



## Trail Guides

By Sidney Stevens

*Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you  
kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith  
be the bridge you build to overcome evil and  
welcome good.*

*~Maya Angelou*

I climbed out of my car, barely noticing the door slam as I headed to my favorite hiking trail. I often retreated there for quiet contemplation and beauty. Today, I didn't smell the fall fragrant air or take in the red-gold tree canopy above me.

All I could think was, *I've lost him for good this time*. I blinked back tears as my sneakers crunched on the gravel trail. How did this happen? My son had refused to finish his college applications again, just like he refused to do almost everything these days.

I'd stood in the doorway of his room, hands trembling so hard from anger (or maybe fear of another argument) that I almost spilled my glass of water.

"Get out," he growled from his bed.

And then it happened—something that still makes me wince. I lunged into his room, overcome with fury, and hurled my glass of water in his face. Water dripped down his forehead and cheeks. His eyes were wide with surprise—and hatred.

A million things ran through my mind. I needed to beg his forgiveness, salvage what was left of our love. Say something. But nothing came out. Not a sound.

He jumped up and shoved me out. The door slammed like I was being locked away from him forever.

*Help me*, I pleaded silently, rounding a bend in the trail. If divine guidance was available (which I wasn't sure I believed), I needed it now more than ever. I'd called for help before, but this time something had to change or my heart would break open and never be whole again. I was dying inside. I'd do anything to make things better. Anything.

Up ahead I saw two figures approaching with a dog. I rarely spoke to people on the trail except to nod or say hi. Walking was "alone time" that I cherished. Today, I couldn't imagine even a nod.

As they got closer, the dog strained at his leash toward me. He was a mixed breed, sable-colored with one floppy ear. Something about him, his intelligent eyes or the way he was so intent on reaching me, made me kneel to pet him.

"What a beautiful boy," I said, looking up at the two women. Both were slightly older and smiling. The dog stared at me deeply, like he could somehow see my aching inside.

"You're lucky, he doesn't usually like strangers," said the taller woman.

"He knows a fan when he sees one," I said and stood to continue on. But the dog whined and raised his paw.

I took it in both hands. “What’s his name?”

“Bert,” said the shorter woman. “I’m doggie-sitting for my son while he’s away.”

I tried to stand, but Bert whined again, and we all laughed at his puzzling behavior. Somehow the conversation flowed from there, like old friends catching up.

Joan and Andie, I learned, both had sons a bit older than mine.

“I didn’t think Josh would ever go to college,” Joan chuckled, shaking her head. “He finally did after working construction for three years out of high school.”

“Ben resisted too—thought the applications were too hard,” said Andie.

“That’s strange, I said, “I’m having the same problem with my son.” I bent quickly toward Bert so they wouldn’t see tears welling up. I couldn’t blink them back anymore, like they had a life of their own. Big awful drops splashed on my shoes, and suddenly everything surged up. Right there on the open trail. In front of strangers. Bright-hued leaves falling all around.

Desperately, I swabbed at the tears with my sleeve and gulped back sobs. “How did you get him to finish his applications?” I finally managed.

“I helped him,” Andie said, rubbing my arm. “Maybe I was wrong, but he needed help and I gave it to him. He’s a psychologist now.”

Tears spilled faster, and Andie and Joan closed around me. Bert huddled in, too. It was like being cradled in the warmest, most tender love I’d ever felt. I surrendered and let my tears flow without fear or shame.

“Our boys were just scared,” Andie said. “Your son probably is, too. Give him lots of love and give him time.”

Was she right? Did fear lie behind all his anger and defiance? Poor baby. Afraid to grow up, to admit how terrified he was.

Joan fished out a tissue from her pocket and said softly, “Strange, but I feel like we were supposed to meet you today.”

It was like a current switched on, a vibrant, tingling certainty. Of course. It was all so obvious. I'd asked for help, for new insights and a new path, and here was my answer as clear as the trees and birdsongs around us.

I looked from Joan to Andie, and then to Bert, the one who'd insisted I stop. I had no doubt some profound helping hand had reached out to me that day. Nothing had ever seemed truer, and I knew right then everything would be okay.

I'm sure nobody noticed the change right away, but things began to shift immediately. When I got home, I pressed my face against my son's door. "Sweetie, I'm sorry," I said. "So, so sorry."

No response.

"I know you're scared about college and all," I continued. "I'm here if you want to talk."

Not a word, but an hour later he came out. His eyes were wary, and he mumbled only that he didn't feeling like talking, but I saw it. Relief. An opening.

His life didn't turn around immediately. He ended up going to college for a year before dropping out. Three years later, he still hasn't gone back, but he talks about it often, and I feel certain he will. I'm confident he'll find his version of success.

What really changed, though, was me. I released something that day, my own fears about him, and since then a kind of magic has brought us closer than I ever imagined possible. We talk about everything—his anxieties and dreams. And I share mine. He's one of my favorite people and a tremendous human being.

I owe it all to three angels (one of them four-legged) who heeded my silent call for help one day and set me straight. I never saw them again, but whatever maneuvered our meeting on the trail is something I've come to rely on more and more. Guidance is always there, often arriving in unexpected forms if you take time to stop and listen.

~Sidney Stevens