

Part Three: The cave...

The learning community of the campfire brought us in contact with experts, and that of the watering hole brought us in contact with peers. There is another primordial learning environment of great importance: the cave — where we came in contact with ourselves. Through legends and artifacts we know that, throughout the planet, learners have needed, on occasion, to isolate themselves from others in order to gain special insights. Whether these periods of isolation took place in the forest, or in caves, whether they were the subject of great ritual, or just casual encounters with personal insight, the importance of having time alone with one's thoughts has been known for millennia. The "vision quest" practiced by some indigenous peoples of the Americas represents one of the more formalized renditions of this practice. After a lengthy period of preparation, the learner is led to a cave with nothing but a blanket and is left for two days without food. During this time, through meditation, the learner may have a vision that can shape or guide him or her through the next phase of life. In addition of being a place of learning, the vision quest also becomes a rite of passage. This rite of passage has another interpretation in modern parlance: the passage of knowledge from an externally accepted to an internally held belief. This internal "knowing" involves far more than memorization — it involves true insight. When Carl Jung was asked if he believed in God, he smiled and said, "I don't believe, I know." We all have times in learning any subject when we need to internalize that knowledge. For Newton, it may have been under an apple tree. For Moses it was the wilderness. For us this internalization may take place during a walk in the woods, but is just as likely to take place during a quiet moment (or day, or week) in relative seclusion in a library (another sacred place), office, bedroom, kitchen or den. Learners have long gathered around campfires, watering holes, and have isolated themselves in the seclusion of caves. They have experienced all these learning environments in balance and, if the balance is offset, learning suffered. These three spaces, while important, are not enough. There is one more space that must be considered.