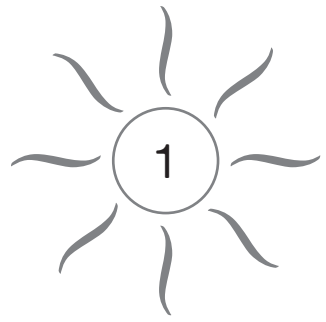




Staring ahead as far as he can see, the line of weeds along the side of the road stretches unbroken. He glances down at the odometer again: 1.3 miles since the last turn; according to the directions, he should be seeing the trail cut into the road by now.

Then he sees it, a break in the weed line up ahead.

He slows the vehicle, then slows the vehicle further.

Driving up to the trailhead, he is surprised to find it isn't much of a trail at all; it's nothing more than an overgrown two-track disappearing into thick brush. This is getting a bit extreme. He's been driving dirt roads out into the middle of nowhere and now this? Is this guy leading him on a wild goose chase? He hesitates. This is a lot to go through for a first meeting.

But this is the end of it; according to the directions, the trail dead-ends up ahead after two-tenths of a mile. He has been driving for more than three hours, and now the drive will be over. Slowly, he eases the SUV onto the trail.

Immediately, he becomes engulfed in greenery; branches and tall weeds scrape against the vehicle. It's like driving into a tunnel. The road is rutted badly, and he is forced to slow his driving even further; it's a good thing he is driving a truck and not a car. What was Nate thinking, bringing him out here into something like this?

Suddenly, the brush opens and the trail smooths out. He is relieved to be traveling on slightly higher ground. To the sides, tall trees grow up from the brush, and there is plenty of light.

He then shifts his focus to the situation ahead of him: he will be

meeting Nate for the first time. This is the start of a new round; they could be working together for the next six months. He has started a new round many times before, but it's been a while, and he can't help but feel a bit uncertain. The challenge is to be open and responsive. He prepares himself by relaxing as a way to connect himself. He again reminds himself that he can't have any high hopes for the encounter; his whole focus is on the opportunity to be engaged.

The trail ends just as the directions said it would. But he doesn't see another vehicle. With the long drive, and having to slow down to travel so many unexpected dirt roads, he is running a little late. He expected Nate to already be there, though he was fine with arriving first. It will give him a further chance to relax and focus. It will feel good to get out of the vehicle.

Getting out of the SUV, Owen extends his arms above his head and stretches deeply, then extends his stretching through his body to the ground as he looks around. It is an interesting setting, definitely in big woods. He appreciates Nate's attempt to at least make where they first meet interesting; he takes it as Nate's attempt to reflect the magnitude of their endeavor. Sunlight filters through the branches, a breeze moves through the leaves. He takes a couple of deep breaths.

"Oh, here he is, the great warrior..."

Sounds of yelling crash around him from the woods beyond.

"The lover of the unknown."

His instant reaction is to crouch down against the vehicle.

"The explorer of consciousness...the liberator of possibility."

What is going on?

"Come to do battle with the forces of *infinity*."

Where is the yelling coming from?

"There are worlds upon worlds before us."

Owen braces against the yelling. He recognizes the yelling as passages from the books.

"We are surrounded by unfathomable mystery."

The yelling has to be Nate but what is he doing?

"It's monstrous to think the world can ever be understood."

What comes to him is that the yelling has to be some kind of ploy, some kind of effort to dominate, take control. His next thought is Nate must be off on some kind of indulgence, thinking he is practicing some technique from the books.

“Man lives only to learn...to be hurled into inconceivable worlds.”

Owen has experienced so many people lost to their ideas of what they think the material is about. From their emails, Nate seemed serious enough, sober enough, but he is probably just another goofball wannabe, caught up in the outrageousness of what he thinks is going on.

“The goal of life is the expansion of consciousness.”

As Owen stands up from the vehicle against the force of the yelling; a huge wave of disappointment threatens to overwhelm him.

“The war is against ignorance...we are being robbed of our heritage.”

Not again. He had such high hopes, worked so hard, struggled so hard. But he also finds himself in the middle of a situation. What he feels most is the force of the yelling pushing against him.

“The individual self has deprived man of his power...the thrust of the warrior’s way is to dethrone self-importance.”

Owen feels the intent to hold him back. And that’s not what his life is about. His life is about action and going forward, and this is the challenge before him. In an attempt to get perspective, and against the yelling, he lifts his eyes to the expanse around him. There is so much beyond; the world is immense.

“Life for a warrior is an exercise in strategy... a warrior considers himself already dead.”

Against the magnitude, he feels the volume of his own living, and it is from that awareness he gets his response. He hopes to open himself, be moved by the full power of existence; the full force of his life will proceed from this moment.

“A man goes to knowledge as he goes to war...wide-awake, with fear, with respect, and with absolute assurance.”

Focusing on the yelling, Owen feels the pressure against him,

but his only interest is to go forward. He feels his commitment as a gathering of resolve from the volume and focus of his life, and from the space around him. He next focuses on the source of the yelling as the source of the situation.

“Energy is the irreducible essence of everything...the ultimate accomplishment of a warrior is joy.”

His training has prepared him. His effort is to open to the yelling and take it in to connect with it and be directed. The yelling fills him until it extends through him and engages with the ground, where the energy gathers and compresses, before expanding and extending back through him along the path of his focus to the yelling.

“The world is nothing but everything at once.”

Once established, his only choice is to follow the connection. Owen gathers himself then starts forward. The challenge is to keep the energy moving. It is not of him and can't be him, or it will get stuck in him. He has to keep returning it as a flow; it is a life force he is keeping alive.

“A path with heart is a warrior's greatest hope.”

Whatever happens is beyond him; he can only be open and connected. It is a dynamic he has exercised and trusts.

From the sound of yelling, the source isn't far, but the direction is through thick brush. Yet the path leading from where he parked his vehicle curves in that direction. His whole focus is to stay open and let the yelling fill him, and from that fullness, the energy expands and extends back to Nate. Owen follows that connection. The connection determines everything that will happen; his whole fate in the moment is to return the energy.

“To break free from our attachment...to fly away on the wings of perception.”

Nate keeps yelling. Owen feels the energy of yelling coming at him but his only interest is to stay open and connected and let the energy return through him.

“Impeccability chases away the human form.”

The energy has to return. If the energy doesn't return the

connection is broken, and he will be available to the energy. There is a lot of energy building as it expands to become a swelling of pressure.

The path does turn left toward the yelling. He can see a flash of clothing through the trees, and then the sight of a guy is before him. The guy is not big, youngish with a round face, with papers in his hands. His eyes show surprise, but there is also a look of determination as he keeps up the force of his yelling.

“Only as a warrior can one withstand the path of knowledge.”

Through the yelling, Owen focuses on the center of energy. There is an intensity building, an element of compression and expansion. It causes him to focus for all he is worth on taking in the energy and returning it. He has to keep receiving and returning. It’s critical now. There is so much energy. If the intensity of the energy gets stuck in him it could be devastating. His whole life depends on returning the energy. As Nate becomes closer the space compresses. The energy is inside the space.

The intensity escalates to a scream. Owen focuses completely on the dynamic of opening and returning. Nate is not giving in. As the gap between them reduces the compression between them increases until it almost lifts Owen, but instead, it lifts his arm in the continuance of compressing and expanding, and as he reaches Nate, his arm comes down in the last instant of return on the top of Nate’s head. The reaction is instant. It is like an explosion. Nate takes the full force of compressed energy; it is inside him, and immediately he begins vibrating with the power of the energy racing back and forth.

The vibrating continues until Nate is convulsing. His body stiffens. His eyes roll up in his head, his mouth is open. Suddenly Nate falls over and convulses violently on the ground.

Owen is shocked. He has never seen anything like this; he is observing a remarkable sight. And he has no care for outcome or conclusion. In that sense, Nate is no place for his involvement. He has satisfied his role of engagement, as a conduit of returning energy, and is left only to witness. The rest is up to Nate and his own involvement with the energy, so that as Nate convulses on the ground it is with

a further element of wonder that he becomes aware that he could be witnessing the death of someone. It is unlikely Nate's body can withstand such convulsing; it seems Nate's body will shake itself to pieces. His eyes are bulging, his face is darkening, his breathing is paralyzed. Unable to breathe, he will not survive.

Yet as he witnesses the scene, he is conscious of another awareness, as if on a horizon, but knowing that awareness is also of him, and with the same objective and dispassionate observation, he is aware of it growing, until the awareness begins to take shape and focus in the form of elements that at first remain arbitrary and passive, then grow in precedence until they gather and formulate. There will be a body. The body will be found. And as that concept expands to fully form, it connects with the idea that Nate knows people and will be missed. Those connections could be traced back to his involvement and authorities will be called. He is many things of space and time, but he is also of the particularness of this world. Directed by that particularness, an awareness comes together until a concern begins to rise. He could be accused of causing the death of someone. For a moment longer, he remains caught between the different interpretations of the event until the ramifications against him continue to build, and he experiences something like a "Pop!" There will be a trial! He could spend the rest of his life in jail! The realization overpowers him with full speed and force. He has to do something! And by the contortion and darkening color of Nate's face, there can't be much time. He steps forward, then drops to the ground. "Nate!" he yells. But nothing changes. He yells again as if trying to penetrate a barrier. "Nate!"

The energy racing back and forth inside of Nate has disconnected him from his breathing. "Breathe, Nate!" But his words aren't registering. He feels Nate is trying to look at him, but his body is thrashing about.

He could spend the rest of his life in jail!

An idea bursts into consciousness: it is whole and complete and is something he remembers from the books, as an almost exact

situation between two apprentices. He immediately jumps on top of Nate, outlining him with his body. He inhales deeply, pushing his abdomen into Nate's. "Find my breath," he yells, his face just inches away. When he exhales and retreats his diaphragm, he hopes to feel Nate's abdomen following but nothing happens. He inhales again, extending his belly. "Find my breath!" he implores.

Nothing happens.

Again, he exhales and inhales deeply.

"Follow my breath!"

His feeling is that Nate is at least hearing him, but there isn't much time. Nate has to be on the verge of passing out. Owen has to be prepared to do everything he can to revive him. He expands his stomach into Nate's, but nothing happens.

Then after another sequence of thrusting and withdrawing his stomach, Nate's abdomen pushes back and then spasms back and forth before he explodes in a huge gasp. Nate is suddenly gasping for air. The barrier has been broken.

Nate's breathing flails in gasps and spasms. He tries again to get Nate to follow his breath, but it is no use. Nate's breathing is trying too hard; he is trying to get his breathing back all at once. Realizing he is only hindering him he rolls off, leaving Nate to gasp on his own.

Nate continues rolling on the ground gasping.

His stomach heaves with his gasping.

His head thrashes back and forth as he struggles to breathe.

Finally, he rolls on his side and pukes.