

A Teacher Tours the Greenbrier Bunker: An Original Case Study for Class Discussion**ABSTRACT**

The author shares a unique autobiographical account that also serves as a case study. Few people are able to access the underground bunker beneath the Greenbrier Hotel in person. The artificial cave is located in a valley in West Virginia in the ancient Appalachian Mountains, and it is expensive and difficult to reach the site. This piece is unlike any other article, and it is followed by very specific ethical questions. The topics of morality, depravity, courage, and cowardice appear in the article. It arises from the author's qualitative research of the Anti-Geoengineering Movement that is supported by a Jane Goodall Roots & Shoots program grant. Mary Hollowell is a certified science teacher.

Having previewed the bunker with a friend, I was not apprehensive, but I was curious about how my daughters and their Aunt Barb would react. It had been a secret beneath her feet when she had come to the Greenbrier Hotel as a child. Would she feel misled and even more indignant than I was on behalf of American taxpayers?

It was interesting that the Greenbrier would not allow guests to bring any phones or cameras on a bunker tour. I did not know if the policy was to make you buy books in the Greenbrier gift shop or if it was intended to prevent some type of industrial espionage. Maybe it was just an effort to create mystique. Barb and I left our equipment in our rooms.

We walked down a sweeping hotel staircase around a Christmas tree. Lights were off in a basement ballroom. Our group of four entered a long hallway. The wallpaper had thick green and white stripes. A woman tour guide met us halfway down the hall.

An entrance to the bunker was concealed behind a fake wall. The guide pushed on a section of the wall. It slid over and revealed a concrete corridor. We walked along the corridor until we reached a huge steel door. It was propped open so you could see that it was several feet thick. Past it was a cavernous concrete room with pillars, the bases of which were painted black. For once, my younger daughter Kate was not inclined to bound ahead. Our guide explained the door's locking mechanism, and we stared at the enormous bolts.

She had an interesting job and a big responsibility. She had to be matter-of-fact about a formerly secret military installation and let visitors draw their own conclusions. I resisted asking about her background and was determined to be quiet so my children could listen. Already, I was having to bite my tongue to keep from yelling about wasted money.

“Let’s back out,” the woman said. “We’re going to go around and enter another way.

There’s an elevator that goes directly to the center of the bunker.” My daughters Kate and Sophie were interested, but Barb looked bored.

The guide slid the wall panel with its garish wallpaper back into place, and we kept walking. The hall sloped downward, and there was an elevator at the far end. “Right now, we’re actually below the bunker,” the woman said, and she pushed a button.

I thought that the place was similar to Willie Wonka’s factory in the Roald Dahl book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Initially, five children holding tickets and their parents were crammed into a hallway which shrank towards a small door that opened into a meadow filled

with candy. The factory workers called Oompa Loompas had to take away the bad children, the ones who did not follow the rules: the gluttonous child, the child with bad manners, the spoiled child, and the child addicted to television. Only Charlie was left, and he won the factory.

We entered the elevator, and the guide produced a special key. She inserted it into a lock in the elevator panel. She turned the key, and we went up. I prepared my children. “Stick with us,” I told them. “Don’t wander off on your own.” The elevator stopped, and we entered what appeared to be a large underground parking deck. “They started building the bunker in 1958, and it was completed in 1961. This was supposed to be central command,” our guide said, making a sweeping gesture. “The bunker could hold up to a thousand people, members of the House and Senate and some aides but not congressional families.”

I had heard that before, but Barb had not. “What?!” she said. “They were just going to leave their families behind?!” I looked around. “Imagine living here waiting for fallout to go away,” I said.

“What’s fallout?” asked Kate.

“Radioactive ash from a bomb blast,” the guide said.

She changed the subject. “Sometimes, we play laser tag in here,” she said about the parking garage/command center. I had not seen that on the activities list. “You might want to come play laser tag,” she told my children.

“Yes,” said Kate.

“No!” I said. “You’re not playing war games!” We could tour the bunker for some history education, but we would not frolic inside of it. *Bad suggestion, lady.*

“Let me show you the auditorium.” The guide led us deep into the command center, past thick concrete columns. You could hide two or three war-gamers behind one of them.

We veered right and entered a carpeted auditorium that was similar to the briefing room in The White House from which the press secretary issued reports. There were rows of seats and a podium on a stage that had an American eagle emblem. “The plan was to broadcast video reports from this room, to create a sense of normality to soothe the American public.”

“Soothe whoever was left,” Barb said, dryly.

Next, we walked across central command to some sleeping quarters that were furnished. A giant dorm room held rows of iron bunk beds. Mattresses were topped with folded army blankets wrapped in cellophane. They had never been opened.

“What would happen if the lights went out?” asked Kate. “That would be bad,” I said.

“You’d use flashlights,” said my older daughter Sophie.

“There’s a backup generator,” our guide told us.

Next to the sleeping quarters, there was a lounge with round tables and mustard-colored plastic chairs. “This is where legislators were supposed to play cards,” said the guide.

Barb was appalled by the starkness. “They’d have gone stir-crazy,” she said.

“Well,” the guide began, “that’s why there’s an infirmary next door.” She led us into a well-stocked medical facility with gurneys and laboratory equipment. She pointed to glass cabinets filled with bottles of pills and boxes of bandages. “They planned to give anti-anxiety medication to anyone who needed it.”

It was similar to the Nazi underground hospital on the Island of Jersey in the English Channel. I had toured it, once, with my own mother when I was a young woman in my early

twenties. The islands of Jersey, Guernsey, and Sark in the English Channel were the only parts of England that the Nazis had managed to occupy during WWII. They had put underwater mines in the channel around the islands. They had built concrete bunkers on the beaches and constructed an underground hospital in the cliffs using Russian slave labor. That hospital, too, had been stocked with medical equipment but never used. Islanders on Jersey in the English Channel were hungry by the time planes flew over for the D-Day invasion of Normandy.

The Nazis had commandeered islander homes, and Trinity Manor in the center of the island had been a Nazi headquarters. Almost forty-five years later, I had lived in a barn at Trinity Manor that was converted into an apartment complex for agricultural students. My roommate had studied a herd of Jersey cows at Trinity Manor, while I had studied endangered animal species at the nearby Jersey Zoo. We had been two young women who'd had fun on the island, but the Nazi occupation had left scars.

Inside the Greenbrier Bunker's infirmary, Barb had turned pale. Kate put a hand on her arm. "Aunt Barb, are you okay?"

"I feel a little dizzy," she said, "but I am not lying on a gurney."

"It happens," the guide said. She must have had other people feel sick during bunker tours. She led us next door to the lounge and pulled out a plastic chair for Barb. "Have a seat," she said. "I'll get some water."

She left, and we sat beneath a buzzing fluorescent light and waited. We watched Barb. "You should put your head between your legs," Sophie said. "That's what we do in gym class."

“What does that do?” Kate asked her.

“It makes blood rush to your head so you perk up when you feel faint,” I answered.

Barb fanned her face. I tried to be helpful by distracting my daughters. “Okay, what have we learned so far?”

“Never start a war,” said Kate.

“Sophie?” I asked.

“Don’t take someone who is claustrophobic into a bunker,” Sophie said, and I was pleased that my eleven year old knew such a big word. *That’s my reader!*

“I am not claustrophobic,” Barb snapped.

The guide reappeared with a bottle of water that she placed in front of Barb. “This isn’t old water from the Cold War is it?” Barb asked.

“Of course not. I bought it myself,” the woman said.

I did not blame Barb for worrying about the water, and I felt guilty for dragging her on the tour. She removed the cap and took some sips. “Do you want to go back to your room?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “Just give me a minute,” she said and drank more water.

“We’ll go someplace spacious, next. We’ll go to the underground highway. That’s where trucks came into the mountain with supplies. It has better ventilation,” the guide said.

“Didn’t people wonder about the trucks?” Sophie asked.

“You’d be surprised how much can be done in plain sight if there’s a good excuse,” the woman said, and I whipped out my pen and notepad to record the comment. There was a rule

against photography, but they were not confiscating my notes. Why, an entire global geoengineering operation at 40,000 feet was hidden in plain sight under the guise of “contrails.”

Barb revived. We were led over to the underground highway, and it was disconcerting. We stood between two lanes. The tunnel was long and dark; they must have done a lot of blasting to make it. “We’re deep inside the mountain, now,” the guide said. I glanced at Barb, hoping she would not turn pale again, but I could barely see her in the darkness.

Lights were recessed high in the walls of the tunnel, and they were covered by cages. Stray rocks kicked up by eighteen-wheelers would not have shattered them. A sidewalk clung to the side of the tunnel. Above it, an enormous pipe extended into the distance. “Do you want to walk to the other end?” the guide asked. “It’s only a mile.”

I double-checked with the guide. “There’s no traffic, here, right?” I asked.

“None at all,” she said.

“Okay,” I agreed.

“Why not,” said Barb. Kate sprinted ahead. The empty underground highway was a novelty. Walking down the middle of it for the second time was one of the eeriest experiences of my life. You could not help but imagine an eighteen-wheeler barreling towards you. “Kate, get back here right now,” I shouted.

She stopped and whirled around. “There’s nothing here,” she said. “I don’t care. Stick with us.”

“Are you sure this is safe?” Barb asked. “It won’t collapse will it?”

“It’s safe. It’s well-fortified,” the guide said.

We walked half a mile, and the highway began to curve. Ahead, we saw light at the end of the tunnel. “The door’s open,” the guide observed.

We marched on until we reached another giant steel door with massive bolts that was cracked open. We squeezed through the opening and emerged on the far side of a mountain. Our eyes had to readjust to bright light. I realized we were in a roundabout. Big trucks could circle around rather than having to make a tight turn from a mountain road.

Kate and Sophie ran around the roundabout, and I walked down the road for a short distance to study the landscape. It was apocalyptic with dying trees on both sides. I returned to my family.

“Can you make it back?” the guide asked Barb.

“I don’t know,” she said, staring grimly at the blast-resistant steel door.

“You know, you’re not the first person who’s felt queasy during a tour. I’ve had to call an ambulance for people who’ve passed out.” It was not helpful information. “I can ask the hotel to send a driver for you,” the guide told Barb, “but it will take them an hour to get here. It’s faster to walk.”

Barb gulped. “I can do it,” she said. She was a real trooper. We went back in. I imagined the door closing behind us, sealing us inside a dark realm for an undetermined amount of time.

On the way back, our guide led us to an alcove carved into the rock that I had not noticed. We walked along a narrow corridor. We made a right turn and another right turn. “These were decontamination showers,” the guide explained about some stalls. We peered into them. For some reason, they were painted blue. Blue was my least favorite color, although I tolerated it on the bottom of swimming pools.

“Creepy,” Barb said. We exited from a different alcove further along the highway and continued walking towards the command center. I studied overhead pipes and worried about leaks. It would be bad luck if a pipe burst during our tour and a sudden deluge swept us out past the steel door and down the mountainside. Being back in the underground parking deck was only vaguely reassuring.

Next, we entered an engineering room that was also interesting. It was loud; equipment was obviously still running. We climbed some metal steps and stared down at huge black water tanks. “Each of these holds 25,000 gallons of water. The boiler is over there. The plan was for everyone to have a hot shower once a week.”

Barb made a face. “Terrible,” she muttered.

“And this is the incinerator for trash.” The woman pointed to the open door of a giant black oven. A shovel for scooping cinders was propped beside it.

Finally, I realized the similarities between the American bunker and a Nazi concentration camp. I stood looking at the oven door with my children and wondered why I had not realized it during my first tour with my friend Steve. The Nazis had killed six million Jews. Some of them were pushed into group showers and gassed using cyanide pellets. Their bodies were burned in ovens, and the smoke went up into the sky.

I did not point out the parallel. Instead, I turned away. I gripped the iron railing of the staircase tightly, as we went downstairs. We left the warm, noisy engineering section, and the command center was cooler in comparison.

I had taken my daughters to visit the local Jewish museum in Atlanta, and we had taken a self-guided tour of the holocaust exhibit. We had carefully studied the buildup to WWII section,

but I had picked up the pace after coverage of the planned coordinated attack called Night of Broken Glass. We had passed through the Warsaw Ghetto portion that had tall brick walls, and we'd viewed some actual railroad tracks that had led to a concentration camp.

After that, I had practically pushed my two children through the concentration camp section. "Don't look. Don't look," I had said, hurrying them through the section. Some things were not developmentally appropriate, and the abject horror was too much for children. I had seen the entire exhibit on several previous field trips with college students and had known that the concentration camp portion displayed photographs of prisoners, medical experimentation, and ovens used to burn bodies.

Beyond that, in the holocaust exhibit in Atlanta, there had been a photograph of General Dwight D. Eisenhower liberating a camp. He was confronting the depth of Nazi depravity for the first time, and he had insisted that it be documented. He had known that the evil he was witnessing was so severe that Americans at home would not believe it unless it was well-documented. General Eisenhower managed to tour the camp, while his friend General Patton was sick.

My children were not thinking about WWII after seeing the incinerator in the bunker, but I was. I had a hard time focusing on the rest of the tour.

Our visit to the Jewish museum in Atlanta had ended well. The last section of the exhibit had featured WWII heroes. "Take your time," I had told my children. There had been different ways of resisting the Nazis and saving lives. Some people had secured visas so Jewish refugees could flee to safety. Residents of Denmark had organized to ship their Jewish population over to Sweden in small boats at night. Danish Jews were rescued ahead of the Nazi invasion. Other

heroes had hidden Jews throughout the duration of the war. The rescuers became known as the Righteous of Nations. Some women had pretended that Jewish babies were their own. Still others had actively fought the Nazis, trying to sabotage their equipment.

Before leaving the holocaust exhibit, I had pointed to a Jewish saying high on a wall. I had read it aloud to my children. “He who saves one life, it is as if he saved the world.” I had explained that it meant those women who managed to save one Jewish baby did well too. They did what they could do. There was no competition between heroes.

Sophie asked a question about earthquakes that helped me refocus on the bunker. “We don’t have earthquakes in West Virginia. The ground is very stable,” the guide told her.

The woman usher us into her office, which was in a room off of central command. Finally, we spotted some other people. A pair of women looked up from their desks and waved. A rotating fan cast a breeze around the room.

Some brochures about the bunker were on the guide’s desk. She picked them up, looked at Kate and Sophie, and said, “You may want to do a social studies project on the bunker. These will help you.” She gave them brochures.

Immediately, I reached into my purse for some Stop Geoengineering flyers, which I carried everywhere. “This is a pollution problem that I’ve studied,” I said, waving the flyers. I crossed the room to hand them to the women at the desks. “Please take a look when you get a chance.” I left a third flyer on the guide’s desk.

Our tour was almost done. There was not time for a long explanation of geoengineering. I would just have to hope that women staffing the only Cold War bunker in America that was open to the public were caring, intelligent, and open-minded.

The guide escorted us back to the elevator and up to the sloping hallway. “Thank you,” I said, shaking her hand. I signaled to Kate and Sophie to do the same.

I wanted to end our trip on a more pleasant note so after dinner, we went on an evening carriage ride. The carriage cul-de-sac was beside the West Wing. Outside, a man wearing a top hat was taking reservations at a stand beneath a gas lamp. People were waiting in a long line, and I understood that there was more than one carriage. It was obviously a popular evening activity. We were scheduled to leave in twenty minutes.

I left my family sitting on a bench watching horses and went back inside to share more Stop Geoengineering flyers. Activism was easier when my pre-adolescent children were not with me looking embarrassed. I did plan to involve them later.

The shops on the first floor were open until 10:00 PM, so I distributed flyers there. Employees of a chocolate shop, a children’s clothing boutique, a spa, and a main gift shop all received flyers. I bought a bunker DVD in case I ever wanted to relive eerie feelings or my children ever wanted to give a social studies report on the bunker. I carried my purchase in a Greenbrier bag back to the cul-de-sac and arrived just in time. Our black carriage was drawn by a Clydesdale horse.

It was driven by another man in a top hat. He held the reins in one hand and tipped his hat. We climbed into the carriage and pulled some blankets over our laps. On January 2, 2016, in West Virginia, it was bitterly cold. Barb and I sat on a bench facing forward with Sophie and Kate squeezed between us. Opposite us was an empty bench. No one wanted to ride facing backwards.

We set off, and I leaned forward to speak to the driver. “Have you had any sleigh rides this year?” I asked.

“No, there hasn’t been enough snow. The snowmobiles are in storage too.” He was a man who needed an explanation for unusual weather. He needed a Stop Geoengineering flyer.

We studied the grounds in silence. We passed lampposts twined with strands of Christmas lights. On a hillside, some honeymooner cottages still had Christmas trees. We approached a golf course that was ringed by houses. Some wealthy people had purchased vacation or retirement homes in the Greenbrier community. Yellow light spilled from large homes out onto the golf course. We could see some people eating dinner and watching television.

We continued riding in a counter-clockwise circle on a wide path around the golf course. Pale moonlight lit a sandpit. The horse’s hooves clopped steadily on the pavement, and the rhythm made me sleepy. Barb’s eyes were closed. A shape darted past me on the golf course, and I sat up. “What was that?” I asked the driver.

“A fox,” he said.

It occurred to me that Sophie, an animal-lover, might want to ride in front with the driver. “My daughter Sophie loves horses. Can she join you?” The man pulled to a stop. Sophie climbed over the opposite bench and up to the front.

Kate was jealous. “I like horses too!” she said.

“Shhh. Just let Sophie enjoy it,” I told her. I had been very indulgent, in the aftermath of my divorce, but my children could not always have everything that they wanted.

“Do you want to hold the reins?” the man asked Sophie. He passed them to her, and Kate pouted. We completed a circle and swung past the cul-de-sac. Cracks of light shone between closed drapes in West Wing hotel rooms.

We started up the main drive to the front. The Greenbrier Hotel was especially imposing at night. Spotlights pointed upward, highlighting its stark white exterior. A few of them were red and green for Christmas. The hotel loomed larger. Closer to the doormen and bellhops, the driver took back the reins.

There was a party on the second floor. A few people in coats stood smoking on the circular balcony above the front steps. They waved at us. Sophie and I waved back, Barb slept, and Kate kept pouting about not being able to drive.

We headed back. By then my nose was cold. I blew into my cupped hands and tried to warm my nose by rubbing it. Our carriage stopped at the entrance to the cul-de-sac, and Barb woke with a start. After we all climbed out, I handed the driver a tip and a Stop Geoengineering flyer. We took a few minutes to pet the horse.

The next morning, we rose early to return to Atlanta. At the train depot, Kate, Sophie, and Barb waited on an outdoor bench beside the train tracks. I went inside the small depot to use the restroom. Outside the restroom, I bent to sip from a water fountain. I recalled that exactly one year ago, at the same spot during my trip with Steve, an old man had sidled up to me. He had whispered in my ear that the bunker was still active.

I had stood up, water dripping from my mouth, and asked him to repeat what he had just said. “That bunker has not been deactivated. It’s ready to go,” the man had said, and I wondered how a complete stranger had known that I’d taken a bunker tour. A huge array of activities was

available at the posh Greenbrier Hotel. The bunker tour was merely one of them. I had hurried away from the man towards Steve.

One year later, under the same circumstance, I was more fortunate. The strange man was not around.

Some questions for discussion:

- 1) Is it ethical to save yourself at the expense of your family?
- 2) Is one decommissioned bunker merely a red herring to hide others?
- 3) What other structures might be good disguises for large bunkers (e.g. airports, museums, office buildings)?
- 4) When should the general public be alerted to a looming disaster: immediately, midway, or after plans to save elites have been fortified?
- 5) At what age is it appropriate to teach children about the holocaust? What are some good curriculum materials?
- 6) What overall message should students take from touring a Nazi underground hospital or a Cold War bunker?
- 7) Is tipping and protesting at the same time legitimate advocacy or bribery?
- 8) Is unwarranted surveillance a type of violence?

References

Dahl, Roald (1964). *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. New York: Knopf.

Eisenhower, David & Eisenhower, Julie Nixon (2010). *Going Home to Glory: A Memoir of Life with Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1961-1969*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Gonzalez, Roberto (2016). *Militarizing Culture: Essays on the Warfare State*. London: Routledge.

- Hastings, Erik [Director] (2011). *The Greenbrier America's Resort: A Brief History* [documentary]. White Sulphur Springs, WV: The Greenbrier.
- Perkins, Margo V. (2000). *Autobiography as Activism: Three Black Women of the Sixties*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.
- Sullivan, Edward T. (2006). *The Ultimate Weapon: The Race to Develop the Atomic Bomb*. New York: Holiday House.
- Watkins, Yoko K. (1986). *So Far From the Bamboo Grove*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Wolf, Naomi. (2007). *The End of America: Letter of Warning to a Young Patriot*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.
- Yolen, Jane (1988). *The Devil's Arithmetic*. New York: Viking Kestrel.