

JANUARY 2026

# Our Lady of the Strays

VOLUME 02 ISSUE 01



*The Mirror and The Map*

## Service Program

Invocation.....	2
Hymn.....	3
Scripture Reading.....	4
Sermon.....	5
Benediction.....	13
Call to Action.....	14

## Invocation

In the spirit of Navigation,

May my sight be sharpened and may my feet stand firm at the helm of this vessel.

Let me press through the waves and weather of the deep, where sea and heavens merge into the order of Life.

Grant me courage in these unknown waters.

Grant me the wisdom to read the stars. Teach me to navigate by the constellations above and within me so that I may find safe passage from where I have been to where I am called to go.

Amen.

## Hymn

**Show Me**

Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
Show me where I had to fall.

Mirror, mirror in my hand,  
Be the North Star of my land.

Be my guide of past and present,  
Of times ahead with new intent.  
Show me truth through introspection;  
Map my path through clear reflection.

Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
Show me how to rise post-fall.

Mirror, mirror in my hand,  
Be the North Star of my land.

## Scripture

From *The Return of the Native* by Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). This novel is all about characters grappling with the grief of unfulfilled lives and stifled ambitions. The character Clym Yeobright, a successful diamond merchant, has his dreams shattered by multiple tragedies. He is left half-blind and spiritually broken, but his suffering alchemizes into wisdom. His grand, abstract plans for himself are replaced by a narrowed but deepened field of action.

The following excerpt is from Chapter One, "The Inevitable Movement Onward", of Book Six, "Aftercourses":

*His sorrows had made some change in his outward appearance; and yet the alteration was chiefly within. It might have been said that he had a wrinkled mind. He had no enemies, and he could get nobody to reproach him, which was why he so bitterly reproached himself.*

*He did sometimes think he had been ill-used by fortune, so far as to say that to be born is a palpable dilemma, and that instead of men aiming to advance in life with glory they should calculate how to retreat out of it without shame. But that he and his had been sarcastically and pitilessly handled in having such irons thrust into their souls he did not maintain long. It is usually so, except with the sternest of men. Human beings, in their generous endeavour to construct a hypothesis that shall not degrade a First Cause, have always hesitated to conceive a dominant power of lower moral quality than their own; and, even while they sit down and weep by the waters of Babylon, invent excuses for the oppression which prompts their tears.*

*Thus, though words of solace were vainly uttered in his presence, he found relief in a direction of his own choosing when left to himself. For a man of his habits the house and the hundred and twenty pounds a year which he had inherited from his mother were enough to supply all worldly needs. Resources do not depend upon gross amounts, but upon the proportion of spendings to takings.*

*He frequently walked the heath alone, when the past seized upon him with its shadowy hand, and held him there to listen to its tale. His imagination would then people the spot with its ancient inhabitants—forgotten Celtic tribes trod their tracks about him, and he could almost live among them, look in their faces, and see them standing beside the barrows which swelled around, untouched and perfect as at the time of their erection. Those of the dyed barbarians who had chosen the cultivable tracts were, in comparison with those who had left their marks here, as writers on paper beside writers on parchment. Their records had perished long ago by the plough, while the works of these remained. Yet they all had lived and died unconscious of the different fates awaiting their relics. It reminded him that unforeseen factors operate in the evolution of immortality.*

Sermon  
*Make it make sense.*

**In our last issue**, the inaugural issue of *Our Lady of the Strays*, I shared with you the ethereal truth of the rules that guide the cosmic structure of the Universe, the shape and process of all that is, ever was, and ever will be. Think gravity, entropy, the conservation of energy. These forces that hold entire galaxies together also guide the rise and fall of every thing.

Recall:

1. Nature is neutral.
  2. Its laws are fixed; their interplay dynamic but harmonious.
  3. These laws unfold in a continuous process.
  4. These laws operate both around and within you.
- And so: To place absolute trust in the laws of nature, as practice rather than fatalism, is to claim your power. In simpler words: go with the flow, humbly but with intention.

I also introduced the SEM, the Socioecological Model, which is a framework borrowed from public health that helps us to think through how, at the human-level, the circumstances around us shape our lives. Just as gravity acts upon us whether or not we see or understand it, so too do social and psychological forces. The SEM gives us a way to name and map those human-level forces that shape our personal universe. It refuses to reduce one's life narrative into a story of personal failure.

We ended with the idea that it is not despite our circumstances but through them that we can move with intention. That awareness is what allows us to reinvent ourselves after we have gone astray.

In this issue, we'll zoom in to the innermost circle of the SEM: the individual. Remember that we use the SEM both to identify factors at the different levels from self to society, and also to consider how the different levels press upon one another. This second part is crucial. It reminds us that even our most personal choices carry the imprint of everything surrounding us.

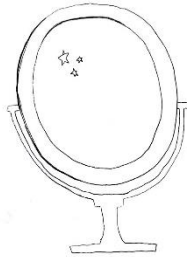
We're going to put this into practice in a method that I call Mirror and Map. It's a simple structure for cultivating awareness, one that helps us see both our actions and the conditions that influenced them.

The Mirror asks: What actions did a person choose? What immediate needs or motives drove that choice? What harm followed, to herself and to others?

The Mirror is the space of accountability. It reflects what is, without excuse or embellishment.

The Map then asks: What does the landscape around this person look like? What patterns and influences guided her toward her choices?

The Map is the space of context. It illuminates how every decision emerges from our social terrain.



**To bring Mirror and Map to life**, we will use two real-life case studies. First, a woman charged with the murder of her ex-partner. Second, a woman who exchanged sex for money in the adult entertainment industry.

#### *Case study #1*

I work in the profession of social services, formerly in direct service and now in program development. It was in my work in the realm of public defense that I had a client whose astray moment, her life-altering divergence, began when she killed the father of one of her children, claiming self-defense. Suddenly, her freedom and her family unit were at stake. The state was pursuing a felony conviction for murder and the county was moving to terminate her parental rights to her children because of what she had done.

If this client were to look in the Mirror, she would start by truthfully naming her action plainly, without justification or defense.

The action: *I killed my child's father.*

It's easy to name the action when we're analyzing someone else. This first step, however, can be surprisingly difficult to take for ourselves. It's natural to want to explain, to contextualize. *I tried to cope with trauma by using drugs. I needed money, so I sold my body. I'm a single parent because my child's other parent failed us. He came at me, so I shot him.*

But true awareness starts with plainly, neutrally laying out the inciting action by itself. *I got into opiates. I traded sex for money. I had a child with someone that I knew was unreliable. I killed my child's father.*

Before we can move toward understanding and healing, we have to be able to say, this is what I did. This is an honest reflection in the Mirror.

In our case study:

*The motivations: I wanted to feel safe. I wanted to be free of my abuser, permanently. I wanted peace in raising the child I shared with him.*

The harm: I am responsible for ending someone's life. I am facing many years in prison. I have lost access to my children. My daughter must live with the knowledge that her father is dead because her mother killed him.

Healing begins with accountability. Two things can be true at the same time: it can be true that we were in some way victims of circumstance or somebody else's actions and that we made choices that placed ourselves in a vulnerable position. Accountability is not the same as self-blame. Blame is a dead-end street of assigning fault, whereas accountability is recognizing one's agency.

This recognition can ache. To claim agency is to acknowledge our role in the creation of our own suffering. And that ache is part of the grief process. But the recognition of our agency is also where the transformation begins. Reclamation of our agency becomes the ground from which we can finally move with intention because we understand what it is that we control.

Next we move to Map, the landscape behind and around our action. Mapping means examining the layers that shaped our choices in the moment. It's examining personal history, internal states, social environment, and broader systems. We can use the SEM to name the risk factors at every level. In this case study:

The landscape:

- Individual: impoverished single mom carrying the full financial and logistical responsibility of raising her child, trauma history of witnessing domestic violence between her own parents, limited capacity to leave her abuser due to income constraints and reliance on nearby family support



- Interpersonal: ongoing physical abuse by the child's father
- Community: culture that normalizes guns and equates violence with protection
- Society: ineffective or inconsistent institutional tools (e.g. police, courts, shelters) that cannot wholly protect victims from their abusers

The point of examining the context of our choices isn't to remove accountability. When we hold both the Mirror (accountability) and the Map (context), we become aware of our agency within the forces that shape us.

#### *Case Study #2*

If I am going to dissect the life of someone else, then I must also offer myself up for the same scrutiny. Here in 2026, it is increasingly common to turn intimacy into a commercial exchange, i.e. trading sexual access for money and/or visibility. The dominant cultural narrative insists that such choices are not shameful or inherently harmful. But speaking from the lived experience of having made that trade as a young, newly independent not-quite-19-year-old, I can say that it can indeed be a way of going astray.

We can flesh this out more fully through the Mirror and the Map.

The action: *I traded sex for money and exposure.*

Again, it is crucial that we plainly name the action. No euphemisms, no excuses. No branding, no defenses. And the same commitment applies to the motivations and to the harm.

The motivations: *I wanted to feel seen. I wanted to feel desirable. I wanted to master my sexuality. I wanted to make big money quickly.*

The harm: A company now forever owns explicit media of me. I wear the scarlet letter of having engaged in a form of prostitution. I have placed a reputational burden on the people I love most, my family of origin and my daughters, who must also contend with that media's existence. That action engendered in me the belief that intimacy is

transactional, an act of performance rather than an act of loving connection.

Moving onto Map, we see that the "moment" I went astray was not a single moment at all. It was the culmination of many conditions that formed a predictable path.

The landscape:

- Individual: a late bloomer with no experience of physical intimacy as a teenager, socially awkward; actively abusing chemical substances (alcohol, marijuana, benzos)
- Interpersonal: socially isolated in a new city, 2800 miles from home; first ever sexual encounter was an assault a few months earlier
- Community: social scene that normalized casual sexual encounters; growing trend of digital exhibitionism among peers
- Society: "sex work is work" and "sex positivity" framed as liberation; commodified intimacy normalized as empowerment; human sexuality treated as capital

This, as vulnerable as it is to share, is a useful case study because, in addition to showing how a series of factors lead to a life-altering choice, so, too, can we analyze how that choice itself became part of the landscape for future life-altering events. In this case, a mix of naiveté and trauma around intimacy influenced my entry to porn which impacted my orientation to intimate relationships which influenced decisions in intimate partners which ultimately led to pursuing unhealthy relationship dynamics that all but guaranteed I would become a single mom.

The Mirror makes starkly clear that my action was driven by a desire for empowerment after feeling powerless (feeling overlooked as a teen, then experiencing a sexual assault my first week of college). The Map traces the influences that made that desire feel normal -- the trauma, the isolation, a culture that romanticizes sexual boldness.

Mirror and Map is a highly useful tool for practicing self-awareness. It forces us as strays to confront where we are and how we got there. We can then use this

information as a springboard for healthier actions going forward. I once believed that selling my body could rewrite the story of my worth; I see now that it only calcified the very story that I was trying to erase.

**I'm going to add a bonus case study.** Let's look at an example of someone who has left a confining religious community. His grief is borne of disillusionment and isolation.

### *Case Study #3*

There are times when our suffering comes not from wrongdoing, but from a necessary change that nevertheless disrupts our lives and sense of self. Not every path that goes astray is the result of an error. Sometimes, as in this case study, straying is an act of courage.

### The Mirror:

The action: *I abandoned my religious community.*

The motivations: *I had serious doubts about the integrity of the doctrine. I wanted to live without fear of divine punishment. I wanted a faith and a life that felt authentic.*

The harm: I am without an anchor. I lost the community that shaped my identity. I now live in the fear that I have betrayed something sacred. The people I love most feel my leaving as a personal rejection.

### The Map:

#### The landscape:

- Individual: deepening cognitive dissonance; a sense of shame around never feeling "enough" spiritually; a longing for authenticity and mental freedom
- Interpersonal: love and acceptance made contingent on obedience; fear of disappointing family
- Community: doctrines that penalize doubt; a culture of perfectionism; an "us versus them" mentality that casts outsiders as dangerous

- Society: mainstream narrative that portrays believers as naive and apostates as liberated

This case shows that grief is not limited to the aftermath of mistakes. Sometimes grief arrives because we did the right thing for ourselves, even if that right thing resulted in a loss. Here, our individual was raised to mesh his identity with the practice of a particular religion to the point that adherence to that religious belief became inextricable with his belonging in a totalizing religious community. Leaving the faith meant losing at once both his sense of identity and his sense of belonging.

We see, too, that sometimes the Map is not just the context for actions but also explains why we feel such grief around the action. His fear of disappointing his family deepens his sense of loss when he moves from his faith community. The societal idea that believers are naive and apostates are enlightened leads him to feel too skeptical for one world while also being too faithful-hearted for the other.

### **Let's turn to you.**

You are here because, somewhere along the way, you became estranged from yourself. There was a moment when you made a choice that changed your life's direction.

Hold up the Mirror: Name the action that you took, plainly and without justification. Next, name the why of your action. What did you believe that choice would give you? What pain were you trying to soothe? What power were you trying to reclaim? And now name the harm. Honor the truth of what happened.

Move to the Map. Trace the forces that shaped the conditions of your choice. Trace through your history, your wounds, your environment, your culture. Where do you see patterns emerging? What is the narrative?

It stings, but trust me that what follows that sting is the beginning of your healing. To recognize your agency is to empower yourself.

We can bring it back to the cosmic truth. At the individual level we see that we, and therefore our choices, do not exist in a vacuum. We exist not only within the Universe, but as individual universes. You are a universe. You are a walking constellation, ever expanding, in flux and unfinished. Remember our ethereal

truth that what may appear as random chaos is actually quite orderly in an overarching dynamic process.

And you, too, can intentionally make order of your life by recognizing the patterns of you as a universe. Name your stars. Name their solar systems. Trace the constellations of desire and fear and hope and hurt that guide your tides. Then, chart your course, the path forward into who you are becoming because you strayed.

This is your practice. This is your power. This is how you navigate the entirety of the macrocosm instead of being lost within it. This is how you begin again.

## Benediction

And it is here that I am:

With intuition as my compass, with courage as my steady wind,

Let my heart remember I am the stars that I follow.

Amen



A series of horizontal black bars of varying lengths, some solid and some with a gradient, arranged in a list-like structure.

As before, you are welcome to contact me via snail mail (PO box) or email. You can share a glimpse at your reflections, or talk through your thoughts on Mirror and Map with me. Let's learn and grow together!

Expect Issue 02 to publish at the start of the second trimester of the year, on May 01. We will push outward to the next circle of the SEM, exploring a relational theme of interpersonal dynamics.

Until next time,  
blessed be your journey.

