

## **EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES FOR STAGE 4, THE WANDFERER IN THE COCOON**

*Please be sure to read chapter 7 (on stage 4) before launching into these activities.*

*The activities in this section are recommended only if you are in stage 4 (the Cocoon) or later stages. If you are in stage 3 (the Oasis), it won't be possible to perform or experience these activities in their fullness. If you're not certain what stage you're in, please review the Introductory Section.*

Our primary suggestions for experiential activities to help you with the tasks of the Cocoon are:

- Learn and use the practices found in *Soulcraft: Crossing into the Mysteries of Nature and Psyche* by Bill Plotkin. *Soulcraft* is, in essence, a handbook for traversing the challenging, rapturous, and radically transformative terrain of the Cocoon.
- Enroll in a program with Animas Valley Institute. All Animas programs are designed to assist people with the tasks of stage 4 and later.

### **What follows are a few introductory experiential activities to address the two tasks of the Cocoon (stage 4):**

- Leaving home (separating from your earlier way of belonging to the world)
- Exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche

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### **The following activities support you in the process of “leaving home” if you are in stage 4 or beyond.**

#### **Leaving home:**

##### **More-than-human Nature:**

*Time: 2 weeks, or a day, Materials: maybe camping equipment, maybe some money*

**2-week version** (not for people who still live with their parents!): Being mindful of the use of fossil fuels, get on a bus, train, or airplane to somewhere neither you nor your friends or family have ever been. Don't choose a significant tourist destination, but rather a place you know next to nothing about. Plan on being there for two weeks or so. Plan on having no contact with anyone you knew before, except perhaps occasional non-interactive messages home that you're all right. If this kind of journey seems too dangerous to you, do not do it! Before leaving home, say good-bye to all of what your life is, everything you own, and all the identities that define you. This alone might take days. Create private ceremonies of surrender and leave-taking. Say good-bye as if you were never coming back. In everyday life, in fact, we never know if we will or not. Don't make any plans of any sort for your two weeks. Not even where you will sleep. You might find places to camp, or you might rent rooms along the way. When you disembark from your bus, train, or plane, simply wander off. If you really are in stage 4 or beyond — this is essential! — you have sufficient skills to take care of yourself and stay out of any significant danger. Knowing this, let Mystery guide you. Walk, rent a bicycle, ride buses. Just wander. Let Mystery decide when to turn right or left, when to stop and rest, when to go on. Obviously, if you're in stage 4, you'll obey traffic laws and common sense safety rules. As for

the rest, leave it to Mystery. Perhaps you'll take odd jobs for a little cash or in exchange for a meal or a place to sleep. At times, you might choose to walk only in slow motion (to break your habit of needing to get somewhere other than where you already are). Another day you might simply sit in one spot and reverently observe life — looking, listening, touching, and breathing in the scents of the world. People might come along and strike up a conversation with you. If they seem harmless enough, don't let them leave until you have received or given something of a mysterious quality. Whatever you do during these two weeks of wandering, do it differently than you're used to. For example, if you're the kind that proudly introduces yourself in terms of your career, instead say you're simply a wanderer. If you normally talk in a sweet, soft way, choose to speak loudly and decisively. Etc. Break with as many habits as you can (without foolishly jeopardizing your wellbeing).

**One-day version:** more or less same as above, except you'll walk or take a bus from your home.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** What did you learn about yourself? What surprised you the most? What new versions of yourself stepped forward? What did you discover about previously unsuspected capacities, interests, passions, attitudes, desires, emotions, memories, images, vulnerabilities, addictions, obsessions, wildness, talents, predilections, loves, or destinies? What mysteries does soul seem to be luring you toward? For one week each, choose one or two of these qualities or experiences, perhaps the most puzzling, and live it/them into your world — throughout each day of your everyday life, be the person you'd be if that quality was at the very core of your life. You might also draw it (in several different ways), make a song or poem from it, dance it, sculpt it, or tell a non-human Other (somewhere outside the four walls of your house) all about it, out loud and with exuberant gestures.

## Leaving home

### More-than-human Nature:

*Time: 1 hour or more Materials: basic hiking equipment and clothing*

Go out. Wander aimlessly in a wild or semi-wild place. Wander further until you have a sense of mystery in and/or around you. Wander some more until you find yourself drawn to another being that feels as if it, too, has left home. Be with this Other. Allowing a good amount of time for this, praise it for the way it is, for its having successfully left "home". Then tell it, out loud, your deepest thoughts and feelings about your own experience of "leaving home" Talk about what ways you *have* left home, or about what ways you've never left home (which is to say, the first home of your adolescent identity). What is scary or exciting about leaving home? Listening on the deepest, most honest level, what do you sense is calling you? Tell the Other about it. What do you REALLY want (in life)? Dare to claim it and say it.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** What are you ready to let go of? Really? We mean both material things (goods, papers, trinkets, books, other stuff) and psychological behavioural things (ways of acting, speaking, belonging, relating, loving, etc). If you cannot deeply feel your gratitude for what these things have given and taught you, then you're not ready to let go of it. Perhaps you will enact a fire ceremony (see below).

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## Leaving home

### The Fire Ceremony:

*Time: 3 to 8 hours or more, Materials: items for building and starting a fire; sacrificial object(s)*

During this ceremony, you sacrifice an object to fire. The object — there can be more than one — must be combustible without creating toxic fumes. More importantly, it is something that represents, symbolically and personally, the identity and way of belonging to the world that you are leaving behind. In sacrificing your item to the fire, you'll be relinquishing attachment to your old story. The intent is not at all to say "good riddance" to what you don't like about your life. Rather, you'll be honoring the chapter of your life that has miraculously ushered you to your current jumping-off place. Consider carefully what your sacrificial object(s) will be. Choose wisely and deeply. This choice is by far the most important part of the fire ceremony.

There are two types of objects you might offer to the fire: those that symbolize Obstacles and those that symbolize Attachments. In some cases, an object will symbolize something that has both qualities:

(1) Obstacles: These objects symbolize a period or style of suffering or crisis, limitation or failure, addiction or numbness. At first, you might hope just to be rid of this aspect or chapter of your life, washing your hands clean of the mess. However, until you see how you've also benefited from the Obstacle, you'll not succeed at moving beyond it; indeed, despite your intentions, you'll continue dragging it around like an anchor. The truth is that without this Obstacle, you'll be exposed — to the dangers of the unknown, to the urgent desires of your own soul, and to your deepest, wildest emotions. Perhaps the Obstacle has, in reality, been a "protection" that was at one time genuinely beneficial to your development. Perhaps it was rooted in one of your childhood survival strategies. From what did it protect you? Can you see how you (unconsciously) created it and how it had served you? Or do you merely feel like an unlucky victim? — in which case you are not yet ready to sacrifice an object symbolizing this Obstacle. (We're not referring here to traumas such as childhood abuse or life-threatening illnesses; we're referring to behavioral styles or patterns or relationships in your life that might have been your way of *coping* with traumas or losses or dangers). That old survival strategy is now getting in the way of your growth by "protecting" you from a danger that no longer exists or that is no longer substantial. You'll know you've fully realized this, when you begin 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 dear friend that has helped you through some very difficult times: Imagine that you're at a train station. Your best friend is on the train. The train is pulling out. You're waving goodbye. Forever. *That's* what this should feel like.

If you'll be offering an Obstacle symbol at your 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 your old way of belonging to life — 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 a wider perspective than merely how it had 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 this work for you. The ceremony will be a celebration and culmination of the preparatory work you've done before it. If you cannot genuinely and deeply reach the sort of understanding described here, do not enact this fire ceremony!

(2) Attachments: These objects symbolize the ending of something (e.g., a relationship or a role) that you're 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're mourning the loss (but, in your grieving, you might 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 this relationship or role was in fact limiting or blocking your growth; at the least, perhaps it's best to move on now. Your goal is 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 embrace of the future and the unknown (your "hello"). A self-created ceremony of mourning might be a good idea. If you have not yet reached a full readiness to let go of your Attachment, do not enact this fire ceremony!

Once you've completed your all-important psychospiritual preparation work and you've carefully chosen one or more sacrificial objects, dig a fire pit in an appropriate, legal, and safe place. It is essential that you do this in a way that will do no significant harm to any living things and that will leave no trace whatsoever after your ceremony. If you aren't positive you know how to do this, you must ask for help from someone who is. Do not line the pit with stones (which would be scarred by the fire). Choose whether you'll enact the ceremony alone or with one or more witnesses. Enact the ceremony at night. Gather the tinder, kindling, and small pieces of firewood that you'll need. (This is a small ceremonial fire, *not* a bonfire.) Sit on the west side of the fire pit. Build the fire and light it ceremonially, offering your gratitude and appreciation to Fire. Tell sacred stories you know about Fire. Then announce your clearest and deepest intent for this ceremony. Once you have a good bed of coals in the pit, then, one at a time, offer your sacrificial objects to the fire. Out loud, tell the story of how that object came into your life, explain what it represents, and say your final good-bye to that whole way of belonging to the world, a way of life that has grown too small for you. Let your emotions flow fully without restraint. Take your time. Sit there and thoroughly feel what you have done by enacting this sacrifice. Remain there until the fire has completely died out (or until there are only a few orange coals left). Then fill in the pit with the earth you dug out of it earlier. Now sit atop the spot where the pit had been. Face east. If it feels right, stay there until dawn.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** Reflect and journal about this experience. For the next month, take 20 minutes or more every evening and reflect on your day: Did your Obstacle or Attachment show up in your life in any way today? They might very well show up in old or new ways despite the Fire Ceremony. This gives you the opportunity to deepen your experience of these Obstacles and Attachments. (It can also indicate that your preparation for the Fire Ceremony had not been thorough enough.) Take the opportunity to once again thank your Obstacles and Attachments for showing up to help you become more conscious.

## Leaving home

### Writing

*Time: one hour or more, Materials: something to write with and on*

If you were to truly leave "home" today (that is, your current way of belonging to the world): What would you leave behind? Which material things (your house, car, books, photos, sports gear, art, "sacred" objects, etc.)? Which relationships with people and other beings (the

ones you love *and* the ones you don't)? Which roles (the ones you gave yourself — such as the one who always smiles, the short one, the shy one — and the ones others gave you — your profession, social status, roles within your circle of friends, family, etc)?

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** For the next three weeks: Choose one of your material objects per day (it can be very small as consciously recycling a piece of paper, it can be something big, like your car) and give it away to someone who can use it, or compost it or recycle it if it is of no use to anybody else.

## Leaving home

### Writing

*Time: one hour or more, Materials: something to write with and on*

Make a list of the times you've lost your sense of identity. Some might have been consciously chosen (like career change or retirement when you lose your identity within the work world), others may have been forced upon you (like aging or loss of mobility resulting in the loss of your identity as an athlete). Each of these losses can be a way of leaving the home we had previously built for ourselves. For each loss of identity, consider how it changed you, what new resources were developed, and the possibility you have unfinished grieving to do (especially if you looked forward to the change and never truly explored what you lost).

## Leaving home

### Writing

*Time: one hour or more, Materials: something to write with and on*

Sometimes it is hard to know what cultural norms are motivating us unconsciously. Talk to a person from another culture about their values. Or watch films or read a novel created from within another culture. In your journal, explore what you learned about your unconscious cultural values. Reconsider the fittingness of these values in your life now. Do you want to choose them consciously, modify them, or abandon them? Why? How does your choice reflect on your need to leave the home of the smaller story you have been living?

## Leaving home

### Art:

*Time: 1 hour or more Material: Clay, paint, or sticks*

Clay: Divide your clay into three parts. Taking one chunk, think of all your major material possessions, one at a time, and let your hands press each of them into the clay. Don't focus on shaping the clay into something (let alone something pretty) but only on bringing the feeling of your physical belongings into the clay. Take the second piece and mold it by pressing all your relationships into it. Again, focus on visiting each of your significant relationships and leaving a mark for each one in the clay. Take the third piece. Feel into the different roles you occupy in life, and let each one impress themselves into the last piece of clay, gathering your sense of each one of these roles and imparting that to the clay. Now, step back a bit and look at the three pieces of clay. What would it be like to leave all this behind? Really. To never see

them again — the whole package, this whole way of belonging to the world? Take your pieces of clay to a nearby stream or lake or large puddle. Let the clay dissolve in the water as you feel the impact of leaving all of it behind, saying goodbye forever to all your routines, material possessions, relationships, roles, your current way of belonging to this world. Notice what kind of patterns appear in the water as your life dissolves in front of your very eyes.

Paint: same as above, except that you paint on three pieces of paper, and then burn them in the end.

Sticks: Each stick represents one aspect of your life as described above. You'll need to collect a lot of sticks — a whole lot more than three. Burn one at a time in a fireplace or in a small fire pit, as described above in the Fire Ceremony (so that your fire does no damage to you or anything else on the land).

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** Reflect on your experience. What dimensions of your life have you felt strongly attached to, but that you are now ready to let go? Can you fully feel your gratitude for what you've learned from these things/relationships/roles? If so, tell them out loud, and do whatever you must to let actually them go.

### **Leaving home**

#### **Art:**

*Time: 1 hour or more Material: Large sheet of paper, colored pencils, crayons, or pastels*

Find a long sheet of paper (perhaps butcher paper). Create a timeline of your life. Write and/or draw the points at which you adopted values from your family, your school, or your community. Add times you relinquished a previously held value or adopted a new one to replace it. As you work with this, allow yourself to experience any emotions that arise, and allow yourself to feel where you are holding these values in your body.

### **Leaving home**

#### **Questions to enjoy or ponder (in the process of "leaving home"):**

- Describe or portray your first home of belonging. What did you (not) love about it?
  - How and when did you leave it?
  - Which aspects of you have not yet left?
  - How well are you doing today striding into the unknown?
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**The following activities support you in exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche:**

### **Exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche**

#### **More-than-human Nature:**

*Time: 1 hour or more, Materials: None*

Apprentice yourself to wandering in nature (both outer nature and your own deepest, individual human nature). Don't begin with any plan of where you'll go or what you'll do. Start by creating a simple threshold ceremony (stepping over a stick or through an archway, addressing the world in your most eloquent language concerning your intent for this walk, or anything else that serves to mark your threshold between ordinary and sacred consciousness). Now stand still. Breathe. Sink into your heart and also into your depths. Let the wild world lure you. Wait until you feel strongly drawn in a certain direction (as opposed to thinking about it and simply deciding). When you're ready, move slowly in order to feel the tugs and promptings and to remain tuned to your peripheral awareness, the shadows, and your feelings... Follow any signs you perceive in the natural world, omens, your gut feeling, your heart. Gradually, let yourself be drawn to a particular being, an "Other" — a plant, bush, tree, rock, stream, insect, animal, wind, or mountain. Sit or stand there. Praise that being, out loud, for its character — whether beautiful, hideous, or otherwise — its mysterious qualities including its shadowy aspects. Talk (or sing or dance) about what drew you to this Other. Let yourself be surprised what you express. Now tell it about *your* character — your soul and shadow, your biggest questions and doubts and emotions, your experience of life purpose and your deepest longings. Speak out loud — even if it makes you feel foolish. Continue speaking until you feel interrupted in some way by the Other. Enter into a dialogue, one that might unfold by way of images (what you see with your eyes and/or your imagination), words (which you hear from the Other or within yourself), bodily (the way your body wants to move or that the Other invites you to move), memories (the kind that emerge "out of nowhere" and utterly surprise you), deep emotion, or through scent, touch, or sound. Do all you can to keep the dialogue going several rounds. Record your experience in your journal. Before you leave, make some sort of offering to the Other — a song, poem, kiss, touch, water, bow, or a bead or some other small gift made of natural materials and that would not be litter. On your way home, remember to cross your ceremonial threshold in the opposite direction.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** What things most touched you during this encounter with the Other, especially in unexpected ways? Choose one of these qualities and spend some time feeling it every night for the next seven days before falling asleep.

### **Exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche**

#### **Writing:**

*Time: 30 minutes or more, Materials: something to write with and on*

Let your heart choose a color or pen and a writing surface. Let yourself sink into your depths, into the mystery in whatever way works for you. Sink even deeper. From this place, allow your writing implement to move on your writing surface. This could take the form of scribbles, words, symbols, sentences, lines, figures, or anything else that flows onto the page. If something very familiar comes out, thank it, let it go, and then sink deeper, allowing the mystery to flow onto your page.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** Of the things that have appeared on your page(s), what stands out as most puzzling, alluring, or repulsive? Every morning upon first waking, look at those things, feel into them, and invite them to accompany you during the day.

### **Exploring the mysteries of nature and psyche**



### **Art:**

*Time: 30 minutes or more, Material: Paper, pencil, coloring pencils (or pen and felt pens), paper*

Take a large piece of paper. Let yourself sink into your own depth, into your soul, into the Mystery. Allow your non-dominant hand to be moved by mystery; scribble wildly or slowly on your paper. Perhaps even with your eyes closed. Open your eyes, and let yourself be surprised by what you see. Turn the page slowly 360 degrees, catching any figures, symbols, shapes that attract you. Trace them, color them. Then look again at what strikes you.

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** Put your piece of mystery art in a place where you'll see it often. Every day for the next seven, notice what other mysterious images appear within your scribbles and colourings.

### **Writing / questions to enjoy and ponder:**

*Time: 10 minutes or more, Materials: Journal or paper and pen*

Journal about the following questions:

- What stops/encourages you from/to being authentic?
- When do you choose acceptance over authenticity?
- What is stirring, calling, longing?
- What kinds of addictions did/do you have? When do they kick in? How do you want to deal with them? What are they hiding underneath?
- Read through the list of soulcraft skills. Which ones intrigue you and why? Choose one to practice more. Journal about the experiences you gain from it.
- What are the favorite phrases of your Loyal Soldier? What tool do you have now to deal differently than the L.S. strategies?
- What is your sacred wound? What do you know about it? How do you live with it?

**Applying your experience to everyday life:** What most stands out as wanting to be changed in your life? Choose one goal that you can achieve by the end of the week or that you can address every day this week.