

Encountering Mythology  
by  
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"There's no shortage of wonder -- merely a shortage of a sense of wonder."

G.K. Chesterton

Many people seem unaware of the beauty that fills the world, the spring buds, summer blossoms, and autumn colors. Older children and adults seem to be bored with anything less than the spectacular. It takes the visual effects of "Star Wars" to capture their interest. How rarely do I see anyone moved by simple beauty -- morning dew on a rose, a sunset, a star-filled night.

Several years ago, with the assistance of NASA, I set up a moon-rock display in a shopping mall. Six samples of lunar rock and soil were displayed and described in considerable detail. Along the top of the display case, in large characters, were the words "Moon Rocks." Very few passersby were even willing to pause to look, much less to reflect upon the great achievement that brought those lunar samples a quarter of a million miles back to earth. A generation ago, the technology required to do so was thought to be possible only in the far distant future. Here they were, the fruits of the dreams and efforts of thousands of Americans; yet these specimens were passed by as if they were so much gravel from the parking lot!

Have the people become like anesthetized patients, or drug addicts who require larger and larger "fixes"? Such people may still know the meaning of a thrill, but they remain oblivious to all but the most bizarre circumstances. Young children seem to be thrilled with life, but adults so often lose the joy they felt as children. Something is missing.

Our vision seems to have narrowed; we can no longer experience simple beauty and enjoy the world about us.

Nevertheless, the inspiring times that carry us beyond the limits of ordinary experience make us more human. These private, solitary glimpses are as overwhelming as they are rare. They lift us out of everyday experience, offering insights into the questions of why we are here and what life is all about.

We all need to transcend, but can we encourage this experience? Can anything be done to return to the joy that we experienced as children? To some extent we can. We must be open and receptive, willing to take the time to look deeper into the world. Can we encourage this transcendence in others? This is a question for every educator and every parent. The answer can indicate how we, as a species, will respond to our environment, if aesthetic sensitivity will become a greater part of that which makes us human, and if we will desire to understand every element of the vast universe that surrounds us.

#### *Children and Adults--Some Differences*

Young children are the best learners. Children and adults not only think differently, but also about different things. Children live in a world of wonder and fantasy. How often did you, as a child, imagine that the doll was really a baby, that the bicycle was really a race car? As children, we could create our own worlds by a whim. However, now that we are parents, we believe that one of our roles is to help our children focus on reality, on the practical, day-to-day considerations that must fill every adult life. We often teach our children to suppress their emotions and encourage them not to express internal values. When we help our children to mature, they seem to lose their innate sense of wonder, their spirited and creative imagination by the sixth or seventh grade.

If a child is going to maintain a spark of childhood, his or her environment must kindle and fan the flame of childhood, that sixth sense called wonder. How often have we chastized our children for walking through the mud without realizing that they did so to observe an owl resting in a tree, or for climbing a tree to look into a bird's nest, inadvertently ripping their clothes? Shouldn't we be more concerned with how we educate our children than with some mud and rips? Better still, go with the child and show her or him how to observe safely.

Educational processes that fail to separate the "reckless" from the "good" intent can crush the spirit of adventure in any child. By stifling interest and enthusiasm, we replace

wonder with worries and concerns. One has only to examine the basic drives of adulthood to see that this is so. The average adult worries about security, recognition, and acceptance, among a host of other things. Children live in a fanciful, carefree world; adults confront a world filled with needs and wants -- "reality." A child takes the time to chase a vision, but the adult who does so is criticized for being a dreamer.

Adults often seem to experience spiritual atrophy. But adults still seek the happiness of childhood--the childhood we leave! Adults surround themselves with all the pleasures and conveniences money can buy, yet they are not happy. Some endanger their lives in the hope of finding the same thrills they experienced as children. The capacity to experience thrill need never really be lost; everyone can continue to experience the mystery of their being.

#### *Discovery of a New Self*

Anyone who has lived in a major metropolitan area is familiar with the mass exodus on summer weekends. Millions of citizens flee the "rat race" to the relative serenity of the countryside. Unfortunately, a vast number of these weekend sojourners fail to leave the trappings of modern society behind. They listen to a blaring radio instead of rustling leaves or birds and crickets; they watch television sets instead of radiant sunsets. These items of affluence prevent their owners from appreciating the country.

The fact that so many people flee the city is a sign of hope as well as of need. One needs unhampered quiet in order to experience wonder and awe. This atmosphere is conducive to "respiritualization," a oneness with nature, a feeling of well-being, and a child-like sensitivity. The maintenance of an exuberance for life and effervescent joy requires beauty, focus, and time to reflect and appreciate. Who can be anything but amazed by the diamond-like stars scattered across the black background of the night sky once we look up and out?

Several steps are required to become spiritually transcendent, to experience wonder and amazement at every turn in life. First, a person must remove physically and intellectually the bonds that bind him/her to earth, that keep him/her from aspiring to great heights. If worries cloud the vision, wonders cannot be seen. The mind's eye is much like a window often smudged with dirt: no matter how intense the light, if the glass is dirty, the light can't shine through. A mind-cleansing process is necessary, a washing away of the day-to-day problems that darken the mind's window on the world.

Everyone can be shown how to break the chains and fetters that hold our spirits hostage. Everyone can experience a re-awakening of the thrill of awe, of a sense of wonder. We can actively engage this capacity--intellect--and use it for spiritual transformation. New thought patterns emerge that can lead to a change in personality. The ability to experience awe must remain a part of ourselves. We must engage all our faculties--memory, intellect, and will--to experience continuous awareness of the world. We must be able to remove the self from all the distracting aspects of our surroundings and focus the mind on that which is pleasing, rejecting all that is disturbing. This is the essence of wonder and awe.

#### *Myth as a Tool*

Mythology can be successfully used to retrieve the minds of those who have lost the receptiveness of a child. Myth is inherently interesting; myth provides insight into the physical and spiritual world and has an air of sophistication about it. Myth is not constrained by natural laws. Horses can have wings (Pegasus), snakes can slither into the sky (UK.TANA), and humans can thunder through the heaven (Thor). The fantasy world provokes a childlike response. Myth can provide exercise for an atrophied imagination, and yet not constrain the intellect. Myth deals with many truths. Myth can help us to peer through the surface of things. Myth gives examples of how one might react to a hostile world and allows one to examine the consequences of action. Myth, in all its varied aspects, shows the meaning and the essence of beauty. What better tool than myth can we find for awakening minds that have fallen asleep as a defense from a world filled with trouble?

Mythology has been handed down for ages, and certain myths lend themselves particularly well to our purposes. One of the best suited is that lore dealing with the heavens. The sky is open and available to all; its sheer beauty inspires awe and wonder. Unfortunately, in this epoch we call the "space age," few of us are acquainted with the night sky. We fill night with artificial light, as though the darkness intrudes. The majority of us live in cities where we see few stars. The night is awash with light from billboards, security lamps, and street lights. Many of us have never seen the Milky Way.

The majesty of the night sky belongs to all of us. We share it world around--past, present, and future. These are the stars that the Greeks saw, that Native American Indians saw before exploration and that future generations will see. This is the common thread that holds us all together. What we can learn through stargazing brings us closer to the ancients as

we come to know ourselves, where we come from, where we are, and where we are going.

#### *A New Look at Old Lore*

Our society considers stories as things to put children to sleep. If we learn to take storytelling, in the form of folklore, seriously, we can learn truths, deeper perhaps than the factual knowledge acquired from putting men on the moon. Let us look at the meaning of legends. *Why* the character acted in a certain way is more important than what he or she did.

Legends show that humans have a place and specific roles in nature. By understanding ancient oral tradition, the American Indian knew what it meant to live in communion with all parts of nature. These people never wantonly killed plants or animals, and took only what was needed from the environment. The Native American took a buffalo for its hide and cut trees to make a lodge. Nothing, however, was wasted, and only that which was needed was taken.

The fundamental truths of life passed down through oral tradition; the American Indians and other ancient cultures lived in communion with the natural world. Today we build houses on shifting sands, we cut down forests, fill our skies with pollution, dump chemical wastes onto the landscape -- all without regard to the consequences. We talk ecology but don't live it. Science has not necessarily brought us any closer to nature. We know more about the physical world, but we also drain swamps and strand fish and birds, and choke plants. We have struggled to understand our world, ourselves, and our role in it. But what important insights have we missed by distancing ourselves from oral tradition?

#### *Oral Tradition*

Oral tradition is one of the richest literary forms in human heritage. The aim of oral tradition is to please. What fails to please is deleted and lost through disuse. That which pleases is used time and time again, and fostered generation upon generation. Each tale assists the listener by helping to explain the world and one's duties in it, by providing role models for worthy action, by relating the predictable and thereby helping to establish physical security, by passing on morals and traditions, and by providing an enriching form of entertainment.

Myths are not meaningless or trite. They may be funny, quaint, childlike, inconsistent, impossible, even vulgar. Myths incorporate fancy, evil, crudity, beauty, and good because these traits characterize life and the world as we know it and as the ancients knew it long ago.

Everything need not be explained because hand-in-hand with oral tradition comes the simplicity of a child. Magic and the unexplainable are merely part of the fanciful world of the child. Unusual events are accepted and, indeed, expected. Certain elements appear time and time again, because oral tradition is as much a tool of teaching as it is a form of entertainment.

Myth placed a special emphasis on the sky. It was not unusual to find coyote trying to outwit the sun or to hear of seven maidens floating lightheaded into the sky. Many regular earth-sky relationships are critical to life: the ebb and flow of the seasons, the calendar and phases of the moon, the length of day and night, the locations of the cardinal points, and the timing of seasonal religious events, to name but a few. Other skylore existed to explain events in nature and the meaning of stars, the Milky Way, aurorae, meteors, and comets. It's this lore, in the presence of the awe-inspiring night sky, that lends itself so well to the reawakening of the inner self.

#### *Storytelling*

The *true* sense of adventure is lost when a person merely reads of the events. Oral tradition is still the best way of sharing. Unfortunately, the art of storytelling has disappeared in great measure, and television has replaced the intimacy of bard and listeners. The visual images produced by the television pale in comparison to the visions conjured up by the voice of an able storyteller.

When a gifted storyteller recites in the oral tradition, he or she becomes a window to the past. Listeners peer through this window, and what they see influences their perceptions as to who these long ago people were, and how they lived, loved, and died. The more the storyteller knows about life, past and present, the better a storyteller he or she is. The more a storyteller knows about the characters in the stories the more he or she feels for them and the better he or she will be as a presenter of the people and the purpose of the story.

Visual imagery must flow through the speech of a storyteller. Words must construct a scene, put color into the leaves, project sounds through the air, and make the listener feel the hard, unforgiving rocks under the hero's feet. These pictures, thoughts, sounds should surround the listener; he or

she should have his or her senses filled by the voice of the storyteller. Adventure should fill the air; the words of the narrator should draw scenes and vivid imagery from the very atmosphere. The storyteller relates history from which the young can absorb the rights and wrongs in the experiences of those who lived before. Storytellers draw attention to the significance of the story, and not to the story itself.

#### *The Setting*

In this work-a-day world there are few chances for individuals to break free from the problems that fill our world. The parks, forests and recreational areas of the countryside are where people can and do experience their world without the omnipresent electric glow of day-to-day life. These are the places where they can discover the night. The night is silent. We must listen intently.

The ideal place to relate elements of sky lore is under the stars, the very stars that may have looked down on the legendary hero long ago. Unfortunately, to the uninstructed, a walk through the natural world can be much like a stroll through an art gallery filled with works that are turned to the wall. Sky lore, the mythology of the heavens, can open us to truths deeper than those revealed through the study of science in classrooms.

#### *The Role of the Planetarium*

Perhaps no science has grown so fast as astronomy. Our knowledge of the moon and planets has increased a billion-fold in the past twenty-five years. The Voyagers, Apollos, Mariners and Vikings have visited these distant worlds. The likes of IRAS and HEAO, space satellites, have peered into stellar nurseries and have witnessed the death of stars. The space telescope to be launched in 1986 promises to see beyond the edge of the currently known universe. Astronomy is one of the few fields of scientific endeavor that attempts to regularly inform the public of its latest advances. Lectures, radio shows, and movies created for television attract a fair amount of attention. Today's children are supercharged with space knowledge. Black holes, galaxies, and the red spot of Jupiter are part of everyday language. The stars are no longer seen as immutable, but are known to be born, live out their lives, and die.

What is even more amazing is that in the space age, so

few are familiar with the night skies, its constellations, motions and wanderers. People seem to be ignorant of the reasons for the seasons, the causes of the moon's phases, the names of the bright stars, and the locations of the planets among the stars of the zodiac. However, city dwellers can still escape to the planetarium to learn more about space-time warps and about the stars that appear nightly overhead.

Over a thousand planetariums dot the landscape on this continent, and the number is slowly growing. Facilities range dramatically in size. The largest have domes 70 feet in diameter, others are only 15 or 20 feet across. Some are staffed by as many as fifty, others by as few as one on a part-time basis. A modern planetarium can accurately and impressively portray the night sky. Nevertheless, no one should ever draw the conclusion that the planetarium can replace or reproduce the grandeur that characterizes the night sky. Many people who first visit the planetarium are awe-struck by what they see, but only because they have forgotten, or never known, the wonder of the night sky. The planetarium frequently has fewer stars; the simulated Milky Way is a shadow of the real thing. The planetarium is magnificent only because it reminds us of what truly exists.

The one outstanding but often overlooked aspect of the planetarium is its ability to incorporate mythology. The motions of the sun, moon, planets and stars; the changing of the seasons; the motion of the stars and a host of other sky phenomena can be integrated into the study of myth. The planetarium can also compress time, allowing for observation of sky events that might have taken the ancients months or years to observe. Days can roll by in seconds and months in minutes. In addition, the planetarium sky is available day or night, and clouds are never a problem.

It is unfortunate that most school districts do not have working planetariums. Politically popular "back-to-basics" movements have resulted in the downgrading or elimination of much of the science instruction that helps to develop skills of thinking, observation and prediction, especially in the lower grades. Fortunately, certain science-related experiences can be used to develop language and reading skills, and mythology can play an important role in the process.

Integrating mythology, space science, reading, writing and analytical skills in a single unit plan can be especially conducive to helping children attain a peak learning experience. In the process of uncovering clues, young people exercise their imagination. Students learn that myths are unique products of unique cultures, and that myths contain fundamental moral, religious, and scientific truths. This approach can take advantage of the shorter attention spans now demon-

strated by students and also help reduce the "science anxiety" noted by teachers.

#### *Integrating Mythology into a School Curriculum*

Any teacher hoping to work effectively with mythology should have a wide knowledge of the available materials. The following bibliography will be helpful in making this possible.

Here is a simple unit outline stating concepts, desired levels of understanding, and examples of activities for all ages. There is a mix of general activities and those specifically slanted towards skylore. This outline is by no means exhaustive in scope, but it should serve as a springboard for anyone working to help students understand the nature and purpose of mythology.

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#### DESIRED LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING                      EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

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CONCEPT: Myths reflect the young mind's way of internalizing the unknown.

Myths help explain the nature of the physical world.

Examine several myths for the explanation of "usual" physical phenomena such as aurora, comets, Milky Way, changing of color in autumn leaves.

Attempt to determine which myths may have come about to explain a "peculiar" physical phenomenon.

Examine lore that attempts to explain such characteristics of animals as the baldness of buzzards or the hairless tail of the opossum.

Myths explain the relationships between creator and created.

Examine myths that deal with the interactions between gods and humans. Establish a set of human guidelines as manifest in the myths. Search for duties of creator to created and vice versa.

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CONCEPT: Myths are vehicles for teaching us to carry on traditional ways of life within different cultures.

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Myths explain personal duties and provide role models for appropriate action.

Discuss segments of that lore in which the main character has a duty to perform. Explain the source of that duty and how and why the main character carried it out. Compare the qualities of the main character and the expected mode of behavior in myths told by several different peoples.

Myths contain and pass on important customs and moral truths.

Examine a variety of myths for a moral (such as we know in fables) in each. Determine how they differ or are similar in different cultures.

Examine a variety of myths to determine ceremonial and traditional styles of life. Determine how they differ or are similar in different cultures.

Based upon several connected myths for one group, establish a pattern of moral laws that reveal to you the codes by which these people lived. Do the same regarding ceremonies and style of life.

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CONCEPT: Myths grew out of the basic human need for laughter and for relief from the daily struggle to survive.

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Entertainment is important for quality of life.

Read aloud, role play, act out, or tell a variety of entertaining,

fanciful stories that stretch the imagination and provide recreation from routine.

Examine a variety of myths to classify them according to the following categories: They are entertaining because they:

- (1) are funny
- (2) are full of adventure
- (3) have foolish characters
- (4) describe bizarre situations

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CONCEPT: Myths are the unique products of unique cultures.

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Cultural differences can affect characters and characteristics of each myth.

To understand how this can come about, set up a situation similar to the game "telephone." To one student, present a brief description of a character in a specific setting (have this 2-3 minute incident in writing for later referral and verification). Ask that the "story" be passed on from one student to the next (out of earshot of all but those two people), until the story passes throughout the class. Compare the final version of the story to the one that you started with. As a group, discuss what may have caused the changes (natural tendencies to rephrase things, lack of understanding of what is being said, poor situation for hearing clearly, inattention, etc.)

Examine myths from a variety of widely separated cultures. Note differences induced by era, geography, politics, economic conditions, life styles.

A given event or feature of the world may represent various things to different cultures.

Examine star patterns in their real setting in the night sky or in a planetarium. Create your own patterns based on what

you "see." Compare these patterns with those of others in the group. Why are there different interpretations of the same fixed points?

Draw a pattern of dots on a clear sheet of paper. Make a copy for each student. Ask each student to "connect the dots" in such a way as to create recognizable shapes. Compare the work of each student to that of the others. Why are there differences in what each student created?

Examine the star pattern of the Big Dipper and search out how many peoples around the world viewed it differently. Compare several stories about the Big Dipper. Why are there differences?

A given event or series of events may be recorded in numerous ways.

Rehearse a series of very clear-cut actions and present them, unannounced. Without discussing anything about the reason for the activity, ask students to write individual reports on exactly what each saw and heard. Compare reports with the actual series of actions.

Though cultures and their bodies of mythologies may differ, many stories have common elements, known as universal themes or motifs.

Compare and contrast several different creation stories. Examples might include Hebrew, Greek, American Indian, Norse, Polynesian, African stories.

Myths have clear, concise messages and should be accepted for their common sense meanings.

Examine a myth from two perspectives: (1) as a parable with a single, significant message, and (2) as an allegory where every aspect is viewed as having a hidden meaning. Compare this with lyrics of songs we listen to today (especially rock and country).

Myths should be viewed with humanistic insights.

In the study of myth, it should become evident that *why* something is/was done is more important than *how* it is accomplished (viz., the impossible). Discuss whether the ancients thought the ends justified the means.

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CONCEPT: Modern storytelling is different in technique and form from the oral tradition of the ancients.

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Modern "storytelling" is packaged in a variety of forms.

Examine television programs, novels, poetry, comic books, and songs for elements of storytelling.

"Myth-making" is with us today.

Examine the modern myths that exemplify our culture, as found in comic books, textbooks for young children, advertisement copy, "old wives' tales" that we pass on by word of mouth, campaign speeches of politicians, etc.

Discuss the comment, "...a thing of which legends are made" in the context of modern events. Are there happenings that lend themselves to being told and re-told until they reach legendary proportions? Are there already people and events of this century which are "legends in our own time?" What qualities are needed to be "legendary"?

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CONCEPT: Myths can help us understand how the ancients recorded and viewed relationships between themselves and their world.

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Many different myths can account for a single set of circumstances.

Divide a class into several groups with 5-6 individuals in each. Ask each group to offer a collective explanation for the following

situation: "Each year, just as the leaves begin to turn colors, streaks of light are seen in the night sky. In one particular year, many more streaks of light appear than usual. Shortly thereafter, a tornado levels a nearby village." Compare and analyze the differing "explanations" from each group. Talk about this in terms of how different myths speak to the same kind of natural happening.

Myths can be used to show how ancient man was reliant upon the natural world.

Look for myths that show important earth-sky relationships. Visit a planetarium for a program that shows these aspects.

Examine lore for aspects pertaining to agriculture (seasons), religion (astrology), Law (calendar), commerce (navigation). Why did the ancients revere and fear as they did? How was water in the form of rain both a blessing and a hardship? Find other dual aspects of nature.

Myths relate things of importance as perceived by each cultural group.

Examine modern and ancient constellation-pictures. Note the mythological nature of ancient constellation-pictures and the "realistic" nature of modern ones.

Myths graphically describe the world as seen by ancients with words whereas in the modern world a picture is used to save a thousand words!

Invite a fine storyteller to share with the group. Are pictures, slides, flannel boards, puppets, etc., needed? Can the listeners create private images while the story is woven with words and voice?

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CONCEPT: Myths can help one take a deeper look at the world and appreciate one's position in it.

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Today's individuals tend to be poor listeners, but this can be changed with training.

Present a short anecdote to several students. Ask each to individually relay this story to others. Within a week's time, compare versions of the retold stories to the original. Slowly train the students to be good listeners and good relayers of stories.

We have a number of preconceptions which make it difficult to see the world with the same eyes as did the ancient ones.

Have students draw pictures or describe in words their ideas of how several people in diverse groups look. Compare these drawings or descriptions with what is considered to be accurate for that kind of individual living in that society at that particular time (e.g., North American Indian at the time of the arrival of the first white settlers from Europe.)

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*Suggestions for a Mythology Related Planetarium Program*

A field trip can be an important aid to the classroom mythology unit. It can give meaning and interest to the classroom activities and can be very valuable in bridging the gap between the relatively abstract thinking of the classroom and the first-hand experience of encountering elements of myth. However, the effectiveness of a mythology-related field trip as an instructional tool is directly proportional to the amount and quality of pre-trip preparation. Teachers and planetarium directors make an effective team for a complete program.

A list of activities follows that might be incorporated into a planetarium program. Teachers contemplating a trip to the planetarium should contact its personnel in advance in order to allow preparation for a program best suited to student needs. Most planetarium personnel are delighted to assist enthusiastic teachers and well-prepared students. Qualified personnel can:

- (1) present one or several creation myths;

- (2) allow members of the audience to create their own constellations and point them out;
- (3) point out and examine the Big Dipper in relation to some of the stories surrounding it and its directional uses;
- (4) point out and examine current seasonal patterns and relate associated stories;
- (5) display constellations of the zodiac and tell their stories;
- (6) display motion of the sun through the zodiac and relate stories dealing with seasons, annual migration of sunrise and sunset points, and heliacal risings and settings of stars in relation to pertinent myths;
- (7) display motion and phases of the moon, examine its time keeping character and explain its unusual markings;
- (8) display motion of stars and planets (wandering stars) and relate myths surrounding planetary motions; point out the nearly stationary pole star and non-setting circumpolar constellations;
- (9) demonstrate the effects of latitude variation and relate myths associated with oceanic navigation;
- (10) introduce, evaluate, and tell myths related to: aurorae, meteors, comets, Milky Way, eclipses, Pleiades, Hyades, etc.

Which skylore is actually examined with the aid of the planetarium or observations of the real night sky depends entirely upon the myths one is acquainted with. Should a teacher be unfamiliar with enough skylore, the local planetarium personnel should be able and willing to help. Most planetariums are very familiar with a vast amount of skylore and their experience should be invaluable in choosing appropriate lore for classroom and sky study.

