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## **The Contemporary Vision Quest: A Nature-Based Approach to Soul Encounter**

by **Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.**

Since the beginning of the human story, people all over the world have received profound insight about themselves and their world by means of spiritual quests. The human soul — “the truth at the center of the image we were born with,” as poet David Whyte puts it — can be uncovered and explored by a variety of methods: arduous pilgrimages, physical ordeals, extended wanderings in wildlands, and the consumption of entheogenic plants. However, one of the most universal and effective ways to uncover the secrets and mysteries of one’s soul is through wilderness-based fasting rites — popularly called “vision quests.”

European anthropologists coined the term *vision quest* to refer to the fasting rites practiced by the indigenous people of North America, but this term can also be applied to similar rites found in European, Asian, Arctic, and Middle Eastern cultures. In the Arctic, Inuit angakok (shamans) spent extended periods alone in the wilderness, fasting and rubbing stones together in order to obtain spirit allies. In Tibet, Buddhist ngakpas (Tantric lamas) conducted vigils in cemeteries and other wild places while fasting and meditating on death and dismemberment. In Australia, Aboriginal youths went on arduous walkabouts to connect with personal power. The wilderness sojourns of Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and other heroic figures from Judeo-Christianity were vision quests as well.

Although vision quest practices vary from culture to culture, there are several universal components: fasting from food and, sometimes, water for a significant period of time (usually three or four days) in a remote wilderness setting; solitude (no other *human* companions); and direct exposure to the forms and forces of nature (i.e. only enough clothing and shelter necessary for physical survival and basic comfort, and no human artifacts that would distract from ceremonial intentions). In addition, vision quests may be enhanced by additional attention-focusing and consciousness-shifting ceremonies, prayers, and practices.

### A Soulcentric Approach to Questing

As one aspect of my soulcraft work, my colleagues and I have developed a contemporary, Western approach to wilderness vision quests. The primary goal of our quests is

to enter the underworld of soul so that the individual might discover the psyche's mysterious images. These soul images, unique to each person, provide the direction, wisdom, and inspiration for providing one's deepest gift to the world and, thereby, realizing the greatest fulfillment that life can offer.

It is important to state that I have been neither trained nor authorized to offer a Native American version of the vision quest. Nor has this been my desire. My goal has been to develop a ritual structure tailored for contemporary Westerners, not to imitate the traditions of another people or another time. It is also disrespectful, I believe, to employ without permission the ceremonial forms of another culture — disrespectful to both the other culture and oneself.

Our quests are structured as follows. First, participants gather for five or six days of group preparation at a retreat center, campground, or wilderness base camp. We work with dreams, soul poetry, deep imagery, trance drumming and dance, dialogues with nature, council, the shadow elements of the psyche, sacred wound themes, and other practices to help participants separate from their surface lives and begin diving toward the underground streams of their souls.

Then, each quester goes off to find and set up a remote camp in the wilderness, taking only water and minimal survival gear. Because the questers will spend three or four days and nights fasting alone, they select their camp locations with care, seeking a place in which they can surrender to forces greater than their surface minds. Exposed to the elements of the wild world, questers engage in practices designed to evoke the encounter with soul, including the death lodge, dialogues with nature, self-designed ceremonies, trance drumming and chanting, responding to signs and omens, and other forms of reverent nature observation. They may choose to conclude their solo time with an all-night vigil inside a ritually constructed circle of stones.

Then they return to base camp to begin the assimilation of their experiences. A total of three or four days of activities support them in embodying what they have learned during their fasts. Within that time, they recount, in council, the events of their underworld journeys. These stories are celebrated and mirrored back by the guides and other group members. As their egos begin to root themselves in the deeper soils of soul, they learn to incorporate their renewed selves — enthusiastic yet unripe — into the social world, first with their quest group and then with the larger community back home. Their guides offer additional one-to-one mentoring during the year following their fasts.

The ceremonial symbols and practices employed before and during the fast place the questers in the portal to soul. If they have the grace and good fortune to enter the inner sanctum, what they see in the mirror of inner/outer nature will reveal clues to the riddle of their lives.

What makes a particular vision quest design effective at facilitating soul encounter is not simply a matter of specific methods or ceremonies, but rather a context that encourages conversation between the conscious self (in a non-ordinary ego state) and the sacred Other of the soul. Through this exchange, the questers move beyond ordinary consciousness to find a

new foundation for their lives. They are shape-shifted by the vastness and enchantment of nature and their own psyches.

### The Call to Spiritual Adventure

The traditions of ancient cultures make it abundantly clear that the original, primary, and most sacred personal adventure was the underworld journey of initiation and subsequent soul embodiment. In twenty years of guiding contemporary vision quests and soulcraft programs, I have seen that this is still true. I have witnessed thousands of men and women enact underworld journeys that included arduous ordeals filled with mystery and intrigue, risk and danger. They return with an astonishing radiance in their eyes and treasures for their people. During the following weeks, they begin to enliven themselves and their worlds through a multitude of creative, life-enhancing projects. They become agents for positive cultural change.

The contemporary vision quest often facilitates the transition through a major crossroads of life—puberty, leaving home, marriage, starting or expanding a family, divorce, vocational change, retirement, major physical injury or disability, loss of a loved one, or spiritual crisis. These times of profound change can be emotionally disruptive, but they can also serve as catalytic thresholds, helping to initiate deep healing, growth, and self-empowerment.

It is not by chance that vision fasts are often undertaken at times of major life change. At such times, our self-definitions no longer fit nor provide enough meaning or passion for living. Yet we are stuck in those definitions like an outgrown set of clothes. Our egos, in their current form, have become an impediment to growth and fulfillment instead of the vehicle for soul embodiment they ideally are. You might say management has become an enemy of soul progress. At times like this, we need to shake up the management team by way of an underworld journey.

Few contemporary people embark upon the underworld journey to soul before the advent of a midlife crisis. Many people don't even then. Although rare, some people, in their early adulthood, have the great good fortune of finding a teacher or guide who understands the necessity and joy of the soulful descent. Others may begin their journey after suffering a terrible calamity: a terminal diagnosis, a near-death experience, a disabling accident, the loss of a loved one, a divorce, a suicidal depression, or the utter loss of religious faith.

In the soul-suppressing environments of Western society, the call to spiritual adventure may never be heard — or answered — in an entire lifetime, or perhaps not until midlife or the deathbed. Our culture promotes the illusion that happiness can be found in material wealth. We dedicate the prime of our lives to building careers and raising families without ever considering the needs of our souls. Then, in midlife, our lives fall apart.

Midlife crises often begin like this: your life has been humming along for some time, fairly secure in its basic socioeconomic qualities, and then *wham!* Suddenly the roof caves in and everything about your life seems wrong. Your job has become a dull cage, your social scene an

unremitting replay of the same characters and conversations, and your family a lifeless mockery of intimacy. Or at least so it seems at the outset of the crisis.

Perhaps the vast majority of midlife crises are belated calls to the underworld adventure, spiritual opportunities triggered by personal crises. Long neglected, our souls appear on the scene with an attitude and with a comment about the course of our lives, shouting, “Hey, look, I’ve come a long way to deliver a gift to the world and I’m tired of this damn foot-dragging, so excuse me while I tilt the floor a bit!”

Whatever allows you to hear the call, you suddenly find your nose pressed up against the existential questions you had been successfully avoiding: what is my life about, anyway? For what do I live?

### Facilitating Soul Encounters

How do vision quests facilitate soul encounters? When designed in a soulcentric manner, the vision quest temporarily removes the ego from its everyday support systems so that it can be introduced to a life more in harmony with the desires of the soul. Ultimately, the underworld journey will render the conscious personality more whole and more rooted in the soul’s desires, but the ego’s self-image must first undergo a death or dismemberment.

The ego employs a conservative assemblage of hard-earned behaviors accumulated over many years. Having learned how to survive in a competitive and sometimes hostile world, the ego is notoriously reluctant to abandon behaviors that have worked. By resisting deep change, the ego becomes an enemy of psychological and spiritual development, leaving us without any passion for living. Periodically, we need to shake up our internal management team by way of an initiatory experience — a death-rebirth journey into the psyche’s underworld. Before our connection to the soul can be strengthened, the ego must be unwound and prevented from reshaping itself in its old form. This process is sometimes termed ego-destructuring.

The initiation is not into any social, religious, or spiritual group but into our own soul path and deeper levels of authentic adulthood.

The principal goal of soul-oriented quests — and all soulcraft work — is a communion between the conscious self and the soul. This communion is facilitated by trance states induced by such practices as fasting, drumming and chanting, prolonged social isolation, extreme physical exertion, and sustained exposure to wind and weather.

Ego-destructuring can be further accelerated by additional soulcraft practices such as soulcentric dreamwork, trance dancing, self-designed ceremonies, ritual sacrifices to fire of symbolic objects, death lodge ceremonies, and the descent into our sacred wounds. In this article we’ll to examine several practices that are effective in the preparation for and enactment of a vision quest.

### Finding Our Souls in the Wilds

Nature-based societies provide carefully crafted ceremonial opportunities — psychospiritual cocoons — for their people who are prepared to descend into the underworld.

For example, a young Australian Aboriginal may embark on a walkabout as one component of his preparation for adulthood. During the walkabout, he wanders into the bush alone for several weeks or months, in search of the one place where he belongs, a place that is part of him and where he is part of that place. In finding that place, he finds himself.

Contemporary author and anthropologist Angeles Arrien, who grew up in the Basque culture, relates how her people traditionally initiated their youth. For Basque children raised in the traditional way, there are several stages of cultural and spiritual training in childhood and early adolescence. At age sixteen, after two years of intensive preparation, some Basque youth undertake a year-long solo “earth walk,” an extended period of wandering in the Pyrenees Mountains along the French-Spanish border. If a youth elects to go on this ordeal of solitude and wandering, as Angeles did, she carries with her a blanket or shawl, woven by her mother, containing 365 warp threads. The wanderer pulls out one warp thread each day, thereby keeping track of the temporal expanse of her journey as she walks a remote trail from one end of the Pyrenees to the other. Wandering alone for a year in rugged mountainous terrain is neither easy nor painless, but it affords a life-transforming communion with nature and psyche.

For most Westerners, we who have strayed so far from nature, devoting a year or even a month to wandering alone in the wild might prove too arduous or dangerous. However, there are ways of wandering in nature that do not demand as much time or expertise and that can be employed as a preparation for a vision fast or as an independent practice at other times.

Dedicate a block of time (from several hours to a full day) to roaming alone in wild nature and take along a gift—perhaps a poem, a dance, a lock of hair, a pinch of tobacco, some food, or a little water—to honor the Other.

You might start walking on a trail, but when the landscape allows (and your orienteering skills permit), let yourself wander off the beaten track. Early on the walk, choose a physical threshold to cross—perhaps a stream, a log, a large rock, or a gap between two trees—in order to mark your transition from ordinary time and space into the sacred. While on the sacred side, observe three cross-cultural taboos: do not eat, do not speak with other humans, and do not enter any human-made shelter.

Because you are stalking a surprise, attend to your hunches and feelings and images as much as to the landscape. Wander aimlessly until something draws your attention. Don’t just pick something; wait until you are called, by way of allurements, repulsion, fear, or curiosity. This may take some time. Eventually, you may be drawn to a dramatic stone outcropping, an abandoned anthill, a magnificent flowering bush, a small lizard basking on a rock, or even a vulture on a rotting cow carcass. Stop and observe it closely for a good while. Utilize all your senses, not just your eyes and ears. Record in your journal what you observe.

While wandering in nature is its own reward, it may also serve as a starting point for other soulcraft practices, as discussed below. By immersing yourself in nature, you will discover that nature mirrors and evokes your soul, revealing your unique way of belonging to the world.

## Reclaiming our Membership in Nature

Nature-based people recognize that the human soul flourishes in wildness and solitude. In contrast is the common experience of fear or boredom when a “civilized” person is alone in nature, revealing how much we have become alienated from the world that has given us birth.

The most direct way to reclaim our membership as a natural being in a natural world is to regularly spend time in wild or semi-wild environments, quietly, observantly, and gratefully.

A woman, while in the Sierra Mountains of California for a week, was preoccupied with questions about what her “medicine” or soul power might be. As she ran through tall grass, she was bitten on the leg by a rattlesnake. At first she was quite frightened, but, after an hour, there was still little swelling. The snake had drawn blood but injected no venom. Grateful, she accepted her apprenticeship to the powers of rattlesnake. She cut off all her hair and dedicated the following year to spiritual wandering and study. At the end of the year, she returned to the same mountains to give thanks and enact a vision quest. During her solo fast, she performed a dance in honor of the snake that had inspired her transformation.

Jerry, an accomplished fifty-year old songwriter and recording artist, took a walk high in the mountains of Colorado one summer and came upon a small spruce at the edge of the tree line. He noticed part of its top had been sheared off, probably by a massive spring snow slide. He sat down beside the tree and spoke to it out loud, something he had never done before.

Later, he wrote in his journal:

*The connection between us was extraordinary. I felt such compassion and strength from that tree—about how you must hang in there through the storms of life, about standing firm in your spot. Our connection was so amazing I just sat and wept with love. Yes, I saw myself in the mirror of that tree—a bit ragged at fifty, but still strong and open and willing to bring all of me to the world.*

Jerry does indeed bring all of himself to the world, courageously sharing his radiant heart through his soulful music. A year later, Jerry visited the tree a second time. It was still thriving at the edge of the avalanche path. Even from his home on the edge of the avalanche path called Los Angeles, Jerry says he can feel his bond with that tree.

## Reflections of Soul in Nature

Nature so effectively mirrors our souls simply because our souls are elements of earth’s soul.

Archetypal forms and patterns exist not only in the human psyche but also in the outer world of nature. Wind, water, fire, mountain, rain, rainbow, bird, bat, butterfly, fish, snake, bear: earth archetypes. The earth archetypes illuminate the edges of our understanding. We see the rainbow, and if we allow our imaginations to be generous, we discover the possibility of realizing our fondest dreams, the longing for treasure, the enchantment of the world, the thinness of the shimmering veil that separates us from the sacred, or the bridge to this world for the gods.

We experience earth archetypes as significant, evocative, emotionally captivating, enchanting. Why are different individuals drawn to different elements of nature? Why *those*? Possibly these are the earth archetypes to which our (unconscious) psyches already attribute meaning, that resonate with the deepest possibilities within us.

In its attempt to be made manifest, the soul takes every opportunity to resonate with any element of nature that stirs it. As we offer our attention to the world, we discover the beings to which we are most drawn. Our fascination with a particular facet of nature is how our souls say "Yes!" to an earth archetype that we, as individuals, especially tune to. As we open ourselves to that element of wildness, we discover a quality of our own soul that longs to be embodied in the world, sung to the world, danced, cried, celebrated.

The earth provides us not only the means to be physically born into this world but also the spiritual means to recognize our deeper identities. Why would she provide one without the other?

A vision quester in the redrock desert of Utah asked for a sign as to whether his fasting spot might be found at the head of the side canyon in which he wandered. Moments later, he looked down and saw an eagle feather on bare rock. Not accustomed to asking for signs, he wasn't sure this qualified. He asked for another feather. Several minutes later, near the top of the canyon, he found one. Still wanting more proof, he asked again and, soon enough, found another. Feeling appropriately humbled, he gave thanks to the Great Mystery. Before long, he had found nine nearly identical black feathers, and he was on his knees, crying. He considered these feathers to be a sign that something special and mysterious might indeed happen for him in that place. He undoubtedly would have felt different if his request for a sign had been followed by a rock fall that chased him away. When he first told me his story, I questioned whether the feathers were from an eagle. Since eagles are rare in these canyons, I suspected they were from the much more common raven. Later, he showed me the feathers. I was not sure they were from an eagle, but they are long wing feathers, definitely too large to have belonged to anything but a raptor. They were rare feathers to find in those desert canyons.

How do you go about understanding a numinous sign, or even knowing you've received one? First, if the sign is going to be valid, you will have asked about something deeply meaningful to you, a question both significant and difficult for you to answer. A *big* question. Asking for a sign to a trivial or mundane question is a sign of disrespect toward the sacred.

You recognize a sign by the fact that your request is followed by an event that has power for you; it strongly attracts your attention, generates a significant emotional response, gets your imagination rolling. It ratchets up your aliveness.

A woman on her vision fast was writing in her journal, recording her burning desire to discover her soul qualities and her path of integrity in this life. Suddenly, a hummingbird zoomed in, very loud, hovered, looked her in the eye, dropped a feather in the crease of her open journal, and flew off. By flying in so close and with so much sound and color and power, the hummingbird startled her out of her reverie and shifted her into the magical now. The woman had been asking the biggest questions of her life as she sat with her sense of lack and

her deepest longing. The hummingbird, for her, was a notification from the soul that she would find her answers by paying attention to the miracles present in the moment, especially to the little things of authentic power. There she would receive the gift. The gift of the feather got her nose out of her journal and beyond her regrets about the past and hopes for the future. It tuned her entire being to the wild world unfolding all around and in her.

If you receive a sign in nature, begin by giving thanks in a meaningful way and then by remembering what inspired you to ask for a sign in the first place. Sit with the sign you received with the same emotions and reverence with which you requested it. Take a deep breath and fully take in the sign with your body, senses, emotions, and imagination. Spend a good deal of time with the sign in this way before you begin to think about it. The sacred Other speaks in images and symbols, and thus working with a sign is like working with a dream. What does the sign evoke in you, deeper than your personality and everyday thoughts? How do you find yourself reacting emotionally? On the heels of the sign, what memories, associations, images, or related symbols arise and have an intuitive click for you? Avoid any attempts to figure out the sign with your mind or impose an answer you had merely hoped for. Let the sign work on you even if one of its meanings is apparent right away.

#### Wandering Deeply into Nature

A man named John came to southern Utah to enact his vision quest. He hadn't known it before, but he had a knack for rambling deeply into nature. While wandering, he learned new things, remembered old things, and returned to a precious innocence he, like most of us, had lost when he was a child.

On our first day, John bravely introduced himself to the group, saying that, truth be told, he didn't *really* know who he was. He had always been called John, he said, but the one thing he knew for sure was that he was *not* John. My guide partner, Steve Zeller, deftly responded, "Welcome, Not-John!" and the name stuck. A few days later, the night before we hiked into redrock country, Not-John had a vivid dream. In it, he was called by his real name:

A lovely buxom nurse comes to me and asks, "Has Windy Marrow played yet?" I say to myself, "What's that? A movie?" I turn to the other people who had been there a moment before, but now I see I'm all alone — all alone with my name, Windy Marrow.

And Windy Marrow, who did not yet understand the meaning of his name, was now ready to play.

One morning in base camp before the start of his fast, Windy Marrow got up early to wander. He was drawn to a pair of red sandstone towers he had spotted up a side canyon. He started from one direction but couldn't find a way up. Backtracking, he tried from another. Finally, he reached the base of the two immense rock columns and walked between them.

There in front of me, suspended four feet off the ground between the massive boulders, is the entire skeleton of an eight-point buck. *The entire skeleton.* This has a huge impact on me. I fall to my knees. The night before, in our trance dance, I had danced the dance

of a dying buck, or it might be more accurate to say he danced me. In my dance, and now in this skeleton before me, the buck has only one unbroken leg. He is hanging in the air, his shoulders and hips wedged in the narrow spot where the boulders come closest together. He must have fallen during winter from high above. He has been picked clean of meat and fur but is still in one piece.

Finding a skeleton in the wild isn't unusual, but finding an entire skeleton of a buck after having danced a dying buck is synchronistic. The next thing Windy Marrow knew, the buck was asking him to take the antlered skull and run the deer trails, and return the skull afterward. The buck wanted to wander his favorite trails one last time.

Off I go, running the deer trails. I am not myself, but I am. My head is a rush of energy I can't translate or understand. What is happening to me? I run the deer trails bare-chested, and know this is what I'm supposed to do.

Upon his return to camp, Windy Marrow told the group what had happened.

I tell my story, but I see some of their looks. I can't help it, people! We're out here on a hunt! Or am I the one who is hunted? I'm at a crossroads. I can't live the so-called sane life my father chose to live. But is this insane? This is no ordinary time. I am in another world, and it's totally me. I don't know the language or the culture, but I will learn it. I have to. There's meaning in this. Something is going on in my being. I've entered a magical time. I once had that magic when I was little, and I wrapped it up and put it away because it wasn't at all accepted in my family.

On his fast during the following four days, Windy Marrow began to understand the meaning, mysteries, and gifts contained in his name and how he might carry those gifts to others. But it is not for me to reveal the mysteries of another's name, which sometimes is best kept secret. Windy Marrow also met a spirit guide on his fast who is still very much with him today, twelve years later. He has learned to live both in the everyday world and the other, sacred world, and how to journey back and forth between them. He teaches others how to do this. Much of his soul power is rooted in this ability.

### Talking across the Species Boundaries: Dialogues with Nature

If you have never traded speech with a lizard, a rattlesnake, an elk, a desert juniper, the wind, or a rock, you have a world-shifting treat in store for you. It's as if you just discovered thousands of new relatives, fascinating and wild beings you can now learn from and commune with. The world is suddenly a different place; a kind of isolation you didn't know you suffered has vanished.

Most modern people would feel foolish to sit and talk with a snake or a tower of rock. Most nature-based people, in contrast, would have the sincerest sympathy for anyone who could not do that with ease, or communicate with a bear, or hear the songs of the stars.

The common Western experience of being mute and deaf in nature suggests how much we have become alienated from the world that gives birth to us. The contemporary eco-philosopher David Abram reminds us that for the vast majority of humanity's time on the

planet, these conversations “across the species boundaries” were a universal experience, part of our birthright as members of the more-than-human community.

Although most Westerners seldom use it, the capacity for these conversations still exists within us as a fundamental feature of the perceptual process. Abram explains how we comprehend the “articulate speech of trees or mountains” through a mixing or converging of our sensory modalities. Something we *see*, for example, induces an auditory or kinesthetic experience.

To practice dialoguing with nature, go wandering outside, anywhere, until you encounter a being that calls to you—a dragonfly, a passing cloud, a soaring hawk, perhaps a wind-sculpted boulder, a lightning-struck tree, a bubbling mountain spring, an anthill, or a blade of grass. Offer it a gift and introduce yourself, speaking out loud—yes, out loud. This is important.

Tell this being all about yourself. Be prepared to go on for an indefinite period of time, maybe a half hour or more. First tell it why you have been wandering around waiting to be called. Tell the truth—your deepest, most intimate truth. In addition to ordinary human language, you might choose to speak with song, poetry, nonverbal sound, images (feel yourself sending those images to the Other), emotion, body language (movement, gesture, dance). Then, using the same speech options, tell that being everything about *it* you have noticed. Describe its features (out loud, if using words, song, or sound) and, respectfully, tell it what interests you about those features and what it tells you about *you* that you find them interesting. Keep communicating no matter what . . . until it interrupts you.

Then stop and listen. Listen with your ears, eyes, nose, skin, intuition, feeling, and imagination (aural, visual, kinesthetic, and so on). Listening (direct, pre-reflective perception) is different from your own psyche fabricating metaphors (such as a tree “telling” you to stand tall), but the latter is okay, too. It may take hours before you get interrupted. Or days. Or never. Or it may take only the time for a deer’s eye to blink.

Keep the conversation going several rounds. In your journal, record and/or draw what happens. Offer the Other your gratitude and a gift if you haven’t already.

The Other might reflect something back to you about yourself, but, more generally, you’ll learn something about the Other. Or about both you *and* the Other. Or about the web that contains you both. It’s best to enter wild conversations with the intent to become acquainted with one of your nonhuman neighbors, rather than, say, to receive some oracular information about yourself.

Think for a moment of your relationships with your human friends. You usually don’t enter conversations to discover more about yourself. You want to get to know *them* and you want to enjoy yourself and deepen your friendships. You’ve also undoubtedly noticed that there are many authentic versions of you, and which version arrives on the scene depends a lot on whom you’re with. You choose your friends largely on the basis of what they switch on in you, who you can be with them. Some of your most intriguing friends are the ones who are

least like you, partly because they draw out surprising and enjoyable dimensions of your own humanness.

Now apply this to relationships with nonhuman Others. A relationship, or even a single conversation, with a tree, butterfly, cloud, heron, moose, or trout is going to fire up dimensions of your wildness, of your soul, that might not have been unleashed through association with even the most exotic human. As you widen the realm with which you are in communication, you become more you simply by virtue of whom you are communing with; you become relational with more of the world.

So, enter your conversations with the Others with the intention of learning about them and developing a relationship, but don't be surprised if you thereby discover more about yourself — perhaps by what the Other tells you or shows you, but, just as likely, by what the conversation draws out of you.

You may need to be persistent and patient. Once a man sat alone, high on a jumble of boulders in a redrock canyon. He told his life story to the canyon and got no response. This took a couple of hours. He told it again. Nothing. A third time. Nothing. Remarkably, he persisted. After he finished a fourth time, the canyon responded—to his utter amazement—and engaged him in a conversation of feeling, images, and thoughts that has continued, off and on, for years.

Another man, on a vision quest in the desert canyoncountry of Utah, became fascinated that trees could grow in such a hot and dry land. His fasting place was beneath a spectacular old juniper, half dead, its gnarled and twisted limbs spiraling up defiantly like a spirited old crone full of audacity and wisdom. The juniper grew right out of solid sandstone, bare white rock with no visible soil. He kept asking the juniper, politely, how on earth it managed to live there. Days went by. No answer.

Finally, on the last day of his fast, exasperated and wild-eyed, he staggered to his feet, looked up at the juniper one more time, shook his fist, and roared at the top of his lungs, "How the *hell* do you survive here?!" Then and only then did the juniper respond. The old woman looked down at him and said, simply and quietly, yet firmly, "Deep roots." Deep roots. The conversation was over. The man reeled and fell over, astonished to get *any* response and struck dumb to receive that particular response. The man immediately knew this was an answer for him, too, that *his* survival depended upon his ability to grow intrapsychic roots down through the bare rock of his surface life into the fertile soils of soul. He returned with a name. Not Juniper or Deep Roots, but Rock.

Do trees and rocks speak in English? No. In fact, they don't speak in human languages at all. We just sometimes *hear* them that way because the larger psyche (of which our egos are one small part) does the translation to help us understand. The same thing happens in dreams. As often as not, the Others of nature speak to us through action, imagery, or emotion.

Dreamwork can reap transformation, healing, direction, and initiation from the rich landscapes of our nocturnal visions. Soulcentric dreamwork, however, diverges from other methods in its premise that every dream is an opportunity to develop our relationship to soul, to who we are beneath our surface personalities and routine agendas. Each dream provides a snapshot of the unfolding story and desires of the soul, and a chance for the ego to be further initiated into that underworld story and those underworld desires.

During the preparation and incorporation phases of the vision quest, we work with dreams soulcentrically. Every part of the dream is understood as a part of the dreamer, representing the dreamer's sub-personalities, attitudes, feelings, wounds, rejected qualities, and hidden potentials. The *I* in a dream represents the ego, the way the dreamer thinks about himself. The dream reveals the relationships between the ego and other elements of the psyche. We understand the psyche to include the collective (universal) unconscious as well as the personal unconscious. Therefore, some parts of the dream are seen as archetypes, the gods and goddesses that act through our psyches, *as well as* representing our more personal qualities.

A key principle in the soulcentric approach is this: the archetypal presences in our dreams — and the dream more generally — may not be the least bit interested to help with the ego's dayworld agenda of personal happiness or adjustment. This agenda itself may be the primary obstacle to soulful growth. Rather, the dream affords the ego an initiation opportunity in the underworld, that would bring about, not a healing or patching up of the ego but something quite contrary: a death to the ego's current way of being in the world.

From the soulcentric view, the dream, like the vision quest more generally, wants to separate the ego from its surface life, at least temporarily, so it can be introduced to a deeper, richer, larger possibility, a life more in keeping with the desires of the soul. Ultimately, this will render the conscious personality more whole, but not without an intervening death.

The specific strategies of archetypal dreamwork (some reviewed below) impel the dayworld ego to dwell as long as possible *in* the world of the dream, *among* those nightworld images, giving them plenty of opportunity to alchemize the ego. This contrasts with strategies that keep the ego in the driver's seat, extracting the dream's images into the dayworld, where the ego, unscathed, can have *its* way with those images.

Dreams can have the same transformative effect on the ego as a thorough immersion in nature. The inner wilds of dreams and the outer wilds of nature are two of our most powerful allies, teachers, and guides in our maturation and initiation. To intensify the transformative effect, we can work with our dreams while immersed in the natural world, bringing dreamwork to an exceptionally deep level and opening new doors to the sacred garden of nature.

To respect the power of dreams, the first rule in a soulcentric approach asks you to refrain from interpreting your own dreams too soon and *never* interpret someone else's dream. Rather, permit yourself the sometimes disquieting luxury of hanging out among the rich symbols and events of your dream, wandering slowly through its images and emotions, twisting

slowly in the breeze of its seductions and abductions. Let the dream do its tidal work on the ego rather than allowing the ego to do its analyzing work on the dream.

You would do best to avoid all those so-called dream dictionaries and other books that purport to tell you what a dream symbol means, as if each dream element could be extracted from its dreamworld and have a fixed meaning independent of its relationship with the dreamer and all other elements of the dream.

There are many techniques for working with dreams without interpreting them right off the bat, or ever. First and foremost, you can gain an enormous amount by simply *telling your dream*, out loud, to one or more people without any comment. Like a poem (it *is* a poem, a soul poem), try recounting your dream in the present tense (as if the action is happening as you speak) and talk very slowly, *very* slowly, even slower, like reading a world-class poem, savoring every word. Allow the emotions of the dream to flow through you as you speak. Pause often. Let the emotions and images do their work on you. Go slowly. Describe the sensory qualities of the dream in great detail — the sights, scents, sounds, tastes, and textures. Describe the subtleties of the personalities and the emotional nuances of the encounters. Linger.

Other dreamwork methods we use include merging with the dream elements through enactment, being interviewed by another while you are in the role of the dream element, asking the people in a dream group to play the characters and/or things or places in your dream, journeying back into the dream through your deep imagination, and entering into dialogues between two or more dream characters. These methods permit you to get inside the dream, to crawl into the skin of different dream characters and discover the conflicts, potentials, and desires — yours — embodied in those beings. You can do this not only with the people in the dream but also with the dream's animals, trees, rivers, mountains, clouds, houses, cars, situations, emotions, sounds, speech, and even qualities such as colors or size.

### Maya's Transformative Dream

While on a soulcraft journey in the redrock canyons of southern Utah, a woman named Maya — a forty-year-old, single health-care professional — chose to work with a disturbing dream:

I am on an extended visit at a friend's house. My friend has two babies, and she has a refugee woman staying with her who also has a baby. I am to sleep in the refugee woman's room. I rearrange things there to make it less cluttered. Later, I overhear my friend saying how inappropriate it was for me to do that, since I am only a guest and the refugee woman gave up her room for me. I feel ashamed. The babies' diapers are being changed, and, even though I don't want to deal with it, I feel obliged to help. In the process, I get runny baby shit on my hands and on the floor. I also notice animal scat in the living room and under the bed where I have been sleeping. I see people stepping on the shit, distributing it all over the floor, and kids decorating the scat piles. I feel disgusted, and I try to wash off my hands, so I can leave. The refugee woman says, "If you rub it, it just goes in deeper."

The themes of not being at home and not fitting in were common to both Maya's nightworld and dayworld. She harbored shame and anger over her sense of dislocation.

To get inside this dream and wander there awhile, Maya was encouraged to go off alone and find a place in the canyon where she might make an “extended visit.” She was to find a place that seemed cluttered and then she was to rearrange the things there, being careful to pick a spot where her rearranging would not harm the environment. Then she was to express in sound and gesture her anger about being mistreated by others and her shame about not fitting in. Finally, she was to find animal scat, get it all over herself, and try to remove it by rubbing it.

Maya accepted this task with some reluctance. She found a place in a side canyon and rearranged some rocks and sticks at the edge of the creek. She asked the canyon for permission to express her rage about not fitting in. Soon she found herself on all fours, screaming and growling with a fierce animal wildness. Then she removed her clothes and, unable to find animal scat, rubbed slimy red mud from the creek all over her body. Her legs looked to her like furry animal limbs.

During her dream task, a transformative process began for Maya. In contrast to the dream ego’s disgust over baby shit and animal scat, Maya discovered a wild power derived from the earthiness and carnality of muck. And, in contrast to her dayworld ego’s shame about not fitting in, she found a social courage and resilience that grew out of her full-bodied enactment of feral anger.

Her side-canyon experience became a pivotal part of the ceremony Maya designed and performed the next evening in base camp. With the group drumming in a circle around her, she gradually emerged from beneath piled bark and sticks — as the mud-covered, wild animal of herself. Moving around the circle on all fours, she growled and hissed, approached each member of the group, and looked fiercely into their eyes.

Maya thus began to reclaim her wildness, her otherness. She had previously experienced these qualities as shit, as socially unacceptable features of the wild animal of herself and the unsocialized babies of herself. She had rejected the “cluttered” ways of her inner refugee, the aspect of self displaced from both mainstream society and from her ego, the psyche’s mainstream. She came to see that her rejection of the refugee of herself had kept her alienated from the wildness of her soul. This rejection left her feeling socially unfit, without a “room” of her own. Now she knows that to have that room she must embrace her refugee soul powers.

The refugee was correct when she said, “If you rub it, it just goes in deeper.” Fortunately, Maya found the courage to rub, and the wildness and earthiness of that mud-dung went in deep enough to be ineradicable.

The denied qualities that once caused Maya so much shame and suffering have a positive and essential function in her life — and in society, too. Since her canyon time, she has been retrieving and integrating her wild nature and other “undesirable” qualities. Maya has come to understand her soul powers to be those of a woman who bestows an essential dose of wildness to the village and whose place in the human community is at the edge, on the boundary between the village and the wild.

During my first few years of backcountry wandering, I carried a large hunting knife, at least seven inches long. I never showed it to anyone, but at night it lived with me inside my sleeping bag. I was panicked by what I imagined might come out of the night to eat me. Every night, upon first getting into my bag, I would repeatedly practice unzipping it as fast as humanly possible, grabbing my knife, and unsheathing it — all in one motion. Just in case. I didn't sleep well.

Gradually, through years of wilderness immersion, I learned to befriend the dark and to uncover (sometimes) the personal demons I projected onto the outer shadows. Now I can say there is no place that feels more like home than my sleeping bag beneath a roof of stars. And I haven't seen that knife for years.

The darkness is as obvious a symbol and site for the soul as any. The dark is the unknown, the mystery, the medium that holds the unpredictable — the possible. It is the best blank screen upon which to project all that is unsolved and unloved in our hearts. We are afraid of the dark simply because we can't see what's there and we naturally assume the worst. When it comes to the dark, "better safe than sorry" turns out to mean "better paranoid and vigilant than murdered."

However, the dark is also the mystery, the medium that holds the seeds of our unpredictable future—our hidden potentials, our wildest hopes, and our greatest fears. The ego knows that, when we enter the dark wild, there is the very real possibility that the ego will be dismembered by the truths encountered.

One practice you might adopt is spending extended periods of time in true physical darkness, outdoors on moonless nights or in caves, with the goal of discovering and retrieving some treasures from the *symbolic* dark, your personal wilderness.

In befriending the dark, offer your careful attention to everything you hear and feel and smell there, knowing much of what you experience will be "just" your imagination projecting unassimilated elements of your own psyche. You will learn much from what you project. But what you encounter in the dark will also include flesh and blood entities of the night — owls, bats, deer, raccoons, spiders, mice — that may be curious about you and even drawn to you.

The greatest gift of the dark, however, will not be what you find there, but how the dark changes you. Offer your self to the dark and ask it to initiate you in whatever ways it will, making yourself a gift to the dark as opposed to merely hoping for a gift *from* the dark.

### Opening Our Hearts to the Dark

Michael, a psychologist and wilderness guide, wrestled with his fear of the wild dark on the first night of his first vision quest.

It was past midnight, moonless black, when I prepared my altar. Questions and anxieties began to fill my mind. What if I got really sick? No emergency room up here. What if I became hypothermic or dehydrated, or got stomach cramps? Then I imagined grizzlies, mountain lions, and bobcats. I began working myself into a full-blown panic.

I heard a rustling of leaves in the woods, not ten yards away. My heart jumped. I tried to make out an image. Ever so slowly, the noise moved through the darkness toward me. It had to be an animal of some kind. Friend or foe? A grizzly or some psychotic killer hiding out in the backcountry? I froze. A dark shape approached, seeming to show no fear. I sensed a gentleness, an openness. I closed my eyes and tried opening my heart. The sound made its way through the dark. I opened my eyes. Something passed in front of me and mysteriously continued into the woods. A doe! Her beauty and grace deeply touched me. My eyes welled with tears. Such gentleness in the midst of my fears!

On the last day, I began to have anxieties about how to incorporate what I had experienced; how to stay true to myself and not let the demands of my home and work life overtake me. I prayed to see the doe a second time. I knelt down, kissed the grass, and gave thanks to the earth, trees, air, and the Creator for providing safe passage. I looked up—and there she was. My body shook with elation. I wept.

I knew then that, come what might, life would flow on, as fierce and gentle as the river and the wind. My task was to let go and let myself be carried, each day closer to home.

For me, the key element in Michael's story is this: in the midst of his fear, he closed his eyes, voluntarily going *deeper* into the dark, and opened his heart.

Befriending the dark serves as a mutually synergistic companion to several other soulcraft strategies such as dreamwork, deep imagery journeys, working with sacred wounds or the human shadow, or confronting the inevitability of death. Each is a way to stretch your limits and become acquainted with yourself on a deeper level, each practice reinforcing and extending what is learned and set in motion by the others.

### The Death Lodge

Many contemporary people who enact vision quests fear they might literally die on their fasts when, in fact, there is less danger of dying on a vision fast than during an average day in our cities. This fear stems from the ego's accurate premonition that its worldview may not survive the encounter with the soul.

To help questers prepare for the ending of their old way of belonging, we suggest some time in the "death lodge." The death lodge is a symbolic and/or literal place, separate from the ongoing life of the community, to which the quester retires to say good-bye to what her life has been. She may dwell there a full month or more, or, during the course of a year, an hour or two every day, or several long weekends. Some of her death lodge work will take place in the cauldron of her imagination and emotions, while at other times it will occur face-to-face with friends, family, and lovers. She will wrap up unfinished emotional and worldly business to help release herself from her past.

In the death lodge she will say good-bye to her accustomed ways of loving and hating, to the social roles that gave her pleasure and self-definition, to the organizations and institutions that both shaped and limited her growth, and also to her parents or caregivers who birthed her and raised her and who will soon, in a way, be losing a daughter.

Whether ending or shifting relationships, she will feel and express her gratitude, love, forgiveness, her good-byes. She will say the difficult and important things previously unsaid.

She may or may not visit with each person in the flesh, but she will certainly have many poignant and emotional encounters.

If her parents were not criminally abusive, she will forgive them for not being who she wanted them to be. If they are still alive, she will attempt this in person. This may be the most important and difficult part of her death lodge. She knows that surrendering her former identity requires her to heal her own wounds to the point she no longer harbors the fantasy that her human parents will somehow become perfect (or merely healthy or responsible) or that she will find someone else — a lover or therapist — to be her perfect parent.

In her death lodge, the Wanderer also mourns. She grieves her personal losses and the collective losses of war, race or gender oppression, environmental destruction, community and family disintegration, or spiritual emptiness. Not only does she cease to push the painful memories away but she invites them into her lodge and looks them in the eye. She allows her body to be seized by those griefs, surrendering to the gestures, postures, and cries of sorrow. She grieves in order to let her heart open fully again.

Anita, a professional and mother in her forties, came to formally mark her empty nest as her youngest entered college. She wanted to honor the end of twenty-one years of soul work, the labor of love of raising two fine young men. And then there were the two failed marriages, an alcoholic father, and a mother who died when Anita was four. In the death lodge, she also said good-bye to her way of being a psychotherapist; she knew a more creative and artistic path awaited her.

Tom, a Harvard M.B.A. in his forties, had made millions as a successful (and ruthless) corporate mercenary. He found himself with a trophy home and boat, a second ruined marriage, no idea who he really was, and his only son suicidal at the end of high school. Stunned to find himself bereft of the American dream, he came to his vision quest recognizing he and his son were facing similar crises of meaning, one at the threshold of emancipation, the other at midlife, but both with the opportunity for true freedom. Tom, who was beginning to discover the fine human being beneath his former corporate persona, had much to surrender in his death lodge — buckets of tears and everything he once thought life was about.

### Sacrificing Old Stories to Fire

On the vision quests I lead, on the evening before the four days of solitude begin, we enact a ceremony in which participants sacrifice to fire an object representing the chapter of life that is ending. This is not their good riddance to a dull or painful life, but rather a reluctant and courageous willingness to separate from a life that, regardless of how unfulfilling it might have been, sheltered them as they grew. True sacrifice is a way to make sacred, not a release of a burden. The quester will henceforth live without the former safety net and will inherit a new life, challenging in ways not yet imaginable.

Fire sacrifice is a symbolic act with deep roots in the universal human unconscious. The objects people bring to the fire ceremony, as well as what those objects represent, are unique and deeply personal. Whether it be a piece of wedding dress (used or never used), a

psychologist's or lawyer's license, a rosary, a spoonful of cocaine, or a photograph of a loved one, as each object is released into the flames, it is as if the individual has thereby said to the Other, "I have come to the wilderness to say good-bye to a life grown too small. I release my attachment to the security and familiarity of that life, honoring it for what it has taught and given me. In the morning, I shall stride deeper into the wilderness, without food or knowing, and await signs or gifts you might send." The courageous and careful choice of sacrificial object and the symbolic action of surrendering that object to fire say much more than the mere utterance of words.

#### Disentangling from the Ghosts of the Past

On a vision quest in the redrock canyons, a psychotherapist named June, whose mother died when she was ten, arrived with a curious history of being tormented by bats. One evening under a full moon, accompanied by drums and rattles, we danced on the compacted sands of a dry creek bed. Several times a bat landed on June, on her shawl or dress, her arm, or in her hair. It never flew into anyone else though there were fifteen of us and we were dancing wildly and weaving among each other in a small forest clearing. On three occasions, the bat became entangled in June's hair or shawl, and another person carefully freed it while June squirmed and the bat squealed. The bat, apparently an abandoned juvenile, was at least as traumatized as June.

During her subsequent days alone and fasting, bats visited her again. June knew the bats had something to communicate, something about *her* but also about *them* and her relationship to them. Finally, she accepted the inevitability of conversing with Bat. At sunset, while two bats flew circles overhead, June introduced herself out loud and spoke openly of her fear of them. Suddenly she became painfully aware of how she had felt, ever since childhood, like a victim, of other people and circumstances. This awareness was her catalyst to dive into her sacred wound, and dive she did. Alone in the wilds, June relived heartbreaking and sometimes harrowing memories, especially her mother's death. She came to understand that the young bat at the dance was mirroring her own sense of being abandoned, orphaned, and yet emotionally entangled in another (her dead mother). She reached the central core of her lifelong experience of being a victim and vowed to disentangle herself from the ghosts of her past.

June's encounters with nocturnal fliers did more than facilitate her healing, however. The bats, she discovered, were also mirroring her unclaimed soul power of navigating in the dark, her exceptional capacities of intuition and imagination. On her fast, she was able for the first time to experience these powers as awesome — not merely terrifying. By entering her sacred wound, June beheld nature reflecting her soul's gift as well as her childhood traumas. Her encounter with Bat held the potential for profound changes in both her social life and her work as a psychotherapist. Yet only time would tell how adept she might become at navigating in the dark.

## Non-Ordinary States and Fasting

On a vision quest, communion with the soul is made possible, in part, through non-ordinary states of consciousness evoked within a ritual framework. Altered consciousness enables us to perceive actualities and imagine possibilities that we might otherwise miss, thereby assisting us to weave the subtle and unseen forces of the world into form, making the unconscious conscious.

There are several methods for altering consciousness that we employ on vision quests. These include fasting, solitude, prolonged exposure to weather and untamed wildness, trance dancing, chanting, drumming, all-night vigils, befriending the dark, talking across the species boundaries, and a variety of perceptual practices.

Fasting is probably the most ancient and universal method for altering consciousness during vision quests. By literally emptying ourselves, we become more receptive vessels for the gifts of soul. There are at least three ways that fasting works its magic on us. First, fasting for three days or more profoundly affects our nervous system and thus our consciousness. Most people report, by the third day, an astonishing clarity of perception, thought, feeling, and imagination. For many, hunger disappears and a refined physical energy and alertness arise. Second, frequent hunger pangs remind our wandering minds to refocus attention on soulful intent. Third, as we grow weaker physically, our ego defenses weaken as well. It becomes more difficult to maintain those everyday boundaries separating us from the vast mysteries within and without, the mysteries through which the soul might speak.

## Exposure to Wilderness

Dwelling in wild nature is another essential element of the vision quest, quite possibly the most important, not merely or primarily because it removes us from the distractions of everyday life. Wilderness contributes toward the goal of ego-destructuring in two other ways — in what it lacks and in what it affords.

First, in the wild world, we find none of the social or physical structures that constellate the ego's everyday commerce. The wilderness does not mirror to the ego its familiar ways of organizing itself or propping itself up. The things we take for granted in our surface life (e.g. clocks and schedules, human relationships, social groupings, jobs, buildings, hobbies, TV, books, computers, automobiles) do not exist in wild solitude. The ego finds itself adrift in an enormous and unfamiliar sea, without anchor or landmarks. It has few means to maintain or defend itself. After several days without companions, food, anything to read, or conventional entertainment, and (thanks to the fast) without the energy to distract or busy itself in any of the normal ways, the ego loses its grip.

The second way wilderness facilitates ego-destructuring is through its powerful resonance with the depths, thereby supporting soul to speak louder. When the soul's voice thunders, it topples the ego's worldview, shatters its fortress of logic and limited values. In every moment, wilderness offers forms and forces that reverberate with the soul: the plunging canyons and soaring mountains, the cascading creeks and placid lakes, the bugling elk and the

howling wolf, the iridescence of hummingbird and lizard, the fragrance of pine sap and cliff rose, the desert stillness, the nightly odyssey of the moon and stars, the caress and whisper of the wind.

### *The Visionary Encounter: Inner or Outer?*

What the quester receives on a vision quest may or may not be visual. It's possible it will not be sensory based at all. The conscious encounter with soul occurs as either (1) a non-sensory experience such as a dream, a waking image, a spiritual voice, an energetic shift in the body, and/or a strong emotion, or (2) a sensory-based epiphany appearing, for example, in the form of a flower or snake, a canyon or mountain, the wind or rain.

Given the profound alterations in consciousness evoked during a wilderness rite, the vision is difficult to categorize definitively as of the sensory (outer) world or the non-sensory (inner). Indeed, it is often a blending or synergy of *both* psyche and nature. The quester may meet, for example, an animal who speaks to him intimately, or a corona around the moon that emanates a melody of wisdom, or a gift-bearing ancestor in the form of a desert whirlwind. Are these events inner or outer? Of imagination or sensing? Both? Maybe it would be best to abandon the Western way of separating inner from outer and to say, instead, that these experiences, these visions, reflect a conversation between the human soul and the soul of nature. A visionary encounter is often a moment when the imagination and senses work together synesthetically and amplify each other brilliantly.

### Sabina's Exchange of Gifts

Sabina Wyss, a personal coach and holistic health professional, was in her mid-twenties and on a vision fast. Alone in the Yosemite high country, she awoke one night out of a sound sleep. In the moonlight, five inches from her nose, she saw a stationary bear paw. Before her body knew to panic, she looked up and was mesmerized by the magnificent animal towering above her sleeping bag. What a blessing, she thought. She lay perfectly still. Then a wave of fear came, soon followed by a calm willingness to die should this be her time. The bear was so close his body heat and scent engulfed her.

The bear moved a few paces to Sabina's backpack and started pawing. Without conscious intention, Sabina sat up and heard a soft warning sound emerge from her throat that alarmed her as much as it did the bear. The bear dropped into a crouching, attack position. Sabina, her heart now beating wildly, assumed this was her last moment. The two stared into each other's eyes, three feet apart. Then the bear turned on his heels and disappeared into the forest.

Sabina did not go back to sleep. In the morning, she discovered the bear had taken her necklace, a large African masterpiece of silver plates and ebony inlays, a gift from a teacher who had his own opinions of who Sabina ought to be. Although she had brought the necklace to honor her teacher, she didn't wear it because it would have been an attempt to please him in the face of her own deeper knowing. The necklace was now the bear's.

The bear left her with two gifts in exchange: the freedom to claim her own path independent of her teacher's projections and a visceral image-feeling of Bear. When Sabina feels in need of spiritual support, she calls on Bear. He is a palpable presence walking along side her. "He guides me toward my true, innate power and how to live that power in the world."

Sabina's midnight exchange established the image-feeling of Bear at the center of her soul path. The interplay between the sensory experience of the bear (sight, scent, and sound), the extraordinary emotions (terror, calm, and gratitude), and the numinous image (Bear as spiritual ally) composed the fabric of this encounter with soul.

### Lamenting

The anthropologists' term *vision quest* is not an accurate translation of the words originally used by the indigenous people of the Americas to refer to their fasting rites. What they called it varied from tribe to tribe. Nicholas Black Elk, a ceremonial chief of the Lakota, explained that their word, *hanblecheya*, means "lamenting" or "crying." For me, *lamenting* is in fact a more accurate and fitting term for wilderness fasting rites than *vision quest*.

*Lamenting* puts the emphasis in the right place. An individual embarks on a rite of soul encounter when he recognizes the story he has been living has become too small. He will have to sacrifice the old story, provoking the ordeal of a good deal of grief.

*Lamenting* conveys the purpose of wilderness fasting rites more accurately than the much misunderstood term *vision questing*. Contemporary seekers might not lament in the same form or idioms as the Lakota, but lamenting is an essential component of a vision fast. An unrestrained lament is a crowbar into the soul, the dark depths of the self.

The lament expresses, in essence, that the quester has lost his way, has strayed off his path of heart, or has gone as far as he could with what he knows. Perhaps it admits that the adolescent personality cannot take him further, and that this recognition and loss are difficult and painful, an ordeal. For the modern vision quester, the lament may sound something like this: "Dear God! Help me! I can no longer find my way in the world by figuring it out. My old way doesn't provide enough meaning! I see people suffering everywhere around me; the animals, the waters, and the land itself are suffering. I long for a vision, a gift to bring back to my community! I seek a way to help my people. I release my former understanding of self and world. I go without food. I dwell alone beneath the sky. O, God! Help me!"

*Your* lament starts with what is most troubling to you, your greatest anguish. Eventually, your lament brings you to your deepest longing. As David Whyte notes, we feel our lack before we feel our longing. Once lament opens to longing, you must give that longing your full attention. As Rumi has said, "It is the longing that does all the work."

### Awaking the Soul with Ritual

Vision quests are grand and complex rituals. Much of their transformative power arises simply from the fact they are rituals. Several rituals features support the encounter with soul.

Rituals are bodily enactments in real time and space, engaging us not only verbally, cognitively, imaginatively, and emotionally but also through our bodies, by way of symbolically rich gestures. As ritual participants, we are thoroughly active, not just listening, observing, or imagining but also *living* our deepest questions and truths, *embodying* our sacred symbols and life themes, and *physically interacting* with the archetypal qualities of the earth and the universal human experience.

The vision quester, for example, is not sitting in a room, feeling, imagining, and thinking. She is out on the land, in the wind, heat, and cold, exposed to the storm and the cries in the night. She is setting stones in the four directions. She is dancing her prayers, singing her heart out, crying to the earth and shouting at the sky for a vision, talking to the trees, the hawks, the moon, and the mountain. She is dressed in sacred robes, tying prayers into cloth bundles, adorning herself with flowers or thorns or mud, all in accord with the counsel of nature and her own soul. She is as fully present to her body and the breaking wave of her life as she has ever been.

Rituals are rooted in deeply meaningful symbols and the sacred objects that embody those symbols. The quester is in conversation with the quadrated circle, the wounded heart, the broken stick, the prayer arrow, the parent's ashes, the religious icon, the wedding ring, the medicine bag, the mask, the drum, the sacrificial fire. These symbols arouse the deepest desires of her heart, her greatest griefs and fears, the archetypal possibilities of the collective human unconscious, and her religious and spiritual yearnings. Through numinous power absorbed and emanated, these symbols uncover sacred layers of her humanity. And they effectively awaken suppressed feeling, often provoking a profound healing crisis.

Perhaps the most significant attribute of ritual is the empowered conversation with the sacred Other, who speaks to us through dream images, deep imagination, archetypes, myths, and nature signs and omens. Our ritual enactments are the human half of the conversation.

The vision quest includes many ritual conversations. The four-directions circle — constructed of stones, branches, or other objects from nature — is a good example. The circle is big enough to stand or lie in, big enough to pray in or enact ceremony. Quadrated circles are universal symbols of wholeness, and thus a symbol the Other readily understands. The quester constructs the circle in a ritual manner, aligning each cardinal stone with the corresponding direction of the world. The message the Other hears may be something like, "I am here to align the totality of me with the totality of the world. I'm here to discover my true place in the world." The circle of stones becomes a request to the Other to come visit, a wrestling invitation to an angel, a beacon for the soul.

Finally, rituals such as the vision quest allow the individual to access and utilize the unique but unusual personal power available during times of major life transition. Typically in our society, we feel weak, empty, and hopeless when confronted by change. But ritual can help us draw upon the power inherent in being neither here nor there, neither this nor that, dead to the old life and not yet born to the new. This is the power of existential freedom, of maximal psycho-spiritual possibilities, of unfettered potential. It is the power of the shape-shifter. Ritual

celebrates and enhances this liminal power by allowing the individual to live in the now in relation to truths not easily accessed from conventional awareness.

During periods of major change, we are stripped of our old place in the world. Ritual helps us relax into a type of homelessness, a lack of stable ground. Ritual enables us to enjoy the uninventoried possibilities encountered while wandering in the magical desert of our lives.

Times of transition are, in fact, the best opportunities to renew the search for meaning. As our old stories fall away, we begin to see new possibilities. When most empty, we're most able to be filled anew. Our eyes open wide to the vastness of life's horizon. Then, our world having become as spare and clear as the open desert, we can, at long last, behold that one feathered gift settling down softly before us on the untrammelled earth.

Short Bio:

**Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.**, is a depth psychologist, ecotherapist, and wilderness guide. He is the founding director of Colorado's Animas Valley Institute ([www.animas.org](http://www.animas.org)) which has been leading nature-based soul-initiation programs since 1980. He thinks of himself as a psychologist gone wild.

Longer Bio:

**Bill Plotkin, Ph.D.**, is a depth psychologist, wilderness guide, and one of the leaders in the field of contemporary, nature-based personal development and initiation programs. He holds a doctorate in psychology from the University of Colorado at Boulder and was previously on the teaching and research faculty at the State University of New York where he studied dreams and non-ordinary states achieved through meditation, biofeedback, and hypnosis.

Bill is the founding director of Animas Valley Institute ([www.animas.org](http://www.animas.org)) in southwest Colorado, a nonprofit organization of over twenty guides that has been leading nature-based soul-initiation programs since 1980. Each year, AVI's staff guide hundreds of people—professionals, artists, therapists, parents, teachers, and high-school and college students—on journeys into the inner/outer wilderness. Bill also conducts five-day soulcraft seminars at retreat centers throughout the United States as well as a training and apprenticeship program for soulcraft guides.

Bill has written many articles and book chapters on psychotherapy, consciousness, and wilderness rites. He is currently completing a second book on soulcentric human development wherein he proposes tasks and archetypes for the eight stages of life when we allow soul and nature to guide us in our growth.