

Among many indigenous peoples of North America, a 16-year-old boy leaves his family and experiences a ritual in which he spends four days and nights alone in a small cave dug into the side of a mountain. He experiences cold, hunger, thirst, fear, and sleeplessness. He has with him several objects of symbolic value. One of these is a pipe. The belief is that the smoke from the pipe goes up to the spirit world and allows power to come down. His hope is to have a vision in which he receives insight and guidance about his future direction in life. At the beginning of the ritual, he is a boy, with a boy's name. At the end, when he comes out of the cave, he is a man, with an adult name, and he knows what his livelihood will be. This ritual, called a vision quest, is an example of a rite of passage. Rites of passage are not found only in indigenous cultures. They are universal, found in all cultures, and include certain birthdays, coming-of-age rituals, weddings, and funerals.