



Hard To Be Free... A short story by *Jason K. Brogden*

Renounce (ri-nouns') *v.* –**nounced**, **nouncing**. **1.** To give up, esp. by formal announcement. **2.** To reject; disown. [<Lat. *Renuntiare.*] - **re-nounce'ment** *n.*

Life may seem like an endless dribble of “why should I’s?” But, life often presents us with choices. These are not choices that we would have wanted to make or chosen for ourselves. However, the reality of existence puts us within a context in which there are times that we have to make difficult decisions. The interesting part is that once the choices are presented to us, we realize that we now have a stake in them. Ultimately, we do not decide under external pressure, but rather by way of inner compulsion. Devotion brought about by discernment to disabuse oneself of deceit leading to disparate dissonance so as not to be duped anymore. It is true that any experiment with life will cost deeply and personally. And so, it is truly hard to be free.



This is a story of a young man who decided to explore the world around him. He was not pretentious or caustic, but rather curious and inquisitive. He was intelligent, but not a scholar. He had little experience, but would not fit the description of a dilettante. This man lived his life always moving towards something rather than always against something. He saw himself as one on a journey; always changing, but still the same person.

One day, this man wanted to go explore a famous trail that lead deep into the wilderness. This trail was not only famous, but ancient, for many estimable men and erudite women have also engendered to explore this trail hoping to discover some mystery about life. The man had been well trained in what all was required in such an exploration and had even completed smaller trails much like it. But this trail was different. You see, in times past, the man was able to guide himself along those smaller trails. He could see the beginning as well as the end the whole time and really never get lost. But on this ancient path, a guide was required. For this trail was long and arduous. It could be convoluted and confusing at times. Why it's possible to even lose one's way...even one's mind and soul on this trail! The young man was indeed nervous to begin the hike, but determined to find out where it led. And so he started where all have started; he approached the trail head.

As he drew near, he was initially struck by how wide the path was for this trail. Why, one could lead a thousand horses down this trail! While in the process of being inundated by his initial impressions and ideals, he was met quite suddenly by the official guide of the trail. The guide possessed all the needed certifications and credentials. He was unequivocally uniformed in his appearance as he dawned the typical dress of just such a person. He was everything one might come to expect from just such a guide on just such a trail. The guide spoke to the man almost immediately and said, "Welcome to the Sublime Trail! How may I serve you?" The young man was somewhat reticent at first, for the guide seemed to have a normal sense of propriety, yet there was something off, something not quite right. He was wearing sun glasses, but that didn't seem so strange. So as not to be seen as rude though, the man quickly replied, "I am here to explore this trail. I am curious as to where it goes and why so many have come here. Tell me, why does one need a guide for this particular trail? I've never heard of such a thing. Has anyone tried it by themselves before and gotten hurt or worse?" The guide was quiescent in his body, but quickly retorted, "This trail cannot be traversed alone. Some have tried long ago and did indeed pay with their lives. This trail is thousands of years old, and so, every so often, oh about every 4 or 500 years, someone tries to go it alone and follow some of the narrow paths that lead off this trail. The smaller paths are only wide enough for one person and so it is easy to get lost."

The young man asked, "How do you know they get lost? Did they ever find them again?" "No!" Replied the guide, "Once they leave the trail, they seem to never come back. If they did, we fear that they would try and lead others as well and more and more would simply get hurt. The trail is wide for a reason and many have traveled on it. That's why a guide has been ordered here, to help those who seek the path and to keep others from being harmed."

As the two men began their journey, the young man noticed how dark it was and how quickly it changed. The head of the trail was rather pretty and well lit, but not now. The guide started working through what seemed like a well rehearsed and familiar explanation of the trail and its history. The young man did all he could to keep up and hear what the guide was saying for he was also trying to keep from falling. Despite its width, the trail was quite uneven and crooked. As a matter of fact, the young man began to notice that there were a number of things strewn along both sides of the trail. The guide had no difficulties navigating. He seemed to know the path well. Time went on, and the guide would point out certain features of the landscape. However, it was clear that either they were in the wrong place or that the man couldn't see what the guide was talking about. Whenever the young man would want to stop and look at something or take a different route, the guide would adamantly say "No! There is only one way and I have my commission to keep you safe. Now follow me please." The young man was growing more and more frustrated. The trail would seemingly wind and even double back on itself endlessly. With increasing frequency, the young man would feel and perceive huge metal objects, much like enormous machines, just sitting in the middle of the path. He asked the guide, "What are these?" The guide replied, "We call these the Assimilators. They help people stay on the path!" The scariest part of the journey up to this point was when the young man thought he saw dead bodies along the trail. He didn't trust his vision though. Not only had it grown dark, but his eyesight was becoming myopic and blurry. He couldn't think straight and began to be afraid of getting off the trail altogether. Finally, as the guide and the young man were walking along, there came a scream coming from the guide in front of him, followed by a loud crash of leaves and twigs. He ran a few steps and then began to fall. He fell only a second or two, but it seemed like an eternity. Once he gathered his strength and checked to see if he was alright, he realized that both of them had fallen into a pit. He called for the guide and asked if he was in good order. The guide said, "Oh yes. This happens sometimes. We'll be alright. Now how do we get out of here?" The young man watched the actions of the guide closely and noticed that he used his hands to feel around the pit, but never looked around. He still has his sun glasses on which seemed quite strange indeed. "You're blind aren't you?" asked the man. "Yes," said the guide, "But you shouldn't judge. Don't make fun of me!" The young man asked, "I wouldn't dare, but how is it that a blind man is a guide for people

on this trail?" The guide sighed and said, "I was willing and needed the money. I have a pretty good mind and thought I could use it here."

After a while, the man and the guide got out of the pit. The man was both angry and scared at this point and wanted to find a way out of this mess. He remembered something his mentor once taught him, "People don't change until their pain outweighs their fear." That being said, the young man became resolute and told the guide, "I hate to do this, but I have to get out of here. This is not for me at all! I saw a small trail just back there a few steps and I am going to follow it. I can't stand this any longer." The guide protested, "But you may die! I know the way, just follow me!" The young man rebuked the guide, "I may lose my life or gain it at this point, but if I keep following you I'll end up like you, maybe blind myself or worse!" With that, the young man walked away and found the narrow path he had seen. The odd thing was that even as he walked away, he never heard the guide yell for him or even follow him. It was as though he really didn't care.

The narrow trail was well lit and smooth, but it required the man to slow down at times. At other points he had to bend over and even get on his knees to get through. Along the way, he found fresh water to quench his thirst and some fruit to keep him going. Strangely enough, he had a chance to experience some of the things he wanted to in the beginning of this whole ordeal. As the young man came through the underbrush and finally busted out into a clearing, he noticed a small, well groomed hill covered in fine grass immediately before him. He climbed the short hill to hopefully get a view of where he might be and perhaps to try and figure out where he should go. As he approached the top of the hill, he noticed an archaic structure sitting atop the hill. There was nothing else around. Whatever it was or used to be, it was surrounded only by grass. As he came closer to examine it, he saw an inscription carved into the granite floor that this arch rested on. He knelt down and read it out loud saying, "There is a difference in knowing the path and walking the path." Right as he said that, the sunlight began to peer over the horizon and filled all of the land below. As the young man's eye's adjusted, he could not see the wide trail that he had started on, for it was covered in shadows and darkness. But he could see many small trails leading away from that part of the land and towards the hill. The young man turned and studied the arch again. He noticed that it had been built long ago by special hands, an artist's hands perhaps. It was not cold or mechanical. It had not been created by some artificial program or engineer. Yet it was with harmony and order that this simple but profound structure complemented its surroundings, and yet was unlike anything else in all of creation. The man wondered why the blind man did not mention this at all. "Did he know it was here and decided to keep it a secret? Maybe he never saw it at all? I wonder if anyone ever tried to get rid of this structure before. It sure seems like an

oddity, yet I'm glad I found it." The man realized that he could have never have found the hill if he had not followed the narrow trail, and he would not have chosen the narrow trail if he had not renounced the blind guide. Had he found what he was looking for or rather was it he who was found? As the young man dwelled on both the beauty and irony of discovering something so out of place yet so perfectly placed, he thought to himself, "Indeed it is truly hard to be free."



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To live in the presence of great truths and eternal laws, to be led by permanent ideals:
that is what keeps a man patient when the world ignores him,
and calm and unspoiled when the world praises him.
- Honore De Balzac-