

**TITLE: "The Two Masks of Nicholas Black Elk"**

an additional study for the manuscript  
Dancing in the Shadowlands with Coyote:  
The Prophetic Rhetoric of Native Dreamers

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## Introduction

It was in August, 1930, when John Neihardt, a "*Wasichu*" (white man), went in search of what he would later perceive to be a fateful meeting with a Lakota holy man. Neihardt expected to find a man to interview who had participated in the Ghost Dance. He found one--and more. An epic poet and storyteller, Neihardt was working to finish the epic poem *The Song of the Messiah*. It would be the completion of five "songs" in his greatest poem, the magnum opus, *A Cycle of the West*. This last song would tell the story of the Ghost Dance, ending the great poem with the massacre at Wounded Knee in the winter of 1890. This scene would symbolize the tragic and ironic consummation of the white man's conquest of the New World. Neihardt believed that Western expansion and the Indian wars formed a national story of epic proportion. He set out to capture this story of "Manifest Destiny" in the manner that Homer and Virgil remembered their histories. In describing the westward movement of the white peoples, he wrote:

The period with which the *Cycle* deals was one of discovery, exploration and settlement--a genuine period, differing in no essential from the other great epic periods that marked the advance of the Indo-European peoples out of Asia and across Europe. It was a time of intense individualism, a time when an old culture was being overcome by that of a powerful people driven by the ancient needs and greeds. For this reason only, the word 'epic' has been used in connection with the *Cycle*; it is properly descriptive of the mood and meaning of the time and of

the material with which I have worked.<sup>1</sup> But the encounter with Nicholas Black Elk temporarily put his epic work on hold.

The sun shone bright when Neihardt and his son, Sigurd, arrived at the red-brick agency office on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. A group of old Indian men watched the small, middle-aged man and his tall son get out of a dusty car with Missouri license plates and enter the station. Neihardt greeted agent Courtwright, and, after polite conversation, asked if he knew of anyone on the reservation who had participated in the "Ghost Dance craze." The agent could not think of anyone, but he questioned the old Indians gathered there. They spoke together in Lakota for a few moments when one of the Indians who spoke English rose and told him about an old man who lived in the hills west of Manderson. His name was Black Elk, "a kind of preacher," and he had been involved not only on the Ghost Dance but also the massacre at Wounded Knee. Neihardt asked if someone would take him out there. One of them, Flying Hawk (or Emil Afraid of Hawk), agreed to guide him to the old one's house and interpret for him since the old preacher did not speak English. The three of them left Pine Ridge for Manderson immediately.<sup>2</sup>

It was a dead-end road that led through the treeless, yellow hills to Black Elk's home--a one room log cabin with weeds growing out of the dirt roof. Two old "long-hairs," who lived in similar cabins in sight of the road, mounted ponies and followed us, curious to know what might be going on yonder. Little else but weather ever happened in that country--other than sun and moon and stars going over--and there was little for the old men to do but wait for yesterday.

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<sup>1</sup>John G. Neihardt, *The Twilight of the Sioux. The Song of the Indian Wars and the Song of the Messiah. A Cycle of the West*. vol.2. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, A Bison Book, 1961), v-vi.

<sup>2</sup>Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 12.

Flying Hawk said he did not think the old man would talk. Just the week before he had refused to talk to a white woman who was writing an article on Crazy Horse. The famous chief was the old man's second cousin. Neihardt responded that he had known Indians for many years, and they had always talked to him. The old men [the long hairs on ponies], who followed the car up the narrow, dust-filled, dead-end road, would see a meeting that day that would come to be considered sacred. It would be the meeting of yesterday, today, and the future, the meeting of tragedy and comedy, the binding of two sticks.<sup>3</sup>

The meeting between Neihardt and Black Elk is important, not only for the literary products that emerged from their joint efforts, but also for the insight into the character of the Lakota holy man and the Native American character in general that this story provides. The Black Elk who graces Neihardt's pages is a simple man of faith and tradition, the romantic tragic noble savage who dominates fully half of the American imagination. But lurking beneath Neihardt's poetic facade was another Black Elk, a man of complex substance and vision. He is more than a tragic figure; he is also a comic archetype, a man of hope and cross-cultural understanding. This other Black Elk, who emerges only with careful critical reading and background research into the cultural foundations of Lakota life and experience, stands as a powerful critique of efforts, whether undertaken by self-styled "friends of the Indian" like Neihardt or more damning critics of Indian savagry, to cast native people in a single preconceived mold. Despite Neihardt's romantic predilections, the Black Elk who emerges from careful study of the poet's words and acts can provide a picture of a sort of "Indianness" that has eluded historians, ethnologists, and others who have sought to tell the Native American story.

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce Peterson, *Dancing in the Shadowlands with Coyote: The Prophetic Rhetoric of Native Dreamers*. (Master Thesis, University of Texas Pan-American, Department of Speech Communication, 1995).

This study will focus on the various efforts by scholars to capture the concept of “Indianness” and the shortcomings modern critics have revealed in these efforts. Then, by employing Kenneth Burke’s models of rhetorical critique to Black Elk’s words and actions, it will show how this remarkable man may personify a new and more convincing sort of Indian, the recognition of whom may allow historians to rise to the challenge posed by even the most pessimistic of today’s commentators.

The chapters that follow will analyze historical and ethnological literature with an eye to placing the problem of “Indianness” into a clear context. The arguments raised by modern critics like Martin will then be used to illustrate the problems inherent in traditional approaches and to sketch the specific limitations which seem to constrain continuing scholarship concerning Native American history. Finally, Black Elk’s story, as revealed in Neihardt’s writings and in a number of lesser-known sources, will be presented as an alternative to the prevailing stereotypical characterization of Indians, suggesting a possible solution to the apparent impasse that Robert F. Berkhofer and others have noted as the main source for stagnation and inertia in Indian scholarship.<sup>4</sup> Along the way, the study will suggest alternative approaches for historians which may help them better to recognize the historical world that was and is Native America.

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<sup>4</sup> See Robert F. Berkhofer, *The White Man’s Indian: images of the American Indian from Columbus to the present*. (New York: Knopf, 1978).

## **Black Elk, Indians, and the Problem of Time**

Before launching into a description of the literature and its perspectives and scapegoats, it is imperative that the terms "traditional" and "progressive" be examined more closely along with their relationship to time. These terms are loaded with value, and although they are necessary to any discussion of American Indians, their limitations must be pointed out. First, the term "traditional" is anachronistic when applied to Lakota religion prior to the Christian and reservation period. "Traditional" religion can only exist when it is being challenged by another religious system. Therefore, to label Lakota religion before the onslaught of reservation Christianity as "traditional" is to project onto it a struggle with Christianity. This of course was not always the case. For example, Columbian Plateau Indians incorporated Christianity into their world prior to the missionary period in a syncretic religious movement known as the "Prophet Dance." Similarly, Black Elk, before his conversion to Catholicism, found no problem incorporating Christianity into his spiritual vision. His role in the Ghost Dance and his Messiah vision are evidence of this syncretism.

Beyond this, "traditional" presupposes some state of being that existed in a time before something else. When is this division in time? When did "traditional" exist? Was it before the advent of Catholicism: before the reservation system, before any kind of Christian influence, before any contact with the white culture, before contact with white diseases? The problem is evident; religion and culture are never static. The Boasian-descriptive-anthropological view of native religion does not describe the process of history. It can only capture a particular moment in time and describe that. Indian religious experience is far too fluid, far too event oriented. This is the weakness of observational science when applied to history. History is, if nothing else, a process, a continuum, something moving. To date, ethnohistory has been the answer to

this problem, but ethnohistory does not adequately deal with the problem of time, at least not mythic time.<sup>5</sup> According to Calvin Martin, mythic time is central to any discussion having to do with native religion.

Martin asserts that Native American culture and Euro-American culture are, "mutually irreconcilable, mutually antagonistic, and mutually unintelligible."<sup>6</sup> Thus, works written by non-Indians about Indian history, even using the methods of ethnohistory, are biased by the authors' particular world view, which in most cases is the anthropocentric western paradigm of history. This western paradigm was also at the root of the church and government's reservation plan of reform. Just as the priests and bureaucratic reformers of the reservation system believed that society was on a progressive-evolutionary path, so also does the whole western paradigm of history. Martin says that this western paradigm "colonizes the Indian mind," and the historian or anthropologist is guilty of "ideological colonization."<sup>7</sup> Just as the Bureau agent, missionary, and priest colonized the Indian, the historian and anthropologist does so also in their writings. A western point of view is projected on to them.

The western paradigm of history is, first of all, anthropocentric. It is a world view embodied in the rhetorical constructs built from Aristotle, St. Augustine, John Calvin, Francis Bacon, Descartes, Newton, Darwin, Marx, and so on to its manifestation in the current scholarship of historians like Francis Jennings, William Cronon, and anthropologist Eric Wolf. Martin accuses these men, and others, of giving the Indian the "business outlook," interpreting Indian-white relationships in economic terms. In *The American Indian and the Problem of*

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<sup>5</sup> Calvin Martin, "Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 9 (January 1978):41-56.; maybe something by Axtell and by Merrill.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin Martin, *The American Indian and the Problem of History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

*History*, Martin essentially says that the western mind is incapable of writing Indian history at all. The book is a series of essays which Martin asked prominent writers of Indian history to write in response to the topic: "The Metaphysics of Writing Indian History," which is also the title of the essay he submitted for the book and circulated among the scholars he asked to write essays.

The Indian lives by listening to "the strains of an older, more ancient muse. . . An older voice, an older song," says Martin. Western historians are analogized as "confidence men" performing a "card trick" of shoehorning the Indian "into the dominant culture's paradigm of reason and logic."<sup>8</sup> The problem of history is that we do not, and from our ivory towers cannot, fully appreciate or understand Indian culture. There are some problems with Martin's approach that are immediately apparent, but they can be dealt with and his viewpoint is provocative.

One of the biggest criticisms of Martin's thesis is his monolithic approach to "Indian" culture, as if it is static, holistic, impermeable, somehow sealed off from interaction. Thomas Biolsi writes that "Martin's proposals for historiography will obscure rather than contribute to our understanding of Native American cultures and societies and the history of Indian-white relations."<sup>9</sup> Biolsi insists that Indian cultures are the products of interaction, that they are dynamic, ever changing. They cannot be viewed as somehow separate from white culture, currently or historically. This is one of the central issues when talking about Nicholas Black Elk. Both he and the religious experience surrounding his visions were the product of interaction. Biolsi is correct in asserting that a stereotypical approach to Indian people in

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<sup>7</sup>Martin. *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, 6 & 9.

<sup>8</sup>Martin, 6 & 12; also: Thomas Biolsi, Book review of *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, in *American Indian Quarterly* v13 n3, (Summer 1989, 261-70), 262.

<sup>9</sup> Biolsi, 266.

particular is problematic. But Martin is not talking about a particular people or person but some area of commonality in world view. If there is some sort of foundational world view in the western tradition that we have inherited from our fathers, then there is also some inherited foundation to a Native American world view.<sup>10</sup> This fundamental way of thinking, this way of perceiving reality, is what Martin is claiming to be "mutually unintelligible" and "irreconcilable." Whether they are "unintelligible," "antagonistic," and "irreconcilable" or not is still in question, but that native worldview and western perception are fundamentally different and that this difference has serious effects on the interaction is not in question.

Father Francis Paul Prucha, the eminent Jesuit priest and Native American scholar, also worries about the apparent divisiveness of Martin's statements. He writes: "I worry that his heavy emphasis on the differences that divide Indians and whites might actually obstruct an understanding of the relations between the two races in historic times and especially in our own age, when cooperation and joint action between Indians and whites are of such great importance."<sup>11</sup> Father Prucha is right to be concerned about our ability to cooperate with one another, but in order to do so, we need to understand each other's perspective. Understanding that we are different is the first step in the direction of trying to view reality from a different perspective than our own. In this respect Martin has begun to delineate the boundary that we must try to step across. Without Martin's "heavy emphasis" something worse might continue--another century of hearing each other's sound but not listening to one another. There is something to be said for the awakening quality of polemic argument. Hopefully, Martin's

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<sup>10</sup> See Åke Hultkrantz, *The Religions of the American Indians*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1979), and Howard L. Harrod, *Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).

criticisms will cause scholars to take another look and listen in a new way to the changing nature of Indian/white cultures and their responses to one another.

The "older voice," the "older song" Martin is speaking of is the mythic voice. For Martin, this is not a primitive voice but a forgotten voice, a voice lost in the western paradigm. His answer is that the exotic items and ideas that came to the Indian from the white world were "folded within the mythic system;" that is to say that they became part of the myth.<sup>12</sup> And myth is not bound by time; it is always present with us. Father Prucha's rather pragmatic approach in his work does not lend itself easily to mythical considerations. Martin's complaint is that the western paradigm is the problem. Even a priest, one who is comfortable and familiar with spiritual substance, is bound by the paradigm. Mythic time is very present in the thinking of many native people today. In a recent class of freshmen and sophomores, the task of writing a book review on *Lakota Woman*<sup>13</sup> by Mary Crow Dog, the story of a young Lakota woman's involvement in the American Indian Movement during the early 1970s, there was one overwhelmingly common response. The majority of the papers included some form of criticism that the story was a little hard to follow. The scenes were "out of time" and "out of sequence." "It was difficult to always know whether you were with Mary in the 1970s or with her ancestors in the past somewhere."<sup>14</sup> Western concepts of progress and its linear, historical consciousness are still somewhat foreign to numerous Native American societies. Indian culture still approaches time differently than western culture, even after centuries of ideological

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<sup>11</sup>Francis Paul Prucha, review of *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, in *American Historical Review* v93 n1,(February 1988): 218.

<sup>12</sup>Martin, *The American Indian*, 197.

<sup>13</sup>Mary Crow Dog and Richard Erdoes, *Lakota Woman*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> American Survey class, Hist. 2314 at the University of Texas-Pan American, Summer Session II, 1996.

colonization.<sup>15</sup> For Martin, the primary difference between Indian views of time and western-culture views is the difference between what he labels as "anthropological time" vs. "biological time." He describes anthropological time as being unable to embrace the true conceptual frame of the mythic, and mythic reality is central to the Indian's world. This is fundamental to all Indian cultures, the myth is alive, it is present with us. Martin tries to describe this presence reality as biological time, an event-oriented mind set. The telling of the mythic story involves the presence of the actors in the story; the mythic is as biological to the Indian as he is himself.

Western perception is in many ways the "antithesis of the traditional mythic reality perceived by the Amerindian." Martin is reminded of the melancholy Columbia River Indian, Chief Broom, in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, a self imposed deaf-mute in an insane asylum ruled over and defined by "Big Nurse." "Historians might entertain the proposition that the world we have generated and defined for the Indian at large is also a kind of insane asylum in which he is more or less spiritually impotent, frustrating his efforts to communicate with either the mythic world or our Western world."<sup>16</sup> In this respect, Martin is much closer to the reality of Indianness than his critics. The Indian has a communication crisis, an identity crisis. The history of the American Indian translates into the people of myth trying to comprehend the people of history while the people of history shoehorn the mythic into their Aristotelian, Judeo-Christian hybrid concept of rationality.

In the concluding essay of *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, Martin reveals the direction his historiography will take him in his next book, *In the Spirit of the Earth*.

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<sup>15</sup> See Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings*. edited and with an introd. by John B. Carroll. Foreword by Stuart Chase. (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology 1956).

<sup>16</sup>Crow Dog, *Lakota Woman*, 32.

This closing essay is entitled, "Epilogue: Time and the American Indian." Calling on Mircea Eliade and Loren Eiseley, Calvin Martin asserts that if we are to "*succeed as a species*, . . . we, in the West, must discard our anthropologically blinded view of the world."<sup>17</sup> The people of myth and the people of history have two entirely distinct orientations of time. The historical is linear and progressive, while the mythic is cyclical, possessing the ability to bring the participant back to the tremendous events that occur at the beginning of time. To experience the mythic events of creation, to participate through ritual the "all important acts of life" revealed by gods and heroes in the archetypes of myth, is to be renewed, given direction, to be, if you will, redeemed. These mythic-redemptive acts make sense out of human activity and behavior. "The aim is thus to arrange one's life so that these sacred acts, these archetypes, can be experienced (conjured up) as frequently as possible," is Martin's claim.<sup>18</sup> He is calling progress back to myth.

Ethnohistory, as revealing as it has been in helping to understand the Indian, is still encased in the anthropological time of Western progressive history. History for Native people is sacred. The mythic narrative is the voice of history, the voice of recollection, the voice of identity. Eliade wrote that people recreate themselves "through the paradox of rite." As a kind of intercessor, the American Indian views himself as a cosmic connection between human, animal, earth, and heavens, a kind of "glue holding it all together," transcending time and restoring the creation order, the original relationship. This description of reality will go a long way in helping to explain Nicholas Black Elk's actions in relationship with John Neihardt. What is disconcerting about Martin is not that he helps us to understand someone like Black Elk a little

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<sup>17</sup>Martin, *The American Indian*, 201. Italics added for emphasis.

<sup>18</sup>Martin, *The American Indian*, 195.

better, it is that he is telling us, we scholars, that "This, is our true and best roles as historians."<sup>19</sup>

Martin would apparently have us assume this role of myth keeper. This is the historiography that Martin attempts to employ in his next book.

*In the Spirit of the Earth*<sup>20</sup> begins with the assertion that the entire concept of Western history is fundamentally flawed. History is an illusionary view of reality, separating humans from nature. When separated from nature, it is impossible to embrace a native view. Not only is an understanding of nativeness impossible, so also is any understanding of "truth" itself. The linear consciousness of Western historical thinking must be abandoned, and an earth centered rhetoric, based in an environment/animal/human, mythical relationship must replace it. This we must do if we are to survive at all. Ironically, he begins his argument in complete agreement with the Biblical precedent that "Words" are the creative substance of all reality. The idea that symbols create reality is basic to both Judeo-Christian and Native American metaphysics. Martin believes that the illusion created in our human consciousness of reality is the product of our word pictures, our language. This of course is nothing new, and a multitude of philosophers, historians, and theologians would agree. The Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday wrote, "A word has power in and of itself..." a word "comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things...And the word is sacred."<sup>21</sup> Martin tentatively agrees. He writes: "Words, says Scott Momaday, are names. Yes, possibly. I like to think of them more as forces that mold the space around me, into which I then pour my sense of reality and my energies..." This "idea is

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<sup>19</sup>Martin, *The American Indian*, 206-207.

<sup>20</sup>Calvin Luther Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time*. (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

<sup>21</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 92

aboriginal," Momaday says.<sup>22</sup> But this idea is not only aboriginal, it is also Judeo-Christian. Here is a place where Martin's argument and Judeo-Christianity might find common ground; "In the beginning was the Word," wrote the Apostle John. This idea is also exactly what Kenneth Burke is talking about when he says symbols are "consubstantial" with reality. Symbols are more than the representation of substance. They are "consubstantial" with the substance, or "of the same substance."<sup>23</sup> In other words, Burke asserts that, words, analogies, metaphors, all symbols, are equal to the substance they portray. Momaday, Martin and Burke are all embracing this rhetorical concept. Martin points to the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer as a model for proper thought. Martin believes that hunter-gatherers possess the rhetorical direction humankind must travel, and walking this road will break "history's hammerlock on our imagination."<sup>24</sup>

The hunter-gatherer societies of the North American continent, which Europeans encountered in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and to a lesser extent, those that remain in the Arctic regions of Alaska and Canada today, are used as referents by Martin to gain an understanding of the Paleolithic mind set. He asserts that they represent the hunter-gatherer world view of the Paleolithic. In this frame of reference, nature and human are one; they are kin. There is no animosity between the two; nature is willing to care for human. The essence of the Paleolithic mindset is "nature conserves me, not I it--this is the underlying ethic."<sup>25</sup> Humankind's problem began with the rhetorical shift from this ethic. The fear of nature crept into the Paleolithic psyche. As the idea that nature would no longer care for humans grew, they began the process of trying to control nature. This move, from faith in nature to fear of nature, is the

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<sup>22</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 2-3.

<sup>23</sup> Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) 16.

<sup>24</sup>The sub-title of chapter five is "Breaking History's Hammerlock on Our Imagination."

<sup>25</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 20

conceptual birth of the Neolithic. Modern man is the product of this change of mind which occurred some 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, a period that covers only about one tenth of "homo's" existence.

Neolithic human is an agrarian human. Mankind created a god to justify subduing and having dominion over the earth. Farming was at first occasional. The switch from hunter-gatherer to farmer was gradual as the fear of lack grew. Within the span of a few thousand years, across the entire planet, the fear grew and the shift to agrarian, larger populations, division of labor, and urbanization took control. Martin uses the eastern woodland bands of North America just prior to Euro-contact as an example of this dynamic which preceded the gathering of food into barns. The inventions of the early Neolithic are: the creation of sky gods as opposed to the human animal relationships of the hunter-gatherer, the invention of linear history rather than cyclical history, and the loss of dialog between humans and animals. This is also, according to Martin, the beginnings of monotheism. He believes that the directive in the book of Genesis, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth,"<sup>26</sup> to be the most destructive utterance of the Neolithic mind. The words of Jesus Christ, "I am the way, the truth, and the life,"<sup>27</sup> also displaced truth from nature. It is humankind's self deception to place truth in the sky with a messiah, awaiting his future return, when truth is here resident in the earth. Beginning with the Neolithic, history has become the story of progress and development whose mission was justified by the gods it invented. Martin writes, "Who, then, is

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<sup>26</sup> Genesis 1:28

<sup>27</sup> John 14:6

this Jehovah? In my opinion, a frank and virulently potent icon of a newly emergent historical consciousness..."<sup>28</sup>

What Martin is describing here may well be true. But if we look at this transition from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic, not from the perspective of a Judeo-Christian progress paradigm, but a mythic viewpoint, one finds a different story. If the story (myth?) in the book of Genesis is approached from the mythic perspective, from a symbolic and metaphorical view, we have thus: The Sky-God comes to earth. Together the "elohyim" (a Hebrew word for god, goddess, or angel, but plural--so "gods") make Adam in "their" own image. Genesis 1:27 reads, then, in this manner: "So Elohyim (Gods) created man (Adam) in his (their) own image, in the image of God(s) created he him; male and female created he them (them at this time is Adam; Eve is in him about to be taken out). Adam, the earth-god (having been given the earth by his/her creator the plural Sky-God) walks in harmony and peace (in the cool of the day) with the Sky-God who gave it to him. Adam is also at peace with the animals and can talk with them as he or they please; he searches among them for a help-mate, a friend, one to walk along side him and one is not found (as yet, her; female is still in him/her-Adam).

This is a very different story than the Protestant Sunday school version, but it is what the Hebrew text says. Adam and Eve are gatherers in a garden, mother earth cares for them (from whose bosom they came). Then a separation comes to them through an animal and their disobedience. Ashamed they cover their guilt with flimsy fig leaves. When they are confronted about their fear and nakedness they point to another as the scapegoat. "The woman you gave me. . ." blames Adam. "The serpent . . ." Eve says, as she points her finger at the animal. Now they are separated from the Sky-God's peace, they must toil in the earth and become growers,

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<sup>28</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 59

until the Sky-God's promise of redemption comes (in the fullness of time or a progression begins). So, as Adam points his fingers at his wife, and Eve at the animal, and they transfer their blame, the Sky-God kills an animal and covers their nakedness with the animal's skin. Now, it is evident here that a mythic view of this story tells us much the same story Calvin Martin has told in his analysis of the transformation from Paleolithic to Neolithic time. The story changes the view of time, from an eternal (non-linear) perspective in the garden, to a progressive (linear) perspective wrestling with the earth until the fullness of time. Myth gives an interesting, if not enlightening, perspective to this ancient biblical story. The mythic and symbolic story tells us deep truths about humanness and our relationship to sky and earth that could not be seen if we, as Darrow and Bryan<sup>29</sup> did, argue about the rationality of the story.

There is a strong criticism brought against Martin's views of the wrongness of the Neolithic and the rightness of the Paleolithic from Gerard Reed. But Reed did not look at this monumental transition in human history and thought from the mythic perspective as we have just done. Reed asserts that Martin is projecting his bias into the story through reminiscing about his father's attempts to "hack out a kind of heavenly geography" from a portion of woodland along the Ottawa river. The portion of *In the Spirit of the Earth* where Martin uses his childhood experience as an analogy of this progressive ideal caused Reed to remark, "Martin's spiritual odyssey seems anchored in a deep conflict with his father."<sup>30</sup> On the surface this bias seems abundantly evident throughout the whole discourse. Martin claims his father wanted to "Make

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<sup>29</sup>The Scopes Trial, where Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan argued the validity of the Bible as accurate, inerrant history.

<sup>30</sup>Gerard Reed, review of *In the Spirit of the Earth*, in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* v18 n2, (Spring 1994): 239.

the place look Protestant."<sup>31</sup> This, for Martin, is representative of Neolithic man's bent toward progress and his father was also a victim of the western paradigm. Reed sees this as a deep-seated resentment in Martin toward his father. Whether this is true or not, Martin's analogy seems a good one. An anger with Christianity and his father, if it does exist as Reed supposes, does not detract from Martin's argument about the dangers and foolishness of progress as an ideology. This same concept of the foolishness of progress has been dealt with very effectively by Jacques Ellul in *The Technological Society*<sup>32</sup> and more recently in *The Technological Bluff*.<sup>33</sup> Yet, Ellul is an eminent Christian theologian and he takes an ecological position very close to Martin's. If Reed's accusation of a bias against Protestant Christianity is accurate about Martin, it is an unnecessary bias, and it does not change his ecological point. Nevertheless, I do not believe that Martin's attack on Protestant Christianity is an attack against religion as much as it is an attack against the pragmatic, and legalistic nature of western European-based Christianity. If it is the tragic nature of a law-based Christianity which sees progress as redemption that Martin is biased against, then Reed's claim that Martin is just angry with the Christian religion and his father is misdirected.

Reed calls the philosophical underpinning of the "truth" Martin espouses nothing more than "a simplistic, reductionist materialism."<sup>34</sup> It is true that spirit, for Martin, exists in biology. Biological, evolutionary science becomes an ideology for Martin. In the *Technological Bluff*, Ellul warns against this philosophic deism of science. He writes: "Science, thanks to ideology, has now become divine as never before. This is precisely the greatest danger. Kaplan put it well

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<sup>31</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 111

<sup>32</sup>Jacques Ellul. *The Technological Society*. (New York: Knopf, 1964).

<sup>33</sup>Jacques Ellul. *The Technological Bluff*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990).

when he said that the danger is not so much the biologizing of ideology as the ideologizing of biology."<sup>35</sup> Martin may be standing on highly questionable philosophic ground here. There is a difference between attributing spirit to biology and making biology spiritual. Yet, it is possible that he is simply saying that the two, biology and spirit, are not separate from one another. This, I think, a philosopher like Ellul would agree with. Nevertheless, putting Martin's "faith" aside, his criticisms of the western historical perspective are enlightening. The idea that the "creation" (or biology to use Martin's term) has spirit is fundamental to the native world view.

Using Ralph Waldo Emerson's metaphor from his 1841 essay *History*, Martin calls western history a "shallow village tale."<sup>36</sup> The chronicle which has been told is simply an exercise in "hubris," an establishing of the sacred myth of progress. He charges historians to embrace a deeper view, to expand the narrative in both space and time. Man must view himself as part of nature not as its lord and protector, and historians must extend the time frame of history beyond what has been traditionally narrated. We must relearn what the Paleolithic hunter-gatherer knew and experienced. As to how this transformation should be accomplished and what tools might be employed to bring it about, Martin is vague. His response to the statement, "But we can't go back," is "But we never left--never left our *true, real* context."<sup>37</sup> We are still on this planet. We have only "left" in our "fevered imagination." We left through fear. Martin would have us return to faith by the corrective process of the word--the Paleolithic Word that the "hunter-gatherers knew to the core of their being."<sup>38</sup> Apparently it is up to new historians, who are

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<sup>34</sup>Reed, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 241.

<sup>35</sup>Reed, 184. citing Kaplan from A. Jacquard, ed. *Les Scientifiques parlent*. (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

<sup>36</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 122

<sup>37</sup>Italics added by this author.

<sup>38</sup>Martin, *In the Spirit of the Earth*, 130

willing to use artists, poets and spirit-beings as sources, to speak into existence a new ancient rhetoric. Martin is right in pointing to rhetoric as the vehicle of change. But as historians, forsaking seven thousand years of tradition completely is a radical call. Is the alternative Calvin Martin has presented history? Possibly; as historians we are always involved in the work of rhetoric, but rhetoric demands examination of the evidence. *In the Spirit of the Earth* crumbles under its own rhetorical weight in a neo-Aristotelian critique. But, then, this is what Martin is espousing-- a total rejection of such a world view.

Whose perspective of history should be utilized, then, when talking about Black Elk? What is the accepted paradigm to be? When we, as historians, adhere to the myth of scientific objectivity, which is the foundational principle of our discipline as a social science, is it our Achilles heel when approaching Native American study as Martin claims? I believe it is, especially when dealing with religious history. Reinhold Niebuhr, the eminent theologian, has expressed the nature of modern science in this manner:

The modern age is variously described as an age of science or as an age of reason. Confidence in the power of reason, and particularly in the inductive and empirical strategy of the rational faculty, is indeed a characteristic of our age...Modern culture is distinguished by its confidence, both in the growing power of reason and in its capacity, when rightly disciplined, to assure the development of every human power and virtue.<sup>39</sup>

As Niebuhr so clearly points out, this dominant idea in western culture is more than just a confidence in reason, but it transcends to a faith in history. This is again, the philosophical foundation of the Indian Agent, the priest, and the historians describing them. They all have faith in the redemptive quality of progressive history. Science and reason have become avenues to redemption. The modern age is based on the concept that humankind, through the evolution

of history, is progressing toward utopia by the faculty of reason. This also is a foundation stone of the "western paradigm" that Martin is so opposed to. This idea is the product of the underlying myth of western civilization, "progress." And modern "professional" history has been largely the work of the "Progressive" school, which means that it carries a significant load of ideological baggage.<sup>40</sup> Beyond progressivism is the polemic critique of "postmodern relativism" which asks, "Is there any discourse that embraces all other discourses about human identity? Or are all traditions closed to each other simply because there is no common grounding or transcendent reality available for all traditions to point toward in the midst of their collective discourse?"<sup>41</sup> The problem for American Indian history is clear, if there is no common ground Martin is correct; we cannot write a history. As it has by now become self-evident, there is no problem with native history as long as it consists of primitive savagism being replaced by progressive civilization. As long as history is progressing, the scientific, rational perspective justifies itself quite nicely. But if we are going to accept the concept that native culture is not barbaric, primitive, or savage, and place it on an even plane with western "civilization," then the native world view must be equally embraced and observed. The problem, of course, as we have seen, is that the native world view (at least that of central and western North American natives) does not place its faith in the progress of history through reason; it has faith in the power of myth, metaphor, and symbolic ritual.

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<sup>39</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History: A Comparison of Christian and Modern Views of History*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 2-3

<sup>40</sup> John Higham, *Writing American history; essays on modern scholarship*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Pearson and Bruce Peterson, "Masks of Tradition: Comedy and Tragedy in the life of Nicholas Black Elk." (paper presented at the Philosophic Collaborations Conference, Southern Illinois University, March 1, 1996).

Howard Harrod's study of Northwestern Plains Indians demonstrates that although there were a number of differing world views among the Plains cultures in 1850, they have deep similarities. Native understanding of the world is "shaped by deeply shared symbolic forms sustained by ritual processes."<sup>42</sup> Harrod's method of study was to describe the shared meanings which constituted the Plains Indian's world views. He found that through the process of ritual, "deeply shared symbols gave shape to native experience." He found the Plains Indian world view to be highly metaphorical and symbolic. Symbolic ritual is central to understanding the world, and it is the vehicle by which Natives acquire knowledge. His description of native symbolism delineates the difference between native and western world views.

Symbols breach the everyday world, and they have been seen to function in both individual experience and in the collective experience of the group. The cultural flavor of social worlds has been understood to arise out of the way various possibilities for experience were ordered. *That is, cultures differ in the value they assign to dreaming, imagining, and religious experience, as compared with thinking, practical action, and working.*<sup>43</sup>

If this is the criteria by which cultures differ, Indian and western European cultures are at opposite poles just as Martin insists. How then can a cohesive paradigm for the study of the history of these polemic cultures be found? Ethnohistory has been unable to agree on one. I insist that bringing Kenneth Burke's symbolic interaction paradigms into the discussion is a logical step toward an answer.

In order to help transcend the incommensurability of traditions and attempt to reach beyond the either/or propositions of "metaphysical biology" and "postmodern relativism," I propose to use Kenneth Burke's "dramaturgical perspective" of rhetorical critique as a frame of reference to

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<sup>42</sup>Howard L. Harrod. *Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality*. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 157

view the discourse between Nicholas Black Elk and John Neihardt. Burke asserts that a definition of man as a rational animal is inadequate. For Burke, the "common ground" of humanness does not rest in the individual but in the human's ability to use symbols. Therefore, traditional critiques of human discourse, which focus on the speaker/rhetor, limit understanding. On the other hand, the relativist's experiential focus examines the effects of the discourse on the critic/receiver. It asks the question: What is a discourse/tradition doing to the one involved in it? Rather than focusing on the individual speaker or the experience of the receiver, Kenneth Burke proposes that the locus should be on their interaction, their "symbolic interaction." Like MacIntyre, Burke asserts that it is the narrative that defines what it means to be human. If we are to critique the narrative, to judge between traditions and the differing discourses of traditions, a rhetorical critique that explores the discourse itself must be employed.

Burke proposes the "dramaturgical perspective," which simply assumes that "all the world is a stage." Dramatism could be said to be an attempt bridge the gap between science and the humanities. The human animal is more than the sum of his/her parts. Oedipus and Ahab tell us as much as the laboratory about what humanness is. How the so-called "social sciences" fit in the gap between science and the humanities is the subject of endless debate. Dramatism is offered as a paradigm that bridges the gap. Theater becomes the root metaphor for a "contemporary image of man." One description of this perspective says, "Dramaturgical thinking is not a linear sequential explanation of human behavior based on mechanistic assumptions as most positivistic social science is. Its point of departure is Kenneth Burke's profound assertion that the difference between a thing and a person is that one merely moves

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<sup>43</sup>Harrod, 158, italics added for emphasis.

whereas the other acts, and therefore the language of mechanism is inapplicable to the study of human selves."<sup>44</sup> The human being is an actor on the stage of history.

Behavior then, is expressed in "dramatistic terms." Man is an actor, and his conduct is the action he performs in the drama of living, in order to achieve what he deems the "good life." The most straight forward definition of dramaturgy is that it is the study of how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives through this process of symbol sharing.<sup>45</sup> What makes man different from other creatures is that he engages in symbol using, "symbolic interaction." Therefore, Burke's definition of man is revealed in this poem:

Man is  
 the *symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal*  
*inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)*  
 separated from his natural condition by instruments of his own making  
*goaded by the spirit of hierarchy (or moved by a sense of order)*  
 and rotten with perfection.<sup>46</sup>

As a symbol user and misuser, identification takes place in the interaction. The identification with symbols transfers the substance of the symbols. Burke calls this the "consubstantiality" of substance. Symbols are more than the representation of substance. They are "consustantial" with the substance, or "of the same substance." Burke describes this process of symbolic identification in this manner: A is not identical to B, but A can be identified with B. "Here are ambiguities of substance. In being identified with B, A is 'substantially one' with a person other

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<sup>44</sup>Dennis Brissett and Charles Edgley ed. *Life as Theater: A dramaturgical Sourcebook*, 2nd edition. (New York: Aldine de Gruyer, 1990), 13.

<sup>45</sup>Brissett and Edgley, 2.

<sup>46</sup> Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 16

than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique . . . Rhetoric deals with the ways people are at odds with one another; identification implies division . . . Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall."<sup>47</sup>

Beyond the uniqueness of symbol using and misusing, Burke asserts that within the use of symbols man has invented the negative and has then been moralized by it. Unlike other symbols that have some kind of substantial referent, the negative only exists symbolically. "It is not" has no specific referent. The negative is a specifically linguistic invention. Additionally, man is moralized by this symbol; "it is not" is translated into "thou shalt not." This implies the ideas of "obedience" or "disobedience" and translates into "order"/law which implies "disorder"/lawless. Between the slopes of order and disorder exists the "ACT of will," where "will is viewed as derivable from the idea of an act." From the ideas of will follow the ideas of sacrifice and grace, "the mortification of some desires." Sacrifice is intrinsic to order, and substitution is intrinsic to the symbol user. Hence, vicarious sacrifice as the way to the ultimate reward, "the Good Life."

This vicarious sacrifice is what is known as scapegoating. The symbol using/misusing human transfers guilt symbolically to the scapegoat. The symbol carries the substance, or to use Burke's terminology, the symbol is consubstantial with the substance. The scapegoat, then, is not a survival from earlier eras, but a device natural to, and inherent to language. Burke writes: "Dramatism, as so conceived, asks not how the sacrificial motives revealed in the institutions of magic and religion might be eliminated in a scientific culture, but what new forms they take."<sup>48</sup> The dramaturgical perspective then, has humankind playing symbolic roles on the stage of

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<sup>47</sup>Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1969), 21&23.

<sup>48</sup>Kenneth Burke. "Dramatism." *Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society*, Ed. James E. Combs & Michael W. Mansfield. (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1976), 14-15.

history with their script being the symbolic interaction of language (verbal and nonverbal), and the play is basically a tragedy, a story with a scapegoat which supplies a catharsis.

This theory of being is also addressed in Erving Goffman's conception of "Impression Management." Being is constructed by doing; for without a presentation of self, a self is not possible. Therefore, individuality is basically a social rather than a psychological phenomenon.<sup>49</sup> Goffman used the word "face" to describe the socially approved identity that an actor presents. This "face" defines the actor by transferring the substance of the symbols into his or her being. Each of us becomes a kind of playwright, writing the role we play, as well as an actor in the play.<sup>50</sup> Or in other words, "theater occurs when one or more human beings, isolated in time and/or space, present themselves to another or others . . . Theater is a glutton. It will swallow any kind of material and experience that can be turned into performance."<sup>51</sup> Burke's claim is that this play that we are all acting in defines us while we write and act out our scripts. And the script that we are acting out, at least in the western tradition, is a tragedy. This need of a scapegoat (vicarious victimage) is a form of "antithesis." Combined with substitution, it provides identification in terms of an enemy shared in common. He describes this tragic world view, this historical play, in the following poem:

"Here are the steps  
In the Iron Law of History  
That welds Order and Sacrifice  
Order leads to Guilt  
(for who can keep commandments!)

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<sup>49</sup>Burke. "Dramatism," 15.

<sup>50</sup>Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>51</sup>Bernard Beckerman, "Definitions -- Theater." *Drama in Life: The Uses of Communication in Society*, Ed. James E. Combs & Michael W. Mansfield. (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1976), 7.

Guilt needs Redemption  
 (for who would not be cleaned!)  
 Redemption needs Redeemer  
 (which is to say a victim!)  
 Order  
 Through Guilt  
 To Victimize  
 (hence: Cult of Kill)."<sup>52</sup>

The tragic frame of reference, then, is the foundation of being in western society, and Burke believes this to be the central temptation that must be somehow corrected. He writes: "A dramatic view of human motives thus culminates in the ironic admonition that perversions of the sacrificial principle (purgation by scapegoat, congregation by segregation) are the constant temptation of human societies, whose orders are built by a kind of animal exceptionally adept in the ways of symbolic action."<sup>53</sup> Burke's answer to this ironic dilemma is to change the play of history from a tragedy to a comedy. Since humans are the writers of the script, as well as the actors, we can begin to change the script; we can begin to improvise, begin to play a comedy. Burke asserts that viewing life as a comedy rather than a tragedy should enable people "to be observers of themselves, while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness, but maximum consciousness. One would "transcend" himself by noting his own foibles. He would provide a rationale for locating the irrational and the non-rational."<sup>54</sup>

This of course is no small request. Nevertheless, a "comic corrective" to a tragic theme is an intriguing idea. Carol Burnette once said, "Comedy is only tragedy plus time." This

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<sup>52</sup>Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 4-5.

<sup>53</sup>Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 16.

<sup>54</sup>Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History* 3rd edition, (Berkeley: University of California Press 1937), 171.

statement has a western linear picture of history inherent in it. Yet, if one was to subject this idea to a cyclical view of history, the result would be the antithesis. If comedy corrects tragedy, would not an overly comic theme need a tragic corrective? It is this paradoxical relationship between the comic and tragic discourse of traditions that we wish to employ as we explore the question of whether, and to what extent, it is possible for those who live within one tradition to actually be able to "hear" what another tradition has to say.

Humanness has two faces. There would appear to be a perspective here that could supply common ground to absolutists and relativists. If the essence of humanness is carried in the discourse, in the symbolic interaction, then the statement: "In the beginning was the word," has a clear appeal to rationality. Not only so, but the idea that we play a role in directing the script of the narrative is also evident, even if the absolutists insists that the director not tamper with the "words." Burke's methods of rhetorical criticism provide a foundation by which we might examine the symbolic interaction of two very different traditions.

Where does all this musing bring us with Nicholas Black Elk then? Can Black Elk be viewed as some sort of bridge between a hunter-gather, earth-centered, mythic reality and a sower, sky-centered, progress to harvest time reality? Possibly. I propose that the historical figure of Nicholas Black Elk presents to us an example of the ability to straddle traditions; that he was authentically conversant with two traditions that would be identified by those invested in this contemporary philosophical issue as incommensurate.

In order to set the proper stage for this historic play, I propose that we attempt to view the whole of western history from a mythic point of view beginning from the event that Martin claims is the beginning of an incorrect way of thinking, the Neolithic revolution. This should prove to be most revealing: to look at this most ancient struggle from a mythic rather than a

progressive view, to examine symbolically and metaphorically what the progressive mind would call the struggle of the savage climbing up to the state of civilization. To use Emerson's language, let us tell this "shallow village tale" from a mythic sensibility. The one thing it will do is describe the roots of the world view that I think John Neihardt brought to the meeting with Nicholas Black Elk. Neihardt had a mythic-epic-romantic view of history which must be explored before going on to any analysis of what went on in the production of the book, *Black Elk Speaks*. In order, then, to find some kind of philosophical common ground, I propose that a kind of symbolic/metaphorical view of the progress of the myth of "noble savage" be explored. This underlying myth of the American frontier is central to the thought of John G. Neihardt, the Romantic-epic poet.

## The Savage Within: Noble, Barbarian, or Civil?

*He had been in the mountains for almost five months, but the snow finally drove him down. Civilization awaited him. He passed some elk he had been hunting weeks before. They were escaping the snow too. He didn't like hunters much. For the most part he despised the modern, deluded, counterfeit woodsman he had been baby-sitting in this pristine but savage land. A month ago they had all finally returned to their urban lairs, taking with them their cellular phones and high-powered, high-dollar rifles. The solitary, high country days he had remained after the last urbanites departed had almost erased their technological stain from his soul, but the prospect of civilization for the winter made his haunted eyes wary, his nerves on edge. He would not speak of it, but this last month alone had not been easy this year. One toe still had no feeling from being frost bit; he hoped he wouldn't lose it. His mule, Two-Step, had taken her last steps up there; he began to eat her back straps on the fifth day of the storm. She was a good friend, both in life and death.*

*He looked at his hands: cracked, knuckles scraped, the fine granite dust of the mountain trails looked as if it was permanently ground into the lines of his skin. He knew it would take weeks of city life for the black stains to disappear, but disappear they would. Relishing the pain for a moment, he sucked air across the open nerve of the tooth he had chipped climbing down the perilous cliff face to reach the river. The pain he would experience over the next few months would be of a different sort. A winter spent being courteous to strangers who would try to engage him in conversation would be harder to endure than an open nerve. To them he would appear to be skittish, full of bitter wisdom and secret understandings. His first night back in the city he had trouble sleeping. He slipped out into the back yard, lay on his back in the dew permeated grass, and fell asleep weeping for his old friend Two-Step.<sup>55</sup>*

Since the earliest of times, this struggle between the "savage" and the "civilized" has sought for some kind of synthesis, some kind of integration. It not only eludes us as individuals, it is elusive to our society as a whole. The myth of this "noble savage" and his struggle to come

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<sup>55</sup>Story adapted from "Answering the Howl: Men as Lone Wolves," by Stephen Harrigan. *The New York Times Magazine*, April 14, 1991, v140, p22, col 3.

to grips with the "progress" of humankind embraces the struggle from innocence to experience. It fills American literature, our art, our politics, our geography, and for many of us, even our daily lives. But this struggle reaches much farther back into the western psyche than America and the "frontier."

The noble savage is one of our most enduring myths; one whose beginnings stretch back beyond the ideals of the Romanticism of western European history. When the first hunter-gatherers bent to the hoe, their dagger pricked them at the belt. When the great city, wall, and temple builder of Uruk, Gilgamesh, ventured into the dark forests to fight evil and find cedar timber to build his civilized temples, he encountered the wild man, Enkidu. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest legends known to humankind. Fragments of the earliest versions date back to the invention of writing itself, about 3000 B.C.<sup>56</sup> Enkidu the wild man is ignorant of cultivation, innocent of humans. He lives with beasts, and is covered with matted hair. Gilgamesh sends a Love-priestess to the wild to trap him. After Enkidu is "glutted on her richness," his friends the beasts will no longer have anything to do with him. "Seeing him the gazelles scattered, wheeling: the beasts of the wilderness fled from his body."<sup>57</sup> He is tainted with the scent of urban corruption. He returns to the woman who teaches him to shave, adorn clothing, and eat bread, instead of sucking the milk of wild animals. Enkidu becomes a shepherd. One day, he wrestles with Gilgamesh in the city and defeats him. The two become beloved companions.

So the epic myth begins. The savage is tamed, civilized, domesticated, and in his challenge of authority, he learns to accept and even cherish the authority of the king. Gilgamesh decides to attack and destroy the shadowed source of evil brutishness, the dark force of the forest. Humbaba is the giant of the cedar forest, and he stands in the way of obtaining

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<sup>56</sup> John Gardner and John Maier, trans. and ed. *Gilgamesh: Translated from the Sîn-leqi-unninni version*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Gardner, 77.

cedarwood for the building of cities and temples. Enkidu is afraid for his friend and master and protests because he knows Humbaba and the vastness of his forest. Humbaba is "like a fire, like a storm, like the very jaws of death." Yet, moved by his destiny, Gilgamesh believes that the men of the city are filled with despair and its source is Humbaba. The darkness of the forest is to blame; the savage Humbaba is the scapegoat; he stands in the way of redemption. They must have cedar to build temples to the sky-gods in order to rise above earthly despair.

At the entrance to the forest the two heroes find a perfect cedar gate. Enkidu cannot find it within himself to destroy the beautiful passage. He is torn between his opposing desires. Caught at the boundary of savage and civilization, he stands at the point where the wild meets the tame. His hand falters as he pushes the portal open, but Gilgamesh encourages him to persevere. "They drew near the [gate]-bolt, the two of them together. Brought to silence they stood: they entered the forest."<sup>58</sup> There, in the chthonic forest, they engaged the giant. Humbaba is one with the wood, an elemental spirit charged by the gods as keeper of the dark forest. Enkidu is terrified, but Gilgamesh animates his spirit saying, "Take your ax in your hand and attack. He who leaves the fight unfinished is not at peace." When Gilgamesh cuts a cedar, Humbaba blows out fire to consume him, but when the seventh cedar is cut and its branches bound, the giant is delivered, "like a noble wild bull roped on the mountain, a warrior whose elbows are bound together." The giant begs for mercy. He says he is like Enkidu now, a tamed force of nature. He will help to cut the forest and will build Gilgamesh a great palace of cedarwood. But Enkidu is jealous, and the two heroes hack the giant into pieces. But instead of containing evil, the gods are enraged and evil is loosed. They are now able to cut the forest, making way for fields and cities, but the angry gods give the giant's fire to the barbarians who will use it against civilization. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the primary legends of humankind's change from

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<sup>58</sup> Gardner, 130.

hunter-gatherer to city dweller, the primal examination of the relationship between savage and city, the root myth of the origins of "civilization."<sup>59</sup>

The word savage has been corrupted from its original meaning "wooded" to meaning "bestial." In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the wild and the savage are perceived by Gilgamesh as evil enemies, but the gods seem to disagree. Yet, even though the forest is ominous, Gilgamesh is drawn to the savage Enkidu. There is a sublime attraction to that which must be overcome in the name of progress.

The Bible provides us with a different perspective on this dialectic. This ancient story is a struggle from innocence to experience, from the harmony of the garden to the toil of a life of works. After the fall in the Garden of Eden, Adam is cursed to become a farmer. He and Eve's gathering days are ended. The earth will no longer give of its bounty freely after the fall, but Adam is told "cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."<sup>60</sup> Here, the transformation to the cultivated world of the Neolithic has a very different quality than in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Man does not progress to farming but falls from his friendship with Sky-God and earth. The giving relationship is ended, and the struggle begins. Not only is man separated from his estate, Sky-God is separated from his earth. He had given the earth to Adam, and Adam had given it away for the knowledge of good and evil, a law to live by. Sky-God is divorced from his wife, Mother Earth, if you will, and their children must struggle to survive. There are myths that earth was taken from the side of the sky; one wonders about the nature of the rite performed in the story on Adam that produced Eve. But this is the nature of myth. Myth is speculative, imprecise, full of

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<sup>59</sup>Andrew Sinclair. *The Naked Savage*. (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1991) 5-7.

<sup>60</sup>*King James Bible*, Genesis 3:17-19.

patterns in the chaos, and certainly unscientific. Mythic narratives are open to the teller's interpretation.

Regardless of which of these mythical views one takes -- the move from Paleolithic to Neolithic as progress or fall -- these archetypes speak to us of the opposition, the struggle between animals and trees and man. Hunter is set against farmer. Anarchy opposes authority; instinct vs. self control; natural man is pitted against civic man. These battles appear in the literature and philosophy of western civilization throughout our history, and the moral condition of the savage vs. the civil has always been a problem. Aristotle declared that an arrogant, gifted man, who could not find a way to fit into the civil life should live outside the city "like a god or a wild beast." Both the superior and the inferior are better off outside the city gate.<sup>61</sup> The root metaphors of our civilization do not clearly delineate for us the moral quality of those who dwell on the other side of the gate in that realm of the wilderness. The savage is out there. The barbarian is out there. The sublime God is out there.

Moses met God in the wilderness and took the children of Israel out of Egypt to wander there until cleansed to enter the promised land. The scapegoat had the sins of Israel placed upon him by the laying on of the hands of the High Priest and was then sent into the wilderness. The prophets found God there, and John the Baptist announced the coming of the messiah as a "Voice in the Wilderness." When Jesus began his public work he came from a battle with Satan in the wilderness ready to speak the Words of God. He was crucified by the powers of state and religion outside the gate of Jerusalem. The Romans were following their custom of displaying their power as an example on the road to the city, but they did not know that they also

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<sup>61</sup>Sinclair, 13.

consummated the law of the scapegoat sent outside the city gate.<sup>62</sup> The paradoxical nature of the wilderness as a harsh, dry place of temptation and trial, and in contrast, a cleansing place of refuge and refreshing has been a constant presence in the Judeo-Christian mind. Roderick Nash contends that by the time William Bradford stepped off the Mayflower, he stepped into a “hideous and desolate wilderness” starting a tradition of “repugnance” toward wilderness.<sup>63</sup> But wilderness in America would not remain so, The Romantic notions of Europe would overcome the initial aversion of the Puritans.

It is said that Tacitus invented the myth of the "noble savage" in response to the decadence and urban iniquity of Rome. He praised the barbarian peoples who could decimate a Roman legion. For the Roman historian, the Germans represented the virtues that had once been Rome's. Frugal living, courage, and chastity described the Germans. These are the qualities that once had given Rome the power to break through the Apennines to conquer Italy. The Germans were a plain, strong and lusty people, committed to family and tribe, compassionate with slaves, free to work their own plots of land and build their own houses. As long as the barbarian was far away in the North, this picture was gratifying when mirrored against the squalor and decadence of the Roman city, but when the noble savage swept down out of his forests and glens to sack Rome, he became a barbarian horde, devoid of culture, pagan in worship, and brutal in nature. It would not be until Europe began to discover "new worlds" that the nobility of the savage would return to Europe.

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<sup>62</sup>Leviticus 16:8-10 & Hebrews 13:11-13.

<sup>63</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982 [1967]), 23-24.

Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, and John Locke inspired the advance of reason over myth in the European mind. Organized thought, rationality, and the increase of knowledge became the road of truth during the Enlightenment. Pagan and Christian myth had been married in the monasteries of the middle ages, and enlightened thinkers cried out to be delivered from this gothic, feudal darkness. Bacon saw the jealous monastic suspicion of free thought as the chief obstacle to enlightenment. He wrote:

"I hear the former sort say that knowledge is of those things which are to be accepted of with great limitation and caution; that the aspiring to overmuch knowledge was the original temptation and sin whereupon ensued the fall of man; that knowledge hath in it somewhat of the serpent, and therefore where it entereth into a man it makes him swell; . . .that experience demonstrates how learned men have been arch-heretics, how learned times have been inclined to atheism, and how our contemplation of second causes doth derogate from our dependence on God, who is the first cause."<sup>64</sup>

This kind of pious fear of excessive knowledge and intelligence would never be crushed by Baconian taxonomies, Descartes' clockwork, or Locke's empiricism. The Enlightenment of reason and rationality would have continual foes in the hearts of a great many Europeans. The schism between Europe's heart and head grew, but the heart would not surrender so easily.

The gentle and tender mystic, Saint Francis, distrusted books and increasing knowledge. He saw them as sources of worldly pride. His intimate relationship with the animals and nature, combined with his distrust of scientific enlightenment, paved the way for the ideals of Romanticism that would arise in Europe in response to the excesses of economic individualism. The noble savage became the antithesis of the rational metamorphosis that continued from Bacon's and Descartes' organized mechanical world to Locke's and Adam Smith's individual economics. The noble savage would be the Romantic's ideal of innocence, and for many, Europe had lost its purity, both at home and abroad.

The simple cottage of feudal Europe began to disappear in the face of the urban growth of the nineteenth-century. A new age had come to Europe. It was a transformation as powerful as the move from Paleolithic to Neolithic. The innocence lost in the metamorphosis from hunter-gatherer to farmer was no more traumatic than the pains of the birth of industrialization. Liberal and scientific ideology had produced a Europe who had lost her innocence somewhere along the way. Eden was again left behind. Rousseau had said in his *Social Contract* that "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." The discoveries of the Enlightenment had produced a materialistic, increasingly industrialized European society in desperate need of a cathartic redemption. The Romantic era of European history is a search for the innocence of childhood again. Utopia could only be found, not in progress, but in regress. Humankind must return to simpler and purer times, but the question of what was pure and what was simple was still being contended. Now there were two Edens -- the first savage and the second pastoral. No one contended with the goodness of the pastoral life. It was clearly edenistic in the eyes of Europe, but the first Eden was not yet redeemed. The Enlightenment view of the savage corresponded more to the ideology of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, rather than to the Garden of Eden.

At the beginning of the formation of reason, Thomas Hobbes had defined the natural state of man as savage in its most negative sense. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes held that the natural state of humans is constant war with each other; their lives are "nasty, brutish, and short." A society can arise only by convention and common agreement. From self-interest, people make peace and obtain security inasmuch as they delegate total power to the state, and in Hobbes day this was ultimately the monarch. The monarch's decrees were absolute in all areas of life, including the

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<sup>64</sup>Hoxie Neale Fairchild. *The Noble Savage: A Study in Romantic Naturalism*. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961) 7-8.

family and religion. Hobbes concluded that rebellion against the state breaks society's basic contract and is punishable by whatever penalty the monarch may exact in order to protect his or her subjects from a return to the original barbaric state of nature.<sup>65</sup> But unlike Hobbes' century, in the nineteenth century, the monarch was no longer supreme. The state was now the benevolent and moral middle class. In order for the social contract to be valid, it must protect the individual rights of the enlightened, rational class. These rights, Locke claimed, naturally belonged to free men. The state's purpose was not to protect society from humans' brutish nature, rather the social contract's purpose was to protect the individual human's freedom from the excess of the state. The question of the human's natural morality was not as important as the fact that the human's natural state is free and innocent. It is the influence of society that corrupts, and individuals must be protected from that corruption. From this idea, Jean-Jacques Rousseau brought nobility back to the savage.

Rousseau must be understood in terms of his relationship to both the eighteenth-century enlightenment and to his influence on nineteenth-century Romanticism. To begin with, he shared the later Enlightenment view that society perverted natural man. Rousseau viewed natural man as the "noble savage" who lived harmoniously with nature, free from selfishness, want, possessiveness, and jealousy. He argued that the restoration of the arts and sciences had not contributed to the purification of humankind but to its corruption. He also believed that social relationships of all kinds were based on an inequality that resulted from an unnatural distribution of power and wealth. Rousseau was utterly opposed to the materialism and determinism of the emerging middle class. He did not believe that human motivation could be explained by the desire to maximize pleasure and to minimize pain but believed that an inner life of feeling and

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<sup>65</sup>*Hobbes Page*, (<http://swift.eng.ox.ac.uk/jdr/hobbes.html>, Mon, 04 Mar 1996 23:13:54 -0600 (CST)).

sentiment was central to the human animal. He contrasts self-love, which is naturally good, to pride, which requires a ghastly comparison with another. Science and art did not lead automatically to progress, and the notion that progress led to the ultimate perfection of humankind was foolish.<sup>66</sup>

For Rousseau, primitive man was just an animal, "weaker than some, and less agile than others; but taking him all round, the most advantageously disposed of any." What makes humans different than the rest of the animals is their ability to alter their condition through the exercise of the intellect. But this, which should be man's greatest glory, is paradoxically his downfall. Rousseau says of this "faculty of self-improvement" that "it would be melancholy, were we forced to admit that this distinctive and almost unlimited faculty, is the source of all human misfortune; that it is this faculty, which, successively producing in different ages his discoveries and errors, his vices and his virtues, makes him at length a tyrant both over himself and over nature." However, humans in their natural state have few temptations to alter the innocence of their situation. They have never experienced the pleasures of civilization, and therefore, have never felt the need for them. They have not had to pay any price for progress, and so are not miserable, primitive, and brutal as Hobbes would have them, but innocent having no idea of wickedness.<sup>67</sup> This philosophy is an intriguing mix of Gilgamesh and Adam. He embraces the paradox of the two ideals. The "faculty of self improvement," which Gilgamesh accepted so completely in his quest to "make a name for himself, is wedded in a struggle with Adam's original state free of temptation. The Romantic ideal of returning to simpler and purer

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<sup>66</sup>Rousseau's Page, (<http://swift.eng.ox.ac.uk/jdr/rousseau.html>, Mon, 04 Mar 1996 23:19:03 -0600 (CST)).

<sup>67</sup>Hoxie, 121-123.

times was reborn. Either Eden, the savage or the pastoral, was better than the excess corruption of capitalistic technology.

The Romantic ideals of nineteenth-century Europe are rooted in this ideal of natural man and a desire to return to innocence. But the noble savage of the Romantics was not Rousseau's good-natured, amoral brute, simply satisfied with "food, female, and sleep" and free from the burdens of progress. He was more, because he was not only an intellectual construction; he could be found in Africa, Australia, the islands of the oceans, but most vividly in the European's imagination and experience, in America. For the three hundred years that Enlightenment thinkers mused away concerning the nature of the natural state of man, European travelers were discovering, befriending, converting, and exploiting the men and women they considered to be savages. But intellectual constructions and "New World" realities were very different things. Utopian dreams and expectations met harsh constraints in the New Worlds, and the outcomes of their choices in dealing with those restraints produced an unique noble savage that would one day become the ideal American that would one day produce a man like Neihardt.

For the most part, the first waves of Spaniards to wash ashore in the Americas probably saw the Indians of the forest in the same light as they saw the characters of the wild men of the woods from their medieval village plays. These characters from the morality plays were dressed in leaves and carried clubs. They represented the rude and brutish life of the forests that had been cleared to make the pastoral fields and villages of Europe. Religious images of the forest were equated with demons, imps, and the evil forces of Satan. The medieval Christian view of the forest was more akin to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* than it was to their own Book's Eden. Views of the savage Indian, or anything from the forest, having value were few. Sir Thomas Moore's Utopians relegated hunting to their slaves. "For they count hunting the lowest, the vilest and

most abject part of butchery . . . the hunter seeketh nothing but pleasure of the silly beast's slaughter and murder." Montaigne too, like the great body of Europe, saw humans as being above all other creatures, but he also saw that man's duty was to be humane, "not only to such animals as possess life, but even to trees and plants."<sup>68</sup> But these more moderate views of the savage were not the norm. The medieval explorer brought the myth of Gilgamesh with him to the New World. The Indian was a beast, either to destroy as a devil or, at best, utilize for labor. There were a few voices raised calling for, at least, the show of compassion one would extend to any life, but they were hard to hear in the New World.

By the time of the dispute between Bartolomé Las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda over the official Spanish policy concerning the native inhabitants of the New World, it was too late for the Indians of the future Mexico. Every Spanish adventurer from some village in Castille was transformed into a caballero the moment he set foot on the American continent. He was elevated above the status of mere toil, and all he could do with his hands amounted to the administration of war. Like a crusading knight, his loot was his due. Whatever he had been in Spain made no matter; in America, he was a warrior lord supported by his brown peasants and serfs. The Las Casa-Sepúlveda debate amounted to little more than justification after the crime. Thirteen years after Pope Paul III issued the bull, *Sublimus Deus*, in 1537, which stated that the Indians were not to be made into slaves but should be treated as possible converts, the argument still persisted. Bartolomé argued for the peaceful conversion of the Indians while Sepúlveda consigned the Indian to repression and exploitation by reason of Aristotle and the Christian fathers. Sepúlveda's argument came from the perspective of a learned philosopher who stayed in Spain to ponder great questions. He knew next to nothing about Indians, never having traveled

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<sup>68</sup>Sinclair, 31-32.

to the New World. His case was based on European philosophies, the idea of the beastly savage. Las Casas on the other hand, had a passion for the Indian out of experience. He had been a traveler and missionary among them for fifty years.<sup>69</sup> Throughout the history of the Americas, those who lived among the savages would have a very different perspective than those that lived on the civilized side of the cedarwood gate to the forest.

Native Americans played four primary roles in the minds of early European colonists. First, they were enemies to be overcome and evicted from the land. This role would prove to be a central viewpoint of Euro-Americans even to the end of the nineteenth century. They were also viewed as potential converts to Christianity, souls to be saved and civilized. The Spanish saw them as porters and miners, a convenient labor force. When the French came to America they also needed a labor force for the fur trade, but the fur traders lived with the natives. The French married into Indian families in order to build the relationships necessary for extracting the bounty of the forest. It is from the French that the positive connotations of the word "savage" come, simply meaning "from the wood or forest." But the fourth role of the native, that of interpreter of the land, was to the greatest extent exploited by the British. The first English colonists would have died quickly without the help of the savage Indian. There is no doubt that the Indian's first role in the eyes of the English was enemy, but when their attempts at survival had failed, the Indian became foremost a wise farmer, a good hunter, and an invaluable teacher.

The English colonists were not supported by a strong monarchy like Spain or France. Joint stock companies of rising middle class merchants possessed economic power in Britain that rivaled and would soon exceed the resources of the king. The liberal ideas of John Locke were to take deep root in the psyche of the English colonists. The individualism that grew in

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<sup>69</sup>ibid., 32-33.

America, alongside the influence of the Indian on the lifestyle of the colonist, produced a people suited to the idea of a noble savage. Indians like Squanto and Pochahantus could quickly take on the mythic qualities of the noble savage. The colonists needed noble savages in order to survive, and needed, they appeared. But even if the colonists needed the wisdom of the Indian, they still wanted him and her to remain outside the gate, and they did not look favorably on Europeans who ventured outside the gates of civilization. The Pilgrims and Puritans of New England fought the wilderness by denying it. They stayed inside their stockades that separated them from the Satanic influences of the savage, decadent forest. But the exclusive and defensive religion of the Puritans and their stout stockades could not keep these children of Adam from the savage within themselves. The greatest evil among the Pilgrims was the devil in their midst, best represented by Morton and his maypole. Morton brought in immigrant European degenerates and Indian women into his community to celebrate midsummer orgies, dubbing himself as the Lord of Misrule. The scene of a white man outdoing the lewdness and barbarianism of the Indian was too much for the Pilgrims. Not only was Morton decadent, he sold arms to the Indians. Eventually he was deported back to England, but even from the beginning, the barbarian displayed within the European settler to the New World appeared as great as the savageness of the Indian. This startling realization would become the catalyst of the development of the idea that the noble savage was one who possessed the best qualities of both worlds, savage and civil.<sup>70</sup>

Thomas Jefferson was a pastoral romantic, and noble Indian savages were potential pastoral converts. The industrial exploitation of Europe was the primary evil that America

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Drinnon, *Facing West : the Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire Building*. (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

needed to avoid. America could become the agricultural producer of the world with her unlimited resources and land. The boundary between savage and civil was steadily moving toward the Mississippi River, and the boundary was clearly marked by the transition from field to forest. For Jefferson, the incorruptible yeoman farmer was the ideal citizen. Noble in character, individual, married to the land he could not be contaminated by avarice and greed. Americans were a self-conscious people. They prided themselves on their Republican government, not bound to a king or the masses, bound only to the pursuit of liberty and justice for all. Americans believed they were destined to lead humanity into the will of God's progress. Their unlimited natural resources coupled with their limited government would enable the individual to lead the advance of a righteous civilization. Their ideas of government had not only come from the philosophers of Europe but also from the examples of the people who first inhabited the land they now farmed.<sup>71</sup> Franklin had viewed the Iroquoian Confederacy as a model for the Articles of Confederation. The ideal countryside was the prosperous, expanding agrarian economy dotted with small villages with churches and schools--a pastoral family farmland connected by canals, steamboats, and rails. The spirit of a secular Christianity was becoming the driving force behind the nation's "Manifest Destiny," a religion that embraced the Franklinian habits of temperance, frugality, order and industry all working together for the reform and regard of the community. The primary player on this expanding frontier stage of romantic pastoral bliss was the frontiersman, the independent, incorruptible pioneer. Like the mythic Gilgamesh, the ones who dwelt at the gate of the savage forest had become heroes in nineteenth-century Europe and America. These mythic men and women despised the excesses

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<sup>71</sup> Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic : Political Economy in Jeffersonian America*. (Chapel Hill : For the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va. by the University of North Carolina Press,

of civil society, reveled in hard work, and would become the backbone of the new American society.

Into this Euro-American archetype stepped Natty Bumppo. No figure in literature embraces the character of what a truly noble savage should be like those in the Leatherstocking tales. In these fictions, James Fenimore Cooper brought the culmination of three hundred years of European political thought and religious belief and married it to the sublime terror and pristine majesty of the savage, unspoiled wilderness. These tales are credited as one of the most important portrayals of the clash between the red and white cultures. The whole world's image of the "Red Man" owes more to the *Last of the Mohicans* than any other single text.<sup>72</sup> Accurate or not, Uncas and Magua are our faces of noble and savage, and the relationship between Chingachgook and Hawkeye is the epitome of the kind of bond that "should" exist between civil and savage. It is the model of the kind of multiculturalism that is the ideal of this republic, this product of Europe and wildness. Yet, regardless of the noble appeal of this relationship, the inevitable tragedy is that the savage is doomed to destruction. It is no wonder that when the close of the nineteenth century was upon us, Frederick Jackson Turner chose the tragic epiphany of the end of the frontier as the defining characteristic of American history.

The bond that is portrayed between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook is interracial, asexual, often wordless, but even more poignant, alienated from both races. I believe it is this alienation that is the central issue in the concept of the noble savage. We love these two men even when we recognize the stereotypical nature of the story. We love these two men even when we realize that the story is filled with Cooper's own prejudices, with society's prejudices. We

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1980).

love them because the stereotypes themselves illustrate and contain important elements of truth. Natty Bumppo is one of the true epic heroes of our time. Leatherstocking is no bastion of virtue. He is human, with prejudices and failings. He can be verbose and vain, but his fervent love of all that is natural, all that is honorable, gives him a credibility, an ethos, that makes his criticisms of society's hypocrisies seem utterly valid. Cooper's summary of him is that he is a "character that possessed little of civilization but its highest principles."<sup>73</sup> Whatever these highest principles are, the western mind has projected them onto the noble savage since the time of the Roman Empire.

Leatherstocking is a man on the cultural margin. His imagined identity is a conglomeration of his moral courage, his biracial clothing, his weather reddened skin, his ability to assimilate the best qualities of two races, two diametrically opposed cultures. His inner integrity and ability to see God in the trees, to hear Him in the winds, to bow down to His will in the cathedral of the forest enraptures the heart of the Liberal American. Yet, the tragedy of the annihilation of an entire people is inevitable in this epic noble picture, and one wonders how nobility can come from such a sin. The removal and destruction of the Indian cultures was continually justified by the argument that, because of the high ideals and tender mercies of Christianity, the native was better off knowing these values rather than remaining in his fallen barbaric state. The only truly noble savage was the one who adhered to the higher principles of Christian mercy and love. The barbarian still lived by the old law of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. How much force was justified when the red man refused to live by this new law? The constraints of the New World forced the frontiersman to revert to the law of the barbarian,

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<sup>72</sup>John McWilliams. *The Last of the Mohicans: Civil Savagery and Savage Civility*. (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995) 12.

kill or be killed. If the Christian frontiersman is unwilling to shoot first and ask questions later, can he survive living at the gate of the savage forest? The answer of course, from the first Spanish ethical debates to the close of Turner's frontier was "no," he had to shoot. Like Gilgamesh and Enkidu, even though when they wrestled Enkidu won the match, just touching civilization separated him from the wild, and changed, he submitted to the greater force, Gilgamesh. The red man was as much a part of Leatherstocking as anything else, he was savage, he was wild, but the greater power of those "higher principles" dominated him in his deepest heart whether he knew it or not, and we admire him for it. It is an alarming paradox that has not only plagued the American dream from its inception, it is a paradox that has plagued what we call civilization from its inception. To think that we can resolve such a primal paradox may be the utmost of vanity. Nevertheless, American romantics have continued to try, and no one more so than the twentieth-century epic American poet laureate, John G. Neihardt. For, Neihardt saw this noble spirit in the American west, and not only in the frontier did he see it, he saw it in himself, and he saw it in Nicholas Black Elk. Black Elk is Leatherstocking "through the looking glass," and as the Mohichans lived on in Bumppo, Black Elk and his vision would live on through Neihardt.

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<sup>73</sup>McWilliams, 22.

## Flaming Rainbow's "Wakinyan"

Neihardt and Black Elk were joined by their commitment to the ideals of nobility which they shared on a spirit or mystical level. Yet, for Black Elk at least, spirit and practicality were one place. Walter Principe defined spirituality as, "the way in which a person understands and lives within his or her historical context that aspect of his or her religion, philosophy or ethic that is viewed as the loftiest, the noblest, the most calculated to lead to the fullness of the ideal or perfection being sought." This definition of "spirituality" was posted on a Native American literature, internet discussion list. Ron Grimes submitted this definition, along with others, in response to the topic, "What does it mean to be spiritual?" Concerning this particular definition, Mr. Grimes notes, "The problem with Principe's definition is that it supposes all people organize their values hierarchically and that one such value is the highest and most normative. I suspect this way of imagining the organization of human consciousness is left over from patriarchally inspired monotheism, so it does not serve the cross-cultural, inter-religious purpose that Principe hopes his definition will serve."<sup>74</sup> Ironically, of the twelve definitions on Grimes' e-mail post, this one described the famous spirituality of John Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk the best. And, these two men collaborated "cross-culturally" for an "inter-religious purpose" more successfully than any other two men in the history of America and maybe even the world. Neihardt and Black Elk worked together to bring to pass a lofty, noble ideal, which they believed they held in common, from their own "historical context," "religion," and "philosophy." These men labored to take what was "noble" from both their cultures and deliver it to the other's

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<sup>74</sup>Ronald L. Grimes ed., "Spirituality: Definitions," (to: Nativelit-L@Cornell.edu, from: <rgrimes@mach1.wlu.ca>, Mon 25 Mar 1996 14:21:18 -0500 (EST)) Grimes cites: Walter Principe, "Toward Defining Spirituality," *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 12.2 (1983) 136.

culture, and to a great extent, succeeded in communicating nobility to the savage in both their cultures.

Like Leatherstocking, Both men lived on the cultural margin of their societies. Both were born in the last of the “frontier” years. They saw the geographic boundary of the frontier disappear. They watched the gate between savage and civil torn down, and they worked to preserve for future generations the nobility of both savage and civil that they had seen at that boundary. They did not do this for some esoteric, anthropological purpose, but for the purpose of healing the nation, to see the tree of life flower again. Yet, as noble as this purpose sounds, both Black Elk and Neihardt were practical men. They both lived off the fruits of their craft. The poet and the holy man’s visions were the spiritual and physical bounty in their lives.

John Neihardt has become our premiere Western-American poet. Much of his poetry is epic in the Homeric tradition; all of it is romantic and celebrates the Western-American historical experience. Vine Deloria Jr., the prolific Lakota writer, describes Neihardt saying, "No one has attempted to recapitulate the western historical experience in quite such comprehensive and ambitious terms as he. Nor have many American poets approached his power to invoke a historical period, his vision in discerning the hidden strengths and weaknesses of the human personality, and his wisdom in placing human activities within the larger stage of nature. In the sweep of his epic poetry, virtues often transcend their incarnate form and speak to us of eternal qualities which we like to imagine we all possess in our best moments."<sup>75</sup> These "eternal qualities" that we humans somehow mythically know the noble savage possesses, the tragic poet from middle-of-the-road Nebraska and Missouri spent his life trying to communicate.

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<sup>75</sup>Vine Deloria Jr. ed. *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*. (Salt Lake City & Chicago: Howie Brothers, 1984), 1.

Neihardt was born in Sharpsburg, Illinois, on January 8, 1881, just short of a decade before the Massacre at Wounded Knee that supposedly ended the Indian Wars he wrote so vividly about. His father deserted the family, and his mother took his brothers, sisters and him to live on his uncle's farm in Wayne, Nebraska. From there he lived a very ordinary life, but as he grew, his understanding of life was extraordinary. At the age of eleven, in the summer of 1892, during a serious bout of fever, he had an out-of-the-body experience, a hallucination, or if you will, a vision. He felt himself flying through space, in another reality, a place so complete and real to him that afterward he dedicated his life to writing poetry, specifically, to reciting the story of western settlement.<sup>76</sup> He portrayed the world of the Indian and the frontier with a beauty and power that embodied the best of both cultures and the worst of both cultures.

He was a tragic poet. Carl Starkloff said, "He showed to his European-American compatriots the terrible things they were doing to the natives of the land they were invading. Thus Neihardt was a tragedian describing for white Americans the death of their own innocence as noble seekers for truth and freedom. This loss of innocence was reflected in the grief and agony of those who suffered at their hands--not without incredibly harsh and often brilliantly conceived wars of resistance--as they trampled out the vintage of Manifest Destiny."<sup>77</sup> The range and scope of his writings are wide and deep. He wrote poetry and prose, short stories, short poems and epic poems, books, plays, articles, essays, reviews, and literary criticism. His work centered on two themes: the exploration and settlement of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains and the universal mysticism he saw in the religions of the world. His longest work is

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<sup>76</sup>John Thomas Richards. *Rawhide Laureate: John G. Neihardt, A Selected Bibliography*. (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1983)xi., and Deloria, 1.

<sup>77</sup>Carl J. Starkloff, "Renewing the Sacred Hoop." *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*. Vine Deloria Jr. ed. (Salt Lake City & Chicago: Howie Brothers, 1984) 159.

*A Cycle of the West*,<sup>78</sup> the series of poetic, epic "Songs" which he was working to complete when he met Nicholas Black Elk.

Neihardt thought that Americans needed to be reminded of their heritage, but not the history book kind. He deplored the elitist attitudes of academicians, especially those who would quench the spirit. In poetry he came to despise free verse and considered Whitman one of the worst influences on American literature. He believed Americans had become "hopelessly provincial" in their sense of time. He found George Edward Woodberry's theories of "race memory" and Carl Jung's discussion of the "collective consciousness" centrally important as a historian-poet. Poetry, for Neihardt, was song, a musical utterance that should reveal the deepest truths of the human heart. He once wrote, "I have undertaken to preserve a great heroic race-mood which might otherwise be lost. Someone must do this, and I seem to be the one."<sup>79</sup>

When he spoke of his methods of writing, he spoke of an "Otherness," and said, "it's glorious to suspect that something stronger than oneself is on the job." He did thorough research for his "songs." When *A Cycle of the West* was published in 1949, it included: "The Song of Three Friends" (1919), "The Song of Hugh Glass" (1915), "The Song of Jed Smith" (1941), "The Song of the Indian Wars" (1925), and "The Song of the Messiah" (1935). His work was often cited by historians, and Frederick Jackson Turner sent two students to talk to him once, telling them, "The poet is the best historian."<sup>80</sup> His most creative years were spent in Branson, Missouri, in the Ozark Mountains. There he could work in greater seclusion. His income was always sparse. He received some remuneration for writing a few book reviews, but the bulk of

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<sup>78</sup>John G. Neihart. *A Cycle of the West*. (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

<sup>79</sup>Lucile F. Aly. *John G. Neihardt*. (Boise, Idaho: Boise State University Press, 1976), 11.

<sup>80</sup>Aly, 12-13.

his income came from speaking tours which he would schedule when funds were depleted. His family lived a simple existence in Branson where he built a studio for his wife Mona, a sculptor who had studied under Rodin in Paris before they were married. As talented and sophisticated as she was, she dedicated her life to her family and her husband.

They led a "country existence in the Ozarks, and collected a family of animals: a Jersey Cow, a goat, horses, and an assortment of small pets. His garden was a not only the main source of food, it was a spiritual place for him and a source of great joy. Of his time there he wrote, "During most of my creative years I managed to arrange my life so as to realize and maintain much of the primitive relationship with earth, sky, and weather. In order to do this, we lived in a small country town and produced most of our food in the old-fashioned biblical way, by 'the sweat of the brow'"<sup>81</sup> He took great pride in raising a big garden that most often overflowed in its abundance to friends and neighbors. His favorite schedule consisted of writing in the forenoons and after a one hour nap, toiling in the garden in the heat of the afternoon. There, while working in his pastoral garden one day, Neihardt stepped across a liminal threshold:

I enjoyed swinging the heavy hoe in the wilting heat of the afternoon under the white-hot glare of the sun. The good old biblical "sweat" made me feel like a well oiled engine, all steamed up and champing at the throttle.

On the day I now recall, it was with such a sense of abundant energy that I was enjoying the rhythmic swing of the hoe, when something must have happened to me. I was unaware of it then, and even now I do not know what it was. As I look back, trying to remember clearly, it seems there was a still, blank place of twilight yonder--no garden, no awareness that one had ever been, no surprise, no wonderment. All that came later with my memory. I was nowhere, floating in the hush of a soft light.

Then--apparently apropos of nothing whatever--there was a little bush, a mere bundle of bare branches and twigs, that came swimming slowly out of vagueness into vision. It was becoming vibrantly alive with a colorless stuff like diaphanous flame lacking heat. This oozed from glowing buds along the branches that kindled, glowing

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<sup>81</sup>John G. Neihardt. *Patterns and Coincidences: A Sequel to All Is But a Beginning*. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 99.

with the ghost of fire. Glimmering twig ends swelled with it, stretching outward and upward with a pulse-like motion into emptiness. There it traced what I seemed to know were experimental patterns of branches, twigs, and leaves, later to be realized in the green world of living matter. These shapes flourished briefly, only to fade and fall back, shuddering, into profound vacancy.

With divine persistence the tentative pattern making went on and on--flourishing, fading, falling back to stretch forth again and again, until some of the spectral shapes held fast; and more and more survived to triumph until the little bush burned tall in ghostly splendor.

Then I was leaning on the handle of my hoe and gazing vacantly at the ground. It was like coming out of a deep sleep. There was a look of queerness in the sunlight and over everything when I gazed about me, wondering what had happened. Could I have nodded for a spacious moment out of time and dreamed such a dream between strokes of the hoe? Surely I had been hoeing happily only an eye blink since.

Now as I gazed about me in puzzlement, I became aware of a little syringa bush that lived alone on the north side of our house near the edge of the garden plot, a good fifty yards from where I stood. I knew it was there, but it was of no importance to me and was seldom noticed, being on the unfrequented side of our house. It had, so I recall vaguely, a neglected, discouraged appearance, and I cannot remember ever having seen it bloom. I am quite sure I had not seen it recently. Why then had it been singled out and so exalted in my--shall I call it dream, since I had not slept?

I am still wondering what the experience could have meant, for always as I think of it a feeling of happy safety comes over me, and I seem about to learn something glorious to know.

Had I somehow in a flash of insight passed beyond the "outer walls of sense" and witnessed the essential miracle of growth, the creative dream at work, the divine ideal still struggling to be real and beautiful?

And last of all--forgive the daring question not irreverently asked--had I seen the "burning bush"?<sup>82</sup>

John G. Neihardt was an uncommon man, a man ideally suited to a meeting with Nicholas Black Elk. There were times, Neihardt once confessed, when the barrier of language disappeared and the two minds, Black Elk's and Neihardt's, worked as one in transmitting the reality of traditional Sioux life.<sup>83</sup> Even though they came from mutually "unintelligible," irreconcilable, and "antagonistic" cultures, these two particular men transcended all of these

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<sup>82</sup>Neihardt, *Patterns*, 100-102.

<sup>83</sup>Peter Iverson. "Neihardt, Collier and the Continuity of Indian Life." *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*. Vine Deloria, Jr. ed., (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1984), 106.

things. There is no doubt that both voices of their cultures are married in the book they produced. Maybe both voices were necessary for the vision to come to pass. Black Elk Speaks was to have a profound effect, not only on Indians and poets, but on the nation as a whole.

The relationship between the two men was established on their first meeting. Remember, that when Flying Hawk had questioned whether Black Elk would talk to the *wasichu*, Neihardt responded that he had known Indians for many years, and they had always talked to him. Just the week before Black Elk had refused to talk to a white woman who was writing an article on Crazy Horse. The famous chief was Black Elk's second cousin. The young woman was Mary Sandoz, who, along with Eleanor Hinman, were conducting interviews with very elderly Oglala chiefs and former warriors about some of the most controversial issues in the band's history. Not only was the problem of gender and age a detriment to the women, they had also stirred up the memories of the events that had bitterly divided the Oglalas during the Indian Wars. In July the women had interviewed He Dog and Short Bull. These men were related to Red Cloud who had opposed Crazy Horse. Even though He Dog and Short Bull had sided with Crazy Horse themselves, the fact that the women had talked with these "Red Cloud Indians" closed the door for them to talk to many of Crazy Horse's relatives. Among those who refused to talk to the women was Black Elk.<sup>84</sup> Other than the friction between the factions, Black Elk's reasons for not seeing the women are unclear, but a month later, he seemed to be waiting for Neihardt.

For Black Elk's purposes, Neihardt was the ideal writer to communicate and further his *wic'as'a wakan's* [medicine man or holy man of great vision]dreams and visions. Like Sandoz would in the future, Neihardt had written about Crazy Horse. In just a short time, the two

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<sup>84</sup> "Mari Sandoz and Crazy Horse," Paper delivered at the Western History Association, Lincoln, Nebraska: Oct. 1996, 8-10.

authors would meet and become fast friends and admirers of one another's work. The spiritual and mystical aspect of Crazy Horse's life was what most appealed to both authors. "He was a 'god intoxicated man' who lived his life according to mystical power-visions and experiences."<sup>85</sup> This is also an accurate description of the great chief's younger cousin, Black Elk. But what Neihardt did in *Black Elk Speaks* was very different from what Sandoz would do with *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas*.<sup>86</sup> Even though Sandoz believed as firmly as Neihardt in mystical truths, she did not have the romantic ability to tap into that awareness in her writing. She considered herself a historian and almost always judged or discussed a work based on its historical accuracy.<sup>87</sup> The literary style was not the primary criteria for her. Neihardt, on the other hand, could, as a poet, focus his entire attention to the mystical. Neihardt not only became the amanuensis for Black Elk, he became the holy man's disciple and a participant in the vision himself. He became a part of the old man, kin, and an integral part or member of the holy man's vision. Black Elk was able to cross the gap of culture and ethnicity by imparting his vision to Neihardt. Helen Stauffer writes, "This meeting with Black Elk became the single most significant influence upon the writer's life and thought. From his meetings with Black Elk he felt he had become the instrument to preserve the wisdom and culture of the Sioux."<sup>88</sup> But his role was more than preserver of culture, it was that of co-creator or seer and foreteller with Nicholas Black Elk in disseminating the holy man's vision. Even so, when Neihardt first approached the holy man, he came asking the same kinds of questions that Mary Sandoz would

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<sup>85</sup> Hellen Stauffer, "Two Authors and a Hero: Neihardt, Sandoz, and Crazy Horse," *Great Plains Quarterly* v1 n1 (1981: 54-66), 54.

<sup>86</sup> Mari Sandoz, *Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942).

<sup>87</sup> Stauffer, 58.

<sup>88</sup> Stauffer, 56.

have most likely asked. It would be Black Elk who would establish the direction of the discourse. Neihardt thought there was a supernatural guidance in their first meeting.

When we arrived, Black Elk was standing outside a shade made of pine boughs. It was noon. When we left, after sunset, Flying Hawk said, "That was kind of funny, the way the old man seemed to know you were coming!" My son remarked that he had the same impression; and when I had known the great old man for some years I was quite prepared to believe that he did know, for he certainly had supernormal powers.<sup>89</sup>

What Neihardt perceived as supernormal, Black Elk more than likely viewed as practical and normal. What the old Indian saw in the encounter was not mystical but a symbolic encounter that conformed to appropriate ritual. The symbolic nature of their first encounter is important to an understanding of their relationship and communication. Clyde Holler has postulated that the ritual content of this meeting is at the core of the two men's relationship. Neihardt must have been conversant enough in the culture to understand some of its norms. He had brought cigarettes. This act established the appropriate context for a meeting.<sup>90</sup> Neihardt explained his purpose to the old man. Black Elk listened patiently as Flying Hawk translated the poet's questions. Black Elk responded politely but briefly; he seemed uninterested in Neihardt's questions. A number of times he mentioned a vision he had when he was nine years old. Silence rested on them for a time as they smoked. Finally Black Elk began to speak as if he were talking more to the landscape in front of him than to his visitors, "As I sit here, I can feel in this

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<sup>89</sup>John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told by John Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)*, (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1932; reprint, Bison 1988), xvi-xvii.

<sup>90</sup>Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of Black Elk Speaks." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* v52, n1, (1984, 19-45), 21.

man beside me a strong desire to know the things of the Other World. He has been sent to learn what I know, and I will teach him."<sup>91</sup>

Holler points out that since Black Elk perceived that Neihardt had been sent by the Spirits, and his arrival was established by an appropriate smoke, he would instruct him. Black Elk's expectations here differ significantly from Neihardt's. The poet wanted to "talk" about "old times" and the "Messiah Craze." In essence, he wanted historical information and at this point probably had no conception of the old man's intentions. Black Elk had singled him out as a disciple, for lack of a better term. Black Elk then gave Neihardt a necklace representing the morning star, the Lakota symbol of wisdom and peace, saying, "Here you see the Morning Star. Who sees the Morning Star shall see more, for he shall be wise." After explaining the symbolism of this sacred ornament, which he had worn when officiating over the Sun Dance, the holy man began to speak of his power vision. Black Elk focused himself on the vision and ignored the questions of Sioux history Neihardt wanted the answers to.<sup>92</sup> When the night came, Black Elk announced, "There is so much to teach you. What I know what was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I will be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so I can teach you."<sup>93</sup> Neihardt was instructed to return in the spring, which would be the appropriate time for his instruction.

Neihardt described his experience that day in a letter written shortly after the event:

He struck me as being a bit uncanny in his intuitions; not that he favored me, but he seemed to know what was inside the visitor. He told me--the sphinx-like old chap--that, as he sat there, he felt in my heart a very strong will to know the things of the other

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<sup>91</sup> Sally McCluskey, "Black Elk Speaks and so does John Neihardt," *Western American Literature* v6, (1972): 235.

<sup>92</sup>Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 21-22.

<sup>93</sup>McCluskey, 236.

world and that a spirit, which stood behind me, had forced me to come to him that I might learn a little from him. In spite of the sound of this statement, he was very modest, modest as a man may be who is sure of what he knows and that what he knows is worth knowing. I had no difficulty whatever with him. He seemed to be expecting me and welcomed me as though he had seen me often. He began by saying that he must tell me his whole story in so far as it could be done in the time we had, but it would take a long, long time to tell it all. First, he said he could not speak to me without giving me some reason to know that he had authority to speak. 'I am just a common man, but I have a gift of vision, which has been hereditary in my family and I must tell you of my people before I tell you of my life so that you may trust me.'<sup>94</sup>

Neihardt attributed Black Elk's actions to supernatural powers. A few scholars have suggested that the poet constructed the details of this first encounter for literary effect. But there is strong evidence against this supposition. Their meeting conformed to a traditional ritual process that would have produced just the kind of response Black Elk demonstrated. Holler uses William K. Powers' work, *Yuwipi*,<sup>95</sup> to demonstrate the nature of this ritual process. In Powers' account of the dialogue between a modern Lakota Holy man, Plenty Wolf, who is being sought out by Wayne Runs Again who wants the holy man to perform the Yuwipi healing ceremony on him, Plenty Wolf acts as if he knew Runs Again was coming. Yet, it is clear that Plenty Wolf does not know Runs Again is coming. Because of his poor eyesight, he has to ask his wife who it is at the gate. Yet, paralleling Neihardt and Black Elk's encounter, when Runs Again approaches Plenty Wolf, he greets him with the ritual hail (*Hau Tunkasila*, Hau Grandfather) rather than the common (*Hau Kola*, Hau friend). Plenty Wolf, then, like Black Elk, speaks of the Spirits that are present and acts as if he were expecting Runs Again. The dialogue is thus:

Wayne came closer so he could be recognized, and the old man greeted him with "Hau Takoja," Hau Grandson, the appropriate ritual response. They said you would come," he said in Lakota, and this astonished Wayne. "The spirits," Plenty Wolf added

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<sup>94</sup>DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 27.

<sup>95</sup>William K. Powers, *Yuwipi: Vision and Experience in Oglala Ritual*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

in English, and laughed a "he-he-he" not in keeping with the dignity of his vocation. . . Wayne was flustered because the old man had expected him, and he tried to explain his reasons in Lakota but faltered. . . .Plenty Wolf was patient. He said, "Smoke first, Cannunpa." . . . After they had smoked Plenty Wolf asked the boy what was troubling him.<sup>96</sup>

The similarity here to Black Elk and Neihardt's encounter is striking. Like Plenty Wolf, Black Elk may not have been claiming to have a literal precognition of his arrival as Neihardt thought. Rather, Black Elk acknowledged a recognition of the ritual which would make the encounter spiritual. Spirits were present and involved because symbolic ritual had been initiated. Neihardt arrived in the appropriate manner, establishing and confirming the proper relationship of kinship between the two men.

Neihardt would most likely have had no concept of the ritual that was taking place. For centuries, whites and Indians have stumbled into relationship rituals not understanding one another's expectations and intentions. When Columbus gave gifts of beads, he unknowingly established a kinship relationship with natives who were astounded when that kinship was later violated. The giving of spiritually-charged objects was a traditional ritual, full of meaning that whites, who thought they were trading beads for goods, simply did not understand.<sup>97</sup> These kinds of adoption rituals frequently appear in the history of native-white encounters.

Pocahontas' symbolic intercession has been viewed as a ritual that adopted John Smith into the Powhatan confederacy. Infamous encounters like these only point to the surface manifestations of the depth of Native American kinship relationships. Yet, Black Elk's affinity with the spirit world must be understood outside of the Western mind's conception of the mystical and

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<sup>96</sup>Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 22, and Powers, *Yuwipi*, 38.

<sup>97</sup> Christopher L. Miller and George R. Hamell. "A New Perspective on Indian-White Contact: Cultural Symbols and Colonial Trade." *Journal of American History*, v73 n2 (1986): 311-328.

metaphysical. The practical, everyday relationship, experiential attitude of this means of perceiving reality has been addressed by Calvin Martin in a unique manner.

Martin examined the kinship relations between early fur trappers, Indians and the beaver they hunted and trapped. Martin's answer to the question of why Indians would participate with whites in the exploitive extermination of fur bearing animals reveals the practical nature of the native spiritual kinship reality. Traditionally, scholars have postulated that the Indians were not able to foresee the consequences of what they were doing in the fur trade, and that their motivation was purely economic, to obtain trade goods. Martin insists that the "fur trading Indian . . . was simply too skilled a hunter to overlook the ultimate consequence of wildlife overkill." If the primary impetus of the fur trade was not economic, and the Indian understood the results of overkill, what then is the primary cause of the Indian's abrupt change from a subsistence hunter to an exploitive pursuer of furbearing animals?

Martin's answer is that on the eve of European contact the Indian and furbearing animals, especially the beaver, were engaged in a "holy war of extermination."<sup>98</sup> As Martin asserted in *Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History*,<sup>99</sup> Eastern Algonkian Indians such as the Micmac and Ojibway (and by implication other hunter-gatherer societies) maintained a kinship relationship with the animals, birds, and places in their environment. This relationship or "power" was preserved through rituals of respect and cultural taboos. Shamans mediated in these rituals of communication with the spirits of the earth. Prior to direct contact with whites, European diseases ravaged the native's world. Their traditional rites and rituals were ineffective

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<sup>98</sup>Calvin Martin, *Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 109.

<sup>99</sup> Calvin Martin, "Ethnohistory: A Better Way to Write Indian History," *Western Historical Quarterly* 9, (January 1978), 41-56.

in responding to these epidemics, and a spiritual breakdown occurred. The shamans' rituals failed to bring healing. The stress of widespread smallpox, measles, tuberculosis and other maladies caused a crisis in the native's confidence, a breakdown in faith. They blamed the outbreaks on the fur-bearing animals and their guardian spirits. The epidemics coincided with an increase in the rodent population in the area. Colder and wetter climate conditions during these decades promoted the fur-bearing animals population. Using the stories of two early trappers, David Thompson and Alexander Henry, Martin demonstrates how the link between the animals' expanding population and malevolent animal spirits existed in the natives' mind. Thompson's narrative states, ". . . the banks at the water edge were occupied by their [beaver] houses. To every small Lake, and all the Ponds they builded [sic] dams. Even to [sic] ground occasionally overflowed, by heavy rains, they also made dams, and made them permanent ponds. . . Thus all the low lands were in possession of the Beaver, and all the hollows of the higher grounds. . . the dry land with the dominions of Man contracted, every where he was hemmed in by water without the power of preventing it."<sup>100</sup> As the beaver took more land the plagues also grew in intensity. Two old Cree near Lake Winnipeg told Thompson, ". . . the Beavers had been an ancient People, and then lived on dry land; they were always Beavers and not Men, they were wise and powerful, and neither Man, nor any animal made war on them. . . I have told you that we believed in years long passed away, the Great Spirit was angry with the Beaver, and he ordered Weesaukejauk (the Flatterer) to drive them all from dry land into the water; and they became and continued very numerous; *but the Great Spirit has been, and now is, very angry with them and they are now all to be destroyed* [emphasis added]."<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Martin, "Ethnohistory," 106.

<sup>101</sup>Martin, "Ethnohistory," 107, the italics is added by Martin in the book.

Fitting these and other legends together Martin finds that the Indian's impulse to destroy the fur-bearers may not have been for the purpose of trade, at least not originally. Economic dependence came later; initially, they were at war, and the fur trade was simply a convenient (and profitable) coincidence. The Indian simply took the "scalp" of his enemy, and Europeans with their powerful medicine (technology) were a strong ally. The failure of the Indian's traditional medicine power and their new "kinship" with the white traders caused a "sweeping and monumental despiritualization."<sup>102</sup> A new outlook, a reforming world view which combined native traditions and beliefs with European rational motivation and Christianity, produced a mind set that paved the way for the wholesale slaughter of game. Nevertheless, the Indians' spiritual predilections survived. They were simply modified to suit the current circumstances. Martin's story is one of an amazing biological, ecological, psychological, as well as economic coincidence. It is an almost surreal historical coincidence that converges on the early fur trade. Martin asserts that the historian must have an understanding of all of these different factors and their relationship to one another in order to understand the history of early Euro-Indian contact.

So also must an account of the relationship between Black Elk and John Neihardt begin with an understanding that the two men saw the world from very different eyes. Neihardt's first impression of Black Elk is colored by a romantic mysticism that is a central ingredient of the make-up of an epic poet. The true mystic in this encounter is Neihardt. What Neihardt understood Black Elk as saying, "there are spirits who have informed me of your arrival," would from Black Elk's point of view, be more of a statement of this nature: "You have arrived at the appropriate time and in the appropriate manner. We should be kin (allies) in the task set before us. It is good. It is fitting. We will begin at the appropriate time--in the spring." The task in

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<sup>102</sup>Martin, "Ethnohistory," 144.

Neihardt's mind was to collect information to preserve in a book. The task in Black Elk's thinking was to establish a relationship of master/disciple by means of the traditional ritual process of Lakota culture.

The cross-cultural aspects of the encounter between Black Elk and Neihardt are extremely important to an understanding of the documents that would come out of their relationship and the effects on the history of both Indian and white that those documents would eventually have. Holler writes that, "In accord with their different cultural backgrounds, each man conceived the project differently. Black Elk agreed to give Neihardt sacred instructions; Neihardt proposed to write a book."<sup>103</sup> Producing a book was not Black Elk's idea or intention, at least at the beginning. According to Hilda Neihardt, her father came home from the meeting filled with excitement about he and Sigurd's "chance" meeting with Black Elk. He immediately contacted William Morrow, the New York publisher, and described his trip, proposing a book that would not only tell the holy man's story but also the story of his people during this monumental period in the history of the United States. Neihardt told the publisher that the story of Black Elk's life would make a book "unlike any that had yet been written--a book truly Indian from the inside out." He also added that Black Elk had several friends that would contribute to the story. Morrow agreed to publish the book and to advance Neihardt one thousand dollars on the royalties. This would make it possible for Neihardt to spend time with Black Elk and his family and conduct the interviews.<sup>104</sup>

Neihardt's approach to the situation was entirely in keeping with traditional anthropological and historical process. His purpose at this time was that of the literary

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<sup>103</sup>Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," 24.

<sup>104</sup>Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 17-18.

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preservation of the way of life of a dead, or at best dying, culture. As a tragic poet, he could see the task in no other way, and this perspective would become an integral part of the history he and Black Elk were about to create. It would be a panorama of history, anthropology, and literature from Neihardt's conception. Neihardt wrote Black Elk to propose his plan of a book:

After talking with you four and a half hours and thinking over many things you told me, I feel that the whole story of your life ought to be written truthfully by somebody with the right feeling and understanding of your people and of their great history. My idea is to come back to the reservation next spring, probably in April, and have a number of meetings with you and your old friends. . . I would want you to tell the story of your life beginning at the beginning and going straight through to Wounded Knee. . . This would make a complete story of your people since your childhood.

So you see, this book would be not only the story of your life, but the story of the life of your people. The fact that you have been both a warrior and a medicine man would be of great help in writing the book, because both religion and war are of great importance in history.<sup>105</sup>

This letter reveals that Neihardt saw the massacre at Wounded Knee as the end of the "complete story" of Black Elk's people. This conceptual frame would effect the book and the future of the religious ideas that would come from it. Black Elk obviously accepted the proposal, but his intentions were not necessarily to have a book produced. It is evident from the ritual process which Black Elk invoked that his intention was to initiate Neihardt as a disciple and charge him with the power of the sacred vision and knowledge he possessed as a holy man. Black Elk intended to give the power of his vision to Neihardt, and by doing so he was giving it to another culture, also.

Clyde Holler's description of how Black Elk made ritual preparations for Neihardt's visit is most revealing. They indicate that the entire project from Black Elk's point of view was the initiation of the white man into the sacred. He erected a ceremonial tipi decorated with sacred

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<sup>105</sup>Holler, *"Lakota Religion and Tragedy,"* 24.

symbols, and planted a ring of pine trees around the site. The symbol over the door of the lodge was a rainbow which represented the rainbow door to the Grandfathers in Black Elk's great power vision. Neihardt was also given the name, Flaming Rainbow. His daughters were also given Lakota names, adopting them all into the tribe. The vision could not be given to outsiders. The pipe was smoked at a feast given by Neihardt where kill talks were given and the people danced. The poet was presented with a sacred hoop and a family pipe. His adoption was complete. From the name Black Elk gave him, Flaming Rainbow, it is clear that the holy man saw him as the door to his sacred vision. Neihardt's role was much more than author; it was holder of vision power, an entrance into the sacred, as well as, sender of words.<sup>106</sup>

Thus began a relationship that would result in one of the most important documents ever drawn up between an Indian and a white man. In the 1960's, *Black Elk Speaks*, became a favorite book of the counterculture which had rejected the materialism of modern America. Through the book's popularity, Black Elk's words found their way back to not only the Lakota, but to Indians and whites from many tribes, uniting them in a common vision that had seemed for many decades to have been lost. But this vision would not be a traditional Lakota vision. It would be a vision produced out of the heart of both men, a product of two cultures. It would be a dynamic, transforming vision, not a static vision, not one frozen in time.

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<sup>106</sup>Holler, "*Lakota Religion and Tragedy*," 25-26.

## Black Elk's "Wakinyan"

Black Elk was born on the Little Powder River in the "Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed on the Tongue River" (1863). He grew up as a member of Big Road's band which wandered and hunted in the western-most part of the Sioux country, on the other side of the Black Hills.<sup>107</sup> The band was Oglala Lakota. There are three divisions of the group of Indians known by the white name Sioux. The Santee speak a dialect called Dakota and they inhabited the territory that would come to be known as Minnesota. They were the first to encounter the whites. It was the winter before Black Elk was born that the 38 Dakotas were hung in Mankato. Further to the west, on the prairies of what is roughly now the Dakota states, wandered the Yankton. They spoke a dialect called Nakota. Black Elk came from the westernmost division, the Teton, who spoke Lakota. They covered parts of western South Dakota, Wyoming, Nebraska, and Montana. Big Foot's band of Oglala Lakotas were Black Elk's people. They camped and hunted in the most westerly portion of the Teton country, past the Black Hills. Black Elk's father was a medicine man, as were several of his father's brothers.<sup>108</sup>

In 1863, these western bands still followed the old ways of the spirit beings. When Black Elk was four years old he would hear voices singing now and then when he was playing. He did not pay too much attention to them. When he was five his father made him a bow and some arrows, and he went out to the woods one spring day to get a bird. Just before going into the woods, he saw a thunderstorm coming, and he heard a voice coming to him. He looked up and saw two men coming out of a cloud carrying spears and singing a sacred song. A kingbird that

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<sup>107</sup>DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 101.

<sup>108</sup>DeMallie, 102.

was sitting nearby told him to listen to them. The bird said, "[Look] the clouds all over are one-sided, a voice is calling you." The men were singing:

Behold him, a sacred voice is calling you.

All over the sky a sacred voice is calling you.

They were coming from the north and turned to go west transforming into geese as they went. The vision lasted about twenty minutes. This vision was in the year Red Cloud made the treaty that ended the so-called Red Cloud War (1868). The army agreed to close the Bozeman trail and abandon Forts C. F. Smith and Philip Kearny. This treaty would become the foundation for all the further legal negotiations between the Sioux and the United States government.<sup>109</sup>

Black Elk continued to hear voices calling him now and then but most of the time he forgot about it. On August 5, 1873, the Oglalas and Brules attacked the Pawnees during a summer Buffalo hunt; they killed over a hundred of the enemy. The bands were moving west and as they came to the Little Big Horn they camped for the night. Black Elk was now nine years old. A man named Man Hip invited the boy to have supper with him. During the meal, Black Elk heard someone say, "It is time, now they are calling you." Black Elk thought to himself, "I am being called upon by the spirits," so he decided he would just go where they wanted him to be. As he left the lodge, he felt his thighs aching. The next day, after they broke camp to move on, he rode with some of his friends. They stopped at a creek to get a drink, and when he dismounted his legs would not hold him. He collapsed, helpless; he could not walk. The boys with him helped him along until the band camped again. He was very sick, his legs, arms, and even his face badly swollen. As he lay helpless and sick in a lodge, he saw through the tipi into the clouds.

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<sup>109</sup>DeMallie, 108-110.

The same two men that had come to him while hunting birds when he was five years old came to him out of the clouds and said, "Hurry up, your grandfather is calling you." The men turned and started back up into the clouds; Black Elk got up to follow. Just as he got out of the tipi he saw a small cloud coming for him. The two men were disappearing into the big clouds. He got on the little cloud and was raised up after them. When he looked back he saw his mother and father looking up at him; he felt sorry he was leaving them.<sup>110</sup>

Standing Bear, Black Elk's friend, was about thirteen at the time.<sup>111</sup> He said Black Elk was unconscious for twelve days. The people said it was a "queer sickness," nobody knew what it was, and no one else in the camp was sick. Black Elk's father visited Standing Bear's lodge for supper a couple of days after Black Elk revived, and the senior Black Elk described his son's condition:

My boy was very sick all at once and it was a strange sickness and he was unconscious for twelve days and it looked like he would not come to and I prepared for it, but all of the sudden he came to, but ever since my boy hasn't been acting well. He is not the boy he used to be. It is strange the way he acts. Poor boy, I thought lots of him and I feel sorry about the way he is feeling now. It seems that he doesn't think of his home very much. He stays out alone. He had been very sick but he seemed to get well so quickly and is able to get around.

Black Elk reported feeling that his "mother and father did not welcome" him when he awoke. This feeling of alienation extended to most everyone in the band. He was up and physically cured, so he participated in the boys' games surrounding the buffalo hunt but could not fit in.

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<sup>110</sup>DeMallie, 113-114.

<sup>111</sup>Standing Bear's account places Black Elk's vision in June, the month when turnips were dug. (DeMallie, 113-114) Black Elk implies it was after the Pawnee battle. If this is the battle at the Republican River where the Oglala and Brulés killed over 100 Pawnees, the vision would have been in August. [George E. Hyde, *Pawnee Indians*. (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1951), 244-247, and Paul D. Riley, "The Battle of Massacre Canyon," *Nebraska History* 54 (1973):220-249] The battle on the Republican river would have preceded the arrival at Greasy Grass Creek (The Little Big Horn) if the band was traveling west as Black Elk claims. Both Men agree that the

The whole time he felt out of place and could not forget about the vision. Describing his feeling at the time, he said, "I felt that I did not belong to the people--they were strangers to me. I wanted to be away from the people and often would go away from them." He went off to think about the vision.

Whirlwind Chaser, the medicine man who had treated him, got a great name and was given a horse because he had cured Black Elk so quickly, but Black Elk thought it was the power of the vision that cured him. He became afraid of the medicine man and would hide from him and avoid his gaze. One night, just after Black Elk was cured, the shaman had told Black Elk's father. "Your son there is sitting in a sacred manner. I can see that there is a special duty for him to do. Just as he came in I could see the power of lightening all through his body."<sup>112</sup> The only person that Black Elk felt comfortable with was his grandfather, Keeps His Tipi. His grandfather accepted him, and the boy would ask him questions, but Black Elk did not talk about the vision with him either. Even though Black Elk was acting strangely, his behavior was soon overshadowed by scouts bringing the news that buffalo had been found.

The young boy had received his "*Wakinyan*" (a guiding vision from the Spirit of the West, from the Thunder-beings), but it had not come in the traditional way. He had not fasted and gone out on a vision quest. He had not sought the vision; the vision had sought him. He did not have the instruction and direction of the medicine man in his quest; on the contrary, the vision separated him from the others, especially the medicine man. His vision came from the Thunder-beings giving him prophetic power. At this time Black Elk was still called by his boyhood name,

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sickness took place at Greasy Grass. Black Elk may, of course, have been speaking of an earlier battle with the Pawnee.

<sup>112</sup>DeMallie, 149-150.

"*Kahachnigapi*." It means "Chosen."<sup>113</sup> Although no one but he knew about his vision, his boyhood name was fulfilled. It would be eight years before Black Elk would seek help from his elders to have his vision "*straightened out*." They would be monumental years for the Lakota, and Black Elk grew to manhood in them.

In July, 1874, Long Hair Custer left Fort Lincoln for "*Paha Sapa*," (Hills that are Black). The Black Hills acted as a storehouse for the Sioux. The hills were filled with small game; their lodge Pole Pines for tipi poles and sheltered valleys for winter camping drew small bands year round. But it was not the utilitarian value that stood out in the Indians' mind when they thought of *Paha Sapa*. Rising four thousand feet above the yellow plains, what stood out was the august power that the dark mountains possessed. *Paha Sapa* was a mystical place. Indians held a mild dread of the region and usually entered in small bands, quietly. The craggy recesses possessed a sacred character, and there, in the center of those recesses, Custer found gold. There had been rumors of gold in the hills for years, ever since the Dakota territory had been organized in 1861, and settlers moved on to the plains southeast of the Indian lands. Dakota land speculators saw the Black Hills as essential to the territory's prosperity. The legislature had petitioned for a federal government geological survey to investigate the area. Soldiers were soon on their way to put the wandering hunting bands on reservation lands.<sup>114</sup> In 1875, Black Elk's band would attend the Sun Dance on the Rosebud where the great Chief Sitting Bull would receive his vision of Custer's demise.

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<sup>113</sup>William K. Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," (*Social Text* v8 n2, 43-56), 44. This paper was first published in *Religion in Native North America*, ed. Christopher Vecsey (Moscow, Idaho: University of Idaho Press, 1990).

<sup>114</sup>Robert Utley, *The Lance and the Shield: The life and Times of Sitting Bull*. (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1993), 115-116.

The traditional or "classic"<sup>115</sup> Sun Dance among the Lakota was a communal event held in the summer. A ritual tree is cut and planted at the center of a circle. The dance takes place within or around this circle. Spectators watch from the periphery of this circle, usually covered by a shaded awning of evergreen boughs. The total space of the ritual circle ranged anywhere from forty to one hundred feet in diameter depending on the numbers involved. There is an opening in the shade at the east which admits the dancers and the rising sun. This symbolically multidimensional ritual is under the direction of a holy man, in the modern dance known as the intercessor. There are singers who sing the Sun Dance songs and play the drum. There is a sacred altar. Other sacred symbols include the buffalo which is represented by a skull and, of course, the sun represented by the color red. Sacrifice is at the center of the dance, usually, in the classic dance, associated with war. Dancers make a vow to *Wakan Tanka* (the Great Mystery or Spirit) to perform the dance which involves piercing the flesh, usually in the breast, inserting skewers into the cuts and tying a rope to the skewers that is attached to the sacred pole or tree. The dancer then dances around the pole, pulling against the skewers and straining against the rope until the flesh is torn and the dancer is released. The dancer suffers for the people. There are many variations of the dance and it can take many different forms depending on the holy man's direction. There is no written text, of course, that must be followed, and the personality of the intercessor, the occasion of the dance, and the differences in dancers and pledges are all factors that propitiate change and variation. Holler writes, "No two Sun Dances are the same.

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<sup>115</sup>For a definition and discussion of the term "classic" Sun Dance, see Clyde Holler, *Black Elk's Religion: The Sun Dance and Lakota Catholicism*. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), xxviii-xxix.

Rather, the Sun Dance is a canvas on which the intercessor paints, in dialogue with the tradition and the needs of his people."<sup>116</sup>

Black Elk's friend Standing Bear described Sitting Bull's Sun Dance camp as being set so that the Rosebud flowed through its center. A place at the center of the oval was selected for the ritual circle.<sup>117</sup> Sitting Bull himself was the leader of the dance, and he also pledged to dance. Soldiers arrived in the area, both to the south and the north over the past couple of months. It became clear the they had come firmly intent on making war on any Sioux or Cheyenne they happened upon. Sitting Bull was holding the dance to fulfill a prayer vow he made in response to a vision he had just a few weeks before. The presence of *Wakan Tanka* was in the wind and it filled Sitting Bull and his people. The buffalo had been plentiful, and the Lakota had never been so confident in the knowledge that their cause was just. The chiefs were all in agreement with Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse's council. They agreed not to look for a fight. The US. soldiers declared war, and the Indians would only fight if attacked and provoked.<sup>118</sup> They were unified, confident of victory if attacked. The vision that prompted Sitting Bull's vow occurred when they were camped seven miles above the Rosebud during the last days of May. The Spirit drew the Chief to a nearby butte. He sat down to pray on a moss covered rock, and he fell asleep. He dreamed. He saw a great dust storm coming from the east catapulted by powerful winds. Flying toward it from the opposite direction came a white cloud in the shape of an Indian village set at the foot of snow-capped mountains. Behind the dust of the eastern gale, Sitting Bull saw ranks and files of soldiers fully decked in weapons and trimmings gleaming in the sun. The storm and

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<sup>116</sup>Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, xxi-xxiii.

<sup>117</sup>DeMallie, 173.

<sup>118</sup>Utley, 135.

the cloud collided in a mighty crash filled with lightening and thunders. Great sheets of rain poured out; the dust settled leaving only the white cloud which serenely floated off to the northeast disappearing from sight. A few days later Sitting Bull held a pipe ceremony. He then faced the sun and prayed:

*Wakan Tanka*, save me and give me all my wild game animals and have them close enough so my people will have enough food this winter, and also the good men on earth will have more power so their tribes get along better and be of good nature so all the Sioux nations get along well. If you do this for me I will sun dance two days and two nights and will give you a whole buffalo.<sup>119</sup>

The move to the site of the dance took place on June 4, and they remained there until the eighth. The morning after they pitched the camp a crier announced with the rising sun, "Brave men, be ready, for your time has come. It is your time to do your duty now to send your voices up to the Great Spirit. . . and we shall go forth and pray and repent."<sup>120</sup> After purification in the sweat lodge, Sitting Bull entered the circle. He smoked and sat with his back resting against the pole. Jumping Bull began to take flesh from the chief's left arm. He used his awl to remove small pieces of flesh. He worked upward and made fifty incisions on the arm. He moved to the right arm and did likewise. Sitting Bull bled profusely from the one hundred places where flesh had been cut away. He stood and began to dance. He was not pierced and hung by thongs, but scars on his breast and back attested to pervious dances where he had been suspended and torn loose. He danced around the pole, gazing at the sun and fasting. After hours of dancing he suddenly stopped. Some thought he had fainted, but he did not fall. He just stood, fixed, gazing into the sun. He was lowered to the ground gently and sprinkled with water.

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<sup>119</sup>Utley, 136-137.

<sup>120</sup>DeMallie, 173.

When he came to himself and opened his eyes, he described his vision. In it, a voice spoke to him directing his vision to fix upon an image of soldiers as numerous as grasshoppers coming out from just below the sun. Mounted on horses, they descended upon the Indian village below, but they traveled upside down, their feet in the sky and their heads toward the ground. Some of the Indians below were upside down also. A voice cried out, "These soldiers do not possess ears. They are to die, but you are not to take their spoils." It was a powerful vision. The soldiers would all die. Some of the Indians would also die, represented by those who were upside down, but it would be a great victory. It confirmed the vision of the cloud and the dust storm. Custer was coming to attack them in their village. There was an immediacy about the hallucination, but they would be ready, they would overcome their enemies.<sup>121</sup>

The Oglala were camped south of the Brule, east of the Cheyenne in the center of the Little Bighorn River camp on June 25, the day Custer came to fight. The Hunkpapa tipis were further south with Blackfeet beyond them. To the east were Sans Arc and Miniconjou. Black Elk's band was in the safest, most protected position in the camp.<sup>122</sup> Black Elk's father woke him up early that day and asked him to take the horses out to graze. The sun was just coming up as he left. There was tension in the camp. His father had told him to keep one horse tied to a long rope so he would be easy to catch and to keep his eyes on the camp and to look around always. "I did not feel right--I had a funny feeling all this time, because I thought that in an hour or so something terrible might happen," is his description of how he felt that morning. Their fears were justified; Custer attacked at mid-morning. A crier came to Oglalas saying, "They are

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<sup>121</sup>Utley, 138-139.

<sup>122</sup>Utley, 149.

charging; the chargers are coming."<sup>123</sup> Confusion broke out everywhere. Black Elk was sent by his father to bring a gun to his older brother. He had his own six-shooter that had been given to him by one of the women in his family. He took it along also. After delivering his brother the gun, bullets began to fly around him as he left the brush to cross an open flat. Getting back into the trees he remembered his vision and it renewed his courage. He began to think that the people in his vision were thunder beings and some of their power was being given to his people. Then he knew they would win this battle. The soldiers were going to all die. The people began to yell, "Crazy Horse is coming" and crying "Hokahey!" The chief was on a white faced horse. Women and children were fleeing, and the Indians engaged the soldiers wildly. Black Elk said, "They were mad and it was hard to check them--they were plum crazy."<sup>124</sup> He saw another pistol and picked it up, and others began to take clothing from the dead soldiers and put it on. He saw a soldier still kicking. A man told him, "Boy, get off and scalp him." So he took out his knife and started to cut off the soldier's short hair. The soldier began to grind his teeth, so Black Elk took out his pistol and shot him in the forehead. When the boy brought the scalp home, his mother "gave a shrill tremolo" for him. The Lakota name for the Battle of the Little Bighorn is *Pehin Hanska kasota*, "Rubbing out of Custer (long Hair)."<sup>125</sup>

Sitting Bull's visions had come to pass. The soldiers were killed, but the victory was short lived. By the winter of 1877, the Indians would be in despair and their unity gone. Sitting Bull came to the painful truth that not only had the soldiers invaded his country, they had come to stay. The army pursued the Sioux. Crazy Horse surrendered on May 6, 1877, and sometime

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<sup>123</sup>DeMallie, 181.

<sup>124</sup>DeMallie, 183.

<sup>125</sup>DeMallie, 184.

during the same week, Sitting Bull crossed into Canada. Five months later, Crazy Horse received a fatal wound from a soldier's bayonet in a guardhouse scuffle.

After Crazy Horse was killed, the Oglala also fled to Canada. They stayed there with Sitting Bull for three years. There they must have seen the refugee Nez Perce, who had escaped the battle of Bear Paw, and listened to their tragic stories. Black Elk grew up in the most turbulent years of the Sioux people. He was born the year of the Emancipation Proclamation, a few months after the hanging of the 38 Dakota Sioux--he would return to the United States from Canada a young man who had participated in the battles and had seen the defeat of one of the greatest cavalries the world has ever known, the warriors of the northern Great Plains.

Black Elk said, "We came back to the U.S. because we were tired of being in Canada. They were only two families when they started back. In Montana, at a camp called "All Gone Tree Creek" (because soldiers had cut all the trees away there), Black Elk was about to take the five horses the two families had with them out to graze when he heard a voice say to him, "Be careful and watch. You shall see." He felt strange and so did not take the horses very far. He followed what the voice said and climbed to a high place to watch. It was not long before he spotted two enemies sneaking up to spy out his family's camp. When the two scouts retreated, Black Elk went back to warn his family and they quickly moved from there before their enemies returned. The voices had saved them. As they fled, Black Elk heard the Thunder-Beings yelling, "Hey, hey!" A cloud covered them as they went, and he felt it protected them.<sup>126</sup> They crossed the Missouri on a steamboat and then traveled on to the Tongue River. They camped at Fort Keogh where there was a summer gathering for a Sun Dance. It was in "The Moon of

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<sup>126</sup>DeMallie, 210-211.

Making Fat," June.<sup>127</sup> The soldiers at the fort took their guns away and many of their horses.

After the Sun Dance, Black Elk's vision began to dominate his mind and spirit in everything. He became fearful, scared of clouds and hearing voices. He could hear the Thunder-Beings calling and could understand the birds whenever they sang. It seemed to him that they were saying, "Behold your grandfathers; make haste." This was in 1880, and he was sixteen years old now. He spent the summer in apprehension. At the break of day he would hear voices coming from the east. He thought the morning star of his vision was calling to him and singing:

In sacred Manner I am Walking

Thy nation has beheld me.

Coyotes and crows called out to him saying, "It is time," and "Behold him." He pondered and wondered at the voices over the fall and winter, glad the Thunder-beings were gone now. But they returned the next summer. He became so scared he would run out of his bed and into other tipis. The voices said, "It is time; it is time." His parents finally asked a medicine man named Black Road to come and talk to the young man and ask him if he had had a vision. Black Elk broke down and told him of the vision he had when he was nine. Black Road was astonished. He exclaimed, "Ahh! Nephew, I have been there for a vision but you have not seen my tracks. There I have been and I have seen a boy in a council tipi and I knew that it was you, I now recognize you. The main thing for you to do, and it is your duty to do as the bay horse you have seen told you, that you should perform that duty on this earth."<sup>128</sup> He was going to dance the Horse Dance first.

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<sup>127</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 163.

<sup>128</sup>DeMallie, 213-214.

The usual course for one who has had a vision of the Thunder-beings was to participate in a "*heyoka*" ceremony. The thunder dreamers played the role of Thunder's messengers by acting foolishly, doing things backwards and making themselves as clowns to be laughed at. But rather than "*heyoka*," Black Road suggested that Black Elk act out part of his powerful vision in a horse dance. From this point forward Black Elk became a powerful medicine man of the Oglala. It was the Spring of 1881, and he was eighteen years old.

He continued to seek understanding of his vision and he went on another vision quest. Black Elk referred to this vision quest saying, "I had to go out lamenting." A medicine man named Few Tails assisted Black Elk this time and left him in a desert place a few miles northwest of the place where his log cabin would one day be outside of Manderson. Naked, and with unbraided hair he waited and lamented. After a time, a spotted eagle came from the west and soared over him. Then came a hawk and landed to the south. A black swallow appeared and lit on a branch to the east. Facing south despair filled him and he cried, tears poured out to the ground, tears for his relatives now gone. "I cried myself to death nearly," he said when recalling the vision. He heard a sound of rustling coming on the wind; butterflies filled the air with a fluttering beauty. The spotted eagle said, "Behold them, these are your people." The butterflies filled the air with color and he could hear them whimpering and crying. The eagle said, "These people shall be in great difficulty and you shall go there." The butterflies swarmed around and then started to fly back to the south. The hawk said, "Behold your grandfathers shall come forth and you shall hear them." The Thunder-beings came as a great cloud, full of voices and the sound of horses. The two men from his childhood visions came out carrying bows. There appeared a dog in the midst of the dust of the storm. The dust was the butterflies hovering around the dog. The two men that were on horses, drew their bows, and shot the dog in the head.

The head transformed into the head of a man. The spotted eagle said, "It is time to perform the duties of your grandfathers."<sup>129</sup>

In *Black Elk Speaks* the dog's head is described as several dogs' heads, and it turns into the heads of white men.<sup>130</sup> In the transcripts published by Demallie, the question is asked, "What did the dog's head represent?" Black Elk's answer :

The dog is timid and at the same time people don't show them mercy. They kill them whenever they get hungry. The dog is used as the material for the performance of lots of ceremonies. The dogs are very useful among the Indians. It is their favorite food. Everyone enjoys dog soup. He is a domestic animal and is of more use to humans than any wild animal. You can depend on him. Just like my dog, Bob. They are the servant of man. We use dog for material for medicine men. Bear medicine men use dogs too. They are at the same time regarded as animals. The dog is not allowed at the ceremonial nevertheless. The meat is to be eaten by the onlookers and performers, but the dog should not be around where the medicine men live. He must be cooked if he comes near there. When a dog is used for ceremonial purposes, it is called sacred eating and it will make clarity of understanding. Dog is a willing slave animal.<sup>131</sup>

Black Elk's answer is not consistent with Neihardt's version that makes dogs into *Wasichus*, (white men). Rather, Black Elk's answer would suggest that the dog symbolizes a sacrificial and servant character. He says he has been shown "good and bad" and then says, "I was to do most of the good for my people." The storm settles around Black Elk and turns into hail. He asks the grandfathers to have pity on him and to spare him. He tells them that he has a clarity of understanding now, and he is "willing to do it on the earth." In the midst of the storm and the big hail he says, "I did not care whether I got killed or not, that probably I would be better off in the other world anyway." It is not clear whether Black Elk was speaking here of the danger of the storm or of some sort of identification with the dream or the dog in the dream. But Neihardt's

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<sup>129</sup>DeMallie, 228-229.

<sup>130</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 189.

<sup>131</sup>DeMallie, 229-230.

identification with the white man and the dog does not appear. Black Elk then laid down and wrapped himself in a robe, finally falling asleep to be later awakened by the medicine man who had accompanied him out there.

When he returned home from the vision he was asked by the old men to tell him what had happened. They smoked the pipe as he told them his vision. The old men simply told him that they thought it "was now time to do those things on earth that would help mankind." They knew he would be a great man and that it was not for everybody, that few had ever had such appointments. The transcript has Black Elk saying, "Many are called but few are chosen."<sup>132</sup> Twenty days later he sponsored and performed the "*heyoka*" ceremony, and afterward, when his people had moved to the Pine Ridge reservation, he performed many ceremonies and worked that his vision would be understood and established. Of the "*heyoka*" Black Elk said, "You have noticed that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping."<sup>133</sup> "*Heyoka*" taught Black Elk much about the paradox of truth.

William Powers says that Black Elk's early years were most likely "like that of any other Lakota boy growing up on the Great Plains in the last half of the nineteenth century."<sup>134</sup> This is no doubt true, but there are differences, the intensity of his vision and the unusual manner in which he received it. But Powers is correct to assume that at this time Black Elk's experience is that of a Lakota boy working out his "*Wakinyan*" by applying it to his life. The vision, and the voices that came with it, had made Black Elk a Lakota medicine man in the most traditional

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<sup>132</sup>DeMallie, 231.

<sup>133</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 188-189.

<sup>134</sup>Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," 45.

sense. His vision was a vision entirely Lakota, but Black Elk was "Chosen," and his vision and historical circumstance were leading him toward an identity that would be more than just Lakota.

Black Elk was now on the reservation and the years of the free movement of the Sioux nation and his people the Lakota were over. Sometime during the next five years he converted to Episcopalianism. Between 1879 and 1888 the only active Christian missionaries on the Great Sioux Reservation were the Episcopalians. In telling of the Episcopalian Church's work among the Sioux in these years, Vine Deloria reported that "Bishop Hare arrived in 1873. When he retired thirty-two years later, in 1905, he had ten thousand souls settled in one hundred chapels on the ten Sioux reservations, ministered to by six Indian priests, six white priests, and sixty lay ministers."<sup>135</sup> In 1886, Black Elk joined Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, and all Indians that joined the show were required to be Christians.<sup>136</sup> His only access to baptism would have been these Episcopalians. Black Elk said he went with the show because he wanted to know the white man's ways. "I wanted to see the great water, the great world and the ways of the white man; this is why I wanted to go," he said. The life on the reservation seemed wrong to him. He was disgusted, he said, with the wrong road his people were on and he wanted to "get them to go back on the good road." It did not seem to him that the people wanted to go the way Black Elk thought they should go, so he made up his mind to leave them and go see what the white man's ways were about. "If the white man's ways were better, why I would like to see my people live that way," he said.<sup>137</sup> William Powers believes that "disciples of Black Elk" have made too much of the idea that Black Elk was seeking to understand the power of the white man. He proposes

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<sup>135</sup>Vine V. Deloria SR. "The Establishment of Christianity Among the Sioux," *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*. Raymond J. Demallie and Douglas R. Parks ed., (Normon: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 108-109.

<sup>136</sup>Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," 45.

that Black Elk, like most other Indians who went with the show, was just bored. The reservation system created a time of emptiness. There was no buffalo hunting, no enemies to fight. The trip to Europe was viewed as a challenge, an adventure that might well rival the hunt or the warpath.<sup>138</sup> Neither motivation should be discounted here. Clearly Black Elk would have these same feelings of excitement and adventure the others who went had. But his own testimony gives his deeper reasons--to understand the white man's power, his medicine, his ways.

First he went to New York and played in Madison Square Garden, and then in the spring of 1887, he went with the show to England. There he played for Queen Victoria. In a letter home he wrote:

Now I will tell you about how I am doing with the wild west show. Always in my mind I hold to the law and all along I live remembering God. But the show runs day and night too, so at two o'clock we quit. But all along I live remembering God so He enables me to do it all.

So my relatives, the Lakota people, now I know the white man's customs well. One custom is very good. Whoever believes in God will find good ways--that is what I mean. And many of the ways the white men follow are hard to endure. Whoever has no country will die in the wilderness. And although the country is large it is always full of white men. That which makes me happy is always land.<sup>139</sup>

Black Elk was learning of the white man's God. As previously stated, all of the members of Buffalo Bill's show were required to be baptized, both Indian and white. How much instruction or indoctrination he had experienced before or after being baptized on the reservation is unknown, but as Powers has pointed out, "In letters he sent home during this time, he is already quoting, albeit crudely, passages from the Bible."<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, if Black Elk had

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<sup>137</sup>DeMallie, 245.

<sup>138</sup>Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," 45-46.

<sup>139</sup>DeMallie, 8-9.

<sup>140</sup>Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," 45.

begun to identify, to some extent, with the white man's God, while in Europe he also saw the white man's great numbers and hypocrisy, and this caused him to fear. He thought of his land, his people, and the Wasichus. Later he would write:

I did not see anything to help my people. I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother. This could not be better than the old ways of my people. There was a prisoner's house on an island where the big water came up to the town, and we saw that one day. Men pointed guns at the prisoners and made them move around like animals in a cage. This made me feel very sad, because my people were penned up in islands, and maybe that was the way the Wasichus were going to treat them.<sup>141</sup>

Black Elk got left behind in Europe. He and two other Lakotas got separated from Buffalo Bill and he sailed for America in their absence. They joined another wild west show and traveled to Germany and France. The next year, when Buffalo Bill returned to Europe, Black Elk found him and got a ticket back to the United States. In all, Black Elk was gone from the reservation, traveling in the white's world, for three years. When he returned to the reservation he wrote of his experience:

Of the white man's many customs, only his faith, the white man's beliefs about God's will, and how they act according to it, I wanted to understand. I traveled to one city after another, and there were many customs around God's will. 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as a sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing' [I Cor. 13].

So Lakota people, trust in God! Now all along I trust in God. I work honestly and it is good; I hope the people will do likewise...Across the big ocean is where they killed Jesus; again I wished to see it but it was four days on the ocean and there was no

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<sup>141</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 217.

railroad. If horses go there they die of thirst. Only those long necks [camels] are able to go there. [It would require] much money for me to be able to go there to tell about it myself.<sup>142</sup>

Black Elk had learned a great deal about the essence of both white customs and Christianity while with the white men. He certainly understood the one scripture that all prophets of the Great Spirit should understand. He also saw how the white man did not follow its truth. This letter was published in December 1889, one year before the massacre at Wounded Knee.

Shortly after his return to Dakota, the Ghost Dance fire burned into the Pine Ridge reservation. Black Elk said that at first he stayed away from the Dance, but at last, he went to find out for himself what the new religion was all about.

So I got on my horse and went to this ghost dance on Wounded Knee Creek below Manderson. I was surprised, and could hardly believe what I saw; because so much of my vision seemed to be in it. The dancers, both women and men, were holding hands in a big circle, and in the center of the circle they had a tree painted red with most of its branches cut off and some dead leaves on it. This was exactly like the part of my vision where the holy tree was dying, and the circle of men and women holding hands was like the sacred hoop that should have power to make the tree bloom again. I saw too that the sacred articles the people had offered were scarlet, as in my vision, and all their faces were painted red. Also, they used the pipe and the eagle feathers. I sat there looking on and feeling sad. It all seemed to be from my great vision somehow and I had done nothing yet to make the tree bloom.

Then all at once great happiness overcame me, and it all took hold of me right there. This was to remind me to get to work at once and help to bring my people back into the sacred hoop, that they might again walk the red road in a sacred manner pleasing to the Powers of the Universe that are One Power. I remembered how the spirits had taken me to the center of the earth and shown me the good things, and how my people could prosper. I remembered how the Six Grandfathers had told me that through their power I should make my people live and the holy tree should bloom. I believed my vision was coming true at last, and happiness overcame me.

When I went to the dance, I went only to see and learn what the people believed; but now I was going to stay and use the power that had been given me. The dance was over for the day, but they would dance again the next day, and I would dance with them.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>DeMallie, 9-10.

Before Black Elk danced the next day, his uncle prayed for him under the sacred tree that had not bloomed. He said, "Father, Great Spirit, behold this boy! Your ways he shall see!" Black Elk thought of his people who were in despair, and he thought of his vision. In the Thunder-being vision of his youth he had seen that he would lead the people back to a place on this earth where they could be happy again. They were on the wrong road now, but maybe they could be brought back into the hoop, to the good road, and the tree would bloom again. He danced that day feeling the power of the Spirit, but he had no vision that first day. In the night, as Black Elk meditated on what he had seen and felt, he thought that maybe the holy tree of his vision was blooming and his dream was coming true. He also thought "that we would disappoint the white race and only my people would live."<sup>144</sup>

The next day as he danced he fell into a vision. He flew over a beautiful and plentiful land. When he touched the ground he was met by men in holy shirts. They sent him back with the knowledge of the shirts, and as he flew back he saw the tree with people dancing around it. "I had hoped to see the withered tree in bloom, but it was dead." That night Black Elk made Ghost Shirts. As he worked, he "thought that if this world would do as the vision teaches, the tree would bloom." The next day he was asked to lead the dance. He prayed, "Father, Great Spirit, behold me! The nation that I have is in despair. The new earth you promised you have shown me. Let my nation also behold it."<sup>145</sup> This prayer would one day be answered, but first more tragedy was at hand for him and his people. But in the vision he would have today, he would see powerful things. As they danced they sang this song:

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<sup>143</sup>Neihardt, 237-238.

<sup>144</sup>DeMallie, 260.

<sup>145</sup>Neihardt, 243-244

Over here they have said, over here they have said.

Father, in tears I have said. The Wasichu have said.<sup>146</sup>

During the dance he floated away. He saw the good land again. Before he got to the land, he had to fly over the ridge with the great flame where there was an enormous rumbling sound. There was tragedy to pass over before he arrived at the promised land. He glided over six villages and came down south of the sixth one. Twelve men met him.

As I touched the ground, twelve men were coming towards me, and they said: 'Our Father, the two-legged chief, you shall see!'

Then they led me to the center of the circle where once more I saw the holy tree all full of leaves and blooming.

But that was not all I saw. Against the tree there was a man standing with arms held wide in front of him. I looked hard at him, and I could not tell what people he came from. He was not Wasichu and he was not Indian.<sup>147</sup> His hair was long and hanging loose, and on the left side of his head he wore an eagle feather. His body was strong and good to see, and it was painted red. I tried to recognize him, but I could not make him out. He was a very fine looking man. While I was staring hard at him, his body began to change and became very beautiful with all colors of light, and around him was light. He spoke like singing: 'My life is such that all earthly beings and growing things belong to me. Your father, the Great Spirit, has said this. You too must say this.'

Then he went out like a light in the wind.<sup>148</sup>

The twelve men who were there spoke: 'Behold them! Your nation's life shall be such!'

I saw again how beautiful the day was--the sky all blue and full of yellow light above the greening earth. And I saw that all the people were beautiful and young. There were no old ones there, nor children either--just people of about one age, and beautiful.

Then there were twelve women who stood in front of me and spoke: 'Behold them! Their way of life you shall take back to earth.' When they had spoken I heard singing in the west, and I learned the song that I heard.

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<sup>146</sup>DeMallie, 262

<sup>147</sup>*The Sixth Grandfather* reads, "I didn't know whether he was white or Indian. He did not resemble Christ. He looked like an Indian, but I was not sure of it." 263

<sup>148</sup>Here, in *The Sixth Grandfather*, Black Elk adds, "It seemed as though there were wounds in the palms of his hands." 263

Then one of the twelve men took two sticks, one painted white and one red, and, thrusting them in the ground, he said: 'Take these! You shall depend upon them. Make haste!'<sup>149</sup>

I started to walk, and it seemed as though a strong wind went under me and picked me up. I was in the air, with outstretched arms, and floating fast. There was a fearful dark river that I had to go over, and I was afraid. It rushed and roared and was full of angry foam. Then I looked down and saw many men and women who were trying to cross the dark and fearful river, but they could not. Weeping, they looked up to me and cried: 'Help us!' But I could not stop gliding, for it was as though a great wind were under me.

Then I saw my earthly people again at the dancing place, and fell back into my body lying there. And I was sitting up, and people were crowding around me to ask what vision I had seen.<sup>150</sup>

Black Elk had seen the Messiah; he had seen the promised land; he had also seen the tragic river that had to be crossed to get there. The only way it could be crossed was to fly on the wings of a mighty, rushing wind.

There were many parallels to the Thunder-beings vision that had first brought him his power. He said that he went to the sixth village because in his first vision he had seen six grandfathers and he was the sixth one himself. He saw two men in his first vision and two in his Messiah vision. He saw twelve horses in his first and twelve men in his Messiah vision. These he thought represented the twelve moons of the year and the villages might represent six generations. In the sixth maybe the tree would bloom as in his vision. He looked at his people; they were poor and lean because of the white man's treachery. When he sang the song he had received from the Messiah, the people wailed and cried. He said, "I realized now that I had prophesied. The Big Foot massacre occurred and I saw them wailing."<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>149</sup>Black Elk says that they were about a yard high in *The Sixth Grandfather*, 264.

<sup>150</sup>Neihardt, 244-247

<sup>151</sup>DeMallie, 265

William Powers says that "according to informants on the Pine Ridge reservation his [Black Elk] manner of preaching the Ghost dance doctrine was decidedly Christian." When he would try to explain the cataclysmic event that the dance promised, the great upheaval of the earth and the restoration of those who had died and the return of the buffalo, he would fill a paunch of water and bury it in the ground. While he preached, he would stamp on the ground around the place until the water began to spill over. He would then compare the cataclysm to Noah's flood, claiming that all disbelievers would perish in it. He also used gunpowder, throwing it into the fire and comparing the explosion and flaming sparks with the torments of hell. These tactics greatly impressed the people, and Powers declares that they were remembered by the people for many years afterwards.<sup>152</sup> Even during these turbulent times--soon Black Elk would be waging war on the white man--he seems to have made some kind of separation between the identity of the white man's God and the white men he would soon be shooting at. Powers describes this ability as common among medicine men. "At this point Black Elk, like so many other medicine men, was participating simultaneously in both religious systems, drawing upon the protocol and ritual of traditional Lakota religion, as well as Christianity to help meet daily problems as they arose." He goes on to point out that "The necessity of Neihardt and others to make him uniquely Lakota has obscured the fact that most Lakotas have been and continue to be quite capable of moving between two or more religious systems on a situational basis, drawing from each and all those prayers, songs, rituals, histories, myths, and beliefs that satisfied the needs of the particular time and its attendant crises. The western position that people are supposed to belong to one religion, or at least to one religion at a time in serial allegiance to a singular belief system, has contributed significantly to the myth of

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<sup>152</sup>Powers, 46.

Black Elk."<sup>153</sup> As the massacre at Wounded Knee approached, Black Elk was using all the spiritual power at his disposal to live his life, to work to find his place in and bring his vision to pass. For Black Elk, the Ghost Dance was not part Indian and part Christian; it was part of one vision, one Spirit.

The whites feared the Ghost Dance. To their eyes and ears it was wild, demonic, and savage. The Indians no longer worked. They had forsaken making some kind of living for themselves. Black Elk became a very powerful leader of the dance, and Indians from other bands came to participate in his power. He made ghost shirts for his people and those from the other bands. The soldiers made a rule that the Indians should only dance three days a month, and the rest of the time they should work. On December 29, 1890, the soldiers came to Big Foot's camp and began to confiscate the Indian's guns. There was a struggle and shooting began. The massacre at Wounded Knee had begun. Black Elk said:

The night before this [Wounded Knee] I was over in the camp at Pine Ridge and I couldn't sleep. When I saw the soldiers going out it seemed that I knew there would be trouble. I was walking around all night until daylight. After my meal early that morning I got my horse and while I was out I heard shooting over to the east--I heard wagon guns going off.<sup>154</sup> A man who returned from Pine Ridge...said, "Hey, hey son, the people that are coming are fired upon, I know it."

I took my buckskin and saddled up. I had no gun. The only thing I had was the sacred red stick. I put on my sacred shirt. This was a shirt I had made to be worn by no one but myself...This was a bullet-proof shirt.<sup>155</sup>

Black Elk went to fight for his people's rights, but he was of a double mind. "I just thought it over and I thought I should not fight. I doubted about this Messiah business and therefore it seemed that I should not fight for it, but anyway I was going because I had already decided to

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<sup>153</sup>Powers, 46-47.

<sup>154</sup>Hotchkiss machine guns.

<sup>155</sup>DeMallie, 273

go." He was with about twenty other men. When they came in sight of the soldiers, Black Elk sang a sacred song. He said he was then depending on his Messiah vision.<sup>156</sup> He sang:

A Thunder-being nation I am I have said.

A Thunder-Being nation I am I have said.

You shall live. You shall live. You shall live. You shall live.

They headed down to help their people. At the head of a gulch Black Elk saw a baby all alone. "I was going to pick her up but I left her for she was in a safe place." Later the baby was adopted by his father-in-law. They rode into battle. Black Elk said, "I could feel the bullets hitting me but I was bulletproof. I had to hang on to my horse to keep the bullets from knocking me off. I had the sacred bow with me and all I had to do was hold the bow toward the soldiers and you should have seen the soldiers run!" Black Elk saw the bullet marks on his shirt and he heard them whizzing by. He said, "I got shot but not much. I could only feel a bullet graze my body, was all." During this time he said, "I did not use my first vision, but I used the power of the vision about the Messiah...I just thought I would probably die before this thing was over and I just figured that there would be a day when I could either take revenge or die. I did not recall the vision that I should have recalled at this time."<sup>157</sup> The Indians gathered at a place between Manderson and Oglala where Black Elk again prayed. This time he recalled his first vision and prayed:

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<sup>156</sup> It is unclear exactly what Black Elk means. Some have postulated that he had a conflict at this time between his Thunder Being vision and his Messiah vision. On the other hand, it could simply be that he is denoting which "power" he is calling upon at a given time and place. Spirit visions come with endowments of special powers released or enacted through songs, dances, or other rituals given during, or symbolizing, the vision.

<sup>157</sup> Again, Black Elk is most likely looking back and wondering which power he called on or which power or gift he should have used in the particular circumstances. An analogy might be made to a Christian deciding what scripture "to stand on in faith" for a given circumstance of life.

Yeah heh!

Yeah heh!

Yeah heh!

Yeah heh!

Grandfathers, behold me and send me a power for revenge.

Fighting continued. The next day Black Elk was wounded. He described hearing "the bullets hitting my clothes. Then something hit me on the belt on the right side. I reeled on my horse and rode on over the hill...I was in fear and had forgotten my power...I doubted my power right there...and my fear for the moment killed my power and during that moment I was shot." A companion grabbed him and wrapped him in a blanket that "kept my insides from falling out." Black Elk said that it was a good day to die, but his friend said, "You must not die today, you must live, for the people depend on you."<sup>158</sup>

The next day Black Elk called an assembly where he remembered his first vision. He took white paint and put a little on each gun to make them sacred. Then the people faced the west, to the direction of the Thunder-beings,<sup>159</sup> and pointed their guns there. Black Elk then sent his voice:

Hey-a-a-a-a. Hey-a-a-a-a. Hey-a-a-a-a. Hey-a-a-a-a. Grandfathers, the six grandfathers that I will thus recall to you today, behold me! And also to the four quarters of the earth and its powers. Thus you have said if an enemy I should meet that I should recall you. This you have said to me. Thus you have set me in the center of the earth and said that my people will be relative-like with Thunder-beings. Today my people are in despair, so, six grandfathers, help me.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>DeMallie, 272-278

<sup>159</sup>Neihardt, 25 In Black Elk's first vision he was told, "Behold them yonder where the sun goes down, the thunder beings!"

<sup>160</sup>DeMallie, 280

A storm began to appear. It was winter, but the Thunder-beings appeared with lightning and thunder. The people raised their hands, crying out. They were ready to go out again for revenge. Black Elk said of his feelings, "Revenge is sweet." But there would be no revenge. That day the elders made peace. General Miles sent for Young Man Afraid of His Horse<sup>161</sup> who came to the chiefs to make peace. Chief Red Cloud and the others agreed. Black Elk said, "We all agreed. I wanted revenge anyway. I knew that when those clouds had appeared the Thunder-beings had talked to me. I did not want to have peace, but the people insisted..."<sup>162</sup>

Between 1892 and 1904 Black Elk continued as a holy man interceding for his people, practicing traditional rituals and healing ceremonies. How his Christian beliefs entered into the traditional ceremonies he conducted during this period is unknown. The Episcopalian ministers, both Indian and white, that had dominated the Sioux reservations before 1890 were not vehemently opposed to Indian ceremonies like the later missionaries. All that was Indian was not considered wrong and pagan, and many of the Indian ministers had been medicine men. Concerning these Indian ministers training Vine Deloria wrote:

Bishop Hare trained those Indian priests and Indian ministers by teaching them the Bible. . . it thrills me how well he trained them, especially in the Old Testament. By teaching them the Old Testament he was really giving them a liberal arts education equivalent to a bachelor of arts, because the Bible contains all the subjects that I had to study to get my B.A.: history, biography, poetry, social problems, economic problems, morality. . . the teachings of these early Indian ministers were simple, sound, sincere, solid, stimulating, and stabilizing! So that's how these early Indian ministers, who never went to school formally, received their training.<sup>163</sup>

How much influence his earlier Episcopalian conversion had on Black Elk during the years after Wounded Knee is unclear. During these years, Black Elk married and had two children.

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<sup>161</sup>Really, Young Man whose enemies are Afraid even of His Horse.

<sup>162</sup>DeMallie, 281

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<sup>163</sup>Deloria SR. "The Establishment of Christianity Among the Sioux," 109.

## **Black Elk Becomes Nick**

In 1893, at the age of 28 or 29, Black Elk was married to Kate Warbonnet. That same year they had a son, Never Showed Off, and in 1895 they had another son, Good Voiced Star.

Apparently, Kate was one of the early converts to Catholicism. The first Catholic mission, Holy Rosary Mission, was built four miles north of the Pine Ridge Agency in 1888. Both sons were baptized in the Catholic church in 1895 and given the names William and John. William died in 1897. A third son, Benjamin, was born to them in 1899. This is the son that would later serve as the interpreter for Neihardt and also Joseph Epes Brown. Benjamin was baptized on March 11, 1901. Two years later Kate died leaving Black Elk with his three young sons. His friend John Lone Goose, a neighbor and Catholic lay catechist, talked to Black Elk during this time about Catholicism. He criticized Black Elk's participation in what the Jesuits regarded as acts of the devil.<sup>164</sup>

In 1904, Black Elk was treating a child using a traditional medicine ritual when a Jesuit priest, Father Lindebner, whom the Indians called Short Father, came into the tent and grabbed the medicine man's tobacco offerings, deposited them in the stove, and took his drum and rattle and threw them out of the tent. He then grabbed Black Elk and commanded, "Satan , get out!" Black Elk went with the priest back to the Holy Rosary Mission. He stayed there for two weeks of training and was baptized a Catholic on December 6, 1904, on the feast of Saint Nicholas. He was given the Christian name Nicholas. On July 2, 1905, Nick Black Elk was confirmed and given the name William. The next year he was married to Anna Brings Back Horses who had also been married before and had a daughter Emma. Anna was a Catholic but had not yet been

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<sup>164</sup>Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," 47.

confirmed, so the same year of their marriage, 1906, she received the sacrament at the Indian Congress on July 7 and was given the name Rosa. After this she went by the name Ana Rosa. She and Nick had four more children, Lucy, Henry, Mary, and Nick Tom. They were all baptized on the day of their births. Benjamin was later confirmed on June 15, 1911, and given the name, Benjamin Aloysius.<sup>165</sup>

Black Elk's family lineage demonstrates the importance of Catholicism in he and his family's life. He embraced his Catholic role with the same fervor as he had his vision quests, his role as medicine man and healer in the *Yuwipi*, the Ghost Dance, and possibly his Episcopalianism.<sup>166</sup> Between 1907 and 1930, Black Elk was completely absorbed in his duties with the Catholic church. As a member of the St. Joseph's Society, a confraternity of Lakota catechists who served as custodians of the local chapels, he held prayer services and filled in for the priests when they had to be absent. Ana Rosa became a member of the St. Mary's Society, and they both found themselves in constant demand. They were popular among the Jesuits and were often asked to travel on evangelistic missions to other reservations. They ministered among the Arapahos, and Shoshonis in Wyoming, the Winnebegos in Nebraska, and the Dakotas in eastern South Dakota. According to baptismal records at the Holy Rosary Mission, between 1906 and 1910 he served as godfather for a total of fifty-nine people. In 1911 he was the godfather for twenty people at a mass baptism at St. Peter's Church in Manderson. From 1920 to 1928 he stood up for twelve people, one of whom was Jonas Ground Spider, sometimes called Jonas Walks Under Ground, who became a leading Peyotist. On September 1, 1930, he became

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<sup>165</sup>Powers, 47-48.

<sup>166</sup> It is doubtful that Black Elk's first baptism was any kind of conversion in the Christian sense of the act. It was simply a requirement of acceptance into Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Although, Black Elk's own testimony is that he joined the show primarily to find out about the white man's God.

godfather, as far as we know for the last time, to Mary Iron Crow who was sixty-five years old.

This was one month after John Neihardt's first visit to the holy man.<sup>167</sup>

There has been much speculation as to why Black Elk converted to Christianity. When *Black Elk Speaks* was published in 1932, there was no mention at all of Black Elk's Christian life in it. Hilda Neihardt Petri, Neihardt's daughter, tells of a conversation between her father and Black Elk that occurred one afternoon when the others in the family had gone to the Catholic church mission. This prompted Neihardt to ask "why Black Elk, whose story revealed beliefs of such beauty and spiritual meaning, was a member of a white church." Whether the implied attitude of disdain for the "white church" is Hilda's bias or was actually present in Neihardt's question is difficult to ascertain. Black Elk's reply was, "Because my children have to live in this world."<sup>168</sup> Interpretations of this statement abound. Hilda interpreted the essence of the conversation saying that, what Black Elk "did not find it necessary to say left us with a strong sense of where his true beliefs remained." Her father "understanding all too well," said no more." She concludes with, "Leaving that sensitive, vaguely unpleasant subject, we turned eagerly to plans for our trip to Harney peak."<sup>169</sup> If this exchange had been in English it would have been hard to ascertain the meaning of Black Elk's statement. As it was, delivered through an interpreter, it is even more difficult to know what was in the old man's heart. Clearly, Hilda felt that Black Elk did not hold to Christianity in the same manner as he had faith in his visions and traditional rituals.

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<sup>167</sup>Powers, 48-49.

<sup>168</sup>Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow*, 88.

<sup>169</sup>Hilda Neihardt, 89.

Early in *The Sixth Grandfather*, DeMallie states that Neihardt probably did not know about Black Elk's participation in the Catholic church.<sup>170</sup> This seems highly unlikely since he stayed with Black Elk for an extended period. Clearly Nick was actively participating in church functions immediately before and after his visit. The early statement is somewhat contradictory since discussing the subject later on in the text he references Hilda's account writing:

Black Elk told Neihardt little about his later life, his experiences in the Catholic Church, his travels to other Indian reservations as missionary, and his work as a catechist at Pine Ridge. Neihardt was curious about why Black Elk put aside his old religion. According to Hilda, Black Elk merely replied, "My children had to live in this world," and Neihardt did not probe any further.

DeMallie interprets Hilda's account by concluding that, "For Neihardt, the beauty of Black Elk's vision made the formalism of Christian religion seem all the more stultifying, and he seems to have accepted Black Elk's pragmatic explanation at face value."<sup>171</sup> DeMallie's affirmation of Neihardt's attitude is consistent with what we know of his attitude toward organized religion, but whether Black Elk's statement is pragmatic in nature is not clear. What the "face value" of the old man's statement is not clear.

In discussing this aspect of Black Elk on an internet discussion list, Mary Sheldon posted an internet letter on the subject that follows the "pragmatic" interpretation: Mary is currently an Assistant Professor of Native American Literature at The University of Washburn, a public, four-year urban and regional university in Topeka, Kansas, the fourth largest among Kansas universities. She uses the name Mary Dog Soldier on the Native American discussion lists and has been a frequent contributor to Native American scholarly discussions for many years. Concerning Black Elk she writes:

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<sup>170</sup>DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 27.

Bruce:

I agree with you that there is an important distinction to make between Black Elk's belief in 'Jesus' and 'European materialism'--or we might add 'American capitalism.' Yet I still believe the question as to WHY Black Elk converted is important.

The Catholic Church used pressure and coercion to force many Lakota to end their traditional ways. Even Raymond J. DeMallie (an apologist for the Catholic Church it seems to me) in his introduction to *THE SIXTH GRANDFATHER: BLACK ELK'S TEACHINGS GIVEN TO JOHN G. NEIHARDT* admits that 'Missionaries moralized it [Wounded Knee] as the will of God, ending once for all the pagan hold of idolatry on the Lakota people' (11). De Mallie goes on to describe how a priest once threw Black Elk and his sacred objects out of a tent as the elder ministered to a dying boy, and yelled: 'Satan, get out!'<sup>(4)</sup> In Black Elk's talks with Neihardt (as translated by DeMallie), Black Elk later argues: 'The whites think we have the power from the devil, but I'll say that they probably have that themselves' (289). Could Black Elk be responding to the harsh attacks against his traditional practices?

By the time Neihardt knew Black Elk, traditional ways were illegal--which had to please the missionaries. For Black Elk to even hold a Rabbit Dance for Neihardt (which the priests denounced as 'one of the chief evils threatening the family'), Neihardt had to get documents from the Board of Indian Commissioners, the Secretary of the Interior, and the agent at Pine Ridge (38). When Neihardt asked Black Elk why he had put aside his traditional spiritual ways, Black Elk replied: 'My children had to live in this world' (47). This is spoken at a time when the Lakota were hungry and the church was in charge of much food distribution, and could influence the distribution of food.

Whatever Black Elk believed about Jesus, the fact that the institutional churches used coercion to force conversions is something we should never forget or sweep under the rug. It happened all over this country. In my own area, elders have told me their parents converted so they would have food. In a southern state after a major flood three years ago, I saw boxes of food and clothes simply stacked up in a Christian Church. I asked why they were not being distributed, and the response was too many were sent for the Native American people who attended, and if others wanted to receive help they would have to at least attend one service. (I worked for the Catholic Church in Native American ministry for three years, and along side Protestant Native Americans in ministry as well.)

In at least three places in female's[sic] translation of Black Elk's words, he quotes Black Elk as identifying himself with a prisoner of war: 'Now, when I look ahead, we are nothing but prisoners of war, but the Great Spirit has protected us so far, and this Great Spirit takes care of us' (289). While there are many words of Jesus in Scripture which Black Elk must have admired and lived better than any Christian or Christian missionary (such as 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do

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<sup>17</sup>ibid., 47.

likewise' [LK3:11]), the reason WHY this traditional healer had to give up his traditional practices in public remains a scandal.

Mary Sheldon"<sup>172</sup>

Mary's observations here supply valuable insight, and her castigation of Church policy is appropriate given our position of hindsight. The Institutions of the church, in all denominations, have perpetrated great injury on innocent people for centuries. Nonetheless, looking back from a late twentieth century moral perspective at the Catholic mission's actions can seriously color an understanding of what Black Elk saw as the Church's role in his and his family's life.

Until 1882, the Episcopalians were officially in charge of the Christianization of the western Sioux. Under Grant's "Peace Policy," the reservations were divided up among different religious groups. The denomination assigned to a reservation was given the task of assimilation. The Episcopalians under Bishop Hare dominated the Sioux, even though other Protestant denominations, as well as Catholics, had established missions on the Sioux reservations. The criteria under the Peace Policy for tribal assignments revolved around who had expended the most time and energy among a particular tribe. Which ever denomination was chosen was given exclusive control over the reservation's affairs. This included the governance of tribal lands, the right to choose the Indian agents, school teachers, and restrict other churches from evangelizing among its people. The missionaries were extremely critical of Indian ways of life but, for the most part, were kind, and the Sioux liked them. For the most part, reservation Indians attended services regularly and demonstrated a sincere desire to know the God that was being preached to

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<sup>172</sup>Mary Sheldon, Internet e-mail post--From zzshem@acc.wuacc.edu Sat Apr 15 15:47:14 1995; Date: Mon, 06 Mar 1995 14:22:06 -0600; From: sheldon mary <zzshem@acc.wuacc.edu>; To: NATIVELIT-L@cornell.edu; Subject: Black Elk. Current e-mail address of Mary Dog Soldier: zzdogs@acc.wuacc.edu

them. What did confuse them was the ill-concealed hostility the various sects and denominations had for one another.<sup>173</sup>

The Peace Policy assumed that the denominations in charge would go about the business of civilizing, assimilating, and Christianizing the Indians. One of the foremost critics of the policy was the Catholic church. They complained that the Peace Policy was dominated by Protestant bigotry and the distribution of appointments discriminated against Catholics. The Catholics believed that thirty-eight reservations should have been put under their administration; their missions, they said, dominated those tribes. The Peace Policy awarded them only seven. The Catholics argued fervently that they were obliged to minister to Catholic Indians, regardless of the Peace Policy directives. Indians, both Catholic and heathen, should not be deprived of the opportunity to embrace Catholicism just because a government did not recognize the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catholic church formed the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, located in Washington D.C., to lobby the government on the behalf of their missionaries and to serve as advocate between the government and individual missions. For over a decade, the Catholics fought for the rights of their Indians. Ironically, it would be the procedures of Grant's Peace Policy that would enable the Catholics, when they did return to the Rosebud and Pine reservations, to secure government support for additional on-reservation boarding schools. These schools would become the foundation for the church to further the work of civilization.

When the Peace Policy was finally repealed in 1882, a time of moderation and tranquillity in the relations between the Indian Bureau and the Catholic Church intervened. During these years the Bureau of Catholic Missions secured financial support from the government in the

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<sup>173</sup> Utley, *The Last Days of the Sioux*, 33.

form of allocated funds from the federally administered treaty money, or "trusts," which belonged to the Indians themselves. Since building these institutions was no longer under the jurisdiction of the Protestant churches, the Catholics were given funds. It was at this time of favorable relations that the Holy Rosary Mission was built. In 1888, the Catholic mission that Nicholas Black Elk would minister as a catechist for so many years was founded.<sup>174</sup>

The federal policy on how to handle the Indian problem went from removal of wandering bands to segregated isolation on the reservation during the years after the Civil War. The government, which once had to negotiate with Indians as citizens of free and independent nations, now allocated Indian peoples to the role of wards of the United States government. They had now been made "domestic dependent nations." The transformation of Indian policy can be attributed to both the pragmatic factors encountered because of the shifting demographics of Indian-white relations and the philosophical, moral, and theological perspectives of the mission boards who had preceded the army that put them on the reservation. The treaties that created the reservation system assumed that once Indians settled on these lands they would hold title to the tracts perpetually as their homeland. There, as independent nations, they could live their lives peacefully as they pleased with the help of the government in the form of the annuities promised in the treaties. This expectation, of course, was impossible given the nature of mission's ideology and the insatiability of Manifest Destiny.

The primary constraint to the missionary's goals had always been the nomadic and migratory lifestyle of the Indian people, especially the northern Plains Indians. Now that they were concentrated on to smaller tracts of land, churches, schools, and missions would be more

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<sup>174</sup>Harvey Markowitz, "The Catholic Mission and the Sioux: A Crisis in the Early Paradigm," *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation*. Raymond J. Demallie and Douglas R. Parks ed., (Norman: University of

effective. The mission after all, for the church, was that of education--to civilize their childlike converts. As the land lust of Manifest Destiny reduced the size of the treaty lands, the government opted more and more for assimilation, and the churches, whose goal had always been assimilation, was the perfect expedient. Once the Federal Indian Bureau adopted assimilation as the most effective and "moral" course to pursue the neutralization of Indian-white hostilities, a marriage between the government and the church seemed the perfect solution. The period of Reconstruction after the Civil War and the subsequent years of Progressivism provided the ideal philosophical and ideological foundation for the doctrine of assimilation to be implemented.

The rhetoric of the Radical Republicans who designed the programs of Reconstruction in the South after the Civil War, spoke of integration and equal rights for blacks in the south. Nevertheless, the Union Armies were segregated, and with the failure of any kind of integration in the South, segregation became an acceptable and obviously natural state of affairs, even for men like General Oliver Otis Howard. Military officers who had played a role in the Freedmen's Bureau and the policies of Reconstruction in the South brought their expertise to the Indian problem when sent to the West. Having Indians segregated in their own communities, where they could be instructed in the ways of civilization, was the ideal method of progressive reform. The reservation system was more than the most expedient and pragmatic method for dealing with the Indian problem; it was completely in line with the principles of social reform. For underlying the plans for assimilation were the developmental social theories of normative anthropology, a developmental social theory based in a faith in the progress of history and the

evolution of human societies. The foundation of progressive reform is the wedding of the Social Gospel and the Social Darwinism of the turn of the century.

Evolutionary or developmental theory considered human nature at both the savage and civilized stages to be one nature. Human societies simply evolved toward a higher state of civilization. For late nineteenth and early twentieth century reformers, at the highest rung of the social and cultural evolutionary ladder were the customs and habits that typify the Euro-American society of the United States of America. The United States was a step above the European society that it had sprung from, and lagging behind them, in different degrees of development, were groups known as barbarian or savage. These non-European peoples' social customs and institutions were examples of those of the European's primitive ancestors. All human beings, whatever stage of development they had attained to, were guided by the same basic principles of thought and action. This assumption was the basic mistake of the reformer missionaries. Indians simply did not think along the same lines and according to the same basic principles as white society.

White social science and religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (and for the most part, even today), believed that since all societies possessed some form of government, some kind of law, marriage, religion, and economic structure, they were similar in origin. This was evidence of a "psychic uniformity" that characterized all humanity. This belief, that basic human nature was a constant, made the supposition possible that structured social change in the character of institutions was the typical means of society's progress. Therefore, even though people at the savage stage of society experienced the world in a different way, it was not a difference at the core; the difference was not one of essence. Just as a child is essentially the same person he or she is as an adult, so were Indians and whites the same in essence. All that

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was lacking in the savage, both individually and as a society as a whole, was experience. Indians simply needed to be raised in the proper environment and they would quickly obtain to the same level as white society. Developmentalism in late nineteenth century social thought, then, was not a change from one cultural state to another but a movement through normal and consecutive stages of advancement. This coincided perfectly with the underlying myth of American society--Progress. Social and cultural progress was the move from innocence to experience, from infancy to adulthood.<sup>175</sup>

The officials placed in charge of Indians on reservations, whether they were Protestant or Catholic missionaries, whether they were army officers or civilian bureaucrats, were firmly entrenched in a faith in developmentalism. They may or may not have known it, or been able to describe it, but it was a fundamental view held by Americans involved with the work of social reform. By the end of nineteenth century, American Christianity, the idea that history was progress toward a higher existence, and the ideals of a liberal government and economy were integrated into one ideal--one faith. With this philosophical image of reality in their mind, making the reservation a "civilizing station," where the natural process of assimilation could take place in a controlled environment, seemed all too natural and right. Rather than homelands, as they were first intended to be in the language of the treaties, reservations became training camps or way stations where Indians could achieve a degree of civilization that would make them comparable to their white contemporaries. They would then be incorporated into the mainstream of society gradually, of course, but ultimately, the reservation, the Indian Bureau, and the missions would become obsolete.

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<sup>175</sup>Markowitz, 116-118.

The primary institution by which this would be accomplished was the reservation boarding school. Progressive faith in educating the young creating permanent social change was a self evident, axiomatic truth in the minds of reformers. The self-contained environment of the boarding school, where Indian children could be tutored and trained in the arts of civilization and society while being protected from the primitive conditions and backward customs of their parents, and especially grandparents, seemed the ideal solution to the "Indian problem." Progressives saw solving problems as their primary function in the earth, and Indians were problems. In 1886, when priests and brothers of the Jesuit Order and Sisters of the St. Francis arrived on the Rosebud Reservation to begin their work of civilization, they inherited the favor of government left over from Grant's Peace Policy, as well as an ideology of reform that for decades had permeated American society as a whole. They found the government willing to help finance their schools.

Just over a year after they established a base among the Brules on the Rosebud, the Catholics founded the Holy Rosary Mission and Boarding School among the Oglalas on the Pine Ridge Reservation. The structure and operating procedures at the mission and the school were typical of the assimilationist goals and in line with federal policies. They hoped that the stringent program of religious and social education would advance the Oglalas from savagery to civilization in one or two generations. In the schools, Lakota children were exposed to a curriculum that would both divest them of native customs and instill in them civilized habits. It was designed as a system of "cultural replacement." The day consisted of morning classes in reading, writing, and math. Everything was taught in English of course, and students were forbidden from and severely punished for speaking Lakota. The rest of the day was dedicated to the practical skills needed in a civilized society. Boys practiced the essential arts of agriculture,

husbandry, and were taught skills like shoe repair, carpentry, and painting. Girls milked cows, and did cooking, washing, and other household management tasks.

During the first years of the school, the children were allowed to return home to their families during holidays and for occasional visits, but this proved to be too disruptive to their training for the teachers to bear. When holidays ended many children had to be retrieved by reservation police, and there were always behavior problems after the home visits. The potency of savagery was too much for the children to resist. "A little leaven, leaveneth the whole lump." Weekend and holiday visits had to be terminated after the first year of the school. This isolationist philosophy was only relaxed during the summer when students were allowed to return to the *tiyospaye* (extended-family) camps. Each year, when school resumed, the teachers lamented that their students had fallen back into the ways of the savage, but each year they tried anew to make them more resistant to the influence of their parents' and grandparents' backward influences.<sup>176</sup> This is the educational system that Lucy Looks Twice, Black Elk's most devoted Catholic daughter, and the rest of her siblings attended.

The work of adult assimilation at the missions took on similar characteristics, but some traditional Indian customs had to be incorporated in order for the adults to identify with the church. The traditional native men's and women's associations were adapted into the Saint Joseph and Saint Mary's sodalities. Both Nick Black Elk and his wife Ana Rosa were members of these societies. Yet, most Indian traditions were considered detrimental and a vigorous campaign against them was waged by the missionaries. The most detrimental to the process of civilization were the practice of polygamy and the ritual dances. Polygamy was outlawed among Indians early in the reservation period, and after the "Ghost Dance craze" ritual dancing was

outlawed. These practices were considered pagan and detrimental to assimilation. The *mastincala wacipi* (rabbit dance), that Black Elk needed to get special permission to hold for Neihardt in 1931, was also forbidden. Because it was held at night, it interfered with the work ethic of "early to bed, early to rise." The *wihpeyapi* (giveaway) was also discouraged since it also interfered with the rational basis of a capital economy; it divested the Indians of capital necessary for the maintenance of their households.<sup>177</sup> This would seem to be a custom that could have easily been incorporated into the theology of Christian giving, but the missionaries were against it. An 1896 entry from Superior Florentine Digmann's diary, who was in charge of the Holy Rosary Mission, demonstrates his attitude toward these customs:

Our Catholic Indians asked shall we contribute to the collection for the next year's Fourth of July celebration? "No" was my answer; the sooner you bury your old unprofitable customs of dancing and giving away, the better for you. One suggested that they should begin the celebration with a prayer and then have their old fun. "A new patch on an old coat will not hold." One remarked that the Agent was in favor of combining both, "wrapping up the old customs with religion" and so leading the Indians over but he would not succeed."<sup>178</sup>

Even as early as 1886, it is clear from this dialogue that the Indian agent saw advantages in combining Indian custom and white customs, if it seemed beneficial to the instillation of patriotism in the natives. The church fathers, on the other hand, believed that the celebration of the Fourth of July was too close to the summer solstice, the traditional time of the summer Sun Dance gatherings among the Sioux. They wanted there to be no reminders of these pagan festivals, and patriotism was not a goal for them. One of the members of the Saint Joseph Society commented sarcastically, "Dress like an Indian and dance with them and you will have

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<sup>176</sup>Markowitz, 122.

<sup>177</sup>Markowitz, 123.

them [the agents] at your feet."<sup>179</sup> This is indicative of the continuing and underlying hostilities between the government and the Catholic church on the reservation. Even though the Catholics had now been given a free reign to minister to the Oglala, and their schools were funded by reservation money that came from the coffers of the United States Treasury, the church and state did not always see eye to eye. The missionaries utterly rejected the idea that the Lakota could participate in traditional "Devil-dominated heathenish" Indian ceremonies and be Catholics at the same time.<sup>180</sup>

The dominant forces that worked against the Catholic missionaries, at least in their minds, were the tenacity of the Indian religion and customs and the federal government's backsliding on the issue of assimilation. The "blanket Indians" or "non-progressive" Lakotas who refused to accept the new ways and held to the practices of polygamy, dancing, and the giveaways were anathema as far as the missionaries were concerned. Any attempt whatsoever reconciling the Indian traditions with Catholic religion was instantly rejected. Worse than the "blanket Indians," who often simply wanted to hold on to time honored traditions and would be satisfied to share common ground with the progressive Indians and church fathers in celebrations like the Fourth of July, were the medicine men and healers who Church leaders believed were obviously in league with Satan. It is into this category that Black Elk was counted in 1904. Henry Westropp, S.J., in a 1908 article he wrote describing Nicholas Black Elk, said that Black Elk, "during many a year, fooled the people with his '*wakan*' or remedies, supposed to possess magical efficacy. During the rising of 1890, at Pine Ridge he played a conspicuous part. The missionaries had not

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<sup>178</sup>Markowitz, 123, cited from: P. Florentine Digmann, S.J. "*History of the St. Francis Mission, 1886-1922*," Manuscript in Archives of Saint Francis Mission, Saint Francis, S.D.

<sup>179</sup>i Markowitz, 136

<sup>180</sup>Editorial, *The Indian Sentinel* v1 n12, (1919), 4.

paid much attention to him, for the 'medicine men' are about the last class of Indians whom we impress."<sup>181</sup> Black Elk's conversion to Catholicism was nothing short of a miracle to the missionaries. He had come out of the darkest reaches of Satan's camp. Yet, as we have already seen, Nicholas Black Elk came into the Catholic camp already having made some kind of commitment to Christianity, and unlike the missionaries who held him up as a model example of a progressive Indian, he seemed to see no problem with a syncretism of the two traditions.

As detrimental as the fathers believed the non-progressive Indians and medicine men to be to their cause, the Indian Bureau was no less of a threat. The government had funded their schools and, at the beginning, seemed to be in agreement with assimilation ideology. But, as the twentieth century progressed, discontent between the Indian Bureau and the Catholics grew. Their secular assimilation viewpoint often conflicted with the church's. Not only was the Fourth of July celebration a point of contention, so also did the boarding schools become a problem for the Bureau. As early as 1889, the commissioner of Indian affairs, Thomas J. Morgan, wanted to replace church-run boarding schools with government-run boarding and day facilities. An 1896 ruling, The Browning Rule, named after Morgan's successor Daniel M. Browning (1893), stipulated that government schools should be filled before Indian children were allowed to enroll in church schools. Browning's replacement, William Jones (1897), continued the campaign against the federally supported sectarian education, and by 1901, the Holy Rosary School found itself without any government support. The church appealed to Teddy Roosevelt in 1904 and they found a receptive ear in the President. He restored their funds by executive order, but in 1906 the Indian Rights Association challenged the order. The Court finally found in favor of the

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<sup>181</sup>Markowitz, 128. cited from: Henry Westropp, S.J. "Catechist Among the Sioux," *Catholic Missions* v2, (1908), 113.

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church in a case brought before the Supreme Court, *Quick Bear v. Leupp* in 1907.<sup>182</sup> But these challenges were only the beginning of the government's withdrawal from the church that would culminate in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934.

It was during these years, as the government was retreating from church run assimilation policies and opting for a less restrictive course, that Nicholas Black Elk worked diligently in his role as catechist. Nevertheless, as dedicated as he seems to have been to the Catholic church and the Holy Rosary Mission, it is doubtful that he worked to destroy the native traditions he held to be sacred during these years. It is unlikely that he worked against his own visions. On the contrary, there is evidence that he may have had moderating effect on the views of the priests during this time. He worked most closely with Father Eugene Buechel, who served as Superior at both the Saint Francis and Holy Rosary missions during these years. In the 1930s, Father Buechel wrote an impassioned plea for moderation in the assimilation process, asking that the Indian not be rushed. His discourse demonstrates that the fathers still held to the socio-developmental view of assimilation, but he was for a much more gradual approach than earlier church fathers expected:

#### GIVE HIM TIME

Let me tell you how the Indian of today impresses me when placed beside the white man. The white man is the Indian's older brother, older by many years who long ago passed through kindergarten and grammar school, who in time went to high school and completed his fine education at the university and took his place in life doing very wonderful things.

And here is his wee little brother, just crawling from the cradle days of civilization. He was introduced to the classroom only yesterday. His thoughts run back to his playgrounds as he wrestles with the strange problems of the primary class. What a change for him! Still he tries and makes progress, too. There is no doubt but that in

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<sup>182</sup>Markowitz, 132-133.

time he will be as well educated and as efficient as his older brother, the white man--if he is given an equal chance.

But what a pity that the little fellow is being overcrowded, that it is expected that he is to be as efficient as his big brother. How could he be?

That is the Indian as I see him. His path to the white man's standard, which he must now attain, is beset with tremendous difficulties. We ought to appreciate them in order to judge him justly and charitably.

To begin with we should remember that the Indian was a nomad and up to two generations ago, knew no other way of making a living. As such he was forever following the tracks of the wandering buffalo, his daily food. With the necessities of life and a few "luxuries" he was happy and contented.

But were not our forefathers nomads, too? The story of the migrations of people in Europe and Asia is the story of our forebears. They turned to farming only gradually. And what crude farming they must have done in their early days. The Indian, however, is expected to grasp in a couple generations what the white man learned only after a few centuries.

Whenever I read of the man who was going to Jericho and fell among robbers who stripped him of all he had and left him for dead, I cannot help thinking of the Indian. Men and circumstances have robbed him and left him half dead.

He is no longer the princely type of American he once was.

Poor Indian brother, my heart goes out to you for being so misunderstood, misjudged and mistreated. Your "case" is plain, yet they will not see. May a good Samaritan come your way soon, not only to pour oil of understanding sympathy into your wounds but actually help you by giving you a chance to help yourself."<sup>183</sup>

Whether or not his relationship with Black Elk had anything to do with his views of moderation and a more gradual and merciful approach to the Indian's development is hard to ascertain. The Fathers were shocked at the publication of *Black Elk Speaks*. Black Elk as a traditional medicine man, was a Black Elk unknown to them. In their eyes he was a model progressive. The reason the priests could not see this Black Elk can be traced to the same reasons that Neihardt, along with many others, could not see the Christian Nick Black Elk. Their stereotypical nature, and their Aristotelian world view made it almost impossible to comprehend

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<sup>183</sup>Markowitz, 127-128. cited from: Eugene Buechel, S.J. "Give Him Time," Printed document in Archives of St. Francis Mission, St. Francis, S.D. (1930s)

that someone could inhabit an identity that seemed so polemic. Simply put, Black Elk either had to fit into one of the two categories of Indian, progressive/Christian or non-progressive/traditional. He could not be both. If he was, then he was in some sort of schizophrenic state. He had to be living in some kind of conflict, some kind of identity crisis, not knowing which path to choose.

The literature on the subject of who is Nicholas Black Elk is extremely polemic. Christians and Progressives want him to be Christian. Traditionalists, and those injured (white, black, yellow, or red) by Christianity or progressive politics, who look to revive something that was lost or taken from them, need Black Elk to be a traditionalist. The problem for both sides of the issue in current scholarship is: Who is the scapegoat? Who is to blame for the Indian problem? Most agree that the church and the United States government policies were wrong--Indians should not have been divested of their culture and religion. But, what is that religion now and what should it be? If Black Elk is a seer, if he is a prophet, what is his position? Which perspective has the greater value, the traditional or the progressive? When you ask this question you run head long into the problem of time. When is traditional? Is there progress?

## A Spirit Vision Written in Ink

Within oral storytelling, the story is not a text imposed on the listener. The listener and the teller co-create the story and also become participants in the telling and in the story. The listener is expected to respond metaphorically and in very sophisticated interpretive ways to the story.<sup>184</sup>

After the 1973 siege of Wounded Knee, *Black Elk Speaks* became sacrosanct. For many, the teachings of Black Elk in John Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, and his subsequent work, *When the Tree Flowered*, along with *The Sacred Pipe*, by Joseph Epes Brown<sup>185</sup> have become the sacred writings of the Native American religious renaissance. In his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*, Lakota author Vine Deloria, Jr., speculates on what Neihardt and Black Elk would think about the effects their collaboration has had:

The basic works of the Black Elk theological tradition, now bid fair to become the canon or at least the central core of a North American Indian theological canon which will someday challenge the Eastern and Western traditions as a way of looking at the world...Present debates center on the question of Neihardt's literary intrusions into Black Elk's system of beliefs and some scholars have said that the book reflects more of Neihardt than it does of Black Elk. It is, admittedly, difficult to discover if we are talking with Black Elk or John Neihardt, whether the vision is to be interpreted differently, and whether or not the positive emphasis which the book projects is not the optimism of the two poets lost in the modern world. Can it matter? The very nature of religious teachings is that they encompass everyone who understands them and personalities become indistinguishable from the transcendent truth that is expressed. So let it be with *Black Elk Speaks*. That it speaks to us with simple and compelling language about an aspect of human experience and encourages us to emphasize the best that dwells within us is sufficient. Black Elk and John Neihardt would probably nod

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<sup>184</sup>Susan Brill, Date: Thu, 11 Jul 1996 21:01:51 -0700; From: Alan Haig-Brown <ahaig-br@cln.etc.bc.ca>; Reply to: NATIVELIT-L@cornell.edu; To: NATIVELIT-L@cornell.edu; Subject: Re: King's "A Seat in the Garden"; At 10:32 PM 11/07/96 -0700you wrote:; >Susan Brill (BUMAIL) wrote:.

<sup>185</sup>Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953).

affirmatively to that statement and continue their conversation. It is good. It is enough.<sup>186</sup>

But Deloria's viewpoint here has not been enough. The task of articulating a theological canon based upon Black Elk's teaching has been undertaken, but it has not encompassed everyone who proports to understand it, and distinguishing the differences in personalities has become the focus of the literature. Not only has distinguishing between Black Elk and Neihardt become the subject of debate, but also distinguishing between which Nicholas Black Elk is speaking is central to the discussion. Is it Nicholas B. Elk the Christian or Black Elk the "*wic'as'a wakan*" speaking? Maybe all of them are speaking, or maybe, as Deloria believes, it is truth speaking.

Transforming native oral tradition to the written word is not always received favorably by Native Americans. The fact that *Black Elk Speaks* was not written by Black Elk is important. When Black Elk told his story to John Neihardt, he spoke in Lakota, his son Ben translated the discourse, and it was transcribed into English by Neihardt's daughter. From those notes the poet formed the story. No doubt much was lost and changed in the process, but then, much may have been gained. In 1984, Raymond J. DeMallie edited the complete transcripts of the 1931 and 1944 interviews and published them as *The Sixth Grandfather*. DeMallie's reconstruction of the original transcripts follows the actual chronological order of the interviews. He also included portions of Enid's (Neihardt's daughter) diary and some of her notes taken for her father's correspondence concerning the book. *The Sixth Grandfather* is the closest approximation of what actually transpired and was said at the interviews. The second interview in 1944, that produced the book *When the Tree Flowered*, was transcribed by Hilda Neihardt, the poet's other

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<sup>186</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, xiv

daughter, on a field typewriter. These are also included. Of the two, *Black Elk Speaks* has been far more widely read. One of the major differences demonstrated between the picture painted of Black Elk in Neihardt's versions and the actual transcripts of the interviews is revealed by Alice Kehoe. She points out that Neihardt's version concludes with a tragic epiphany. Neihardt has Black Elk ending his story with this speech:

And so it was all over.

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.

And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth--you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, the sacred tree is dead."<sup>187</sup>

Kehoe points out that Black Elk was hardly the pitiful old man which Neihardt portrays here. DeMallie's work clarifies Black Elk's true frame of reference. What Black Elk actually said at this point was:

You have heard what I have said about my people. I had been appointed by my vision to be an intercessor of my people with the spirit powers and concerning that I had decided that sometime in the future I'd bring my people out of the black road into the red road [of life]. From my experience and from what I know, and in recalling the past from where I was at the time, I could see that it was next to impossible, but there was nothing like trying. . .

At that time I could see that the hoop was broken and all scattered out and I thought, "I am going to try my best to get my people back into the hoop again," At this time, when I had these things in my mind, I was abroad with strange people. [*In other words, this period of soul-searching and apprehension of the blackness of the Lakota's road was the time of his peregrinations in Europe, well before Wounded Knee.*]. . . At that time the wilds were vanishing and it seemed the spirits altogether forgot me and I felt almost like a dead man going around--I was actually dead at this time, that's all [*he means that his healing power had left him while he was away from his homeland*]. In

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<sup>187</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 276.

my vision they had predicted that I was chosen to be intercessor for my people so it was up to me to do my utmost for my people and everything that I did not do for my people, it would be my fault--if my people should perish it seemed that it would be my fault. If I were in poverty my people would also be in poverty, and if I were helpless or died, my people would die also. But it was up to me to scheme a certain way for myself to prosper for the people. If I prosper, my people would also prosper.

I am just telling you this, Mr. Neihardt. You know how I felt and what I really wanted to do is for us to make the tree bloom. On this tree [*of life*] we shall prosper. Therefore my children and yours are relative-like [*kin*] and therefore we shall go back into the hoop and here we'll cooperate and stand as one...our families will multiply and prosper after we get this tree to blooming.<sup>188</sup>

Clearly Black Elk saw the interviews with Neihardt as being the beginning of a collaboration that would do more than just preserve his vision. Neihardt became the path, the door, through which he could continue fulfilling the call of his vision to become the intercessor for his people. Black Elk simply did not believe the dream had died; he was not a man living in reflective despair. Yet, Neihardt could hardly have seen him any other way. His romantic and tragic world view could allow no other picture, at least at this time, the time when he was completing *A Cycle of the West*. But even the tragic poet came to believe that the tree would flower again. This is, after all, the title of the 1944 book. Kehoe writes, "Black Elk saw the tree of life blooming once more for the Lakota; 'you remember,' he said to Neihardt, 'I saw many happy faces behind those six grandfathers' in the vision."<sup>189</sup>

Not only does DeMallie's book point to translation and style differences between the transcripts and Neihardt's finished works, he discusses Black Elk's Christianity. This was in no way eluded to in Neihardt's works and has become a major point of dissension in the formulation of a native religious cannon. How much of Black Elk's vision is influenced by his Christianity?

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<sup>188</sup> Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization*. (Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1989), 59-62, I have used Kehoe's account here keeping her observations in italicised brackets.(DeMallie, 294)

<sup>189</sup>Kehoe, 62.

Was he a traditional shaman or a progressive Christian? DeMallie and Kehoe imply that Black Elk became a Catholic for reasons of social expediency but remained a traditional Lakota at heart.<sup>190</sup> DeMallie implies that the Ghost Dance was such a disappointment to Black Elk that he abandoned its teachings. Clyde Holler in, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy," takes exception to this idea. He points out that Black Elk continued to use his Ghost Dance vision as the image of the "happy promised land."<sup>191</sup> DeMallie paints Neihardt's appearance in 1931 as almost a conversion experience for Black Elk. The poet reawakens the old man's hope and renews the traditionalist that has been buried since his conversion to Catholicism in 1904. DeMallie sees Black Elk as shifting some of his guilt and responsibility to Neihardt, he writes, "But the vision, and his failure to live up to it, must have been a heavy burden. This burden he could at long last transfer to another man."<sup>192</sup>

It is true that Black Elk intended to give his power, his vision to Neihardt. But this was done according to established ritual. Sharing his vision, giving his power to Neihardt, should not be deemed an act of shirking his responsibility. On the contrary, he was fulfilling his role as "*wic'as'a wakan*," as a holy man, a keeper of vision, an advocate and intercessor for his people. The truth of the matter is that there is very little evidence for what Black Elk was thinking during the years between the Ghost Dance and Neihardt's first visit. The limited picture we have of his actions seem to suggest that he was actively engaged in working out his vision in both the realms of "traditional" native rite and the increasing understanding he was gaining from his relationship with Christianity. Black Elk does not strike me as a man faltering in his convictions. Rather, the

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<sup>190</sup>Julian Rice, *Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991) 2. DeMallie, 71-72. Kehoe, 123.

<sup>191</sup>Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 7.

<sup>192</sup>DeMallie, 28; also Holler, 10.

picture emerges of a visionary, trying to understand himself in relation to his calling (vision), all the while, trying to communicate what he does understand in the most practical, everyday manner, taking whatever opportunities present themselves in his life experiences to fulfill that call. To view his conversions, if that is what they are, as a pragmatic response is to colonize him with a western ideology. Black Elk would be more accurately viewed as a holy man, working for the life of his people, settled in his convictions that the Spirit had called him. Whether the symbol system he employed was that of native rite or the Catholic sacraments, the message was the same in substance. A duck in English is the same critter as a pato in Spanish. The statement, "because my children had to live in this world," can be as easily understood as saying, "we are here, in this reservation world, the accepted symbol system is Catholicism, I am accepted as catechist, holy man, so I teach using these symbols." When the opportunity came to teach with native symbols to a white disciple rather than teach Indians with Christian symbols it had to be intriguing as well as exciting. Maybe the irony and amusement of Coyote got the better of him, and he just had fun communicating his dream with the different metaphors to different people. Black Elk did seem to recognize that in Neihardt was "a heart to understand." Jesus said to his disciples, "Unto you it is given to know the mysteries. . ." It has been my experience that when a teacher finds a student or disciple that has ears to hear, the wonder and excitement overcome both the discouragement of not being heard and the temptation to speak in a language your audience cannot hear. When Neihardt showed up, it seems most likely that Black Elk found someone with ears to hear.

After the publication of *Black Elk Speaks*, which caused no small uproar in his Catholic friends' circles, Black Elk reaffirmed his commitment to Catholicism for their assurance. After an accident with a team of horses in the winter of 1933 Black Elk received the last rites of the

Catholic Church and when he recovered he dictated a document concerning his belief in

Catholicism. In the document, which is preserved in the Holy Rosary Mission, Black Elk says:

Thirty years ago I knew a little about the one we call God. At that time I was a very good dancer. In England I danced before Our Grandmother, Queen Victoria. At that time I gave medicines to the sick. Perhaps I was proud, I considered myself brave and I considered myself a good Indian, but now I think I am better.

St. Paul also became better after his conversion. I know that the Catholic religion is good, better than the Sun dance or the Ghost dance. Long ago the Indians performed such dances only for glory. They cut themselves and caused the blood to flow. But for the sake of sin Christ was nailed to the cross to take our sins away. The Indian religion of long ago did not benefit mankind. The medicine men sought only glory and presents from their curing. Christ taught us to be humble and He taught us to stop sin. The Indian medicine men did not stop sin. Now I despise sin. And I want to go straight in the righteous way that the Catholics teach us so my soul will reach heaven. This is the way I wish it to be.<sup>193</sup>

Many believe Black Elk made this statement because of pressure from the priests and his daughter Lucy Looks Twice who was a staunch Catholic. It is probably impossible to ascertain Black Elk's frame of mind from the written record, but what is clear is that he continued to teach and promote both traditional and Christian inspiration throughout his life. From the statement above, Black Elk obviously made a symbolic connection between the piercing at the Sun Dance pole and Christ's piercing at the tree of the cross. Black Elk participated in both symbol systems. He was an active participant as a Catholic catechist, converting other Lakotas to the faith. He attended church councils and conferences, and he kept Christian holidays. He also danced in Indian pageants and struggled to see that his great vision and traditional Lakota rites would be remembered and preserved.

In the fall of 1947, Joseph Epes Brown sought out the holy man finding him in Nebraska harvesting potatoes. He spent the winter with the extended family while Black Elk told him of

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<sup>193</sup>DeMallie, 60-61

the sacred pipe. Ben once again translated, and in 1953 Brown published *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*. Even though the reader is encouraged by Brown to conceive of Black Elk as an unreconstructed traditionalist, a passive native informant about past rituals who has remained unaffected by reservation life, this book is often overtly Catholic. It seems as if Black Elk was trying to make the Lakota religion acceptable to Christians. The seven rites appear to be a synthesis of Lakota and Catholic beliefs. The Lakota rituals are structured in a parallel fashion to the sacraments of the church. Many believe this to be Black Elk's attempt to bridge the two worlds of the religious traditions that his life embodied.<sup>194</sup> The symbolism of the rites clearly suggest this, but Brown presents him as a traditional medicine man. So, for both Brown and Neihardt, Black Elk is all Lakota, and in this they are correct. He could be nothing else. He is Lakota, but a Lakota "*wic'as'a wakan*" has the right and duty to paint his own version of the dance as he sees fit to interpret the times. Just as Sitting Bull used the canvas of the Sun Dance to interpret the times, so also Black Elk painted his canvas interpreting his times.

A theology has evolved around the Christian Black Elk just as it has around the traditional Black Elk. This Christianized Indian symbolism is labeled "Fulfillment Theology." Arising out of the Jesuit belief that God can be found in all that is good, regardless of the culture, traditional Lakota rituals and rites are viewed as shadows and types which should lead one to Christ. Two authors have furthered the picture of Nicholas Black Elk as a respected religious practitioner who lived his life as a bridge of adaptation, always striving to lead his people into the deeper religious experience of Christ.

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<sup>194</sup>DeMallie, 71.

Paul Steinmetz, a Catholic Priest on the Pine Ridge Reservation, has supplied the most extensive theological work along these lines. In 1965, he used the Sacred Pipe as a prayer instrument at the funeral of Rex Long in the Slim Butte Community on the reservation. In 1969, he published an article in the *Pine Ridge Research Bulletin* entitled, "Explanation of the Sacred Pipe as a Prayer Instrument." He opens the article with the statement:

One starting point in the blending of traditional Sioux Religion and the Christian religion would be to transform the Sacred Pipe into a Christian prayer instrument. The Pipe is a type of Christ because it is the instrument of the mediator in the Sioux Religion just as the Sacred Humanity is the instrument of Christ the Mediator in our Christian Religion. Christ fulfills the pipe rather than destroys it since He does in a more perfect way what the person praying with the Pipe does in an imperfect way.<sup>195</sup>

Many have taken exception to the idea that the traditional forms of Lakota religion are inferior to Christian forms as implied in this text. When Steinmetz published his book in 1980, *Pipe, Bible and Peyote Among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity*, his views after years with the Lakota, although no less Christ centered, were less dogmatic. In his preface he writes:

Since then [Rex Long's funeral] I have become more and more a part of the complex inter-dynamics of the religious practices of the Oglala Lakota. I feel that the contribution they are making to the history of religion should be more widely known.

I am indebted to the many Lakota people who have accepted me not only as a Catholic priest but also as a "holy man" in their own religious tradition. I must confess that Lakota Religion has added a new depth to my priestly life.<sup>196</sup>

Clearly an evolution from the position of Lakota ritual as a cultural avenue to prepare the way to Christ, to Lakota Religion adding a deeper understanding to his own individual Christianity, is

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<sup>195</sup>Paul B. Steinmetz, "Explanation of the Sacred Pipe as a Prayer Instrument," *Pine Ridge Research Bulletin*, v10 (August 1969), 20.

<sup>196</sup>Paul B. Steinmetz, *Pipe, Bible and Peyote Among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity*, (Stockholm, Sweden: Borgströms tryckeri Motala, 1980), 7.

evident in his years of association with the Lakota people and culture. The experience of this priest may be what Black Elk desired as a product of his life as Lakota holy man and Catholic catechist, a closer understanding of the individual's relationship to the "Great Mystery." For Steinmetz, Black Elk was a fellow holy man working to further the religious identity of the individuals placed in their care by God.

Michael Steltenkamp, in *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, presents the life of the Christian Black Elk. He believes that the tendency to compartmentalize Black Elk's life and thought into non-Indian social-Christian or native traditionalist does a great disservice and is wholly inaccurate. He writes:

Black Elk's life goes beyond the neat construct of total nativism on the one hand, or complete absorption of Western ways on the other. His biography is not a profile in syncretism but is, rather, an example of reflexive adjustment to new cultural landscapes that previously had not been explored.<sup>197</sup>

Steltenkamp does not see *The Sacred Pipe* as a Lakota counterpoint to the Catholic sacraments. It is not a "compromising syncretism." Black Elk's focus was not on which tradition had more or less validity, rather, there was one essential for Black Elk--"searching for and reliance upon *Wakan Tanka* in the everyday course of events." The Sacred Pipe was another attempt by Black Elk, the holy man intercessor of his people, to move them toward a closer understanding and relationship with God, the Catholic God.<sup>198</sup> Steltenkamp implies by his characterization of Black Elk as a Pagan before his conversion to Catholicism, that Black Elk was a , a *yuwipi* man rather than a *wic'as'a wakan*. *Pejuta wicasa* is a "medicine man," a healer. The title is not on the same level as *wic'as'a wakan*, a "holy man," or "keeper of the people's vision." Steltenkamp would

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<sup>197</sup>Michael F. Steltenkamp, *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*, (Normon & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), xxi.

have us believe that Black Elk did not become *wic'as'a wakan* until after his 1904 conversion. A *wic'as'a wakan* could also be a healer, but unlike the *wic'as'a wakan*, the *pejuta wicasa* could not officiate the great rites like the Sun Dance or Ghost Dance. We have already seen that Black Elk was a the leader of the Ghost Dance, and the fact that he gave Neihardt the morning star pendant demonstrates that he also could lead the Sun Dance. Black Elk presented himself to Neihardt in their ritual first meeting as a Sun Dance intercessor by presenting him with this gift. He also gave that power to Neihardt at that meeting. Steltenkamp wants to make Black Elk's conversion to Catholicism the event that makes Black Elk a holy man, whereas before he was just a more common healer, or for Steltenkamp, a conjurer. Yet, it is clear Black Elk's authority as *wic'as'a wakan* came before his Catholicism, and he gave that same authority to Neihardt.<sup>199</sup>

The perspective, that Black Elk was not so much wrestling with his own spiritual identity as he was fighting to continually develop his people's spiritual identity with whatever means that circumstances placed at his disposal, is the most valid picture. He also adopted Neihardt, chose him as a disciple, endowed him with power and authority to interpret vision by giving him the morning star pendant.. Neihardt does not experience the old Indian's Christianity because Black Elk saw no need to introduce Neihardt to what he should have already experienced, and should understand better than Black Elk. Neihardt would know that face of God. Black Elk gave his vision to Neihardt in Lakota tradition and ritual. He did this expecting Neihardt to give it to those that needed to know it, that is, those who did not. Subsequently, by doing so, he also preserved that tradition, for his Great Vision lives on. The same could be said of his work as a

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<sup>198</sup>Steltenkamp, 164.

<sup>199</sup>Holler, *Black Elk's Religion*, 16.

catechist. Those who knew not Christ, he worked diligently in his role as *wic'as'a wakan*, to introduce them to Him.

Support for this perspective is supplied by David Lewis' discussion of the important role individual biographies should play in the progressive-traditional dichotomy. He uses William Wash's biography, a Ute Indian living on the Uintah-Ouray Reservation, as an example. Lewis maintains that when the stereotypes of "traditional" or "progressive" Indian are focused upon, an inaccurate, stereotypical picture emerges. But when one examines the lives of particular individuals, the biographies present "'bicultural' individuals who spent their lives on the borders between ethnic groups, mastering the knowledge of two cultures without being immobilized by the process."<sup>200</sup> Scholars tend to perpetuate the stereotypes with the understanding being that it is necessary to "simplify a complex, dynamic situation." This of course is only necessary in an Aristotelian, rational need for classification which western science is based upon. Lewis rightly points out that what is traditional changes over time. As we have already seen, the very terminology locks us into the western myth of progress. Progressing from traditional to the better is the only direction possible but this model does not function when dealing with Indian history. "Equating progressive with change and traditional with resistance sacrifices individually complex behavior, diminishing our understanding of Native Americans' rationales and responses."<sup>201</sup> What Lewis is describing here using the Ute, William Wash's life as his example, is the crux of what scholarship has also been doing in the analysis of Nicholas Black Elk.

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<sup>200</sup>David Rich Lewis, "Reservation Leadership and the Progressive-Traditional Dichotomy: William Wash and the Northern Utes, 1865-1928," *Major Problems in American History*. A. Hurtado & P. Iverson ed., Lexington: D.C. Heath & Company, 1994), 421 Reprinted from *Ethnohistory* v38 n1 (1991): 124-142.

<sup>201</sup>Lewis, 432.

Viewed as a cultural middleman, Black Elk personifies the "coexistence of oppositions."<sup>202</sup>

Black Elk himself once said, "You have noticed that the truth comes into this world with two faces. One is sad with suffering, and the other laughs; but it is the same face, laughing or weeping."<sup>203</sup> The paradox of fully embracing opposites was not foreign to Black Elk.

Understanding this ability is central to the comprehension of Native American religion and will help to understand Black Elk's role as Christian and traditional holy man..

In a recent article in *American Indian Quarterly*, Lee Irwin explores the concept of "cognitive asymmetry" in relationship to the culture and dreams of the Plains Indian vision quest. He proposes that through the process of dreaming, humans surpass the constraints of rational thought. When the mind is unbound from the immediate sensory and empirical conditioning (the dream or visionary state), the past, present and future merge into "meaningful atemporal continuities." In other words, the non-rational dream state of consciousness is as epistemically valid as rational paradigms. Irwin declares that, "To understand the visionary world of Native American religions, *it is necessary to overcome a rational bias* that would reduce dreaming to an expression of the 'irrational' or 'epiphenomenal' mind."<sup>204</sup>

Describing the Freudian model of dream interpretation as based on the "hermeneutics of suspicion," Irwin delineates the Boasian model where dreams and visions are reflections of various social and cultural traits and "patterns." He goes on to cite George Devereux, A. Irving Hallowell and Anthony Wallace's work, who employed both strategies of dream interpretation. They still regarded dream contents to be incoherent and illogical but saw them as expressive of

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<sup>202</sup>Lewis, 433.

<sup>203</sup>Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks*, 188-189.

select cultural experiences. This school still held a skeptical view in regard to symbols possessing "universal" contents. Disregarding the religious significance of Native American dreaming, they interpreted all dreams as "compensatory defense mechanisms" (response to cultural stress). Nonetheless, Wallace recognized a certain "intuitive sophistication" in Iroquois dream practices (the Handsome Lake visions). With some reservations, anthropology began to view dreaming as a creative force in social construction.

On another front, research into dreaming in the area of sleep studies verified the reality of dreaming, but relegated the content as random and therefore meaningless. Irwin finds that, "Cognitive research in dreaming has tended to concern itself almost exclusively with the process of dreaming--the 'how' of dreaming as an information processing event-- and has shown little interest in the socio-functional or symbolic-cultural significance of dreams." Dream content has been devalued because it lacks the socially conditioned logic of western thought. Because of these typically western-rational ideas about the dream experience, Irwin asserts that we are seriously inhibited in our ability to understand the Native American visionary traditions. He suggests that the research in "cognitive asymmetry" will help with an understanding of the native visionary world view.

The fact that the two hemispheres of the brain have distinctly differing functions has been well researched and documented. The distinction between the hemispheres emphasize that the left side of the brain is concerned with verbal, analytic, linear, rational, sequential, and pragmatic interaction with the environment. The right hemisphere functions are "characterized as imagistic, synthetic, spatial, imaginative, and involved with a holistic and symbolic processing of

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<sup>204</sup>Lee Irwin, "Dreams, Theory, and Culture: Plains Vision Quest Paradigm," *American Indian Quarterly* v18, n2, (Spring 1994): 229-246, 1. Article secured through electronic transfer. Specific page numbers unknown at this

Peterson

experience--that is, with nonlinear, simultaneous, or parallel processing of perceptual events and characterized by a more passive or receptive mode: its function is, 'with perceiving the world as it is rather than subjecting it to some purpose or design.'<sup>205</sup> This difference is what is labeled as "cognitive asymmetry" or "verbalvisual tension," and is directly related to individual and cultural learning. Using the analogy that Euro-American cultures seem left-hemisphere dominant while Native American cultures seem to correspond to a stronger right-hemisphere prominence, we can speculate about the nature of societies using sleep experiments. Sleep research demonstrates a clear correlation between the ability to access the dream-imagery cognitive process and mental health. This may well be true of cultural health. Research has demonstrated that the ability to access right-hemisphere activity is minimized in dominant left-hemisphere individuals. This could logically extend to the macro level.

The important contribution of dream research then is in its expression of a model where visionary experience is a central ingredient in the cognitive process of both the individual and society's ability to shape belief, thought, behavior and interpret experience. In the native world there is no separation between the world of vision and the world of daily experience. For Euro-Americans there is a clear distinction, even a gulf, between the largely ignored dream world (at least in the modern frame) and the rational, waking "real" world. Western thought gives little to no credence to the "irrational" visions, myths, and dreams of the "primitive" world, whereas for the American Indian, dreaming and visions are given strong ontological priority and are regarded as being a primary source of knowledge or "power."

Irwin labels this Indian view, the "visionary episteme." He defines this as:

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time but numbered 1-19. italics added for emphasis.

<sup>205</sup>Irwin, 6.

The underlying infrastructures or conceptual frames that organize shared, collective perceptions of the lived world and motivate actions and behavior. Thus an episteme is a complex, culturally conditioned and learned organization of thought, perception, and action shared within a particular community of people and sanctioned through symbols, images, objects, behavioral norms and recognized modes of social discourse and interaction. The episteme represents the shared knowledge of both the individual and the community.<sup>206</sup> In Native American Plains societies, this knowledge has retained a high degree of variability--a variability conditioned by the specific contents of individual dreams."<sup>207</sup>

To epitomize reason as expressive of the highest or best in human functioning is clearly a cultural bias. This is the position Reinhold Niebuhr labeled as the "modern age." Rather than rationality being the epitome of the best in human functioning, it may well be seriously dysfunctional. The individual subject, in sleep research, who is deprived of dreaming soon goes mad until the dreaming is restored.

To summarize Irwin's portrayal then, dreaming is a form of knowledge for the Native American. It is epistemological and ontological, and through the study of this view an "emergent 'postmodern' science of wholeness is gradually being articulated." But what is important to the discussion and understanding of Native American history is that seeking to understand native history through a piece-by-piece analysis based upon mechanistic or intellectual principles of hierarchical order and causal relationships between parts is to severely limit our perceptions and our perspective. Simply put, rationality alone cannot comprehend native history. As already demonstrated, the native world view is too fluid both in time and space. To continually attempt to classify people and events in an Aristotelian rationality will invariably cause us to miss the point (or multiple points). Irwin summarizes saying:

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<sup>206</sup>This is clearly what Anthony Wallace described as the "Mazeway" in: Anthony F. C Wallace, "Revitalization Movements." *American Anthropologist*, v58, (1956); 264-281.

<sup>207</sup>Irwin, 8.

The fundamental concept is that rather than a fixed world being constructed out of a limited set of known, unchanging laws and relations in a static, deterministic manner, there is a world-process of ongoing, explicit manifestations of an implicit, emerging higher order dynamics that continues to unfold over the generations through a series of reorganized perceptions coupled with new interpretive perspectives.<sup>208</sup>

In light of this, it is the "Dreamer's" role to show how the part, symbolically and metaphorically, expresses the whole. This is exactly what Black Elk spent his life doing.

Nicholas Black Elk is still doing this. When Dee Brown said, "The basic works of the Black Elk theological tradition, now bid fair to become the cannon or at least the central core of a North American Indian theological cannon which will someday challenge the eastern and western traditions as a way of looking at the world," he probably little knew how prophetic his statement was. Black Elk's visions have not only preserved a traditional foundation for Native American religion, but he has also supplied an ingredient to Christianity which has been seriously lacking in a religion that has been bound to the rational world view of the modern age. What Paul Steinmetz found in living with the ritual process among the Lakota people was the restoration of the "liminal" threshold to his individual Christianity.

Howard Harrod describes the fundamental nature of the native world as:

. . . surrounded by, and interpenetrated by sacred powers. Migrations into the world of sacred beings was a regular, and potentially a daily, occurrence; for in their dreams the people *often entered the threshold* of the world of transcendent significance...The central importance given to dreaming and waking visions, whether occurring spontaneously or ritually sought, was clearly the cultural feature that made the people's experience open to transcendent realities. . .<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>208</sup>Irwin, 11.

<sup>209</sup>Harrod, 160-161. Italics added for emphasis.

If there is one thing lacking in modern Christianity is the ability to "often enter the threshold" of rebirth and renewal. The Native American found it natural to step through the threshold and renew his kinship with the animals who had sacrificed themselves in the hunt that the Indian might live. If the modern Christians could find it natural to daily step over the threshold and renew their kinship with the Scapegoat who sacrificed Himself so that they might live, that living ritual of rebirth and renewal would surely end their madness. Black Elk said that "The Indian medicine men did not stop sin." This may be true but they certainly had a process that enabled them to begin anew.

Theologically Black Elk appears to have been much more than a progressive Catholic catechist or a traditional *wic'as'a wakan*. The picture of an Indian struggling between two cultural traditions should not be denied; that is probably a fact of life for all who have been labeled holy men. This fact is clearly evident in Steinmetz's writing. But that is not the whole picture of Black Elk. There is a transcendent quality about the holy man that speaks not only to both traditional and progressives, to both red and white, to both native and Christian; Black Elk also speaks to the whole of social structure and the health and survival of modern culture. If our progressive rationality has divorced us from the world of a creative, revelatory epistemology, If our culture and our science is like a person who cannot dream, might we not as a society go mad? How to avail ourselves of both the apollonian and the dionesian, the tragic and the comedic, the rational and the dream in our culture and in our studies and research is a question that is not answered easily. Social scientists, historians, and philosophers have been searching diligently. Is it possible that Nicholas Black Elk and John Neihardt have shown us a way? If so, it is not a wide path but a narrow one that is not always easy to see.

## Conclusion

Black Elk and Neihardt began a process that day in 1930 that continues to this day. Many a historian has cited the massacre at Wounded Knee as the closing chapter on the traditional culture of the Native American. Neihardt himself painted this picture in *A Cycle of the West* and *Black Elk Speaks*. But culture does not ever die, it continually transforms, grows, reaches out in new patterns to meet the new coincidences. The vision of Nicholas Black Elk grows across America to this day. Black Elk found the means to assure the renewal of the sacred hoop in the *Wasichu* poet John Neihardt. *Black Elk Speaks* is not an absolutely accurate picture of the life story and visions of Nick Black Elk, especially according to the standards of a western paradigm of thinking. But the *wic'as'a wakan* sanctioned the poet with the spiritual authority to paint what he would with the oral story given to him. Flaming Rainbow, like a Sun Dance leader of pre-reservation times could interpret the times and rituals to serve the people as he would. This is the nature of oral tradition, it is changing and fluid, meeting the needs of the time. This kind of spirituality, this kind of mysticism is ultimately and altogether practical. Through Neihardt's pen the vision has continued into our present day. The religious experience that has grown up around *Black Elk Speaks* is the product of more than one world, the product of more than one living tradition. Black Elk brought the Lakota world and his faith in Christ together. Neihardt brought his disdain for organized religion and his connection to the tragic myth of the noble spirit to Black Elk's cabin. Together, these two Dreamers opened a door for two very different traditions to cross over into the other, a way for them to hear one another. Comedy and tragedy could look at each other, maybe even embrace each other. It took both sticks of the Messiah vision to open a path from the black road to the red road. Somewhere in the center of the hoop, where the two roads crossed is a red pole, a dead tree springing with buds.

Is there an example here, an analogy that we historians might take a lesson from? The picture of Nicholas Black Elk that appears here is a that of a practical man whose actions are determined by both the concrete circumstances of the scene with which he was confronted and the motivating dream and vision by which he directed those actions. Scholars overwhelmingly agree that the research and ethnology that John Neihardt did in preparing to write his manuscripts was quite thorough and painstakingly meticulous. DeMallie's compilation of the original transcripts of the Black Elk interviews are testimony to his scrutiny. But it is the story he told that captured the hearts and imagination of the people. Neihardt has received much criticism that he was not true to Black Elk's story, but in light of his relationship with the holy man, he was true to his charge. Even if Neihardt wrote in a tragic style, his story is exceptionally true to the vision. It is probable that Black Elk's story needed a tragic frame of reference in order for the people whose hands would turn its pages to identify with the story. The readers of *Black Elk Speaks* needed a noble savage to redeem them in the 1960s. But catharsis is the work of the prophet, not the work of the historian, but historians do have the task of judging effects.

The Greek word *histor* translates wise man (person) or judge. History is from its foundation supposed to shed light on our identity. It is more than simply a recording of facts; it is to judge and interpret events in order to make us wise. Scientific paradigms are wonderful tools, but our tools should not be allowed to cripple us. The historian needs to see more than one world to truly see and judge. More than one perspective is necessary for the truth to begin to emerge. As Turner's students who sought out Neihardt suggest, historians have some charge as poets, as bards, certainly as good storytellers of truths. At the same time we must always be aware that, as storytellers, we are involved in the act of rhetoric. It is imperative that we subject ourselves, as well as those we write about, to the critique of motives. The tools of rhetorical

criticism allow the historian to look at stories rationally while viewing symbols and motives cross culturally. They allow us to subject our stories and the actors in those stories to a kind of rational judgment.

For years, our western rationality and economic exchange perspective, as well as our romanticism, have blinded us from seeing Indians as real people, in a real world of their own making. Ethnohistory has brought greater understanding and shined new light on the history of what it means to be an “American,” in the broadest sense of the term. But Martin is correct in disturbing us out of a complacency. There is more to do. More perspectives are needed to truly be able to see. The critic says “but this, (whatever discipline “this” might represent at the time) is not history.” Certainly Calvin Martin’s use of poets and other alien sources to the current discipline of history have purchased for him a full measure of this kind of censure. But there is truly only one foundation stone of what history is, and that stone is “the story.” We are first of all storytellers, narrators, tellers of tales. Our goal is to make our stories as “true” as we are able.

In an essay on our roles as storytellers and historians, William Cronon wrote, “I would assert the virtues of narrative as our best and most compelling tool for searching out meaning in a conflicted and contradictory world.” He comes to this conclusion through the use of a Burkean critique of a few recent offerings to environmental history. History succeeds when it makes us look at the scene, the place, and the people, animals, plants, rocks, and spirits that inhabit them. Only storytelling can do this. Cronon goes a step farther in asserting that “historians and prophets share a common commitment to finding the meaning of endings.”<sup>210</sup> With this I wholeheartedly agree. In our rational quest for truth, we have lost the heart of storytelling—the

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<sup>210</sup> William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative.” *The Journal of American History*. V78, n4 (March, 1992): 1374-1375,

spirit. If we are to tell more than a “shallow village tale,” or escape from a constant story of tragedy which simply beats the same old scapegoats, history must speak with a deeper voice. We need a voice that has the depth of both the faces of comedy and tragedy, a voice that can move from vision and myth to science and rationality. History, as a discipline, needs to be able to move across the threshold to rebirth and renewal, just as Black Elk did, just as Neihardt did, just as Howard Harrod asserts that the native world had the ability to do. Somewhere, on the other side of the liminal threshold from where we are now, is the place where consequential stories are born and the best method of critiquing those stories on the rational side is rhetorical criticism. Black Elk told a story orally, in ritual dances and acts, and in the story of his life. Neihardt told a story with his pen, from the podium of the lecture circuit, and in the acts of his life. Both men told stories and told those stories well. Kenneth Burke’s patterns of symbolic interaction provide a way to examine some of the motives of these story tellers, as well as their stories, even though they come from supposedly irreconcilable worlds. His perspective finds some of their common ground. Surely, the one common ground that prophets, poets, and historians have is the story. Let us continue to tell our stories, reaching out for all the help we can get, even if it paradoxically takes us into irreconcilable places. It may be in the paradox of irreconcilability that we, like Black Elk, will see both faces of truth.

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