

## Stuck at Lake Partway

MOST SPIRITUAL SEEKERS, and the author includes himself in this group, are akin to campers at Lake Partway. We're pleased that we have escaped the dirty and crowded city of Godless Materialism. We've piled what we consider to be the basic necessities of life into our present vehicles of spirituality, and have driven with considerable ease to the lakeshore campground, nestled at the base of Mount Spirit, where now we are comfortably settled in.

Ah, how pleasant it is to be among like-minded people. Here we are, the spiritually blessed, enjoying the refreshing breezes that blow down from the mountain while so many other poor souls suffer through an endless hot summer in the miasmatic streets of Godless Materialism.

We sing devotional songs around the campfire at night. We read holy books during the day. Brief explorations of the surrounding territory give us a little exercise without wearing us out. The food is tasty, there are just a few mosquitoes, and a battery-powered TV can pick up stations from the city (we sure don't want to miss out on news and entertainment while camping).

Still, things could be better. Lake Partway is shallow and clogged with weeds. The many vehicles going in and out of the campground are noisy and stir up clouds of dust. Often there are arguments over who gets an appealing campsite. The air is smoggy, though not as bad as in the valley below. And after we've sung all the songs, read all the books, and hiked all the nearby trails, there isn't that much new to do.

Childish voices keep echoing in our brains: "We're bored! There's nothing to do here! When are we going back to the city?" And though we've been able to put them off one way or another—"Don't you just *love* camping at Lake Partway, kids? Maybe we'll roast marshmallows tonight!"—a hidden concern lurks beneath the surface of our outward enthusiasm: maybe trading the excitement of Godless Materialism for the blandness of Lake Partway wasn't such a good idea.

Then a stranger appears. Tall, exceedingly fit, bronzed by the sun, eyes with a depth that comes only from gazing on the unimaginable. He is spotted striding boldly down the mountain path that no one ever takes because it is too steep and rocky. Where did he come

from? Someone invites him to stay for dinner, and afterward, over coffee, he is asked where he's been camping.

"Nowhere. I live here. Well, not right here, up *there*." He gestures over his shoulder into the darkness. "It's a pleasant place. It fits me."

"Tell us about it. Is it better than Lake Partway?"

"Oh, yes. It's better than every place. There's nothing like it. That's why I stopped camping here like you, and settled into One."

"One what?"

"Just One. If it was anything else, any thing at all, it wouldn't be One. Don't you see?"

Actually, we don't. But this conversation is a stimulating change of pace, since the stranger, who just wants to be called "Guide" (he's forgotten his old name, he says with a wink), has an engaging, if decidedly eccentric, manner about him.

"Guide, can you tell us more about this wonderful place you call One?"

"Sorry, I can't. Really, it's indescribable," says Guide. "All I can say is that if you saw it, you'd like it so much better than Lake Partway. It's the place you were wanting to find when you left that terrible city, Godless Materialism. You just stopped too soon once you got a little way up the slope of Mount Spirit. This campground is all right, compared to what you left behind, but nothing like what lies at the top of the mountain. I can show you how to get to One, if you like."

"What road do we take? And how long a journey is it?"

"There isn't any road. The vehicles that got you here can't take you any farther. From here on the path is narrow and not clearly marked. As to how long you'll be walking, well, it depends. Some people make it a quick trip. Others meander more. This mountain is much vaster than you can begin to imagine. There are folks who have been wandering around up there for an awfully long time. That's why you'd be smart to let me show you the way."

As captivating as Guide is, he's starting to lose some of his audience. A fair number of campers left when they heard they couldn't take their vehicles to One. "I'd like to see this place," they explain, "It sounds wonderful, but no way am I going to walk there. I'll wait until they put in a road."

A few of us, however, have grown so tired of Lake Partway, and so enthralled by Guide's cryptic praise of One, that we take him up on his offer. We're told, "Meet me at the bottom of the path at dawn. And come prepared for a tough hike."

We do just that. There we are, right on time, the first rays of the sun hitting our expectant faces, everyone carrying large knapsacks filled with water bottles, peanut butter sandwiches, cameras, toilet paper, sunscreen, extra clothes, first aid kits. We're ready to go, Guide!

He takes a quick glance at us and says, gruffly, "Leave all of that here."

"Are you kidding?"

"I said, leave it here. You won't need any of that stuff where we're heading. It'll just slow you down. Anything we have to have, we'll find along the way."

Guide didn't have many aspiring travelers to One to begin with, and he just lost a good share of the group that had gathered at the trailhead. The malcontents shake their heads and return to their campsites, talking among themselves: "That guy is crazy. We were smart not to follow him. You can't climb a high mountain without supplies, especially food and water."

A small band, though, follows Guide's orders and we take off our knapsacks.

"All right, then, here we go," he says. "Straight up!"

It's a hard climb. The path is amazingly steep, and doesn't have any switchbacks. We just put one foot in front of another and slog our way up the side of Mount Spirit the best we can. Soon we've stopped talking among ourselves, saving our breath for climbing.

But when Guide calls for a stop and we turn around, the view makes us forget how tired we are. Lake Partway now looks like a pond, we've climbed so high. The air is much cleaner. Just as Guide promised, without moving far from the trail we drink from a creek flowing with crystal-clear water and feast on delicious berries. Our exhaustion gives way to a second wind. We jump up eagerly when told it's time to move on.

Guide points out sights along the way. There are lots of side trails where, he says, explorers of Mount Spirit have gone off and never bothered to return to the main path. "They like where they are," Guide adds, "but I wish they had kept climbing. It's so beautiful at the very top."

Those words bring a little more spring to our legs, which now are back to being wearied, matching the condition of our spirit. Our enthusiasm is starting to fade along with the scenery. Once we passed timberline, the terrain turned barren. No more creeks and berry bushes, just craggy rocks and tufts of hardy vegetation. The

food and water we enjoyed at the overlook are a distant memory. Now we're darn hungry and thirsty.

Some people turn back, notwithstanding Guide's attempts to encourage them: "It's just a bit farther, don't give up."

"Yeah, that's what you've been telling us since we started," they say disgustedly, setting off at a lope down the mountain, eager to get back to the comparative comforts of Lake Partway.

The handful of us who are left have a strong urge to follow in their footsteps, but something keeps us moving uphill, struggling to keep pace with our indefatigable companion, who isn't even breathing hard. He seems very much at home on Mount Spirit. Part of the reason, we note enviously, is that Guide isn't carrying an extra ounce anywhere on his lean and muscular form. The same definitely can't be said for us, over-fed and under-exercised as we had become at Lake Partway.

"Well, here we are," Guide finally says to his bedraggled party. We look up, mouths devilishly dry, sweat pouring from our foreheads, feet blistered, stomachs growling from hunger.

A cry goes out in unison. "What?!" All this, for *that*? A sheer cliff rises before us, the height of which can't be measured, as the top is hidden in clouds. There's no way around the cliff, for deep chasms fall off on each side of the narrow ridge on which we're standing. There doesn't seem to be any way up, either. The rock wall is almost perfectly smooth, and we don't have either the energy or the skill to even hazard an attempt to climb it.

"Is this the One?" we ask, not sure what answer we want to hear. For even though it would be dismaying if this was what we'd been working so hard to reach, being told that this was the end of the path would mean that the rough climb was over.

"No," says Guide with a grin, "but we're close. The way is through here." He points to a small hole in the cliff that we had failed to notice before. "Let's get moving. Don't want to dawdle now."

"You want us to go in there? You can't be serious." It's a narrow, pitch-black tunnel. We can't see more than a few feet inside. There doesn't seem to be any room to turn around if you got stuck. And then there is a final blow to our already shaky confidence. Guide tells us: "Oh, I forgot to mention that you need to take off all your clothes. It's a tight fit, and even a small button or zipper could be enough to hang you up."

Well, that does it. We followed Guide this far because he spoke so enthusiastically to us about the wonders of One. And even though the path up Mount Spirit was more challenging than any of us had imagined, at least we could always see where our next step was taking us. Up to this point we also had the option of turning back, which made it easier to move forward.

Now Guide is asking us to embrace an act of reckless abandon: crawl into a lightless tunnel that leads god-knows-where, with no food, no water, no clothes, no illumination, nothing at all.

Still, we've come this far. And if Guide made it in and out, safe and sound, we should be able to do the same. Yet again, why take a chance? Maybe Guide is a beguiling psychopath who lures trusting victims into a deathtrap. But Lake Partway has lost its appeal and we certainly don't want to go all the way back to Godless Materialism. Who knows, though, whether the uncertain promise of what the One offers warrants risking all that we have in hand now?

So we stand in front of the mysterious passageway, unable to decide whether we are on the brink of making the most marvelous discovery imaginable or if we are about to lose our lives in addition to everything that Guide had made us discard already.

We gaze at Guide, trying to decide. Is he a saint? Or is he insane?

"It's up to you," he says, as if he knows what we are thinking. "Alone to the alone, that's the way to the One. Each must decide for himself. I'll see you on the other side, or maybe not."

Then, we glimpse a gentler side of Guide that hadn't been much in evidence before. With a smile he comes up to each of us in turn, holding our hands in his, looking into our eyes. No words are exchanged but we understand Guide's silent message: I once stood where you are standing; I once questioned as you are questioning; I once hesitated as you are hesitating; we are the same, One.

Guide's final words mirror his unspoken sentiments. "You can know what I know if you do what I do." With incredible alacrity he turns on his heel, tearing off his clothes in a single motion, and dives headfirst into the tunnel. He's gone.

We're alone. It's unbearable. Tearfully, we turn to each other. What do we do now? The full course of our lives has brought us to this question, this cliff, this passageway, this choice. To move any closer to the One means stripping ourselves naked, maybe even abandoning our very existence. To return to the shores of Lake

Partway means never knowing what wonders, or perhaps terrors, are at the pinnacle of Mount Spirit.

Tearfully, we turn away from each other, realizing that Guide was right: it is up to each of us alone to decide what path to take. Indeed, I already know what I must do. It just will take some time—an instant, or an eternity—to tell myself.

*And the attainment of it [the One] is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent. . . . until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one's self alone That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being. [I-6-7]*