

Black Elk Speaks:
A Native American View of Nineteenth-Century American History

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Henry David Thoreau wrote of the American Indian in his *Journal* a few years before Black Elk's birth that "It frequently happens that the historian, though he professes more humanity than the trapper, mountain man, or gold-digger, who shoots one (Indian) as a wild beast, really exhibits and practices a similar inhumanity to him, wielding a pen instead of a rifle" (Thoreau 438). Black Elk, holy man of the Ojibwa Sioux (Lakota), experienced the inhumanity Thoreau refers to first hand on the Great Plains and eastward for his entire life span from the 1860s to the 1950s. It is fortunate that one white man, John G. Neihardt, wielded the pen in the Native American's favor, to tell Black Elk's story of the Lakota people the way it was told to him at Manderson, South Dakota in 1931. Black Elk sensed Neihardt would come and, when the poet showed up, he implicitly trusted him. Though Neihardt romanticized somewhat the words of Black Elk, the essential spirit of Black Elk's story of a people remains faithful and fairly accurate according to scholars like Robert F. Sayre and Raymond DeMaille, who have examined the original transcriptions made at Manderson.

Though such details as soldier weed (an antidote to the white soldier's fire power) and Black Elk's sense of fulfillment rather than despair are not found in the published version of *Black Elk Speaks* (1932), I will rely on this text as my source for the Native American's wielding of the pen (through Neihardt) to set the record straight. Too many American historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (including Francis Parkman) assumed a priori that the western expansion of the United States into "Indian Territory" was sanctified by an abiding manifest destiny. Even if, thought the non-Indians, the Indian people, instead of being militant, were quaint and charming, they had to make way for the progress of an advanced civilization. Black Elk questions white man's "progress" and "advanced civilization" by giving us through Neihardt the true story of his people, their plight and their near demise at the hands of the white man, though he is hopeful that the fourth ascent on the good red road will come sometime in the near future. The good red road, of course, refers to the road of

health, strength and wholeness as opposed to the black road of war and despair.

At the outset of Black Elk's story of his people, which he recollects at age 68 when Neihardt visits him, we are given a harmonious world view of the Plains Indians before it was almost irreparably damaged by the white man: "It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit" (Neihardt 1). But this world of sharing, where even strong and able hunters must give to the weak and sick, will be disrupted by the Wasichus (they who are many) who from Black Elk's viewpoint abandon their disadvantaged people.

To begin with, Black Elk's father limps from a wound received at the Fetterman Fight on Peno Creek near Fort Phil Kearney in 1866 when Black Elk was three years old. As a boy Black Elk was told that "the Wasichus were coming and that they were going to take our country and rub us all out and that we should all have to die fighting" (Neihardt 8). What was the reason for the Wasichus wanting to take the Lakotas' country? Black Elk explains:

When I was older, I learned what the fighting was about that winter (1866-67) and the next summer. Up on the Madison Fork the Wasichus had found much of the yellow metal that they worship and that makes them crazy, and they wanted to have a road up through our country to the place where the yellow metal was (The Black Hills); but my people did not want the road. It would scare the bison and make them go away, and it would let the other Wasichus come in like a river. They told us that they wanted only to use a little land, as much as a wagon would take between the wheels; but our people knew better. And when you look about you now, you can see what it was they wanted. (Neihardt 9)

Black Elk reiterates that before the soldiers came the Lakota people were seldom hungry because humans and animals lived together like relatives. "But the Wasichus came," Black Elk says, "and they have made little islands for us and other little islands

for the four-leggeds, and always these islands are becoming smaller, for around them surges the gnawing flood of the Wasichu; and it is dirty with lies and greed" (Neihardt 9).

The symbol of the harmony of living in the natural world is the circle (hoop) which is like the sun and moon and earth and even a bird's nest. The Wasichus, who had broken their circle at the close of the Middle Ages (see Marjorie Nicholson, *The Breaking of the Circle*), were intent on breaking the Lakota circle by having them live in a psychic nightmare of a square wooden framed home instead of a tipi. The Wasichus must have been some kind of trickster spider like Iktomi in that they succeeded in weaving "a spider web all around the Lakotas" (Neihardt 10). In fact, little children were admonished to behave well or "the Wasichus will get you" (Neihardt 13).

As Black Elk grew older he began to experience first hand the horrors of military conflict which in itself drives all people as crazy as the Wasichus are driven by yellow metal. Black Elk readily admits that cruelty and killing are fully human characteristics, not just Wasichu, and once the wholesale killing began on the Great Plains in skirmishes and battles leading up to the Battle of the Little Bighorn in 1876 (when Black Elk was 13 years old), his people, too, went crazy with killing. Indian children killed animals wantonly out of frustration; warriors ordered boys to take scalps from dying soldiers. Black Elk recalls: "There was a soldier on the ground and he was still kicking. A Lakota rode up and said to me 'Boy, get off and scalp him.' I got off and started to do it. He had short hair and knife was not very sharp. He ground his teeth. Then I shot him in the forehead and got his scalp" (Neihardt 112).

Standing Bear adds to Black Elk's story explaining that "We were all crazy, and I will tell you something to show how crazy we were. There was a dead Indian lying there on his face, and someone said: 'Scalp that Ree!' A man got off and scalped him; and when they turned the dead man over, it was a Shyela—one of our friends. We were all crazy" (Neihardt 116-17). And Iron Hawk exclaims that "These Wasichus wanted it, and they came to get it, and we gave it to them" (Neihardt 127).

However, the victory at the Battle of Little Bighorn was short lived and soon all of the Lakotas, even Chief Crazy Horse, who was killed at Fort Robinson, Nebraska in 1877, eventually submitted themselves to the white man's fort and reservation. The Wasichus created for the Lakotas a system of dependency and handouts to replace the Indian's

original total self-sufficiency and self-reliance. Black Elk and others believed the only way to understand the crazy mind of the Wasichus was to join them, work for them, and live among them. Ironically Black Elk and others joined, of all things, the *Buffalo Bill Show*, but in so doing, he gained further insight into the demented world (from his viewpoint) of the Wasichus where lies and greed abounded. Black Elk's spiritual vision of the good red road prevailing had to wait to be on this side of visionary time. He must walk the black road of poverty, despair and loneliness, and no better place to see and experience this than in the white man's world itself.

When Black Elk was 20 in 1883 he remembered that the bison herds were slaughtered by the Wasichus who "did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy, and they took only the hides to sell. Sometimes they did not even take the hides, only the tongues; and I have heard that fire-boats came down the Missouri River loaded with dried bison tongues. You can see that the men who did this were crazy. Sometimes they did not even take the tongues; they just killed and killed because they liked to do that. When we hunted bison, we killed only what we needed. And when there was nothing left but heaps of bones, the Wasichus came and gathered up even the bones and sold them" (Neihardt 213). The concept of selling for profit replaced praying to the spirits.

Even the prairies became cluttered with strange gray square houses with "lines drawn to keep them in" (fences). It became increasingly apparent to young Black Elk that "everybody was for himself" with "little rules of his own." After Black Elk had joined the Buffalo Bill Show and gone to New York he began to understand why the Wasichus had no respect for the Lakota people, the land, and the sacred four-leggeds like the buffalo. Of New York, he says:

I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation 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 too were penned up in islands, and maybe that was the way the Wasichus were going to treat them. (Neihardt 217)

The final blow to the people of the Plains came in 1890 when the soldiers fired on men, women and children killing perhaps 250 Lakotas. The U.S. Government had outlawed the Ghost Dance and when a group of Lakotas gathered to perform this dance refused to have their tipis searched for weapons, a first shot was fired that resulted in a massacre and the end of a dream, a dream of a good red road which Black Elk had seen in his vision when he was a boy of nine. However, Black Elk, according to Raymond DeMaille in *The Sixth Grandfather*, was not a despairing old man of 68 when Neihardt visited him, but a man of hope who knew the red road would come sometime in the future for visions had to be trusted.

Vine Deloria, Jr. comments in his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks* why this book has become increasingly significant for *all* Americans since War II:

Black Elk Speaks did not follow other contemporary works into oblivion. Throughout the thirties, forties, and fifties it drew a steady and devoted readership and served as a reliable expression of the substance that undergirded Plains Indian religious beliefs. Outside the Northern Plains, the Sioux tribe, and the western mind set, there were few people who knew the book or listened to its message. But crises mounted and, as we understood the implications of future shock, the silent spring, and the greening of America, people began to search for a universal expression

of the larger, more cosmic truths which industrialism and progress had ignored and overwhelmed. (Neihardt Xii)

If Deloria, who wrote the introduction in 1979, were to update his commentary, he could add plenty of fuel to the fire: HUD scandals of the 1980s, the S&L debacle, the BCCI banking scandal, squandered relief funds for the suffering in Ethiopia and many more. And yet on the positive side he would have to mention U.S. Senator Bill Bradley's proposal to restore lands to the Lakota people in the Black Hills, which had been unlawfully wrested from tribal jurisdiction in direct violation of the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868 signed by federal agents and Chief Red Cloud. Black Elk has indeed spoken and, perhaps, some of us have listened.

Works Cited

Neihardt, John G. *Black Elk Speaks* (with an introduction by Vine Deloria, Jr.). Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988, orig. copyright 1932.

Thoreau, Henry David. *Journal* in 14 vols. Ed. Walter Harding. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1984, orig. copyright 1906.

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