



# Meaningful Journey

A pilgrimage in seven stages

L'Esprit du Chemin



# Greetings!

Hello traveler. Are you going on a pilgrimage?  
And do you want to make it a meaningful journey?  
Then this story might be of service to you.



# A Companion

This story is a companion for your soul. A companion inspired by the stories of thousands of pilgrims and by the great travel stories and wisdom traditions around the world.



# Navigation

After an introduction, our story follows the seven stages of the Meaningful Journey. Each stage has a symbol.

The journey starts at the top - at the small house on the hill - goes clockwise (the call, the departure, etc.) and ends at the beginning. The house therefore has a double meaning.



Introduction





## **A meaningful journey**

A pilgrimage is, worldwide, an ancient symbol for the journey through life.

The word ‘pilgrim’ comes from the Latin ‘per ager’ (through the field) and ‘peregrinus’ (stranger): the pilgrim leaves the familiar life behind, crosses uncharted territory and meets the unknown.

Pilgrimages are ‘in’. Routes to Santiago, Rome and other pilgrim destinations are being signposted from ever increasing distances. More and more travel guides and websites provide useful information.





In the meantime, that other route – the life path - seems to become more and more of a labyrinth. World-wide, things are evolving faster and faster. Our societies become ever more complicated and traditional relationships are under pressure. People are allowed, and obliged, to make their own choices in all of this turmoil. Many people therefore experience it as really valuable to take to the road for a while as a pilgrim.



Carrying everything you need yourself, being in nature, facing the unknown, settling into the rhythm of the journey, travelling on your



own, meeting other people, making your own choices - away from the well-known and the familiar. These are wonderful ingredients for a profound experience.

So, travelling as a pilgrim is an excellent way of becoming at ease, of taking the time to discover (again) who you are and what is really meaningful ('sacred') to you.

For many people their decision to go on pilgrimage, coincides with a special occasion or a new phase in their lives. For others their journey gains meaning along the way:

*"The Camino gradually polished me from hiker to pilgrim."*

- Jeroen Gooskens -





# Theme:

## Holy places

Why set out on a pilgrimage? In religious traditions, the answer is clear: to visit sacred places and thus profess the faith. Those places have been in contact with the divine: prophets, apostles and other saints were born or buried there, insights or laws were revealed, miraculous interventions took place (such as: healings). So there, pilgrims can experience a glimpse of the great mystery or even touch it, through relics.

*Relics are remains of a saint's body or objects that have been in contact with a saint.*





In the West, more and more pilgrims are heading for these sacred destinations, even though for most of them they no longer have a religious significance. The destination still points the direction, but “the way is the goal”. First of all, many people want to give meaning to their journey themselves.

That is why new forms of pilgrimage emerge (such as the Great Stones Way in the United Kingdom, the Walk of Wisdom in The Netherlands, and the Tour de Vézelay in France) and individual pilgrimages to a self-chosen destination, which is ‘sacred’ for personal reasons.







# Rituals

In the religious traditions, pilgrimages are above all: journeys to sacred places. In those places you can ask for insight or help, or say thanks for it. The contact with the divine is so essential, that often is prescribed exactly how it should take place, through prayers, hymns, actions, clothing. In short: through rituals.

Even if your pilgrimage is not religiously inspired, rituals can be very important to give meaning to your journey:

*"Rituals can help us shape that what we have no words for."*

- Leen Wijker -

At each stage we give examples of rituals that can be part of it.





# Call

I am challenged





Call





## Wake up!

In movies, an alarm clock rings, a letter is delivered, or something dramatic happens. This is how the main character is awakened. It is the call to let go of the familiar life and start moving:





“The call comes either in the form of a crisis that we cannot resolve in our ordinary way, or in the form of a natural desire for a more fulfilling and meaningful life.”

- Joseph Campbell -

Often a special event (‘crisis’) is the reason to go on a pilgrimage: the loss of a loved one or a job, a serious illness, the transition to the next phase of life (for example: from study to work, from work to retirement).

But it can also be a call from within, a voice inside you saying it is time to take the road, literally and figuratively.

For example, because you set yourself important questions: Is this the life I really want to lead? Is my relationship OK? Is my work meaningful?



It can be tempting to hide those questions and dive into your busy life. But the call is magical. If those questions are really important to you, they keep coming back.

*“Too often in life you make decisions which you only partially support.  
This leads to other decisions which in fact you do not support at all.  
Until one day you wake up and you can no longer find yourself.  
Then you pick up the things that are important to you and set off. Until you meet yourself again.  
And then you speak to yourself clearly.”*

(An Aboriginal on a journey along traditional dream paths).





# Theme:

## **The mentor**

Usually we do not respond immediately to a call. First you must gather courage. In the meantime, our doubts are often strengthened by the people around us, who want to keep us at home: You are doing just fine here, right? You cannot let us down, isn't it?

The temptation can then be great to give up your dreams and plans. But you can also decide to use these reactions to make your plans even better and stronger...



Sometimes you suddenly meet someone who, on the contrary, encourages you to keep asking the questions that are so important to you. Someone who stimulates you to look for your own answers. A mentor who offers insight and tips, but who also knows that eventually you have to find your own way:

*"It's your way, only yours. Others can walk with you, but no one can do it for you."*

- Jalal ad-Din Rumi -







## Rituals

You decide to take to the road. Do you want to mark that moment with a ritual or a symbol? For example: buying a backpack, putting your pilgrim passport on your bedside table, starting a diary?

You may set out to get answers to questions that are essential to you. Which destination do you choose for that? Which route? On foot? From home? Alone?

Travel with full attention. That starts with the preparations:

*"The way we pack our luggage determines our journey."*

- Phil Cousineau -



Keep it simple, travel light! Still, you might want to make room for:

- something that symbolizes the meaning of your journey, so that you always carry that with you?
- a symbol of something you want to leave on the way? (For example: a stone.)
- a few tea lights, for special moments?
- gifts for people you meet on the way? (For example: cards, poems.)

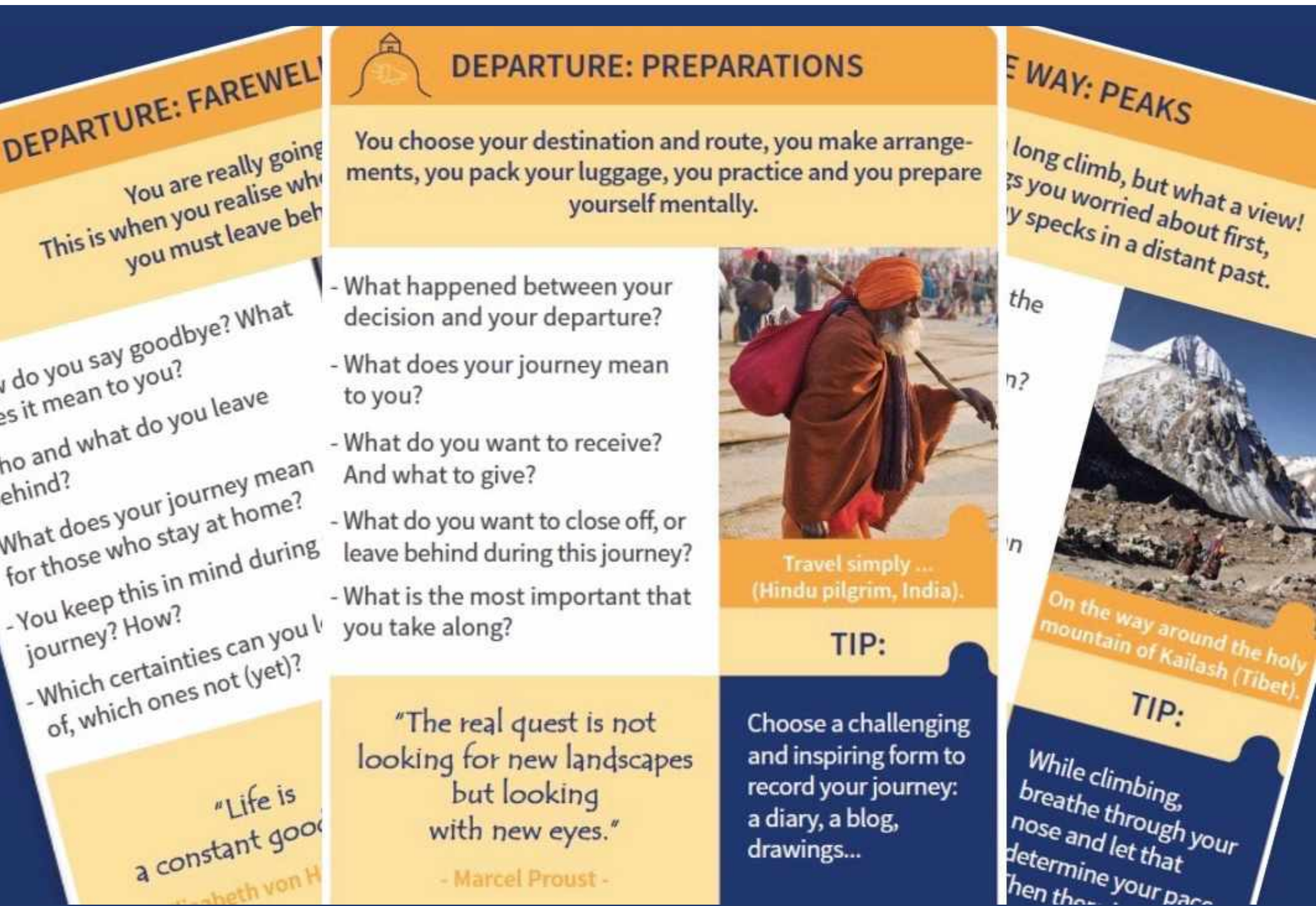
Try to leave with a clean slate. Then you can fully focus on your journey.







# Cards



These cards are like a travelling companion. Someone who sets you questions, offers you insight and sometimes challenges you to take a different path.

[www.espritduchemin.org](http://www.espritduchemin.org)







# Departure

I accept the challenge, I take to the road





Departure





## The first step

You accept the challenge. You cross the threshold from the familiar to the unknown. In the great travel stories, that threshold is often depicted by a gate, a bridge, the opening of a dark forest or a cave. The threshold is sometimes guarded by giant guardians, who make one last attempt to keep the traveler at home. They symbolize the doubts on departure.

Chances are that you too will doubt again. That you too see threatening guardians in front of you: Do I really want this? Can I do it?





Then it may be useful to ask yourself: What is the worst thing that can happen to me during my journey? Don't those guardians immediately become much smaller - as if by a spell? Even if the forest in front of you still seems so dark: go, go your own way:

*"Only when you show the courage to go your way, the road will show itself to you."*

- Paolo Coelho -

*"Wanderer, it is your tracks which are the road, nothing else. Wanderer, there is no road; walking makes the road."*

- Antonio Machado -



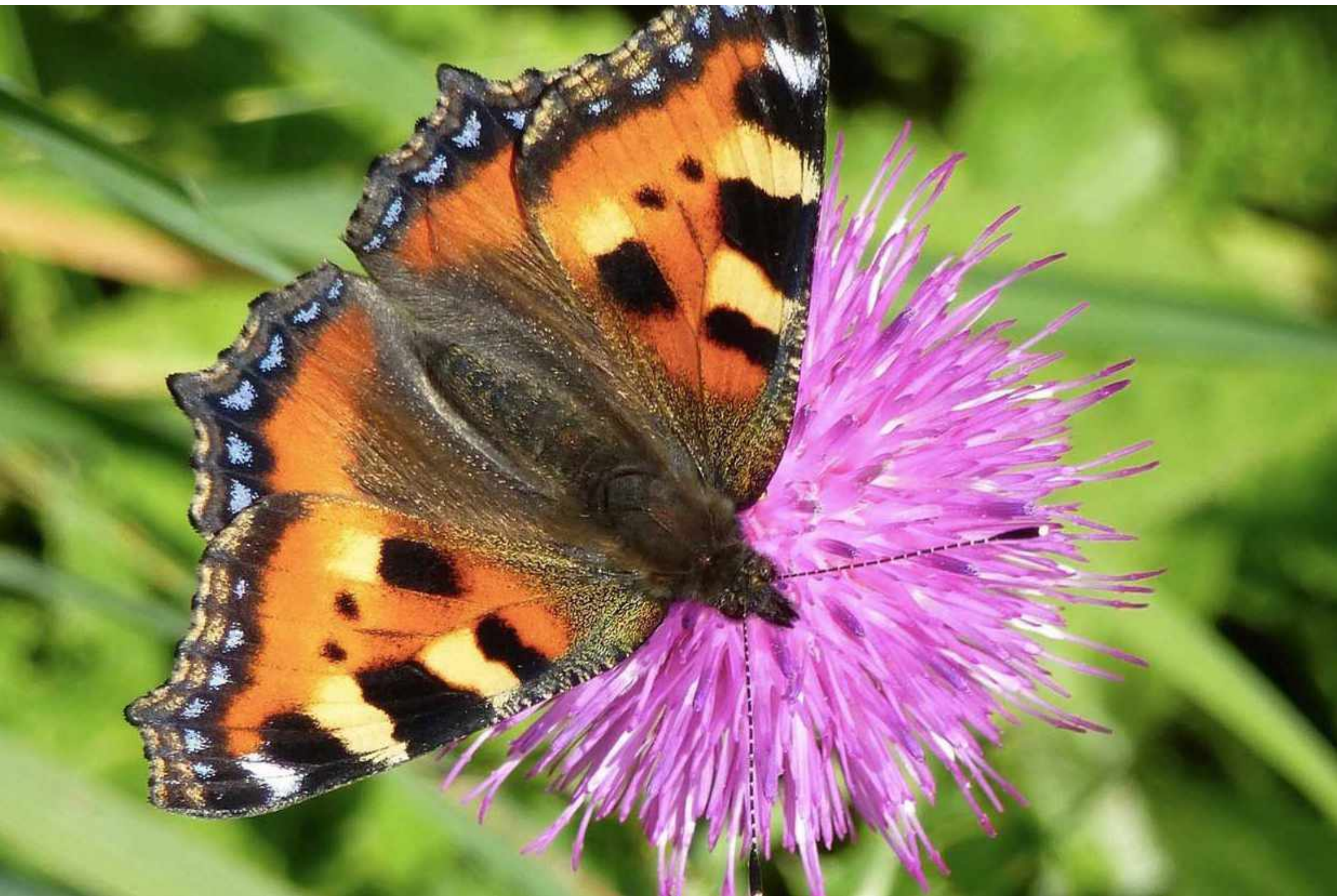


You leave. You are open to what is to come,  
without expectations.

This is your journey, an opportunity to live your  
ideal life. You let go of your familiar position  
and roles - at home and at work - you choose a  
new identity, and you fly out like a butterfly...

*"It doesn't interest me what you do  
for a living. I want to know what you  
ache for, and if you dare to dream of  
meeting your heart's longing."*

- Oriah Mountain Dreamer -



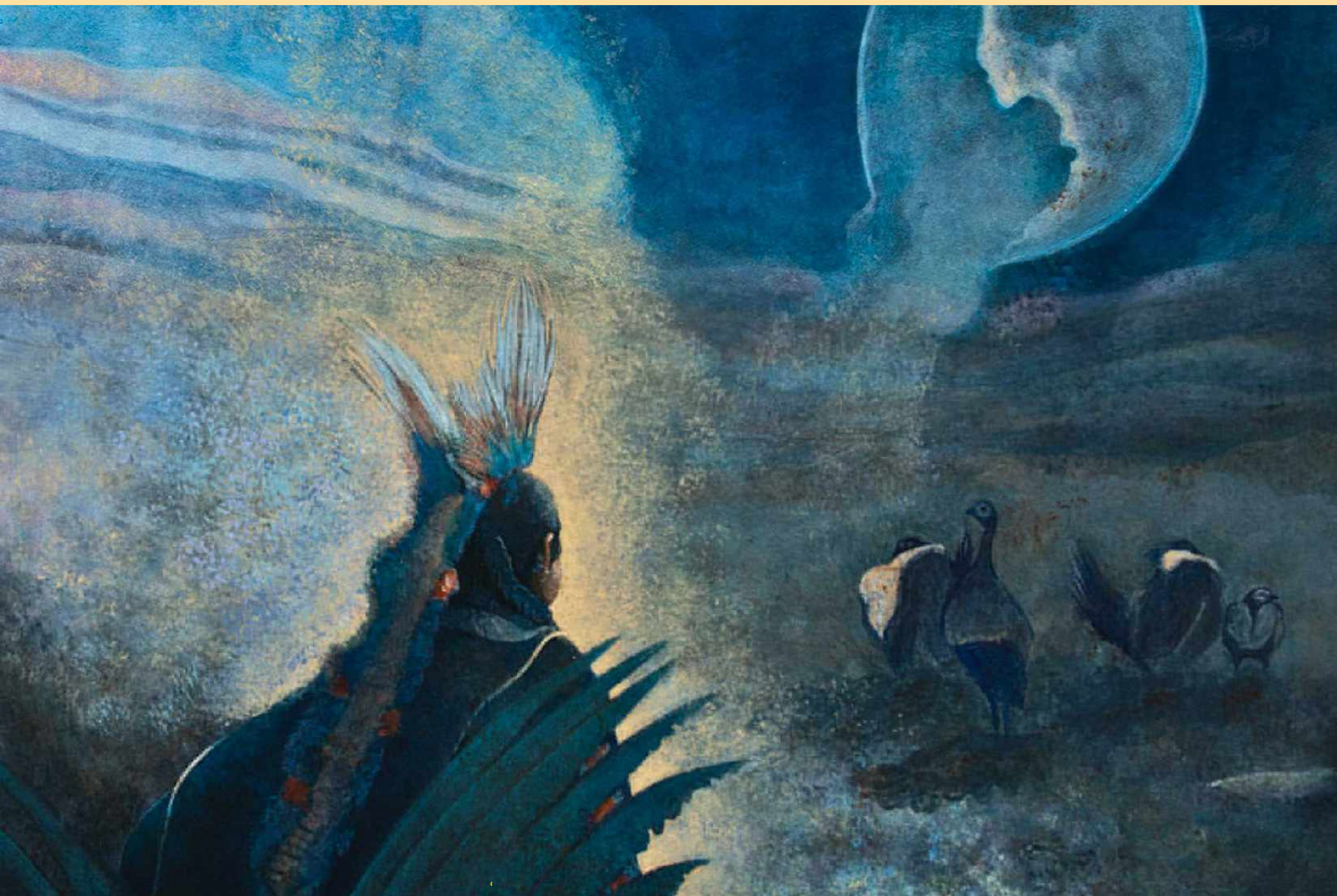




# Theme:

## Retreat

In some Native American cultures, a ‘vision quest’ marks the transition of young people to adulthood. Part of the ritual is a complete fasting, four days and nights, alone, in a sacred place in nature. There the young people ask the spirits for a vision, to be able to give meaning to their lives and their role in the community.





In other cultures too, a temporary retreat has an important function, as a rite of passage, at other special moments, or as a regularly recurring ritual.

The religious traditions have their own examples:

- The prophet Moses climbed Mount Sinai three times and received the Ten Commandments.
- Gautama Buddha meditated under a tree for seven weeks and attained enlightenment there.
- Jesus fasted forty days and nights in the desert and then began to preach.
- The prophet Mohammed fasted in a cave during the month of Ramadan and received his first revelations there.







## Rituals

Find out which rituals are part of the pilgrimage you have chosen. What do they mean to you?

Some pilgrims mark their departure with a farewell party, a pilgrim blessing, or a ritual that they devised themselves. Others are guided by family or friends, who accompany them on the first stretch.

Special moments can also be: the first stamp in your pilgrim passport or attaching your pilgrim symbol to your backpack or pannier.





When leaving, the person who departs usually takes center stage. But keep in mind that your journey also affects those who stay at home. They also experience their first step. How do you take this into account, now and on your way?

Tip: write a letter to yourself before you leave, for example about what you want to learn, discover or answer. It can help you to consciously take to the road. Maybe you want to bring your letter to someone special for safekeeping?

After returning home, the letter can help you while you reflect on your journey.











# On the way

I am really being tested





On the way





## Pushing boundaries

You took off. You are looking for your own way. That takes courage. Sometimes more than you think you have.

For some, the temptation is great to try to avoid this “test”.

They:

- stuff their (overweight) backpacks and panniers full of security.
- use luggage transport and taxis, to bypass difficult obstacles.
- call, text and email a lot, so as not to let go of the familiar.
- plan everything, to not give in to the unknown.





Of course, there may be good reasons to use additional tools. What is a piece of cake for one can be a great challenge for someone else. What matters is that you really embark on the adventure of a lifetime, that you keep developing yourself.

Moreover, even if you have prepared your trip so well, you will discover that things often turn out differently along the way:

*“Life is what happens to you when you’re busy making other plans.”*

- John Lennon -

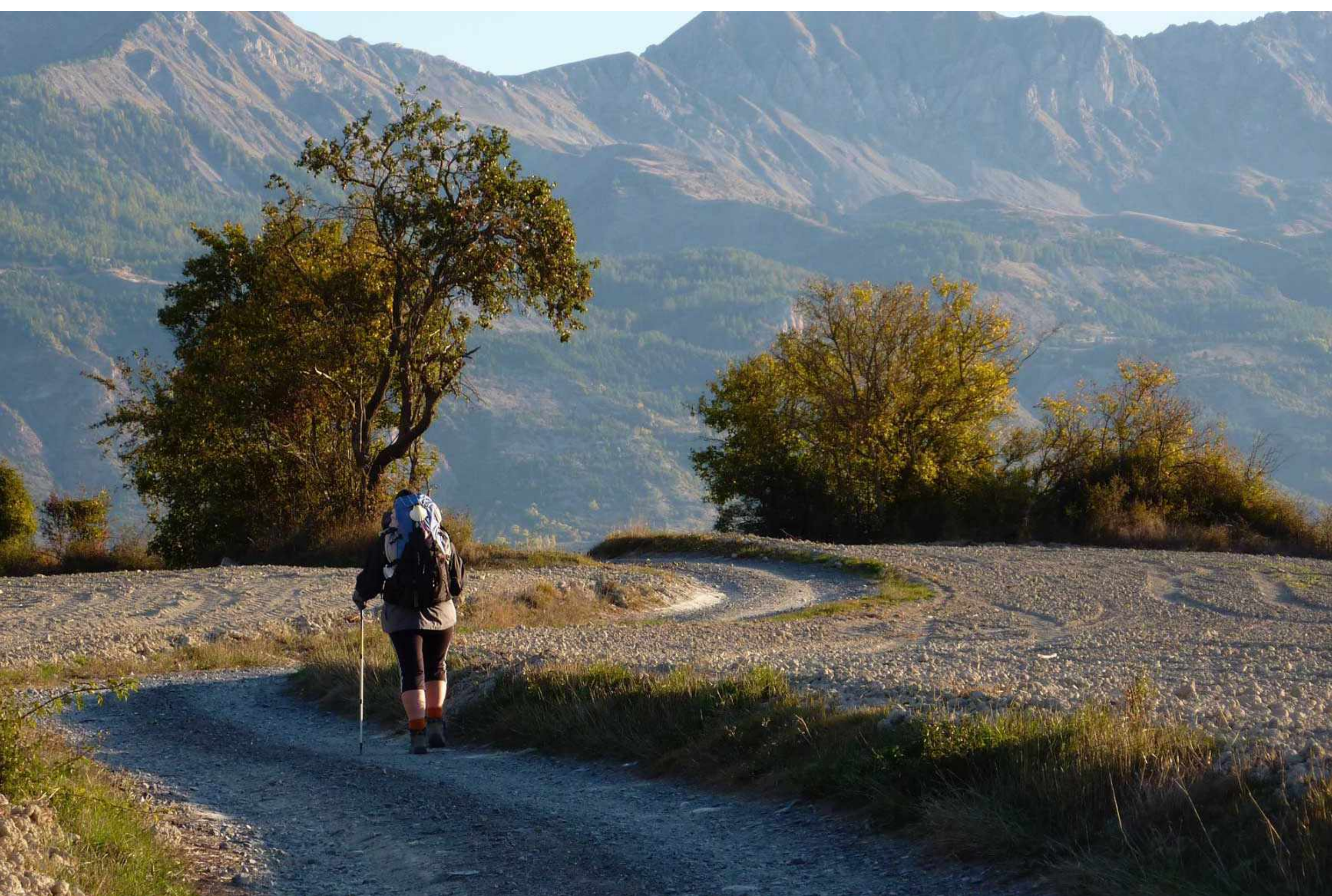
Your old routines no longer work, new solutions are needed. Difficult moments arise. You run into yourself. Doubts you had before you left may come back stronger than ever: What did I start with? If only I had listened to ... If only they would see me struggle like this....





Anyone who undertakes something new wrestles with such doubts. It is difficult, but part of it. Accept that and take the next step.

And of course there are not only obstacles on your path. There are also many beautiful moments. You live more intensely on the road than in 'normal' life. You walk (or cycle), as it were, with all your senses on edge.



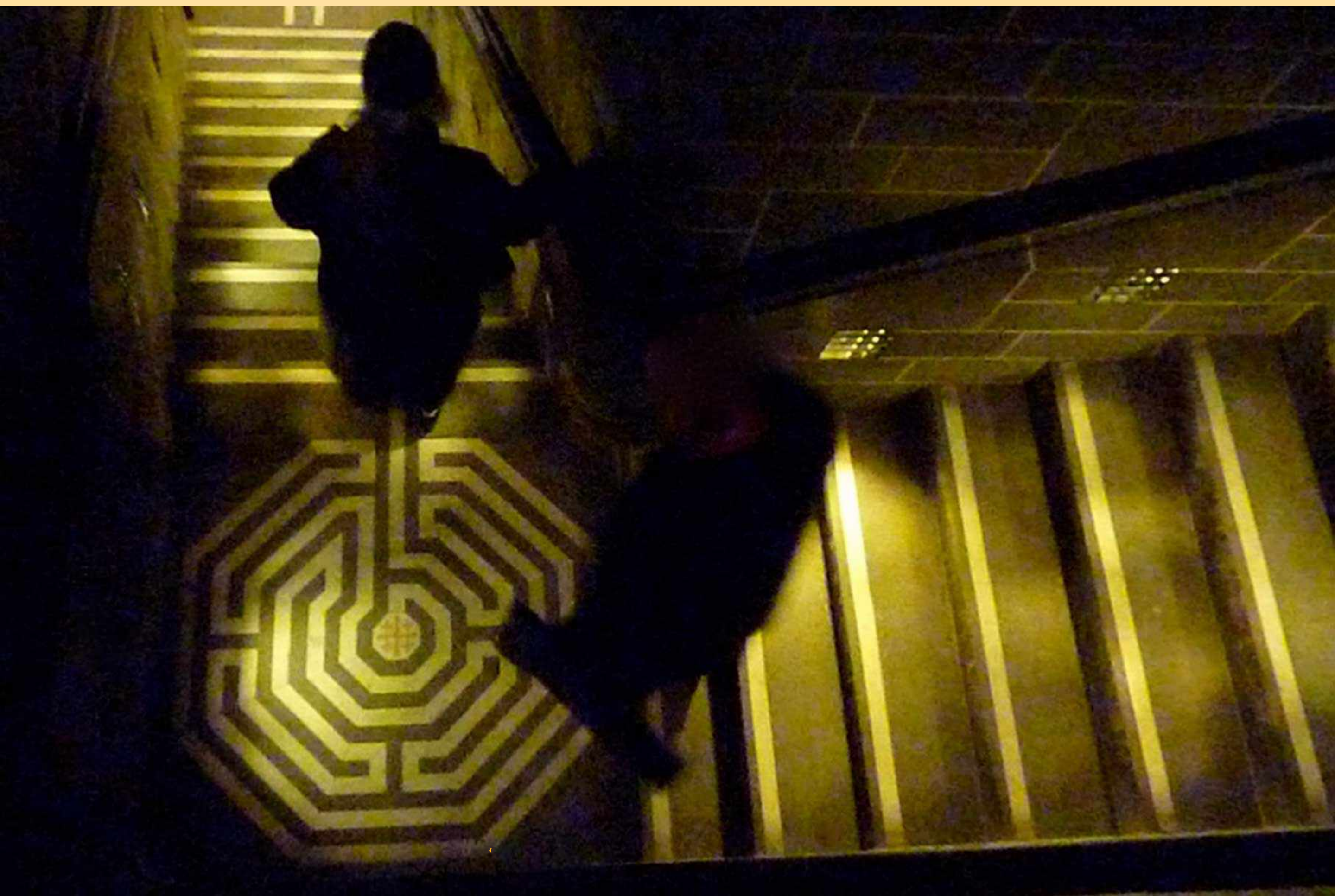


# Theme:

## **Labyrinths**

The labyrinth, like the pilgrimage, is an ancient symbol of the path of life.

You go out, into the labyrinth, looking for something essential. Sometimes you seem to be there. Then you are far off it again. If you discover what is really valuable to you, you have reached the core. Then you start your way out of the labyrinth, and you explore how you can shape the new in your everyday life.





*Well known is the myth of the Minotaur, in a labyrinth in Crete. It was a monstrous bull, fed by human sacrifices. The hero Theseus ventured into the labyrinth, defeated the monster and found his way back through the thread that his beloved Ariadne had spun for him.*

In this sense, we all take our threads with us on a journey: talents, promptings, dreams. But not only that. After all, the monsters from the great myths often do not symbolize the other, but especially our own shadow sides.

*“It isn’t the mountains ahead to climb that wear you out; it’s the pebble in your shoe.”*

*- Muhammad Ali -*

Those shadow sides are part of your (life) journey, no matter how difficult. Accept it and try not to ‘kill’ those monsters. They often guard a precious treasure.







## Rituals

Along the way, many pilgrims naturally develop a new rhythm, a new ritual: get up, pack, say goodbye, walk or cycle to the next hostel, register there and have your pilgrim passport stamped, unpack, wash yourself and your clothes, clean your shoes or bike, have a rest, exchange experiences, eat, sleep. Day in, day out, further and further...

Keeping a diary is often an important part of the ritual. It is a tread on the spot that gives room for reflection, by recording events, impressions and thoughts. In that sense, it can also work as a logbook that helps keep your small boat on track.

A diary is really something for yourself. Not to be confused with a blog, which is mainly aimed at informing others. A big difference!







# Pilgrim

I find support in myself and feel stronger





Pilgrim





## **Strength and confidence**

On your journey, help comes not only from the outside, but also from the inside.

How many stories are there of pilgrims who discovered a great, unsuspected energy and ingenuity in themselves during the most difficult moments of their journey?





The unexpected forces you to let go of your routines and to a new approach.

As troublesome as that might be at that moment, it is also an opportunity to use and develop your strength, creativity and wisdom. And ... to learn to trust it.

*When the knight Percival quickly found the castle where the Holy Grail was kept, he actually didn't know what to do. Then his years of wandering through an immense forest began, where he was faced with countless assignments. Eventually he found the castle again and then, purified by his journey, he did the right thing. Thus he became the new Grail King.*

“Usually the (inner) allies appear the moment you realize that you cannot complete this journey in the same way as the previous one.”

- Joseph Campbell -





Many pilgrims walk (or cycle) alone during the day and seek the company of others at night, in restaurants and hostels.

This way you travel in your own rhythm and with your own thoughts, and then exchange them with those of others. In doing so, self-awareness weaves itself: alone, together, alone, together...







# Theme:

## What is my myth?

For many pilgrims, their journey is a rite of passage, from an 'old' life that they want or have to leave behind (study, work, partner) to a 'new', still unknown, life. Along the way, it is no longer about *what* you are (student, entrepreneur, spouse, pensioner), but about *who* you are. That 'status' connects you to many others, who are also on their (life) path.

"Once I was speechless.  
That was when someone asked me,  
"Who are you?""

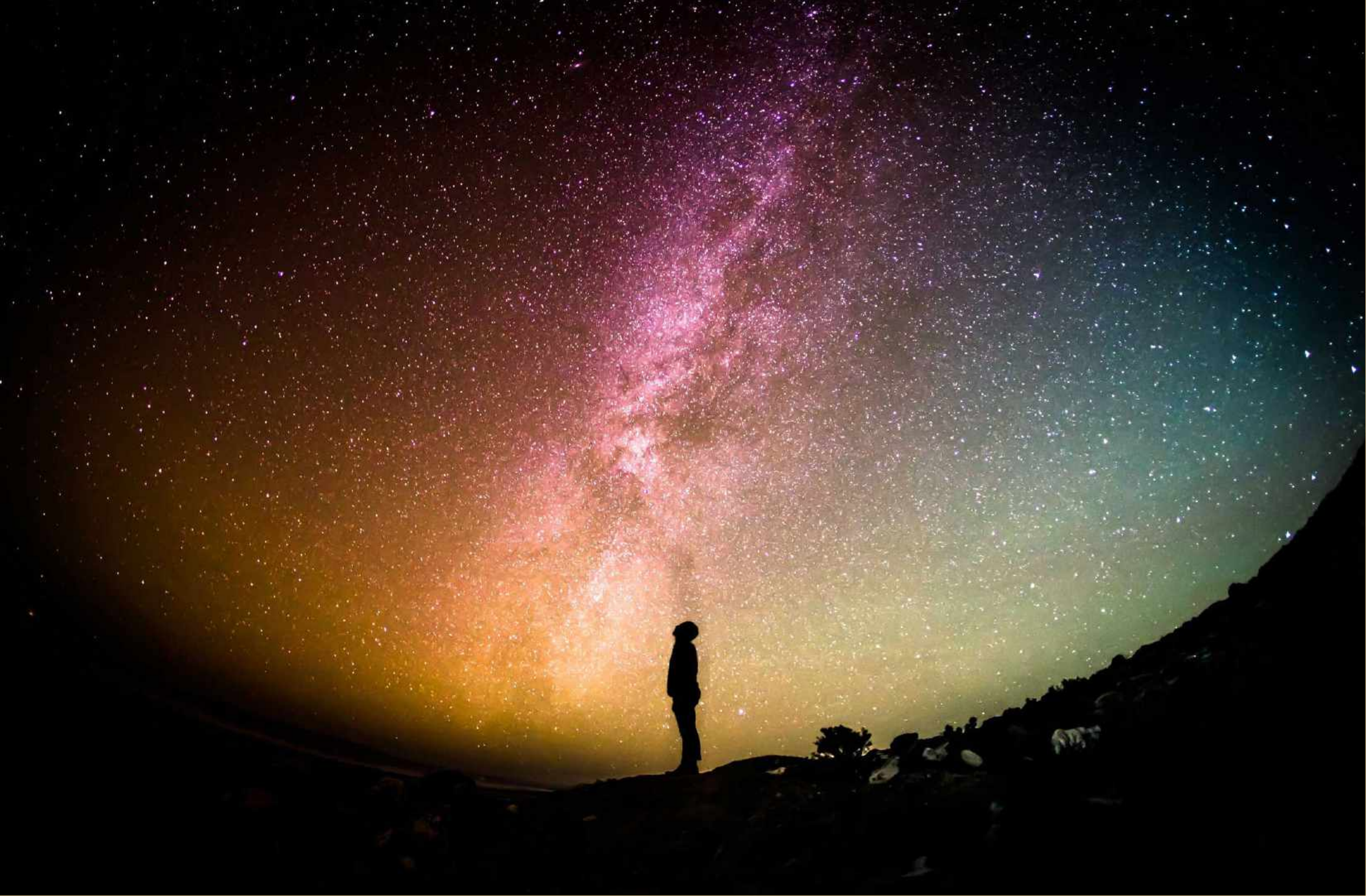
- Kahlil Gibran -

"The world is an inn for travelers."

- Afghan saying -







Along the way important events, emotions and choices from your life will emerge. That is very important. The more sincere and better you can tell your life story, the better you will understand yourself and your relationship with others. To be able to develop yourself further from there.

“Don’t settle for the stories that come your way, develop your own myth.”

- Jalal ad-Din Rumi -







## Rituals

Most of the time you are alone on your way. And maybe you have never been alone for so long. That can be a special task. Personal rituals can provide space and structure to give real attention to yourself. For example:

A dormitory in a pilgrim hostel can be restless. Try to wake up quietly. Close your eyes for another moment, take a few deep breaths, see the new day ahead of you. Think about what you need to make something beautiful out of it and... what you want to give. Then get up.

Every day, take a moment for yourself. Do something you really enjoy doing: tai chi, meditation, singing...

Lead your thoughts while walking. Choose a theme every day, such as:

- a book or a movie,
- a period in your life,
- family, friends, colleagues...







# Companions

I experience support from others and  
the Other and feel stronger





Companions





## **Magic and meetings**

Along your way not only ‘dangers’ lurk. You will also find your allies there. How many pilgrim stories are there about special encounters, great hospitality, and spontaneous help offered unexpectedly?

The major travel stories then tell about ‘magic’ and ‘angels’.

On the Camino you often hear people say: That cannot be just a coincidence...





“The moment you truly commit yourself to something, providence also starts to move. All kinds of things are happening to help you that would never have happened otherwise.”

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe -

“Follow your passion and the universe opens doors where there used to be only walls.”

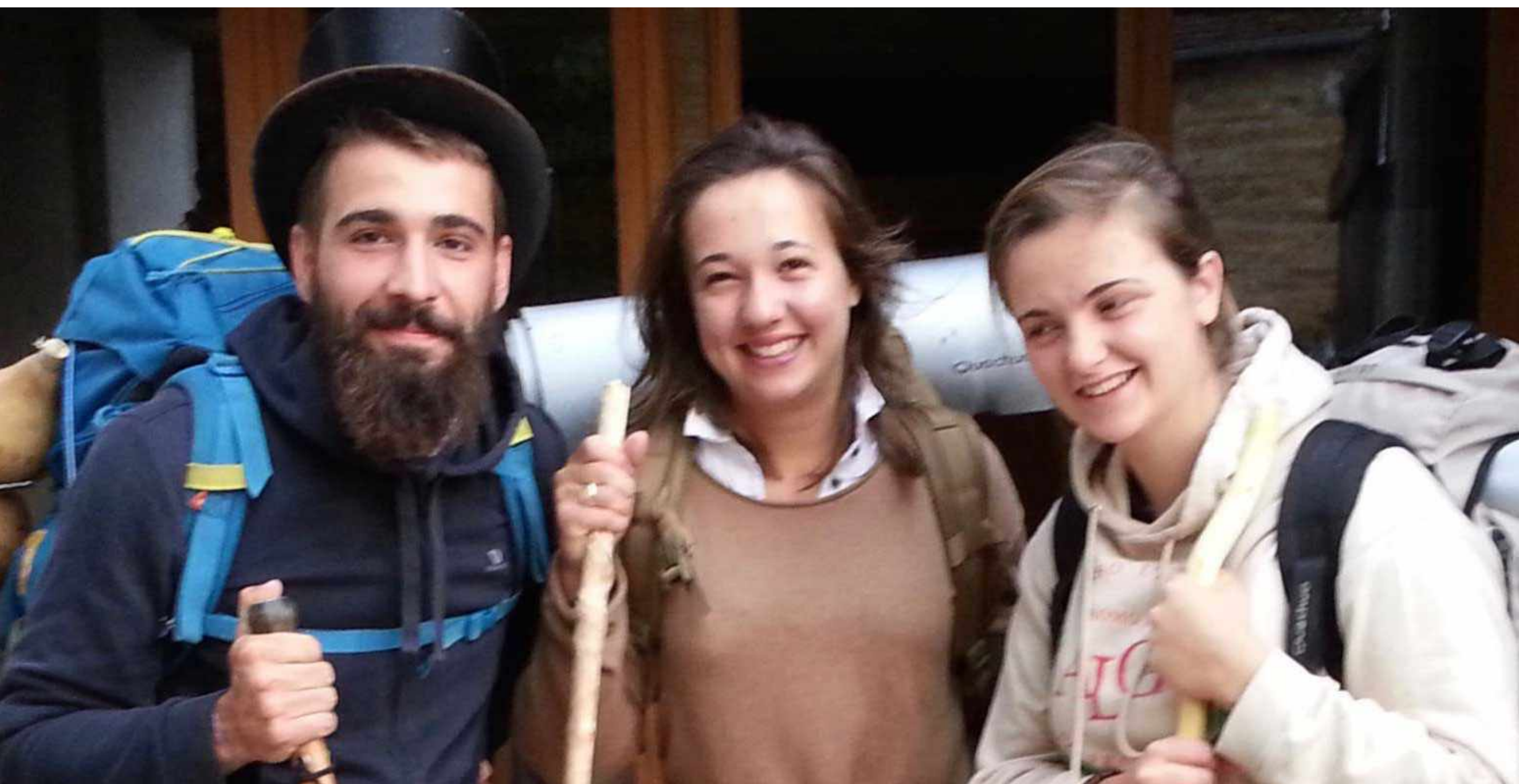
- Joseph Campbell -

And of course you can also ask for help yourself. Many people are only too happy to give it.





On a journey friendships for life can develop. But meeting travelling companions often involves saying goodbye later on. That can be very difficult. Is that because of a deeper connection? Or is it mainly a matter of looking up to having to continue alone? If it's the latter, step over it. You will see that afterwards you are more open than ever to new encounters. Besides... you wanted to go your own way, right?



*Pilgrim André agreed with himself that he would spend a maximum of three days with the same traveling companions. He kept to it, though sometimes with pain and effort.*







# Theme:

## **Mystical experiences**

Whether or not your journey is religiously inspired, along the way you can be more open than usual to ‘mystical’ experiences: moments when you as a person can feel very small and at the same time deeply connected to something that is big and meaningful, even if it is very hard to put into words.

It can happen to you, for example, under an endless starry sky, at a beautiful sunrise, or during meetings with other pilgrims from all over the world. Everyone makes his or her own journey and at the same time there is the connection of like-minded people. And if, with so many, we attribute a special meaning to something, it almost automatically becomes reality.

You can also have a mystical experience when all the puzzle pieces suddenly come together. If you get an in-depth insight in a flash or suddenly find the answer to a question you have been walking around with for a long time.





“We came all the way here to  
explore the moon, and the most  
important thing we discovered was  
earth.”

- Bill Anders, astronaut Apollo 8 -







## Rituals

Being on the road together as pilgrims gives a special dimension to your journey. Walking, sleeping, eating together... Encounters color your experience. Rituals can provide extra depth.

For instance:

- make a drawing for someone whose language you don't speak.
- surprise pilgrims who arrive at the hostel after you with a pot of tea.
- every (other) day share something that concerns you personally with another person.
- ask to be quiet for a moment before meals.
- surprise someone with a small treasure you found along the way (a stone, a flower).
- every day leave something special on your path (a drawing, an arrow from pinecones, a note).







# Arrival

I get a new insight,  
I make a decision





Arrival





## **Reached the core?**

In the metaphor of the journey, your arrival means that you have reached the core (of the labyrinth), that you have found your 'Grail', that you know what is really meaningful ('sacred') to you.

On a pilgrimage, the arrival means above all: reaching the chosen destination. It may be that you arrive there before the questions you left home with have been answered...

For some, the arrival is mainly a disappointment. Suddenly you realize that the journey is over. That it is done with the now familiar, simple life on the road. With travelling day after day, at walking or cycling speed, together with other pilgrims.







Moreover: upon arrival in cities such as Santiago or Rome, ‘ordinary’ life turns out to be in full swing. There you are...

There are pilgrims who decide to leave immediately. Sometimes they return home within a day. Not rarely they regret that later: what did I actually expect?

“Do not expect Santiago to make you rich. Santiago gave you the marvelous journey.”

- inspired by the poem ‘Ithaca’,  
by Constantine Cavafy





“There is no way to happiness;  
happiness is the way.”

- Gautama Buddha -

After arriving at your destination, you cross another threshold. You are going back home. Just like your departure from home, this threshold is an important moment. Allow yourself the time...





# Theme:

## ‘Job’ done?



In religious traditions, the arrival at a sacred place is the highlight of the journey. There, as a believer you come into contact with the divine. After that - for example - pilgrims to Mecca may call themselves ‘Hajji’, and pilgrims to the 88 temples on the Japanese island of Shikoku ‘Henro san’.







What does the arrival mean for non-religious pilgrims? After all, their journey is not centered on the sacred destination in itself.

Many report to a pilgrim bureau to receive a statement that they have walked or cycled at least a certain distance. That in itself can be an achievement, but was that what it was about?

Other pilgrims continue walking or cycling to reach another, non-religious endpoint.





For example: Cape Fisterra or Muxia, on the Atlantic Ocean, about 100 km past Santiago de Compostela. There they conclude their journey - and with it sometimes a stage of their life - and turn around....

The turning point is a moment to dwell on. Your journey is over. Take your time to realize this, to celebrate. Do not be swallowed by waiting family members or the rush to buy a ticket for the return journey.

Previously, it was inevitable: a pilgrim left home and went all the way to the chosen destination and back, usually on foot. Now that destination is for most pilgrims the end point of their journey.

Or so it seems. But nothing is less true. In fact, you are only halfway, at the core of the labyrinth. Now a new challenge awaits: to take your experiences and insights home. You leave the familiar markings of your pilgrimage behind and start setting course yourself, by giving your journey meaning in your everyday life.







# Rituals

If you are following a route to a religious sanctuary, it is important to know which rituals are part of the arrival and whether they are appropriate for you.

And vice versa, it is important to know how to respect the rituals of others.

In many religions, cleaning is an important ritual upon arrival. Muslims wash before entering the mosque. Hindus bathe in holy rivers like the Ganges.





On pilgrim roads to Czestochowa (Poland) an important ritual is to ask forgiveness for what you have not done well along the way. As others go to confession when they arrive at their holy place.

Either way, it's about coming to terms: with yourself, with others, with the Other.

Another important ritual is making a sacrifice, for example to ask for help or as a thanks for it. The sacrifice does not have to be expensive (burning a candle). The sacrifice may be related to the requested help (a healed disabled person sacrifices his or her crutches).

Do you want to come to terms before you arrive?  
Do you want to make an offering upon arrival?

In the past, many pilgrims purchased an insignia symbolizing the sacred place they had visited, as evidence and remembrance. If the insignia had come into contact with the sacred, it also provided protection for the return journey

What do you take home as a 'sacred' symbol of your journey?







# Home coming

I make my insights of meaning  
in my daily life





Home coming





## The most difficult stage?

In the great travel stories, this is the beautiful ending: after long wanderings, the hero(ine) comes home with a treasure, for example a medicinal potion or golden apples that make the eaters immortal. It is proof of a successful journey and above all: something to share with those who stayed at home.

Which 'treasure' do you take home? What made the journey meaningful to you?





In addition to all the personal differences, the answers of many pilgrims have this in common:

- the simple life of the day, with little stuff.
- letting go of certainties: learning to trust that things will work out.
- the importance of encounters, hospitality and connection,
- the ‘magic’: chance events, miracles along the way.

How can you make these and other experiences and insights meaningful for your everyday life, also in relation to others?

*“Your return to everyday life is the test of your pilgrimage.”*

- Jennifer Westwood -

This ‘test’ can be the most difficult stage of your journey. You are now alone. Your fellow pilgrims have also gone home. Moreover, at home daily life simply had its course.





Can you be open to the experiences of those who stayed at home or maybe your special journey gets in the way?

On the other hand: can you put that 'special' into words?

And ... can and do you want to tell what the journey has done to you personally?







# Theme:

## **Closing the circle**

Being on the road as a pilgrim is (usually) not an end in itself. Ultimately it is (also) about finding peace in yourself, coming home to yourself, and thus closing the circle. Hence the division into seven stages. Among other things, this number symbolizes: it is completed, full circle.

“The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

- Thomas Stearns Eliot -

“Our treasure is buried under the hearth of our house.”

- Martin Buber -





For some, their pilgrimage is an experience that changes their lives completely. For others, their journey is a confirmation that they were already on the right track. Still others, along their way, find inspiration for small changes or initiatives.

“Choose one thing, do it attentively and with great care, and you will do a lot of things at once.”

- Thich Nhat Hanh -

These days, many pilgrims set out again and again. This can be a source of inspiration for them every time. Or have modern pilgrim roads - certainly the busiest - become a new ‘comfort zone’? And can you still be a pilgrim (= stranger) there?

Of course everyone answers these questions for themselves, but it seems useful to ask them.







## Rituals

You may have had a goodbye party when you left. Are you throwing a party to celebrate your home coming?

At home, many pilgrims give their journey a special place, for example in the form of a symbol at the front door or a work of art in the house.

If you wrote a letter to yourself before you left, you can open it now. Did your journey gain the meaning you wanted? Or a completely different one?

Tip: write another letter to yourself and describe what the real meaning of your journey was for you, how you want to convert that meaning into your daily life, and who your traveling companions are in doing so. Make an appointment with yourself when to open this letter, for a new look back.





# Colophon

The Meaningful Journey is an initiative of L'Esprit du Chemin:

... a hostel for and by pilgrims, which

... offers hospitality and accommodation

... in a tradition of simplicity, quality and inspiration.

The hostel, opened in 2003 and 100% volunteer work, is located 25 km from Vézelay, in the hamlet of Le Chemin (= The Way!). Read more:

[www.espritduchemin.org](http://www.espritduchemin.org)

You can order a printed version of the inspiration cards from our website.

The cards are cut to size and plastic-coated.

The set of 24 cards, including a wrapper with explanation and tips, comes in a small bag, weighs 74 grams and costs 5 euro (excluding postage).

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A pilgrimage in seven stages

