gray chaos.

Don Carlos steadied me in the pool of water, and Jorge gently pulled my arm to turn me toward the trail that ascended into the clearing. I awkwardly made my way up into the grassy meadow, where a few Ecuadorian children and some adults who had followed us down into the valley waited. Breathing heavily, my heart still racing, I made my way past them. The children gave me little notice, as they continued to play with a small dog that had come with them. The women, all wearing shawls and thickly layered necklaces of gold beads, nodded to me and smiled.

In the meadow were the rest of my companions. They stood in their hiking boots, rain ponchos, and Levis. A few of them looked apprehensive as I, rather wild-eyed, emerged from the trail.

By now, Linda had put on her blouse and shorts. Barefoot, she had made her way a few feet from the trailhead and lay face down in the grass. Because my body was wet, I had difficulty pulling on my clothes. My mind raced with thoughts. I was too distracted to be bothered with a shirt I couldn't button. I fell to the grass and crawled over to her.

"Hey!" I said, touching her shoulder. "You looked like an angel coming out of that cave."

She raised her head and then sat up. I knelt on my knees opposite her.

"A crying angel," she said matter-of-factly. "I was weeping the whole time."

"What about?" I asked incredulously. It never once had dawned on me that she had been crying.

"This world," she said. "It's so beautiful, and it's so fragile."

"Were you frightened?" I asked.

"Oh, no," she said. "I felt like I was being cradled. I felt like I was sitting within a womb." She hesitated and thought. "I was being rocked by Mother Earth. That's what it felt like."



Palm frond arches mark the entrance to Otavalo during a festival.

"Well," I said, "I felt there was a mother there all right, but it felt like a mother bear. I thought I would be torn apart. I thought I was going to die."

Linda looked at me quixotically and then smiled. "Well," she said with a small laugh, "we all get the mothers we need."

Others of our group now began to make their way back into the clearing after their journeys into the cave. We huddled in small groups. Some returned crying. Some bounded into the clearing as if they were facing a new life. And some returned looking as if nothing at all had happened.

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We Westerners have been born into and shaped by a spiritually dismissive culture. Personal visions, like the one that occurred for me at Tundo Poglo, step beyond Western secular and rational notions of what is considered real. Yet, underneath the West's focus on the linear and logical, there is a richly textured and nonrational life. This life runs like a subterranean river pushing us to recognize that we are also living in a world of mystery and emotion.

There are many ways of knowing, and the knowing that can occur with the personal confrontation of the sacred is the basic spiritual heritage of all native peoples. Wherever we go, there is the rich tapestry of visionary understanding, spiritual symbolism, and deeply experienced ritual that weaves through all cultures: from the Celts to the Norsemen, from the inhabitants of Rhineland Germany to the native peoples of Africa, from the natives of the Polynesian islands to Australia's aboriginal people.

I am, of course, not the first person to seek understanding inside the mouth of a

cave. The divinity Gaia, or Mother Earth, was said to inspire visions at the cave at Delphi long before the area was conquered by the Greeks, who deemed it was really the masculine power of Apollo who spoke through the vapors. To the Greeks, Delphi was the center of the universe. But whether it was the matriarchal Gaia or the Greek god Apollo speaking, the oracle spoke always in the feminine voice—first the temple priestess, then the temple virgins, and later wise women over fifty years of age who were able to "hear" the messages of the cave.

It was to these women at the cave of Delphi that legions of people made pilgrimage and sought advice, including Socrates; Pythagoras; Herodotus; Plutarch; the great liberal lawgivers Lykurgos and Solon; Oedipus, king of Thebes; Alexander the Great; Croesus, king of Lydia; and envoys the world over.

Through the gates of Delphi they all passed. To the feet of the temple women they went—but not before passing under the chiseled rock inscription to "Know Thyself," and the admonishment that everything be in moderation, even, it is suspected, in the seeking of advice through the caves and the clefts of the earth.

The ritualistic solo descent into Mother Earth or Pachamama, as the Ecuadorian *yachaks* envision this force, also has roots in other pre-Christian ceremonies. The German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr (Duerr 1985:27-28) describes an ancient ceremonial cave ritual at the Oracle of Trophonius in the Greek city of Lebadeia. The ceremony had been occurring for centuries when the Greek historian Pausanias visited it and described it almost two thousand years ago, in about 175 B.C.E.

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In a painting by an Otavalan artist, a shaman and his spirit dove bless a couple.

There, the initiate was first anointed with oil. The initiate then drank from two cups: one containing the water of Lethe, which symbolized the forgetting of the material world, and the second containing the water of Mnemosyne, which symbolized the later remembering of what was going to be experienced in the cave. The initiate then descended a ladder into the cavern.

Pausanias reported that some initiates returned filled with terror, unable to recognize themselves or their surroundings. According to his report, days passed before some initiates could laugh again. Other initiates were even less fortunate. Some who dared the journey into the cave could never again find happiness and were called "men without laughter."

Delphi and other areas of visionary inspiration were finally and permanently silenced in the fourth century by the Roman and Christian emperor Theodosius, who ordered all oracles to be closed and divination to cease. Of course, no one person has that much power. Visionary sight, or insight, remains always. The question is only, from where will it spring? And when it does arise, how will the person experiencing the vision come to terms with it?

To the Birdpeople Yachaks—in fact, to shamans everywhere—it is Nature that speaks most loudly the wisdom we seek. Place has presence, and some places have more presence than others. In the awe and mystery of that presence, we find openings into the discovery of ourselves.

The macrocosm is the microcosm. We are nature seeking Nature.

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The last two members of our group made their way up into the clearing. While the shamans gathered their belongings at the cave, the rest of us talked. Most of us stood together or sat on the grass. Everything looked so much brighter and more distinct than it had before I crawled into the cave. The land began to take on the look of some small paintings I had seen days earlier in Otavalo's marketplace—bright splashes of paint depicting neatly outlined purple mountains, orange clay-shingled houses, and bold green farmland. In these paintings, there was always human activity: brown-skinned men working the fields, women carrying babies, people walking the roads. I had judged these paintings as interesting only, perhaps too simple for my tastes. But now I felt like I was in one of those paintings. This made me happy, and I was awed by the bright spectacle of life and the thrill I felt from living. I turned to Llyn, one of the initiates in our small group of apprentices, and described what I was feeling.

"It's all joy," she said smiling. "You," she said, pointing to my chest, "feel happy seeing yourself as if you were in a wonderful and glorious painting." "And I," she added after a brief pause and perusal of the grassy clearing in which we sat, "see myself as a kid again, rolling in a beautiful grassy field just like this. I think

sometimes we get so busy, we forget that, underneath it all, we float on happiness. It's around us everywhere. We just need to be shaken up a little so we can see it."

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When I walked out of the cave at Tundo Poglo, I understood that I would need time to comprehend fully what had happened to me there. The experience lingered. When I returned to my home in Colorado, I was absolutely awestruck by the beauty of the spring and summer. It was as if I was walking out of the cave again, drenched by the light and life of earth. Each new blooming flower seemed attached to creation, as they came, as usual, in waves of type and color: first the crocus, then the tulips, and then seemingly all of them at once in a pandemonium of intensity and shape. The large hibiscus towering in front of my south-facing porch seemed to wait patiently until the middle of summer. It then slowly produced eye-ball-sized buds that began bursting one morning into violet and white flowers the size of saucers and with petals as thin as tissue. In its life was more glory than I had ever noticed.

What I had before taken for granted in the seasons of growth now seemed a miracle. In those flowers, creation revealed itself in all its grandeur and fullness. I wanted to hold on, not so much to the spring and summer but to an awareness of life that comes with flashes of intensity in which there are no words, only prayers of gratitude. Music could invoke the same feeling in me, as could the sight of a happy baby, or the trill of a bird; and sometimes, I would experience a wonder that seemed to come out of nowhere.

Beauty, light, and celebration were now a larger part of my life. And it all began with terror in the darkness of a cave, in the dampness of Mother Earth, with visions of what was let loose from what, at the time, I perceived as the contents of Pandora's box. I later became intrigued that, in the cave, the mythological image of Pandora had come to my mind. That the myth had even occurred to me was a surprise. I wanted to know more about it, and this is what I found.

Pandora, to the Greeks, is what Eve is to Christianity. To the ancient cultures predating Greece, she was the first woman. According to Greek legend, she was the "beautiful mischief" (Panofsky 1956:3). In Greek lore, Zeus commanded that all of the gods bestow her with gifts that she could bring to mortal man. Her name, therefore, has been translated to mean "the

gift of all" (Hamilton 1940:70), "rich in gifts," or "all giving" (Downing 1984:154).

The original sense of the myth is more clearly reflected in pre-Hellenic oral traditions, in which humankind was said to be given a vessel sealed by God that contained "goods" rather than "evils" (Panofsky 1956:8). Because of human curiosity and eagerness, Pandora opened the vessel lid, and the powers of God flew heavenwards and to the four corners of the earth. Pandora quickly put back the lid, but all except one power had escaped. And that was the power of "Hope," which would continue to be in human possession.

In early Greek pottery, Pandora is portrayed in a form and style that make her almost indistinguishable from Gaia, or Mother Earth, the giver of all gifts, those we welcome and those we fear (Downing 1984:154). She most probably entered Greek mythology through the earlier Goddess-based spirituality of Crete, the ancient island nation whose people and institutions so influenced the Greek mainland. Within Pandora was the potential for strife and compassion, terror and love. Above all, she was the independent, intuitive, and generative force in the universe, the giver of divine graces, and the antidote to stasis.

As Hellenic culture gained influence, it embraced a masculine sky god that superseded the goddess-based spiritual philosophies. Myths and teaching stories changed to suit the times. And by about 675 B.C.E., when the great Greek poet Hesiod was writing his *Theogony*, the myth of Pandora was interpreted as a story that tells of God's creation of a woman sent to earth to bedevil humankind. In this later version, Pandora is blamed for letting loose evil upon the world. Here, Pandora is the feminine siren who committed the ultimate affront to orthodoxy—she bucked the masculine spiritual authority who had told her to keep a lid on her passions. In older wisdom traditions, sin results from ignorance. According to Hesiod's interpretation, sin originates from curiosity, and free will becomes a threat.

In Hesiod's story of Pandora, Zeus fashioned her as a punishment for man. The gods placed mostly evil into a sealed box and gave it to Pandora. Possessed with a lively curiosity, she "had to know what was in the box. One day she lifted the lid—and out flew plagues innumerable, sorrow and misfortune for mankind. In terror Pandora clapped the lid down, but too late. One good thing, however, was there—Hope ... mankind's sole comfort in misfortune" (Hamilton 1940:70-72).

The more conservative and fundamentalist of Judeo-Christian outlooks accept the same interpretation in their story of Eve. In the Garden of Eden, she is the source of evil, rather than boon. She is curiosity and independent choice, interpreted as "evil seed."

However we view either Pandora or Eve, she represents the original womb from which all humankind is given birth. She is the radical act of creation in which another way to look at the world begins. Her curiosity and independence are the antidote to the incontestable spiritual authority that, in the hands of humanity, is the power that corrupts. Without her push to create, to supersede authority, and to question the known, culture languishes, unable to see past its own spiritual dogmas.

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In the cave at Tundo Poglo, I felt something and I saw something. And I learned this: Birth has a cosmic model, and she is fierce and loving. She disrupts the known and the boundaries of our own fabrications so that creation may occur. Her transgressions symbolize the wildness of human spirit and the freedom creation intends. She is the loving mother, the intuitive, and the wild-haired medusa. She is Pandora and Eve. She brings with her all things, and she sustains all things in a world where death and grief find themselves linked to hope and love (Sexson 1992:103). I can only bow or pray, and sing a Homeric hymn to the earth:

"Earth of substance. Earth of my body, and ancient force. Through you is born all things of this world. And from you all things are nourished. Yours it is to make or refuse life. Amen" (Adapted from Eliade 1957:139).

The test of truth is our own experience, say the mystics of all cultures. But sometimes, we need a little help putting it all in perspective. The journey toward our personal comprehension of the sacred, said the German mystic Eckhart, is really just a quarter-inch in front of our noses, and a million miles deep. At this very second, we are immersed in everything we need for perfect understanding. The trick is to be able to shake loose habitual patterns of thought just long enough to allow new comprehensions their due.

From chaos we are born. Chaos is not the enemy. The enemies are the illusions that take away our sense of our own experience, the ecstatic and the terrifying. As a culture, we deprive ourselves of our authentic spiritual ground because of our proclivity to follow the spiritual compre-

hensions, doctrines, and dogmas of others. We deprive ourselves of the sense of wonder. We deprive ourselves of an embryonic sense of purpose that aches to be born. We also deprive ourselves of the sense of beauty and magic that waits beyond our worries and anxieties, our depressions and obsessions, our preoccupations and our bills.

In large numbers, we pay our money for workshops and stand at the self-help and "spirituality" sections of bookstores. We return to these places time after time and sample the wisdom traditions of the world, for in each, there is the remembrance that there is a place of refuge and confidence where we can chip away at our own, and the world's, suffering.

We long to find that still point of strength to which all wisdom traditions, shamanic or otherwise, point. And they point to this: That, one day, we will awaken as if from a dark sleep to find the sun, the moon, and the stars shine through us, and we through them. That the source of galaxies, humankind, and our own true selves is a joy so profound that it wills creation. And that the light of understanding we seek is our own light.

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