

Lesson 2

## Ride the Spirals

By Cougar

“Head west,” he said, looking off in the distance. Heavy rain splattered down, drumming hard on the hood and windshield. Carefully, I guided my vintage Volvo station wagon around the ramp and onto the 422 expressway. The tires were getting a little bare these days. They weren’t tracking the way they used to. Next to me, John LongTrail telescoped his lanky limbs into a space visibly uncomfortable for him. Usually quite expansive, he was quiet that day, brooding almost--like the steaming July weather that spawned these storms. Try as I might, I could not help taking it personally.

An eighteen-wheeler streamed on by, atomizing gallons of water, drenching everything in its rushing, furious wake. My fingers tensed on the wheel, waiting for visibility to return. Three months before, LongTrail had helped me to see myself, and really the whole confused dance of my life, in a strikingly simple and positive way. Partly with his words, and partly with help he seemed to conjure from his backyard forest, he had induced a vision in me. In that vision, I became aware that the deeper directions of my life depended more than anything else on whether or not I was smiling out at the world. It was a living, personal thing, this world, the way I suddenly saw--and also felt it. Everybody outside my skin was conscious of me, though on different levels, of course. Stone, plants, animals, people—all had different forms of awareness. And they manifested in different ways towards me, ultimately in an effort to support my healing. It followed then that the main directions of my life depended primarily on whether I reciprocated that loving care. They were joyous beings. Everything really began with the simple act smiling back at them all. Be polite, LongTrail advised, show some respect--and then fasten your seatbelt.

The rain let up a little, then came in hard again. We perspired. Even with the overcast, the muggy heat on this Sunday afternoon was too much for the Volvo’s fourteen year old air conditioner. We were heading for some church, Unitarian I knew, where LongTrail had been invited to speak. It was far from his usual venue, his beloved hills and forests. I remember being surprised that he had accepted. And why, I wondered, had he wanted me to drive him?

“Could you reach back and wipe your side windows for me?” I asked. “There’s a rag in the door pocket.” The weak AC, and this other fault—that, unaccountably, the long side windows of the old wagon fogged up something terrible, so that my blind spots got really big—these were the only complaints I ever had about the Volvo. “Oh... ok,” he answered, still off, it seemed, somewhere inside himself.

At that point, as I said, there in that rainy parade of Sunday drivers--I was taking his absence rather personally. For quite some time, the vision of a conscious, loving world had stayed bright and immediate in my mind. Mostly very aware, I had been able to act from the space of the understanding it gave me. Impressive things had happened as a result. Doors were opening. One of doors was that, well—maybe—this enigmatic old teacher might take me in as a kind of apprentice. But now, it was all fading somehow. The curious sense of silent beings looking back, waving at me, almost—that was nearly gone. At the same time, some of those supposed doors looked as if they might not live up to their promise either. Closets or blind

alleys... maybe they were nothing more. I felt panicked I was losing the whole perspective. And LongTrail—did this very silence mean he was disappointed in me? Was he aware I was losing it, and even now re-evaluating any commitment to invest energy teaching me? As it happened, keeping all this a secret slowed down my half of our usually lively conversations considerably. Some of the old feeling of hopeless depression was back. Ugh! How bad that tasted, like old mold from my basement crawl space.

We exited the freeway. LongTrail's memory of the way returned reluctantly, almost. Only after a couple of false turns, down streets with stamped out houses, did we find the Unitarian church. I parked as close as I could to the glass doors, and we ran for it. The building was old, seventies mod, with rusting casement windows and Venetian blinds. Tacked up there on the brown bulletin board was a sheet of paper, dog-eared with rain. It read, "Shamanic Worldview, with J. LongTrail, Sunday, 3:00 PM, Interfaith Study Group." In the lobby, he took off his old, leather cowboy hat. The brims were sewn up high along the sides, and water poured from the little spout they made in front. His worn boots left wet spots on the beige linoleum. Off to the left, through double doors, we peered into a small lounge. Gathered there were 8 or 10 people, ladies with gray or white hair, a couple of men with thick glasses. A very tall, very formal woman met us near the door. LongTrail introduced himself, and then me. Her name was Marcelline.

"We will convene here in the lounge," she said. "I understand you had asked to be seated near some kind of fireplace. As you may know, many churches are unable to afford non-essential luxuries like fireplaces. This is certainly true in our case. I hope that wasn't a requirement." Through the lofty mask of her smile, I got the feeling she looked down on us in more ways than one. LongTrail took all this in.

"Why no," he said, "it was by no means a requirement, just a desideratum." His smile was stretched and thin. What crossed my mind was, boy, this was a very long way from the firepit. Marcelline, for her part, was trying hard to get a read on some guy in leather hat, yellow slicker, and jeans who could say "desideratum" instead of request. "Now the honorarium, on the other hand..." LongTrail continued, shrugging his shoulders. And he held out his hand. Marcelline did a quick double-take, and then looked relieved, her smile broadening just the tiniest. She was on firm ground again, she had decided. If the stranger mentioned money first, then he was probably safe. A huckster at worst. "Of course," she said, fishing an envelope from the white shoulder bag she carried.

We walked in and sat down. There were introductions. LongTrail seemed ill-at-ease, but also determined to make the best of it. Many would describe him as an "animist", he began. He explained what that meant. The living consciousness he felt was everywhere had only been squeezed out of our European view of the world a few centuries ago--because of conflicts between natural philosophers and the Roman church. Spirit was a matter of dogma, back then, whereas mechanism was virgin territory. He said that forms of awareness were very likely one of the fundamental properties of all matter, like shape, mass, charge, or momentum—and that physicists were starting to figure this out as well. For this reason, he argued, animistic worldviews were not necessarily the "primitive" belief systems western intellectuals had made them out to be. They had also undergone very sophisticated evolutions in China, Tibet, and Japan. If today's mysticisms were tomorrow's science, then very likely high school kids would

be laughing at us one day soon for being so “primitive” ourselves as to have missed the fundamental role awareness plays in the physical universe.

Opening up a little bit with the group, LongTrail acknowledged that he had had great difficulty shifting into this older belief system. His years at various universities had locked his mind pretty much in what he called the “dead world” mode of perception. Some of his later, native teachers hadn’t known which to be more amazed by: how stuck he was therein, or how persistent he proved in trying to get unstuck. “The one thing that finally worked best for me was this,” he said. “I would say to myself—if the Great Mystery wants to flow a personality into some plant and talk thereby to me, who am I to say that It can’t?”

At this point, LongTrail shifted focus slightly. For the previous 25 years, he said, he had worked very hard to cultivate strong relationships with various animals and plants—that he believed in what many would call “magic,” and was very concerned with its role in healing. This, he pointed out, made him a “medicine man,” or “shaman.” He appeared ready to talk about that for a few minutes. But I could see the group was growing restless. This news was more intimate, and harder for them to hear. A heavyset woman fanned herself pointedly in the humid air, while one of the men loosened his narrow, checkered tie. Marcelline excused herself and got up to make tea.

“I don’t have much use for ‘isms’,” LongTrail said finally, sensing their limits. “But here’s one I don’t worry about. Probably the best two-word description of what I practice is ‘shamanic animism.’ That abbreviates nicely to ‘shaman-animism.’ Next time you’re at a cocktail party, have two martinis and try telling somebody you heard a ‘shamananimistic’ lecture recently. It’ll twist your tongue for sure.”

Polite hands clapped dutifully from the sofas and chairs. The tea and biscuits were served. One brave soul stumbled three times, finally uttering “shamananimism” without realizing her mistake. It was time for questions, and these headstrong folks were not shy. How could you pray to animals or even rocks? Why degrade the transcendent splendor of almighty god by suggesting that mere matter was somehow aware or even divine. Wasn’t that paganism, or worse, pantheism—idol worship, really? The man with the checkered tie actually stood up to point out that stones were obviously inert, immobile lumps subject to the blind forces of physical law. To call them “stone persons” was a primitive form of the “pathetic fallacy” dispelled by Western philosophers centuries ago. And to say plants “spoke” to you was at best wildly metaphorical, something every child learns to distinguish from literal truth.

I watched as LongTrail tried dutifully to field the various questions. At times he nodded or seemed to shrug slightly, as if he were re-experiencing the former objections of his own mind. No, he answered, you didn’t pray to rocks. You conversed respectfully with them, usually not with words, but rather through images, associations, and feelings that arrived in connection with your efforts. This was a skill he felt most adults could relearn. But it involved really slowing down. You had to open up to what seemed at first to be extraneous impressions, and then become aware—almost by feel—that some of these spoke to your heart. Maybe the plants were like god’s fingers, he said. The Great Mystery waved them at you, or spoke in sign language, but still you didn’t mistake the fingers for the whole being.

It was in answering the man with the checkered tie that LongTrail hesitated and seemed unclear about what to do. “A long time ago,” he said finally, “I was trained in physics and math.

Your comments remind me very much of my own, when I was first exposed to all this. I only shifted from the objectivist views you espouse here today when it became overwhelmingly obvious that there was too much real, verifiable information arriving as a result of my animistic experiments. In that sense, it was my love of science that led me here. And I can only recommend that, if it interests you, you perform your own experiments. Let yourself be attracted by a tree. Sit or lean up against it for a time and see what comes to you. Oh, and I might add, you are certainly right about the children. They are naturally connected to this larger, richer worldview. It is as if, at four years old, they could see both in the spectra of infrared and also visible light. By 7 or 8, however, they suppress the infrared pictures, because we have told them these are nonsense. Yet our military technicians know quite well that neither spectrum holds the whole truth, and the satellite or soldier is far better off scanning in both.”

The session wound down. Raincoats and umbrellas appeared as the group eddied about, shy at braving the rain. Individuals departed in one or another direction. It was odd and very conspicuous to me, but no one said thank you. The downpour had reduced to a drizzle by the time we walked to the car, but picked up again before we were three blocks away. LongTrail seemed drained. I worked my way back to the 422 and got on. Neither of us spoke. The rain continued, cycling from moderate to heavy and back several times. Predictably, the Volvo’s side windows fogged up again. In the heavy silence, I didn’t ask LongTrail for a wipe-down.

“Why did you go there?” I asked instead. “It’s a long story,” LongTrail answered, sighing. “I had a friend once who belonged to that church.” Distracted by the traffic, having missed the implication that this was somehow in the past, I then said, “Oh... which one was it?”

I was shifting into the left lane, to go around one of those little two-vehicle convoys with yellow blinkers and this wide-loaded truck up ahead. A huge earth moving machine rode on twenty two wheels down the wet road, its own monstrous tires bulking up, still and threatening, as we passed. “He wasn’t there,” LongTrail said. “He’s dead now.”

When I was far enough past the convoy to re-enter the right lane, I checked the rearview, and glanced quickly back to the right. Through the steamed up windows, not much was visible. Still, having just cleared the truck, I regarded the space beside me as empty, and started my change back into the right lane. Without warning, the loud, angry blare of a car’s horn blasted out over the drumming of the rain. It was so close it seemed to come from within the Volvo itself, actually, from the right, rear corner. “Look out!” LongTrail shouted. Instinctively, I cut the wheels back over to the left, just in time to see some kind of small, fast, silver-gray BMW come absolutely barreling by inches from our right side.

It was one of those moments when time seems to slow down. I was aware of the BMW fishtailing, back wheels to the left, as the blonde driver cut right to avoid us. Tires screeched. My mind fastened on the fact that it was painted a perfect silver gray, which would pretty much disappear in rain or fog, and then again on how well the car handled. The driver steered left into her skid. The little sports car tracked off straight as an arrow down the road. All this in less than an instant. Then LongTrail shouted “Hey!!” and I realized we also were skidding. “Oh shit!!” I muttered. Doing fifty miles an hour, with nearly bald tires, on a rain-slick road, and a huge wideload semi just behind us—we were out of control.

What happened next is burned into my memory. Once, long before, I had rolled another little station wagon out in Wyoming by over-controlling in the skids, so I knew what was

coming. Driving on snow and ice, I had learned to support my arms and hold the wheel with just the tips of my fingers and thumbs. That way, I could reverse it instantly and by just the right amounts when the back end suddenly swerved out of one skid and into the other. The odd thing was that my peripheral vision picked up LongTrail also holding up his hands, thumbs just touching the first two fingertips. His eyes were closed, his face smiling and peaceful. It was almost as if he was holding some invisible wheel.

WHOA!! With a wild lurch, the Volvo reversed its skid. Now my corner of the car slid first down the left lane. And a much larger, deeper horn was sounding just behind us. Oh shit shit shit!! LongTrail held his strange posture, and I applied just the smallest amounts of left turn to the front wheels that would keep us from doing a 360—anticipating already the next reversal. WHOA—there it came again. I turned the wheel slightly to the right, so that the Volvo's two front tires pointed straight ahead. Thank god I was ahead of it. The back end whipped off to the left again, and then right once more. But I was in the groove, front wheels corrected always straight down the road, and each back end swing was less.

As the cycle of skids subsided, the deep, strident truck horn blared on unceasingly behind us. It sounded like a freight train. LongTrail furiously rolled down the car window and stuck his head out. "Stay LEFT," he shouted, and with that the huge twenty-two wheeler came rumbling by us in the right lane, tires spinning up their enormous, blowing mist of water. LongTrail was soaked. When the smaller outrider truck that followed had passed as well, he guided me over into the now empty right lane.

We slowed down and parked on the shoulder of the expressway. For a long moment, everything was quiet, perfectly still. We were safe. My hands shook uncontrollably. A drop of water gathered on the tip of LongTrail's nose. Low over the front of the car, a couple of crows flew by, cawing at first loudly through his open side window, then more and more softly, until they disappeared in the drizzle. We watched them go. The silence went on, and seemed to deepen. "They came to carry off our spirits," he said, finally. He took a very deep breath. "But we have survived to dance a while longer on this sacred Earth." And slowly, a big grin formed on his face..

"Good JOB!!" he said, slamming his big hand down on my shoulder. He gave me a shake. "Damned fine driving, Mark... Boy, that lady needs to have her head examined..." I shrugged my free shoulder, gulped, and managed the start of a smile. He saw me struggling.

"So what the fuck is wrong with you these days, anyway?" he said, looking straight at me. "Wh... What d'ya mean?" I stammered. "You just finished saying I did great."

"No, no..." he said. "You did do great. In honor of not getting killed, however, I just thought I would ask what's eating at you these days. You've gone all quiet. You seem down in the dumps."

"Well... uh..." I said, stalling, panicked now in a different way. But then, why not just tell him? "Look LongTrail, I feel terrible about it, but I just can't seem to hold on to my inner smile anymore. That vision of the cosmic parade I had, it was very strong for a while, but now it's fading like a week-old dream." Cars swished by, rocking the Volvo just slightly with the wet pressure wave of their passing.

“I hear the second part,” LongTrail said finally. “But I don’t get the first. Why are you feeling terrible about it?”

“Well hell...” I replied, “I thought I had learned something, or healed something, and was making progress, but now it seems like maybe I didn’t. I feel like I’m letting myself down... I... I guess I also feel like I’m letting you down.”

“Two steps, one step...” he said. I muddled around with this a minute, then finally realized I had no idea what he was referring to. “What?” I said. He completed it for me. “Two steps forwards, one step back,” he said.

“Well what about it?” I asked, still not onto his train of thought. He answered me with another question. “Well how do **you** expect your healing, your growth, to proceed?” I looked at him. Slowly, he rotated the handle on the door. With his other hand, he pointed at this as if it were somehow important. His side window rose up till it was mostly closed. As it did, a narrow streak of clear glass appeared near the front of the window, the only place the worn inside gasket had wiped away the moisture. “Well,” I said, “I guess I expect to work hard, learn things, and gradually get better.”

With the nail of his little finger, starting just at the bottom of the vertical streak and heading towards the rear, LongTrail drew a faint, straight line that rose just slightly as it proceeded. “So not like this,” he said, indicating the vertical streak, “not like a rocket. But more like this, slow and steady.” Now he pointed at the second line.

“Why not?” I said. “Maybe it goes up a little faster sometimes than that.”

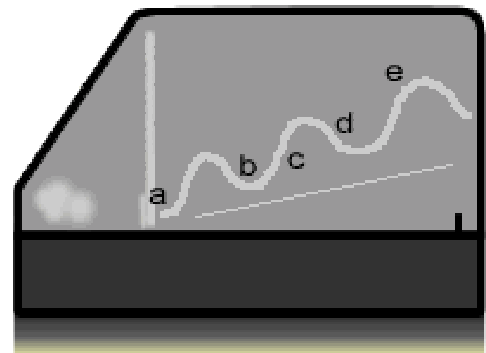
“What if it goes down?” he said. With a kind of thoughtless, smug negativity, I answered, “well, we don’t call that growth, do we.”

“I guess that’s why you’re depressed then,” LongTrail said. “But your expectations for how healing will look as it happens to you are pretty shallow and short-sighted. I mean they are typical of this straight-line, patriarchal culture, and it is true you do have to work steadily at it, but still, you might want to take a look at them.”

I thought about that for a minute. “And if I did,” I said, “what do you think I would see?”

“Two steps forwards,” he said, “one step back.” LongTrail used his finger and drew a fatter line on the window. I’ve sketched it here for you as I write. It went up at about 45 degrees and peaked. “Two steps forwards...” he said again. Then it curved over and went down again about halfway. “One step back...” The line bottomed out and rose again higher than the previous peak. “And again two steps forwards...” The line curved over again and down, losing once again about half of what it had gained. He repeated the whole cycle one more time, until a series of three waves, each higher than the last, rose towards the upper back corner of the fogged up side window. It was around this time that my hands finally stopped shaking.

LongTrail's Car-window Drawing



a-workshop b-no support c-joined group  
d-home for Christmas e-forgave mother

“Any serious growth, Mark,” LongTrail said, “is most likely going to come in waves. There’s outreach, moments of altered perception, or highly focused periods when your ‘getting it.’ Things move quickly then. It feels great. You’re powering up the front side of the wave. But these are normally followed by consolidation, re-assertions of older patterns, or just simply a weariness that can no longer support the focus. Some of the new skills crumble then, for a while anyway, and the good feelings might well be gone. For someone who expects a kind of straight-line growth, these ‘one-step-backward’ periods are a problem. As opposed to something that is a natural and largely inevitable part of the healing cycle, she or he experiences them as failures.”

I would very much like to say here that I thought about this as well. But that’s not what happened. Through the steamed up car windows, red, white, and blue light suddenly strobed. I imagined ambulances. Then I realized--the state police had arrived.

“Ah Christ,” I said. But LongTrail grabbed my arm, suddenly very insistent. “Mark, Mark,” he said. “This is it. You’re at the party. Wake up!! For god’s sake smile at the dancers!” And of course, he was totally right. I heard cruiser’s door shut and rolled down my window. A short, thick, carefully uniformed bulldog of a man stood there in the mists looking at me. His Smokey-the-bear hat was protected by a plastic shower cap.

“Good afternoon, Sir,” he said. “Are you in need of assistance?” I told him no, that a blonde woman in a silver BMW had almost caused us to have an accident, and that I had pulled over for a moment to catch my breath. He leaned over a little, and peered across the car at LongTrail. I was then shocked to hear him asking for my license, registration, and insurance card. “But officer,” I said, “I haven’t done anything.” He looked at me. “I am not, at present Sir, charging you with any infractions. I am, however, asking to see those items. I have to justify my time.”

Justify your time? The voice inside me was angry. Oh give me a break! But I held my tongue, and collected the required documents. “Please turn on your lights Sir,” said the trooper. He then walked to the back of the car, looked at the lights, came back to the window and told me to turn them off, and disappeared again back into his cruiser. I rolled up the window, very upset. “Cops didn’t used to be like this,” I said. “He’s back there running me on his computer, fishing for stuff. God, on top of every thing else today, now we’ve got the fuzz.” Suddenly, I felt very depressed.

“Take a deep breath, Mark,” LongTrail told me. I managed some semblance of one. “Come back to the parade, put yourself that festival. Do the best you can to energize your inner smile. It is the only thing that matters right now.” Part of me (the “life’s not fair” part) wanted to bitch and moan, but still I made an effort. He pointed again at the curves on the window. “For very different reasons, you and I have both been on the back side of some waves recently.”

The lights of the cruiser continued to splash violent colors inside the car. I realized suddenly that this was true—this whole trip to speak at the church involved things that were difficult for LongTrail. It wasn’t just me that was down. Hadn’t he said his friend was dead? But LongTrail went on.

“If you’re going to be good at growing,” he said, “you have to expect the backsides and remind yourself that things always get a little rocky there. It’s like two steps forwards and one step back is as good as anybody’s doing. That’s the best it can be. The trick is to accept this as

the way of all deeper growth, and make sure that ONE step back is all that it is. Many people, you see, are taking two or more steps back.

“As a case and point,” he said, “there is only one way to influence what that trooper ends up doing with us. You and I now have to finesse the backside of this curve. Smiling now minimizes our losses, ok? We act like the joyous, successful beings we are. Are you with me on this?” As he said these things, I was thinking about my underlying assumption that any steps backwards were “not growth.” It was both refreshing, and a little scary to accept that periods of “backsliding” were inevitable. In my early days as a young Catholic, “backsliding” was a very dirty word. “Yeah ok,” I said, “I’m getting something here.”

“It’s amazing,” LongTrail said, indicating the window, “how much reality there is even in these oversimplified curves. I once taught a four-day workshop in which I explained a lot of things like this. It took place in October. One guy, in particular—call him Chuck—did three big waves in the next few months. He blew out of that workshop all transformed and enthused. But then he couldn’t come to the weekly support meetings we were having. Before long, he was down in the dumps because he couldn’t ground it all. Like you right now, he couldn’t hold on to it. But Chuck was determined. He rearranged things so that he could come sit with us on Wednesday nights. We got him through this first backside and he started to go up again. Our phrase for this is ‘riding the spirals,’ as opposed to ‘falling off the curve.’” As I listened to this, my own slump troubled me already less. Well of course that had to happen. What had I been thinking? And indeed I had been deepening it, just as he described.

“Shortly after Thanksgiving,” LongTrail went on, “Chuck was about at this second peak here. His process for translating the new insights into his life patterns was more realistic, better grounded. Then he went home for Christmas, and it was a long, ten-day visit. Well, the family he had grown up in was very troubled. It was the source of much of his wounded behavior. The holidays are often hard, and he was a thousand miles from our support group meetings. So, after his most recent two steps forwards, he now took the expected step back. It was a biggy. But it **was** expected, and instead of crumbling, he rode it out. In January, after he returned, several of the sick patterns of his past were very activated. He came to the group and really was able to release some of them. In many ways, he forgave his Mom. And then, of course, he really soared for a while, up to this next peak here.”

Rap, rap, rap! The trooper was back at the window. My face fell, as my mind returned to the car, and our situation. “Come on! Smile!” whispered LongTrail. What the hell, I thought, and rolled down the window. “Thanks very much for your offer of assistance, officer,” I said right off. And I did smile. He handed me in my documents.

“Your welcome,” said the trooper. “The trucker reported your near accident on his CB. They’re watching for a speeding BMW up ahead. But he also said your right rear taillight was out. So there was no signal for your lane change.” Holding the smile got a little harder. The trooper leaned an arm over on the door of the car. “How soon can you get that fixed?” he asked. Dear lord, he was going to be nice to me!

“I’ll be at the parts house eight o’clock tomorrow morning,” I said. “So then I’m not going to cite you,” the trooper finished. “If you need more recovery time, there is a rest area 3 miles ahead. Please stop there if you need to. Otherwise, it’s dangerous to be parked here on the shoulder. And if you do have to stop, put your blinkers on.” I thanked him again, with genuine

feeling. “Oh by the way,” he said, “the trucker thought you guys were goners. He says that was damned fine driving.” At this point, LongTrail tells me, I actually blushed.

Then, the trooper was gone. The flashers cut off as he pulled around us onto the road. We wiped the windows down and cautiously started driving again. LongTrail suggested trying to aim the side vents of the dashboard heat outlets towards the door windows. To my surprise, that seemed to have some effect. The rain settled in to a light drizzle and hung on.

“So you’re saying you have to expect partial regressions,” I said after a while.

“Serious growth sets up in waves,” LongTrail answered, tweaking the direction of his dashboard heater vent. “The phrase ‘keep on the straight and narrow’ is typically bad patriarchal advice. It’s not straight, its curvy. Narrow or otherwise, it winds around. Almost by definition you are going to be a little more upset when you experience what seems like losing ground. But what happens if you add to that upset now a whole overlay of disappointment, self-pity, renewed despair, anger, and bitterness because you believe you are failing? ‘Life’s not fair.’ ‘I should never have tried.’ Those reactions, based on a mistaken understanding of how healing works, only prolong the downslide. Often, people become bewildered and just retreat from their efforts to grow into another period of avoidance, denial, or distracting behaviors. They really don’t understand how what they are attempting to do really works.”

“That certainly describes what I’ve just been going through,” I said. We were leaving the expressway. LongTrail had just the right angles on his heater vent, and the upper two thirds of all three of his right-side windows were clear. I was amazed. “Not only that,” I added, “I felt I was failing you too. So I stopped telling you about it out of shame.”

“Well,” LongTrail said, after a minute, “I’ve certainly been there. I think the guy I once knew back there at that church died maybe perhaps in part because I was ashamed and never said some things.” There was a distant, sad look on his long face. I stayed quiet. We drove across the rolling, wooded hills that surrounded his home. More and more, what farmers there were sold out to developments. The needlessly elaborate facades of expensive McMansions filled too many treeless slopes.

“But look,” I said, as we turned onto his road, “I can imagine that, at times, maybe even much of the time, this understanding of the one-step-back would keep you from losing it on the backsides of the curves. But what about if even that doesn’t work. What do you do if, despite your awareness of what to expect, you find that bitter or angry or hopeless voice taking over?”

“Ah, Mark,” LongTrail answered. “That’s something I really like about you. You have a knack for getting right to the bottom of things.” He went quiet. “Well... thanks,” I said. We turned in his driveway. “But what about that?” I asked again.

“There’s a lot to that answer,” he said, looking straight at me. “We’ll come back to that question many times as we work together. The short version is—you have to love yourself for failing.” At that, I was about to object, or launch a question. But he silenced me and went on.

“That bitter, angry, hopeless voice only got that way from lack of love. Somebody, or a whole string of somebodies, warped and wounded various layers of your self through their inability to love. And these layers are stuck in a timeless trap of self-fulfilling abuse. So, on the one hand, you can’t indulge them, you cannot let them rule you. But on the other, sometimes

they are going to come on very strong. And when they do, if you then start up with things like ‘I hate you guys for this,’ and ‘why can’t you assholes grow up’--then you are also failing to love. This is very subtle.” He was quiet for a minute. We crunched to a stop in the wet gravel of his driveway. The rain stopped.

“But on the other hand, it is the ultimate cure.” LongTrail said. “Paradoxically, you have to say something like ‘I love myself for being unable to do this.’ You look at that voice in you that says ‘life’s not fair,’ and you say ‘I love you for having that feeling.’ Again, this is not to say ‘I indulge you.’ It’s rather something like ‘I see you, I know you defended me at some point in the past when it was needed, and I embrace you now until you are able to change.’ But let’s not go too deep here yet. In the simplest terms, if you cannot stop despair or bitterness, your mantra must be ‘I love myself for feeling this despair, or this bitterness.’ In this way, you will get underneath it and heal it. Basically, my man Thaddeus Golas had it exactly right”

It was Tuesday, I think, a couple of days later, when something else about all this fell into place. In the vision LongTrail had provoked months ago, I saw stairways. At first, through the eyes of despair, they had lead only down, but then suddenly I became aware that they went up too. Eventually, I saw that, driven by feedback effects between myself and the other dancers, the stairways themselves moved. They were more like escalators. They had their own momentum, and carried you along one way or the other. My big insight, at the time, was that what LongTrail called your inner smile was something like the up-switch for the escalators. Achieve it, and the escalators would only go up.

But now of course, I had to incorporate this new and crucial fact—they **were** escalators, but they never went only one way. Instead, they naturally cycled from going up to going down. That was such a fundamental insight. And it required a much more grounded and realistic assessment of what the inner smile really accomplished. Smiling consistently back at the living, loving world made the upswings longer and the inevitable downswings shorter--as short as possible really. But nothing would ever free you from the downswings completely. This was quite a relief in one sense, because a step backwards was no longer some kind of big failure. On the other hand, it was very sobering to think of all the backsides you would have to go through if you really wanted to evolve. It was certainly no path for cowards.

The other thing I could not get out of my mind was perhaps a silly question. But it stuck there anyway, that curious last remark LongTrail had made, something like, “my man Thaddeus Golas had it exactly right.” Who the hell was “Thaddeus Golas”?

## **Working with the Story**

Processes to Deepen Your Understanding  
and Help you Use the Story to Grow

1. Take a few minutes and think about what sort of meaning this story has for you in your life as it is right now. Jot these things down, or make an outline of them, or write about them if you feel like it. It’s good to read the story again when you do this, especially if you have only heard it read aloud in the circle. If it doesn’t mean much to you, then it would be good to

articulate why it doesn't. Also, if there are things that aren't clear, or don't make sense to you, make note of these here as well.

2. One point of this story is that growth or change comes in waves. The clearest example is LongTrail's story about Chuck's experiences after the workshop. How many different kinds of waves or spirals are there also in the events of this story? Consider here things like the weather, the driving, states of mind, levels of risk or danger, and so on. How do these various waves relate to the central message of the story? Look around in your own life for some waves that are affecting you? What kind of growing do they have to do with? Are you "riding the spirals" or falling off the waves?

3. The first story, "Start with the Smile," contains various descriptions of how beings one meets in the "parade of life" might act or react. There are suggestions about what they like or don't like, how the "royal nasties" differ from "shut downs," and so on. All of this second story takes place on a trip, on the road. Take Mark's interaction with the state policeman and decide whether it fits LongTrail's ideas about how these things work. Does LongTrail use what happens in it to try to teach Mark more deeply? Can you find instances in your own life where your own attitudes are being fed back to you?

4. Discuss the role the meager AC and ventilation system in Mark's car plays in the working out of this tale. What does this role suggest about the relationship between "fogginess" and "clarity"? What might this mean to you?

5. Towards the end of the story, LongTrail says that when your best efforts to keep out of negative states aren't good enough, you should "love yourself for being negative." What is your understanding of what this means? Does it make sense to you? Is it something you can practice? Suppose you "loved yourself for being negative" without ever first trying not to be. Would that be the same thing?

6. Near the end of the first story, Mark decides that moving through life is like being on escalators, that things surge either up or down with their own momentum, and that the inner smile is like the "up switch." What is the big change he has to make in this idea by the end of this second story? Really, how do you feel about this change? What does it mean for your experience of growth in your own life?