

Animas Valley Institute  
P.O. Box 1020 Durango, CO 81302  
800-451-6327 or 970-259-0585  
[www.animas.org](http://www.animas.org)  
[soulcraft@animas.org](mailto:soulcraft@animas.org)

# PSYCHOSPIRITUAL PREPARATION FOR YOUR QUEST

## PREPARATION QUESTIONS

---

Your answers to these questions will help us discover more about you before you arrive for your quest, and perhaps the questions themselves will help you get to know us...

Please keep a copy of your answers for yourself.

(1) Why is this a potent time in your life to seek an encounter with your soul?

(2) What phase of your life is coming to an end now?

(3) What new phase is getting ready to be born (if you know)?

(4) How have you ripened yourself and/or how has the world ripened you to participate fully in a vision fast not only for yourself, but also for "your people" – whether they be community, fellow creatures, or world – *and* in companionship with your fellow participants and guides?

(5) What processes are you engaged in now (and/or will be engaged in between now and the vision fast) that you believe will enhance your experience and participation?

Please e-mail your responses to us at [soulcraft@animas.org](mailto:soulcraft@animas.org), and they will be forwarded to the guides.

### IMPORTANT NOTES:

1. Please send your answers in a Word document attached to the email if at all possible. It makes the process of compiling your answers much easier.
2. ***Please put your name and the program name above your answers so as not to be confused with someone else.***

---

*The following activities are recommended to you as part of your preparation:*

### JOURNAL WORK

---

Begin or intensify your journal work. Here are some possibilities to write about:

- Begin to record in your journal what you discover about *yourself* as you think about attending this quest. For example, what feelings emerge? What hopes and expectations arise concerning your quest? What are your fears about the Quest? Tell yourself the truth; by honoring your fears, you evoke and strengthen the Warrior sub-personality within you that had the courage to say "yes" to the Quest. What symbols and gestures of your own soul do you recall or discover as you reflect upon the quest? What ideas or images arise concerning ceremonies that you might want to perform?
- What phase or stage of your life is ending? Be as specific as you can.
- What transition(s) are you going through and how do you feel about these shifts?
- Why is this a right time to go to the wilderness to "cry for a vision" in a sacred manner? What do you seek?

- What in you is getting ready to be born? Make your best guess if you don't know! Don't worry it'll be different than you imagine, anyway. Project it nonetheless. It will help you cast off from the shore of your past.
- Are you prepared to surrender to the deepest strivings of your soul?
- In what specific ways are you prepared to be available for whatever gifts or power you receive?
- Who are your People? (They are not necessarily limited to humans, but they are the ones for whom you will hope to bring back a vision to perform, a "Give-Away" that will be as much an act of service for them as it is an act of self-fulfillment for you).
- For what will you pray? (It is often recommended that you pray for only one or two things).
- Use any other journal-work process with which you are familiar.

Some people choose to compose a **Personal Myth**: a short autobiography told in the third person that is symbolically authentic as concerns the important themes of the stage of your life, or your whole life up to now, that is getting ready to end. The facts don't matter! Have it take place anywhere and anytime that fits best with your myth. Add or subtract or modify characters from your life if this aids in portraying the thematic truths. Have yourself represented by one character, two, or several (or, if it fits, none). Give yourself a symbolically significant name (or use "the Hero" or "the Heroine"). If you wish, have your myth include the full story of that life (past your present age), all in the past tense, including the way it would be likely to end if the predominant themes stayed the same. Think and feel (and write) mythically.

Read Roger Housden's "**The Journey**" about Mary Oliver's poem of the same title. Then take up your journal and record your impressions and images about why you are currently daring "to take your heart in your hands and walk through an invisible wall into a new life". Why *now*? In what way is it "already late enough"? In what way is this the only thing you could do? What do you know about the life that you may be saving? What tells you that you are about to strike out into mysterious territory? What is the "outworn way of being in the world" to which you are now dying? What is the nature of the past and the "polite society" from which you now have an opportunity to break? What is that urgent, passionate call to embark on a spiritual journey? What is the wildness now coursing through your veins? Have the wild beasts already appeared to hinder your progress? What are they?

## **DEATH LODGE PREPARATION ACTIVITIES**

---

During your solo, you will have an opportunity to perform a Death Lodge ceremony. The ceremony will be explained by your guides before your solo. The Death Lodge preparation process offered below is a valuable component of your preparation for that ceremony as well as the Animas Quest.

In the weeks or months preceding the vision fast, the quester prepares to separate from her ordinary life and the ongoing life of family, friends, community, and place. She will soon cross alone into the mysteries of nature and psyche. She recognizes that the one who leaves home will not be the one who returns. She longs for the journey, but is understandably terrified by the prospect.

In this preparation phase of your vision quest, you are readying to leave home, to lay to rest the old story of your life. We suggest some time in the Death Lodge, to support you in this task — preparing to die in order to be reborn.

The Death Lodge is a symbolic and/or literal place to which you retire to reflect on and say good-bye to what your life has been. Some of your Death Lodge work will take place in the cauldron of your imagination and emotions, while at other times you may choose face-to-face encounters with family, friends, and lovers.

Many people embark on their quests in part to say good-bye to an outgrown identity; in a sense to attend their own funeral. If this is true for you, you might write a eulogy for yourself, an honoring of and a farewell to the old story. Although the new story stirs inside you, if even barely perceptible, you know the old story must be laid to rest.

To begin, seek a place — a physical space and/or with your imagination — that speaks to you of death, a space that feels like a place to die. Invite yourself to feel the ways in which you are already dying to your old life. Allow yourself to feel the undeniable tug and pull of your approaching fast, the knowing in your bones that it is time to say goodbye and make peace with the past. Reflect on your life up to the present day and invite significant

individuals and memories — unfinished experiences — to arrive in your awareness. What might you discover, in these last days of the old life, that you need to express, request, complete, let go of, give, or clear?

This is an opportunity to feel what deeply stirs in you, including gratitude, grief, love, anger, compassion, hurt, and forgiveness. This is a time to seek out those significant people in your life and say the difficult and important things previously unsaid. This is an opportunity to say your good-byes.

You might ask yourself if it is time to forgive those with whom you are angry, to forgive them for not being the way you wanted them to be. You might explore the possibilities of forgiveness, its capacity to heal the forgiver and sometimes the forgiven. Forgiveness does not excuse harmful actions but it does embrace the other's humanity and the fact that their limitations might have led to unskillful behavior. You might discover, on the other hand, that you are not ready to forgive. Either way, you'll tell yourself and others your truth.

Perhaps it's time to tell a loved one, at long last, that you dearly love them, to express appreciation for kindnesses you had taken for granted, or to sit with a friend and speak intimately of his or her significance in your life. If you find yourself in tangled and unsatisfying relationships, you might choose to attend to what is unfinished and seek resolution.

During this process of reflection and action, you might recognize that some of your choices have caused others pain. If so, perhaps you're ready now to accept responsibility for the consequences of your choices, however unconscious or unaware you may have been at the time, and for your potential to do harm. Although many hurts and injustices cannot be undone, you might make some restitution, symbolic or actual. Often the most difficult task is to finally forgive ourselves. By doing so, we become free to move in the world in new ways.

Your Death Lodge time prepares you to complete unfinished business linked with your old life story. This might require actions such as disposing of possessions that bind you to your old way of being, writing a will, giving away special objects, repaying a debt, finishing a truly meaningful project, letting go of a half finished project whose expiration date has long since passed, or ending/changing a living or working arrangement. Only you know what is yours to do.

Engage in your Death Lodge activities as thoroughly as you sense is necessary. The steps you take during this time might be many or only a potent few. Do your best to resolve loose ends, which can get snagged along the way and become anchors when it's time to leap.

(You'll find additional reading on the Death Lodge in *Soulcraft*, pages 105-108.)

## **THE FIRE CEREMONY**

---

The Fire Ceremony is one of the powerful group ceremonies performed during the quest prior to your solo time. As with any ceremony, it is strengthened by what you put into it. The following information will guide you in your preparations. This ceremony includes your sacrifice of an object to a sacred fire. This will be an object (or objects) that you will bring with you from home and that is/are small and light enough to be carried in/on your backpack. Ideally, it will also be combustible without creating any toxic fumes! Most importantly, it will be something that represents, symbolically and personally, the current phase of your existence that you are about to surrender or leave behind. (This "current phase" may be conceived any way that seems right to you: it may be a period of only the last few months or years or it may be the period of your birth to the present, or it may go back even further).

In sacrificing your item to the fire, you will be *making it sacred* and *relinquishing your attachment* to the period of your life that is ending. In the Fire Ceremony, you will be manifesting your willingness to move on in your life, to let go, to enter the central, mysterious phase of the transition rite that is the Vision Quest. The idea is *not* to say "good riddance" to what you don't like about your life. Rather, you will be *honoring* the chapter of your life that has miraculously ushered you to your current jumping-off place. Please consider carefully what your sacrificial object(s) will be; choose wisely and deeply—the fullness of your Quest experience may depend upon it.

There are two types of objects that you might choose to offer to the ceremonial fire: those that symbolize Obstacles and those that symbolize Attachments. In some cases, an object will symbolize something that is *both* an Obstacle and an Attachment:

**(1) Obstacles:** these objects symbolize a period or style of suffering or crisis, limitation or failure, addiction or numbness. At first, you may hope just "to be rid" of this aspect of your life, washing your hands of the mess. However, until you see how you have also *benefited* from this Obstacle, you will not succeed at moving on from it; indeed, despite your intentions, you may continue dragging it around like an anchor. The truth is that without the Obstacle, you might be exposed – to the dangers of the Unknown, to your own Soul, or to your deepest feelings. Perhaps this Obstacle has, in reality, been a "protection" that was at one time beneficial. Perhaps it was a Childhood Survival Strategy. Or an Adult Survival Strategy. From what did it protect you? Can you see how you created it and how it served you? Or are you merely an unlucky victim? (I'm *not* referring to trauma's such as childhood abuse or life-threatening illnesses; I *am* referring to behavioral styles or patterns or relationships in your life that may have been your way of *coping* with traumas or losses or dangers). That old Survival Strategy may now be getting in the way of your growth by "protecting" you from a danger that no longer exists or that is no longer substantial. Once you have fully realized this, you will come to feel that saying goodbye to that old Strategy is not so much like a "good riddance" to an enemy. It's more like saying goodbye to a good friend that has helped you through some very difficult times: Imagine that you are at the depot. Your friend is on the train. The train is pulling out. You are waving goodbye, forever.

If you are preparing to offer an Obstacle symbol at the Fire Ceremony, the question is, "Are you *willing* to let go of this?", NOT so much "Are you *able* to?" You need to honor and thank this "Loyal Soldier" – for getting you, in more or less one piece, to this casting-off point. You need to be able to see the Obstacle more broadly and in wider perspective than merely how it has limited you. You must be willing to go on without its protection. This may take some preparation! Don't expect the Fire Ceremony itself to do all this work for you. The ceremony will be a celebration and culmination of the preparatory work you've done before it.

**(2) Attachments:** these objects symbolize the ending of something (e.g., a relationship or a role) that you are somewhat or totally reluctant to surrender. Perhaps it has ended without your desire or consent. Perhaps you part with ambivalence. It is, in any case, a significant aspect of your life to which you had been attached, or to which you are still clinging, or of which you are mourning the loss (but, in your grieving, you may be stuck in anger or denial). In the case of Attachments, you must reach the place of knowing that it *is* time to let go; perhaps that this relationship or role was in fact limiting or blocking your growth; that, at the least, it is best to move on now. You want to move toward feeling released, free from that Attachment. You need to do your grieving (saying "goodbye"), moving on to a full acceptance of the loss, and then a full embracing of the future and the unknown ("hello"). A self-created ceremony of mourning may be a good idea.

Notice that in both categories the conscious attitude needs to be balanced by the unconscious one: the "good riddance" must be balanced by both a "good friend" and a "goodbye"; the "goodbye" balanced by a "hello".

You can prepare for this ceremony by really feeling deeply into what object or objects represent the aspects of your life that you are ready to sacrifice to the Fire. We have found that the more meaningful the object is to you, the more powerful the transformation. Some people spend quite a bit of time creating an object to bring for this ceremony. Please be sure that, when burned it will not be toxic to the environment.

## **DREAMS**

---

Record your dreams. If you are having any trouble recalling them, have a long conversation with yourself as soon as you get into bed concerning the exact reasons why you are interested in remembering your dreams (this works 95% of the time). Review as many as possible of *your* genuine reasons and keep up this review until you fall asleep. Have your pen and journal ready at your bedside. As soon as you wake up, don't move your body an inch until after you have replayed your dream(s) in your imagination. Then reach for your journal. Transcribe your dreams in the present tense as if you are recording actions and experiences that are occurring *as you write them*. Include all emotions. Ask only *yourself* what they mean, or don't ask at all.

## THE DAY WALK

---

The Day Walk is a ceremony that helps you prepare for your quest. It is a full-day walk in wild nature, feet roaming upon the Earth with the open sky above, always held and touched by the breathing, animate world. It's a day of wandering, engaged in the conversations that arise as you simultaneously attend to your unfolding emotions, memories, deep thoughts, and unfettered imaginings, and also to the wild landscape in which you're immersed.

As you roam, you *listen* to the world and to the self through your engaged sensing, feeling, thoughts, and imagination. Remaining fluid and open, you encounter those forms and forces of wild nature that most deeply resonate with and reflect your own true nature and your current location in life's journey. Perhaps during this wandering you'll overhear the wind or a creature whisper something that will be of immense help as prepare for your upcoming fast.

Your heightened but relaxed attention and your willingness to be fully present to the natural world allows an untamed conversation to blossom. At the beginning of your walk, you might speak softly to your strategic thinking mind, inviting it to take a well-earned rest during this day. Where exactly you go and what you experience cannot be planned or figured out.

The Day Walk is customarily enacted one month before the fast. On the eve before your Walk, pack what you'll need for the day, including the "emergency items" you'll carry when on your quest. (See packing list.) Bring your journal. Let someone know where you're going, when you plan to return, and what to do if you don't. You'll fast this day-until you end your Day Walk around sunset- but remember to carry (and drink) plenty of water, and bring a small amount of food should you need to break your fast early for safety reasons. Like your approaching solo fast, this is not a contest of endurance or survival. Allow yourself to discover your own pace and your particular way of moving in relationship with yourself and all that surrounds you. Be prepared, at some point, to offer a gift — a poem, grief, yearning, joy, your eloquence, a song, a dance, a lock of hair, praise, or water.

First thing in the morning, ideally before sunrise, make your way to a natural place, an expanse of land where you'll wander for the day. Dawn and dusk will be your thresholds.

As you begin, fill the day that now stretches before you with the intention that your wandering might help prepare you in just the right way for your fast. If you've already been engaged with a particular inquiry or intention regarding your life and/or your fast, you might further imbue this day with it. Speak out loud your question or intent, as clearly as you can, and then surrender it to the space of the day. As you move over the land and allow yourself to be moved, you might wander into terrain in which the possibility of "answers" pale next to the blossoming of your own deepest questions, longing, lament or intention; *these* will usher you into the greater potentials of your fast. Perhaps you'll discover more about why you're *really* embarking on this journey.

You can intensify your Day Walk by marking, at the start, your transition from ordinary consciousness to sacred consciousness. You might do this with a simple ceremonial act — something meaningful to you: a gesture, song, rhythm, prayer, or putting on or taking off a piece of clothing.

Also, during your Day Walk, it's customary to eat no food, enter no human made shelter, and share no speech with other embodied humans you might encounter. These taboos have long been observed by native humans entering sacred time and space. By observing them, we enrich our encounter with wild nature and the numinous, the unknown and the unseen, and the insights that might claim us.

Wander without an intended destination. As in a dance, allow yourself to be moved... by a deep knowing at your core, a call to go left or right, upstream or down, an impulse to linger a bit longer or to move on. Follow your intuitions. What will you encounter? Perhaps red fox, milkweed pod, a song on the wind, sun-bleached bones, wind rippling over water, or the pale moon above.

Feeling your way, you might stumble upon the soft animal of your own wonder, boredom, fear, grief, joy, gratitude, despair, or longing. Linger there. If a crow were circling overhead at different times throughout the day, she might see you kneeling, skipping, touching, tasting, laughing or crying, wandering on trail and off, or resting in stillness.

An attraction, fascination, or curious repulsion might draw you to spider web, gnarled tree with exposed roots, snakeskin, meadowlark's song, or the place where the grass quivers. Your body might respond with an unnamable heaviness, a chill on your skin, tingling pleasure, numbness, or an ecstatic surge of energy.

And, just as you would carefully observe a wild creature moving in the surrounding landscape, you might similarly track any images or wisps of dreams or memories that pad softly at the edges of your awareness.

At some time in your wandering, you'll find (or, be found by) one particular thing, material or not, that calls you most strongly. You'll recognize it by how it resonates within you upon discovery. Even though it remains a mystery, you'll know it holds meaning for your journey. This thing and the way the encounter moves you can serve as a symbol to help you prepare for your fast. If it's a material thing, this thing might return with you, but only if it grants you permission and you know without a shadow of a doubt that taking it with you would not constitute the slightest disruption of that environment. In any case, it might, if you wish, return with you in your deep imagination.

The dusk will be your closing threshold. With simple ceremony, end your wandering in the same place you began. Offer your gratitude and a gift, if you haven't already.

Before completing your transition back to ordinary consciousness and your everyday world, be sure to use your journal to collect the experiences of the day. What did you observe, feel, imagine? What other wild beings (inner and outer) did you encounter? Precious insights may arise from your experiences; golden nuggets, deepening mystery, and/or a thread to follow. If so, gather these up and allow them to guide you in preparing for your quest. (As your thinking mind rouses from its rest, resist the impulse to analyze or interpret your experience.)

You might choose to share the story of your Day Walk with your guides and co-questers when you all gather together. It might be best to refrain from sharing it with others, or, if you do, only with those who will surely honor its mystery and not even consider giving you advice, or interpretations.

---

## **SUPPORT GROUP**

As a part of their preparation many people assemble a support group at home -- a small group of friends and/or family members who understand what it is that you are doing and who are wholeheartedly rooting for you. This group will take on the role of what used to be the clan or "lodge" in more traditional societies. You will meet with them as a group at least once and perhaps several times. You will tell them, for example, the exact dates of your solo/fasting time (which is listed at the top of this letter), what you will be praying for, etc. You may ask them to send you off with a ceremony, or to welcome you back in a certain way. Or you might merely ask them to pray for you while you are fasting. And you might create a ceremony of thanksgiving for them either before you leave or upon your return or both. Their love will feed your soul during your fast.

---

## **THE EDGE**

Pay attention to the Edge of your waking consciousness (i.e., subtle and fleeting thoughts, feelings, images, perceptions, memories, imaginary conversations, waking dreams, daydreams) and record what you find there.

---

## **READING**

Do some additional **reading** *if you'd like*. (This is probably the least important of the preparation activities). You might use the **AVI Recommended Reading List** as a guide.

## **GETTING IN SHAPE**

---

You must be in good enough condition to hike one hour with a 40-50 pound pack on your back, handling an elevation gain or loss of about 600 feet. In addition to your own equipment, you will be asked to carry about 6 - 10 pounds of group food and kitchen equipment.

You know your body and you know when it is or is not in good working condition. If you are out of shape, begin to build your strength. Running, walking, cycling, getting plenty of exercise and fresh air, are natural means of tuning yourself to walk the steps of balance and harmony. Sleep is also an important part of your physical preparedness.

## **DIET**

---

In the month or two before your Quest, we suggest minimizing your consumption of alcohol, consciousness-altering drugs, tobacco products, heavy meats, oily/fried foods, junk food, overly processed items, etc. This will minimize the symptoms of toxicity that you might otherwise experience during your fast.

One month before the actual quest commences, after the Day Walk has been completed, begin to watch your diet more carefully, cutting down on beef, pork, and other heavy or oily forms of meat protein, substituting more cereal and grains – in short, balancing the diet and not overeating. Also begin to drink more fluids and juices and eat more soups and stews. Gradually, you will be cleansing your body by flushing it out, keeping your digestive tract in balance by training it to go on less. It also helps to practice going without food between sunrise and sunset, just drinking water, or to skip occasional meals. Do not, however, overdo it. Come to the threshold healthy and strong.

**Menstruation:** The experience of the vision fast often brings on menstruation ahead of schedule. Many women realize beforehand that this special time of the month will fall during the time they are in the sacred world of the threshold. They look forward to their moon, for it is a time of power, of heightened intuition and attunement to the spiritual heart of Grandmother Earth.

## THE JOURNEY

One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began,  
though the voices around you  
kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house  
began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug  
at your ankles.  
“Mend my life!”  
each voice cried.  
But you didn’t stop.  
You knew what you had to do,  
though the wind pried  
with its stiff fingers  
at the very foundations-  
though their melancholy  
was terrible.  
It was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.  
But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice,  
which you slowly recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do-  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.

Mary Oliver

## The Journey-Commentary

MARY OLIVER maps out the only trip worth taking ... and ROGER HOUSDEN explores how Mary Oliver's poem eerily mirrored his own life-changing trip.  
(Please see the attached poem).

"THE JOURNEY" IS A POEM OF transformation, and as much as any poem Oliver ever wrote, it is a mirror in which you can see a reflection of your own story. It captures that moment when you dare to take your heart in your hands and walk through an invisible wall into a new life.

When I first read this poem I had just landed in San Francisco from London. That one reading made my hair stand on end. It confirmed the rightness of all that had just happened in my life. A few months earlier, I had woken up one morning and knew I should leave my native country of England and go and live in America. Just like that. Rather than a decision, it was like recognizing something whose time had come. Everything needed to change, and the time was now. I sold my house, my library; my love of 12 years and I finally parted; I read my diaries of 25 years, and then burned them. I got on a plane to California, and I have been there, in a new life, ever since.

The move to America was a long time coming. On the other hand, it took no time whatsoever. I was 53 at the time. This kind of knowing just happens. One day, I was lying in my bed in my hometown of Bath, England, when something that had been gestating for years suddenly stepped out into the clear light of day. When it finally came out of my mouth, I realized that what had surfaced was the true journey of my life - its underground stream, its guiding motif.

Perhaps this sounds too dramatic, too grand a gesture, for the kind of lives that most of us live. Yet at the time, it was the only thing to do. The poem might seem dramatic to you, too; surely, you might think, it must have been written for the benefit of someone else -- not for you, not for your humdrum, ordinary life. After all, you may say, you are hardly about to leave everything behind and strike out into some mysterious territory.

Don't be so sure. I believe that Mary Oliver's poem can speak to anyone, wherever they are on their journey. Profound and significant changes can occur through the smallest, apparently insignificant gesture. If you are in the right place and read this poem at the right time, it may be the nudge you need to fall headlong into the life that has been waiting for you all along.

*One day you finally knew  
what you had to do, and began ...*

EVERYTHING HANGS ON THAT first step. It is not enough to *know*, you have to begin. The time for discussion and deliberation is over. In a lucid moment like this, the mind is quiet with a tender certainty. It is time to start walking, to stand by the truth you may have known all along but were not ready until this moment to call by its true name.

IT HAD TAKEN ME A LONG TIME to be ready. In my case, the shell of my life had to be softened, broken down even, before that moment of truth could appear. I needed to be humbled, cooked in the tears of loss, for any deeper life to emerge.

The pain of loss, grief, and despair is not essential for transformation. It is possible to step into a new life in

more graceful ways. But for most of us, and certainly for me, pain and loss usually prepare the way. The moment itself may seem effortless, but a lifetime of suffering may have preceded it. A new life requires a death of some kind; otherwise it is nothing new, but rather a shuffling of the same deck. What we die to is an outworn way of being in the world. We experience ourselves differently. We are no longer who we thought we were. But I do not suggest for one moment that it is easy. Nor that there are any guarantees. If you start down a new road, you cannot know where it will take you.

All the same, when you are ready, you begin. The directness of this knowing, quiet yet strong, can propel you out of your habitual perceptions of life and into the unknown before you have even a moment to think twice about it,

The forces wanting you to stay where you are can be daunting. But the choice is always yours.

*though the voices around you kept shouting  
their bad advice-  
though the whole house began to tremble  
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.  
"Mend my life!"  
each voice cried.  
But you didn't stop.*

A JOURNEY LIKE THIS GOES against the prevailing current. It requires you to step out of line, to break with polite society. Other people will feel the ripples, and they won't like it. Any authentic movement usually requires a break with the past -- not because the past *is* bad, but because it is so difficult for a deeper truth to make itself known among the accretions of habit and conformity.

It may mean that one day, for no apparent reason, you simply know that you cannot continue to play by the rules you have accepted for years -- the unwritten rules of a relationship, the abuses of power at work, the script you have written for your own life. It may signify a spiritual awakening, prompt you to enter a monastery, travel the world, announce your love for someone, or start painting -- only you will know how the poem reflects the unique design of your own journey.

Whatever your circumstance, people will start to give you advice as soon as you disturb the status quo. That advice is likely to be bad. It will be bad because they are seeking not to understand and further your calling but to preserve the world as they know it. And yet in the midst of the shouting and the falling masonry you will know with an unusual quietness that it is all happening in the only way it can, and that whichever way it turns out, no matter what suffering you endure, it will be all right. There, in the midst of the cyclone, is the peace that passes understanding.

*though their melancholy  
was terrible.*

HOW MANY OF US KEEP ON walking, how many of us stay true to what we know our lives are crying out for, when those close to us implore us to stay behind and look to their needs? So much of your life can be spent in anxiety and worry over others, especially if you are a woman. Women are both genetically and culturally disposed to caring for others, even when it means disregarding their own needs. Yet to walk on, as the person in the poem does, is to finally realize that you cannot shoulder another person's work for them. This life is a vale of soul-making, Keats said; and each one of us must take the charge of our lives upon ourselves. Far from being a display of selfishness, this is the most compassionate act you can do for anyone: to stand by the truth of your own life and live it as fully and passionately as you are able.

In leaving your past behind you, you walk through your fear of the unknown. To walk on despite all the pleas for you to come back is to know that you are free from the clutches of guilt. When you are free of the grip of guilt and fear, love blooms: love of the truth. You will say what you have to say, and do what you have to do - not out of anger, nor irresponsibility, but because if you do not cleave to the truth, you

know you will die. After all,

*it was already late  
enough, and a wild night,  
and the road full of fallen  
branches and stones.*

ALREADY LATE ENOUGH: HOW long will you go on sleeping? This calling is passionate, urgent, even. Once you hear it, you cannot help but feel how late it is. You may have waited all your life for this one moment; there are no second thoughts. You wake to a wild night. Why does Mary Oliver insist it be wild? Perhaps because truth is wild; it is dangerous. It upsets things, brings down branches that were rotten on the tree, dislodges stones whose foundations were already shaky. The wild is uncompromising; its terms are always nonnegotiable, and it would rather die than not be true to what it knows.

No wonder, then, that a journey of this kind can seem fraught with danger, at least from the perspective of common sense. Danger and darkness are in the nature of any pilgrimage, whatever the destination. Perhaps this is why, in old Arabic poetry, travel is considered one of the four great subjects worthy of the poet (along with love, song, and blood). These were considered the basic desires of the human heart, and thus travel was elevated to the dignity of being a necessity for any human being who is truly alive.

So when the wilderness courses through your veins you have no option but to leave conventional wisdom behind and head for the source - for the source of some holy river, the summit of a mountain, perhaps, but always to the source that is in the innermost heart. The door for this journey opens inward as well as outward, and the inner terrain is often more rugged than any outer wilderness. Inward or outward, the journey will have its own wild beasts for you to contend with. And yet from the very beginning, you will be sustained by your knowing, by the rightness of it all. You will feel it in your bones. You will feel it in your blood before it ever forms into words.

*But little by little,  
as you left their voices behind,  
the stars began to burn  
through the sheets of clouds,  
and there was a new voice which you slowly  
recognized as your own ...*

HOWEVER YOU UNDERSTAND IT within the context of your own life, Mary Oliver's "The Journey" speaks to the birth of a new self. This is the self who slips through the cracks of the ordinary mind when the sentry is off guard. If there is one word that can describe its voice, it is the word *authentic*. It will carry your own true taste, free of the flavor of anyone else. It is true, even if small, unashamedly small. You might even say this new identity is self-born, an immaculate conception of the spirit in you that is on an altogether different frequency and level to the life you have lived so far.

This new self does not walk away from the world, but into it. Its voice, Mary Oliver tells us,

*... kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world ...*

IT WANTS TO PLUNGE INTO LIFE with a dedication and a commitment that can only come with a rare abandon. Not a commitment to save the world; not necessarily the determination to fight for some cause, but the readiness to stand by your deepest knowing and to express that in your life first, whatever that may mean. In daring to do that, you do not leave the human community behind; on the contrary, you affirm your belonging within it, and your identification with the struggles and joys of all. In being true to that small voice within, the poet says, you are being of service to others and to the world in the most profound way possible. You cannot know where that voice will take you, but in being willing "to save the only life you could save," you are affirming one of the deepest and most sobering truths of all:

No one else can ever walk your journey for you. You alone can respond to your call.

Excerpted from *Ten Poems to Change Your Life* by Roger Housden  
(Harmony Books). Copyright © 2001 by Roger Housden

**Animas Valley Institute  
Recommended Reading List  
(version 2009)**

**Bill Plotkin's Books:**

Plotkin, Bill. *Nature and the Human Soul: Cultivating Wholeness and Community in a Fragmented World*. New World Library, 2008.  
(available January 2008)

Introduces a visionary ecopsychology of human development that reveals how fully and creatively we can mature when soul and wild nature guide us. A model for a human life span rooted in the cycles and qualities of the natural world, a blueprint for individual development that ultimately yields a strategy for cultural transformation.

Plotkin, Bill. *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche*. New World Library, 2003.

An experiential guide to the wilderness of your soul. David Abram refers to this book as "an abundantly wise and carefully crafted survival guide for the wild soul currently dozing (or dying) at the heart of your civilized life."

Plotkin, Bill. *Wild Mind: A Field Guide to the Human Psyche*. New World Library, 2013.

Our human psyches possess astonishing resources that wait within us, but we might not even know they exist until we discover how to access them and cultivate their powers, their untapped potentials and depths. *Wild Mind* identifies these resources — which Bill Plotkin calls the four facets of the Self, or the four dimensions of our innate human wholeness — and also the four sets of fragmented or wounded subpersonalities that form during childhood.

**Soulcentric Supportive Reading:**

Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous*. Vintage Books, 1996.

Abram, an ecophilosopher and magician, interweaves Balinese shamanism, the study of language, sleight-of-hand magic, and close, personal observations of the natural world to explore how humans truly are a part of nature.

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*. Peregrine Smith, 1981.

By the legendary coyote and radical defender of wilderness, this book is an account of an idealized summer in the awesome slickrock country of southeast Utah. His experiences and impressions constitute a vision quest in which the desert's harshness and solitude are his teachers. Lots of desert-dry humor and vivid images. Especially recommended if your Animas program will be in southern Utah.

Berry, Thomas. *The Dream of the Earth*. Sierra Club Books, 1988.

*The Great Work. Our Way into the Future*. Bell Tower, 1999.

This eminent cultural historian says we stand at a defining moment in history, one in which the Earth itself calls out to us to embark upon a resacralization of nature. When we live in a culture that is a destructive and disrupting force on the Earth, as we do, we cannot embody our souls without becoming cultural change agents. Berry's books eloquently provide the context for why cultural change at this time — "the Great Work" — is both necessary and ennobling.

Bly, Robert. *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*. Harper & Row, 1988.

An excellent and literary introduction to working with your Shadow.

Brown, Joseph E. (Editor). *The Sacred Pipe: The Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Penguin Books, 1971.

Brown has recorded here descriptions by Black Elk, the great Lakota Medicine Man, of their sacred rites. Includes the *Hanblecheya* rite ("crying for a vision") and the *Inipi* (sweatlodge purification ceremony).

Brown, Tom. *Tom Brown's Field Guide to Nature Observation and Tracking*. Berkley Books, 1983.

On our vision quests and other soulcraft programs, our lessons often come through Grandmother's children: the plants, animals, waters and rocks. This book shows us how to fine-tune our senses and pay proper attention to those teachers.

Campbell, Joseph. *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press, first published in 1949.

This classic by the great mythologist shows us how all myths can be understood as stories of the heroic underworld journey, of which Animas programs are a modern ritual enactment.

Campbell, Joseph, with Bill Moyers. *The Power of Myth*. Doubleday, 1988.

A beautiful and powerful summing up of Campbell's lifelong exploration of the realm of mythic imagination.

Cumes, David. *Inner Passages, Outer Journeys: Wilderness, Healing, and the Discovery of Self*. Llewellyn Publications, 1998.

This South Africa native uses personal anecdotes to study the transformational and healing qualities of nature, including wisdom from the Bushmen of the Kalahari, as well as other spiritual traditions.

Diamond, Stanley. *In Search of the Primitive: A Critique of Civilization*. Transaction Books, 1974.

A brilliant anthropologist's explanation of the true meaning of "primitive" and of the importance of myth and ritual to psychological and cultural health.

Duerr, Hans Peter. *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary between Wilderness and Civilization*. Basil Blackwell, 1985.

A rather curious, irreverent, scholarly treatise on the epistemology and topography of the realm of mysteries—"the other world"—that we enter during the descent to soul. In this realm beyond the boundaries (Dreamtime), "nature regenerates itself by dying first", as do humans.

Edinger, Edward F. *The Creation of Consciousness: Jung's Myth for Modern Man*. Inner City Books, 1984.

Presents Jung's "new myth", not another religion, but a psychological standpoint from which to understand the essential meaning of every religion. Jung finds his relation to God in the experience of the unconscious, and he holds that God needs humans in order to become conscious of His dark side.

Eisler, Riane. *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*. Harper & Row, 1987.

Drawing on recent archaeological evidence of our most remote human past, Eisler powerfully portrays an emerging new vision of our current potential: an equalitarian partnership society that emphasizes the celebration of life rather than the subjugation of nature, women, and minorities.

Foster, Steven, & Little, Meredith. *The Book of the Vision Quest: Personal Transformation in the Wilderness* (Revised Edition). Prentice Hall, 1988.

A beautiful and deeply moving book about the structure and the experience of the vision quest by the two people most influential in reintroducing this rite of passage to our culture. If you cannot find it through your local bookstore, contact Lost Borders Press, Box 55, Big Pine, CA 93513.

Foster, Steven, and Meredith Little. *The Roaring of the Sacred River: The Wilderness Quest for Vision and Self-Healing*. Lost Borders Press, 1998.

I recommend this one especially to those who might be considering an apprenticeship to the vision quest.

Gallegos, Eligio Stephen. *The Personal Totem Pole: Animal Imagery, the Chakras, and Psychotherapy*. Moon Bear Press (Box 468, Velarde, NM 87582 505-852-4897), 1987.

The presentation of the animal chakra imagery process by its originator. We will use this beautiful and powerful process as part of our preparation for, enactment of, and follow-through of our vision quest or other soulcraft program.

Gallegos, Eligio Stephen. *Animals of the Four Windows: Integrating Thinking, Sensing, Feeling, and Imagery*. Moon Bear Press, 1991.

This is a profoundly important, provocative, and ground-breaking book, the first clear and comprehensive introduction to the four modes of human knowing: thinking, feeling, sensing, and imagination. The author shows that the four windows are of equal value and power, and that our survival depends on redressing our culture's over-reliance upon thinking.

Gatto, John Taylor. *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*. New Society Publishers, 1992.

This small book, by an award-winning educator and educational activist from New York City, exposes the inadequacies and the counter-educational intentions of our society's school system. The journey to soul requires that we be able to think creatively, imagine wildly, feel deeply, and sense the world fully — capacities that our schools actively repress.

Glendinning, Chellis. *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*. Shambhala, 1994.

On the relationship between addiction and ecological crisis. Reclaiming our innate wholeness.

Hillman, James. *The Dream and the Underworld*. Harper and Row, 1979.

My vote for the best book on a soulcentric approach to dreamwork. A difficult read, yet transforming.

- Hillman, James. *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy — And the World's Getting Worse*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.  
He's right about psychotherapy — and about the world. Hillman says we need engaged action in the world in order to transform our suicidal society — and a contemporary way to approach the depths of the soul (something like soulcraft).
- Hollis, James. *The Middle Passage: From Misery to Meaning in Midlife* (1993)  
*Under Saturn's Shadow: The Wounding and Healing of Men* (1994)  
*Tracking the Gods: The Place of Myth in Modern Life* (1995)  
*Swamplands of the Soul: New Life in Dismal Places* (1996)  
*The Eden Project: In Search of the Magical Other* (1998)  
*Creating a Life: Finding Your Individual Path* (2000)  
*On This Journey We Call Our Life: Living the Questions* (2002)  
All published by Inner City Books.  
Well, I guess you can see that Hollis is my favorite Jungian author. Each of these small books is a jewel. The titles are self-explanatory except for *The Eden Project*, which is perhaps the best book I've read on romantic relationships.
- Houston, Jean. *The Search for the Beloved: Journeys in Mythology and Sacred Psychology*. Tarcher, 1987.  
An excellent book that focuses upon the Sacred Wound, the Mythic Journey of Transformation, the Discovery of the Larger Story, and the Union with the Beloved of the Soul.
- Jensen, Derrick. *A Language Older Than Words*. Context Books, 2000.  
*The Culture of Make Believe*. Context Books, 2002.  
Jensen has written the most engaging, comprehensive, impeccably researched, and horrifying books I have read about the atrocities that characterize much of civilization. He argues that only by understanding past horrors can we hope to prevent future ones. I believe he is correct. These are two of the most important books you could read in your life.
- Johnson, Robert A. *Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth*. Harper, 1986.  
This is one of the best books I've come across on dreamwork and active imagination. It also includes excellent suggestions on the use of ritual to integrate the insights of inner work into one's everyday life. By the popular Jungian-psychologist author of *He, She, and We*.
- Jung, Carl G. *Man and His Symbols*. Dell, 1964.  
Jung's own introduction to his work on the unconscious, myth, symbols, and the process of individuation (all of which are central elements of the domain — Dreamtime — traversed by the underworld traveler).
- Jung, Carl G. *Memories, Dreams, and Reflections*. Vintage, 1965.  
Jung's autobiography, the telling of his “personal myth” (his phrase). A stunning modern – and archetypal – Heroic Journey.
- Kabir. *The Kabir Book* (Versions by Robert Bly). Beacon Press. 1977.  
Ecstatic poetry in the Sufi and Hindu traditions by the 15th-century master. “The God whom I love is inside”.
- LaChapelle, Dolores. *Earth Festivals*. Finn Hill Arts (Box 542, Silverton, CO 81433), 1976.  
“A guide to help you and your children learn from the earth and benefit physically and emotionally by celebrating earth festivals”. A how-to do-it type book.
- LaChapelle, Dolores. *Sacred Land, Sacred Sex: Rapture of the Deep*. Finn Hill Arts (above), 1988  
Her most comprehensive work, “concerning Deep Ecology and celebrating life”. Shows us how to recover the essential elements of being human, including The Sacred, play, ritual, sacred sex, earth ceremony, and “seven ways toward human/earth bonding” (i.e., the use of sage, the gourd rattle, trance dancing, the “talking staff” council, chanting, the stories of the bards, and Tai Chi; most of which we employ during Animas programs).
- Lao Tzu. *The Way of Life* (Translated by Witter Bynner). Perigree Books, 1944.  
This little book by the 6th-century B.C. master profoundly expresses the basics of Taoism – the way of nature. As close as you can get to verbally articulated earth wisdom.
- Levine, Stephen. *A Year to Live: How to Live This Year As If It Were Your Last*. Three Rivers Press, 1998.

A guide to living consciously for one year, mindfully choosing our activities, relationships, and spiritual practices. An excellent preparation for the first phase of the underworld journey, the Severance, when we say goodbye to what is dying in our life.

Levoy, Gregg. *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*. Harmony Books, 1997.

A wonderful inquiry into the many kinds of callings we receive in finding our way to an authentic life. Levoy describes the territory we must navigate in order to embody our personal vision — and offers suggestions on how to do so.

Lopez, Barry. *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven*. Avon, 1976.

A spare, sensitive, poetic evocation of the magic of the desert and the mysteries awaiting you there. Will you be joining us in the desert?

Lopez, Barry. *River Notes: The Dance of Herons*. Avon, 1979.

"A prose poem, a love song to a mountain river. . . . a heady distillation of everything that is mystical yet comforting in the mountains". Will you be journeying to the mountains with us?

Macy, Joanna and Brown, Molly Young. *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World*. New Society Publishers, 1998.

A discussion of how the devastation of the Earth has a direct effect on our own psyches, and how we can mend the rift through conscious ceremony and practices within our community.

Metzner, Ralph. *The Unfolding Self: Varieties of Transformative Experience*. Origin, 1998.

A pioneer in the study of consciousness, Metzner draws on a wide range of cross-cultural wisdom to describe the various archetypes and dynamics lying within the universal transformative experience.

Noel, Daniel. *The Soul of Shamanism: Western Fantasies, Imaginal Realities*. Continuum, 1997.

The best book I have read on shamanism and neo-shamanism. Noel explains that the deep imagination is bedrock to what we think of as shamanism. He gives a shamanic dimension to psychology and a psychological exploration of shamanism.

Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems*. Beacon, 1992.

Here are many of the best poems of the great contemporary soul and nature poet.

Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael: An Adventure of the Mind and Spirit*. Bantam, 1992.

A captivating novel that allows us to understand — and feel more fully — how contemporary civilization is destroying the world, and how we might be able to save the planet from ourselves by changing our lives.

Prechtel, Martín. *Long Life, Honey in the Heart: A Story of Initiation and Eloquence From the Shores of a Mayan Lake*. Tarcher, 1999.

The American-born author, in his eloquent, lyrical language, tells the story of how he became a village chief and shaman in a Mayan village in Guatemala. There's much to gather from this book about nature-based ceremony, soul initiation rituals, and about learning to deeply belong to true human community and to the Earth.

Prechtel, Martín. *The Disobedience of the Daughter of the Sun*. Yellow Moon Press, 2001.

This extraordinary Mayan tale about the love affair between the ego and the soul is one of the finest tellings in print of a traditional sacred story.

Rezendes, Paul. *Tracking and the Art of Seeing: How to Read Animal Tracks and Sign*. Camden House, 1992.

A great resource to help you re-enter the ancient dialogue between animals and humans, a dialogue which helps us re-awaken to the beauty and mystery of nature and helps us see how to live respectfully and sustainably with the Others.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. (Robert Bly, Editor) *Selected poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. Harper & Row, 1981.

Rilke, Rainer Maria. (Translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy) *Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God*. Riverhead Books, 1996.

Two of the best translations of the poems of the German master poet of soul.

Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (editors). *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*. Sierra Club Books, 1995.

A compilation of leading-edge psychologists and ecologists, who discuss various aspect of the growing field of ecopsychology, which posits that the well-being of the individual is directly related to the well-being of the Earth.

Rumi, Jelaluddin, in John Moyne and Coleman Barks, trans., *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*. Shambhala.1999.

My favorite volume of the 13th-century Persian master's ecstatic, soul-resonant poetry.

Shepard, Paul. *Nature and Madness*. Sierra Club, 1982.

A psychohistory of our culture's estrangement from "reality" as seen in modern environmental destructiveness.

Silko, Leslie. *Ceremony*. Signet, 1977.

A beautiful and moving novel that teaches us why "the only cure is a good ceremony" and why "the stories [myths] are all we have to fight off illness and death".

Snyder, Gary. *Turtle Island*. New Directions, 1974.

*The Old Ways*. City Lights Books, 1977.

*The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*. New Directions, 1980.

The poet and prophet on deep ecology, Place, "the old ways", Taoism, etc.

Somé, Malidoma Patrice. *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. Arkana, 1994.

Malidoma is an initiated shaman born to the Dagara people of West Africa. He also has two doctoral degrees from Western universities, and now lives in California. Consequently, he is one of the few people who has been able to "translate" from the true world of primary people to the modern world (and vice versa). In this book, we learn how initiation genuinely functions in a society that honors soul.

Storm, Hyemeyohsts. *Seven Arrows*. Harper and Row, 1972.

A beautiful book of teachings by a Cheyenne shield-maker, containing fables, stories, and rites of great importance to the study of the vision quest. Includes the classic story of "Jumping Mouse".

Swimme, Brian. *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*. Bear & Company, 1985.

An extraordinary and effective example of a modern "myth to live by"; a story that helps us locate where we are, why we are here, where we are going, and, perhaps, what it all means.

Swimme, Brian. *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story*. Orbis Books, 1996.

An introduction to the new cosmology that integrates scientific discovery with a sense of wonder, allowing the reader to discover the sacredness of our place within the universal unfolding.

Van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. University of Chicago Press, 1960.

First published in 1908. Van Gennep was the first anthropologist to note the regularity and significance of the rituals attached to the transitional stages in human life.

Williams, David. *A Naturalist's Guide to Canyon Country*. Falcon Publishing, 2000.

If you are going to be joining us for an Animas program in southern Utah or southwestern Colorado, Williams' book is the best one I know to familiarize yourself with the flora and fauna of this enchanted land.

Whyte, David. *Where Many Rivers Meet*. Many Rivers Press, 1990.

*Fire in the Earth*. Many Rivers Press, 1991.

*The House of Belonging*. Many Rivers Press, 1997.

*Everything is Waiting for You*. Many Rivers Press, 2003

David Whyte's eloquent poetry is unmatched in providing a contemporary voice to the desires of the human soul.

Whyte, David. *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*. Doubleday, 1994.

How to bring your full, passionate, creative soul, with all its urgencies and unnamed longings, to work with you.

Zimmerman, Jack & Virginia Coyle. *The Way of Council*. Bramble, 1996.

An excellent and comprehensive introduction to council work.