

The Offering of the Pipe

Black Elk Speaks:

My friend, I am going to tell you the story of my life, as you wish; and if it were only the story of my life I think I would not tell it; for what is one man that he should make much of his winters, even when they bend him like a heavy snow? So many other men have lived and shall live that story, to be grass upon the hills.

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.

This, then, is not the tale of a great hunter or of a great warrior, or of a great traveler, although I have made much meat in my time and fought for my people both as boy and man, and have gone far and seen strange lands and men. So also have many others done, and better than I. These things I shall remember by the way, and often they may seem to be the very tale itself, as when I was living them in happiness and sorrow. But now that I can see it all as from a lonely hilltop, I know it was the story of a mighty vision given to a man too weak to use it; of a holy tree that should have flourished in a people's heart with flowers and singing birds, and now is withered; and of a people's dream that died in bloody snow.

But if the vision was true and mighty, as I know, it is true and mighty yet; for such things are of the spirit, and it is in the darkness of their eyes that men get lost.

So I know that it is a good thing I am going to do; and because no good thing can be done by any man alone, I will first make an offering and send a voice to the Spirit of the World,¹ that it may help me to be true. See, I fill this sacred pipe with the bark of the red willow; but before we smoke it, you must see how it is made and what it means. These four ribbons hanging here on the stem are the four quarters of the universe. The black one is for the west where the thunder beings² live to send us rain; the white one for the north, whence comes the great white cleansing wind; the red one for the east, whence springs the light and where the morning star lives to give men wisdom; the yellow for the south, whence come the summer and the power to grow.³

But these four spirits are only one Spirit after all, and this eagle feather here is for that One, which is like a father, and also it is for the thoughts of men that should rise high as eagles do. Is not the sky a father and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children? And this hide upon the mouthpiece here, which should be bison hide, is for the earth, from whence we came and at whose breast we suck as babies all our lives, along with all the animals and birds and trees and grasses. And because it means all this, and more than any man can understand, the pipe is holy.⁴

There is a story about the way the pipe first came to us. A very long time ago, they say, two scouts were out looking for bison; and when they came to the top of a high hill and looked north, they saw something coming a long way off, and when it came closer they cried out, "It is a woman!," and it was. Then one of the scouts, being foolish, had bad thoughts and spoke them; but the other said: "This is a sacred

1. Neihardt's expression "Spirit of the World" corresponds to Black Elk's "Great Spirit" (Wakhá tháka 'great holy'), the traditional Lakota conception of the totality of all that is sacred, powerful, and mysterious. The Lakotas also use this word to designate the Christian God. See Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 68–80.

2. The thunder beings (Wakíyá) are embodiments of the power of the West, manifested in the violence and destructiveness of storms of thunder and lightning. They are conceptualized as giant birds whose outstretched wings are black clouds and the flash of whose eyes is lightning. See Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 119–20, 155–57, 278–80.

3. The four directions (world quarters) are personified as winds, each designated by a symbolic complex of colors, animals or birds, and distinctive powers (see Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 124–27). Two other directions, up and down, were recognized in addition to the four winds, making a total of six. Ritual actions, such as offering the pipe, include all six directions in order to call upon and bring together the powers of the universe.

4. The first six paragraphs are Neihardt's, expressing in his own words his sense of Black Elk's mood and motivation for telling his life story.

woman; throw all bad thoughts away.” When she came still closer, they saw that she wore a fine white buckskin dress, that her hair was very long and that she was young and very beautiful. And she knew their thoughts and said in a voice that was like singing: “You do not know me, but if you want to do as you think, you may come.” And the foolish one went; but just as he stood before her, there was a white cloud that came and covered them. And the beautiful young woman came out of the cloud, and when it blew away the foolish man was a skeleton covered with worms.

Then the woman spoke to the one who was not foolish: “You shall go home and tell your people that I am coming and that a big tepee shall be built for me in the center of the nation.” And the man, who was very much afraid, went quickly and told the people, who did at once as they were told; and there around the big tepee they waited for the sacred woman. And after a while she came, very beautiful and singing, and as she went into the tepee this is what she sang:

“With visible breath I am walking,
A voice I am sending as I walk.
In a sacred manner I am walking,
With visible tracks I am walking,
In a sacred manner I walk.”

And as she sang, there came from her mouth a white cloud that was good to smell. Then she gave something to the chief, and it was a pipe with a bison calf carved on one side to mean the earth that bears and feeds us, and with twelve eagle feathers hanging from the stem to mean the sky and the twelve moons, and these were tied with a grass that never breaks. “Behold!” she said. “With this you shall multiply and be a good nation. Nothing but good shall come from it. Only the hands of the good shall take care of it and the bad shall not even see it.” Then she sang again and went out of

5. See *Sixth Grandfather*, 283–85. A longer version of this story as told by Black Elk is in *Brown, The Sacred Pipe*, 3–9. For other tellings of the story, see *Lone Man* (Teton from *Standing Rock*) in *Densmore, Teton Sioux Music*, 63–67; *Finger and Thomas Tyon* (Oglalas) in *Walker, Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 109–12, 148–50. The bringing of the pipe marks the beginnings of the Lakotas as a people. See DeMallie, “Kinship and Biology in Sioux Culture,” 127–30.

6. The phrase “the powers that are one Power” is Neihardt’s.

7. “Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been. There is no one to pray to but you.” Compare with a prayer of the *huká* (adoption) ceremony: “*Tuwá thókeca kephíca šni yeló. Wakhá tháka, niyé thokéya nicáğa*” ‘No one else may be mentioned [There can be no other]. Great Spirit, you were the first to exist’ (Curtis, *The North American Indian*, vol. 3, 77, 151). These are Lakota ritual expressions that are addressed in turn to each of the powers called upon. Here, Neihardt’s wording gives a sense of monotheism. See discussion in *Sixth Grandfather*, 91.

8. The Lakota word translated as “nation” is *oyáte* ‘people’, in the sense of a social group. It is used not only for humans but also for animals (for example, the four-legged nation, the buffalo nation); birds (the winged nation); celestial phenomena (stars), and any other type of living thing. Here, “finished” means “created.”

9. The White Giant is *Wazíya*, the spirit of the North. He is a contrary figure who wraps himself in his robe during the summer, but removes it in winter, shaking it to produce snow. See *Walker, Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 120–21.

the tepee; and as the people watched her going, suddenly it was a white bison galloping away and snorting, and soon it was gone.⁵

This they tell, and whether it happened so or not I do not know; but if you think about it, you can see that it is true.

Now I light the pipe, and after I have offered it to the powers that are one Power,⁶ and sent forth a voice to them, we shall smoke together. Offering the mouthpiece first of all to the One above—so—I send a voice:

Hey hey! hey hey! hey hey! hey hey!

Grandfather, Great Spirit, you have been always, and before you no one has been. There is no other one to pray to but you.⁷ You yourself, everything that you see, everything has been made by you. The star nations all over the universe you have finished.⁸ The four quarters of the earth you have finished. The day, and in that day, everything you have finished. Grandfather, Great Spirit, lean close to the earth that you may hear the voice I send. You towards where the sun goes down, behold me; Thunder Beings, behold me! You where the White Giant⁹ lives in power, behold me! You where the sun shines continually, whence come the day-break star and the day, behold me! You where the summer lives, behold me! You in the depths of the heavens, an eagle of power, behold me! And you, Mother Earth, the only Mother, you who have shown mercy to your children!

Hear me, four quarters of the world—a relative I am! Give me the strength to walk the soft earth, a relative to all that is! Give me the eyes to see and the strength to understand, that I may be like you. With your power only can I face the winds.

Great Spirit, Great Spirit, my Grandfather, all over the earth the faces of living things are all alike. With tenderness have these come up out of the ground. Look upon these faces of children without number and with children in their

arms, that they may face the winds and walk the good road to the day of quiet.

This is my prayer; hear me! The voice I have sent is weak, yet with earnestness I have sent it. Hear me!¹⁰ It is finished. Hetchetu aloh!¹¹

Now, my friend, let us smoke together so that there may be only good between us.¹²

10. This is a traditional Lakota prayer. Standing Bear commented to Neihardt that he first heard it when he was twenty years old (Sixth Grandfather, 285).

11. Hetchetu yeló! 'So it is!'

12. The Lakotas believe that when men smoke a sacred pipe in common, "its influences are supposed to bind them together forever in amicable relationship" (Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 90).

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Early Boyhood

I am a Lakota of the Ogalala band.¹ My father's name was Black Elk, and his father before him bore the name, and the father of his father, so that I am the fourth to bear it. He was a medicine man and so were several of his brothers. Also, he and the great Crazy Horse's father were cousins, having the same grandfather. My mother's name was White Cow Sees; her father was called Refuse-to-Go, and her mother, Plenty Eagle Feathers. I can remember my mother's mother and her father. My father's father was killed by the Pawnees² when I was too little to know, and his mother, Red Eagle Woman, died soon after.

I was born in the Moon of the Popping Trees (December)³ on the Little Powder River in the Winter When the Four Crows Were Killed (1863),⁴ and I was three years old when my father's right leg was broken in the Battle of the Hundred Slain.* From that wound he limped until the day he died, which was about the time when Big Foot's band was butchered on Wounded Knee (1890). He is buried here in these hills.

I can remember that Winter of the Hundred Slain as a man may remember some bad dream he dreamed when he was little, but I can not tell just how much I heard when I

* The Fetterman Fight, commonly described as a "massacre," in which Captain Fetterman and 81 men were wiped out on Peno Creek near Fort Phil Kearney, December 21, 1866.⁵

1. Lakhóta 'Allies' is the self-designation of the Western Sioux; they comprise seven tribes: the Oglála, Brule (Sicháǵu), Minneconjou (Mnikhówožu), Hunkpapa (Húkpapha), Two Kettles (Óhenuŋpa), No Bows (Itázipchola), and Blackfoot Sioux (Sihásapa). See DeMallie, "Sioux Until 1850," 718–60.

2. The Pawnees, a Caddoan-speaking tribe, lived in earthlodge villages in east-central Nebraska. They and the Lakotas warred with one another until the federal government removed the Pawnees to Oklahoma in the 1870s. See Parks, "Pawnee," 515–47.

3. Months were designated by moons and named to reflect the changing of the seasons. Čanáhopho wi 'popping trees moon' refers to the loud cracking of trees during the coldest part of the winter. For Black Elk's list of names of the moons, see Sixth Grandfather, 291–92; compare Walker, *Lakota Society*, 123.

4. Years were designated as "winters," beginning with the first snowfall, and were named after memorable events. Pictographic calendars (waníyetu yawápi 'winter counts') served to record the passing winters, the names serving the same function as dates in Euroamerican culture. See Walker, *Lakota Society*, 111–57. The winter count collection preserved in the Smithsonian Institution is published in Greene and Thornton, *The Year the Stars Fell*.

5. Lt. Col. W. J. Fetterman and his command were killed in the battle called "the Hundred Slain," following a Cheyenne prophecy that the Indians would kill one hundred soldiers. The actual number, as Neihardt notes, was less. For White Bull's eyewitness account of the battle, see Vestal, *Warpath*, 50–69, and Howard, *The Warrior Who Killed Custer*, 37–38. A detailed account from the Cheyenne perspective is given in Powell, *People of the Sacred Mountain*, 1:451–61. Also see Hyde, *Red Cloud's Folk*, 145–49.