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Black elk's Universal Mission

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BLACK ELK'S UNIVERSAL MISSION

Few Native American leaders of the past project the particular aura of Black Elk. John Neihardt's best seller *Black Elk Speaks* has no doubt greatly contributed to his fame. The holy man stands as the last of a race. He was present at many of the tragic events that marked the end of traditional Lakota culture: the extinction of the buffalo, the beginning of life in the reservation, the massacre at Wounded Knee.

It is certainly not easy to do justice to such an important personality without peeling back the layers of an enigma. Various biographies of Black Elk show different facets of the life of the elder Lakota. Thus he is an intriguing personality and symbol to Neihardt and John E. Brown, who are primarily fascinated by his cultural heritage and the first part of his life. He is a surprising figure for those who follow the events of his later years through the eyes of Raymond DeMallie or Michael Steltenkamp, particularly the latter who documents Black Elk's forty years as a Catholic missionary and catechist.

Juxtaposing the two views, we confront a riddle. Black Elk is no longer just a heroic figure from the past, but a vibrant individual fully engaged in the challenging transitions of his people. He stands with a foot in both worlds: preserving tradition on one side, accepting the new with an open mind on the other. Is it a stance of convenience as some claim? Or is he a fully modern individual able to transcend barriers of culture and tradition?

Steltenkamp's book *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala*[1], was published in 1993, some sixty years after the much more famous *Black Elk Speaks*[2]. The two portrayals are perfect material for a controversy—but must it be so? Did Black Elk's mission come to an end at Wounded Knee? Did he find a new impetus in meeting with the Jesuits' form of Christianity, or did he just capitulate? Did he deny

Lakota tradition when he embraced Christianity? In sum, does the later Black Elk contradict the earlier one?

The way out of such an either/or approach is intuited by both Steltenkamp and DeMallie. The former states: "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." (1993, xxi) Looking at it from a historical perspective DeMallie offers the judgment that "the universalistic message of Black Elk's teachings reflects an ecumenical attitude that is foreign to traditional Lakota religion." (1984, 89)

Following these intuitions no dichotomies are necessary to understand Black Elk's stance. To extricate ourselves out of false dilemmas we need only refer to the fragmentary views of Black Elk's early and later life with what Black Elk himself has to say about his choices. Black Elk's interviews with Neihardt collected by DeMallie are a great contribution to dispelling the misperceptions generated by the Black Elk icon of myth.

Walking the Earth in a Sacred Manner: Lakota Culture

The Lakota were relative newcomers to the Great Plains. Until the 16th century they had been living by the headwaters of the Mississippi, in present day Minnesota. In the 17th century they were displaced by the Chippewa. In the Plains they attained a new level of supremacy by exhibiting a keen power of adaptation and survival. They moved away from the use of the canoe, becoming buffalo hunters and adapting to the horse.

At the spiritual level a new revelation imbued Lakota spirituality: the revelation of White Buffalo Calf Woman. She is the one who, according to tradition, brought the Sacred Pipe to the Lakota, although it had already appeared throughout North America much earlier. It is no doubt a historical event corroborated by many existing documents, chief of them the pictographic records called "winter counts.' Every winter the various tribes recorded the most important or unusual events that happened each year. The appearance of White Buffalo Calf Woman is recorded in the year 1785-86 in Blue Thunder's winter count, 1797-98 in the Battiste Goode (Brulé) count, 1798 in the No Ears (Oglala) count, 1800 in the Big Missouri Count.[3]

The original Sacred Bundle, containing the first sacred pipe, has never left the Cheyenne River reservation.

The events of White Buffalo Calf Woman occurred at the time of a famine. The tribe had sent out two hunters to scout for game. In a vision the two saw a woman approaching them and carrying an object in her hand: the sacred pipe. Against the best advice of the other, one of the hunters wanted to seduce the maiden. While approaching her he was covered by a mist. When the cloud retreated only a pile of bones was left with snakes crawling over it. The other hunter listened to the maiden who instructed him to go back to camp and have a council be ready for her arrival. When she arrived at camp at sunrise, the woman told the tribe that they had been chosen for a difficult task. She entrusted to them the sacred pipe and sacred bowl that she carried with her, and instructed them in the new sacred rites—five according to one version of the legend, seven according to another. Among these rituals were the vision quest, the adoption rite, the Sun Dance, spirit keepers, and the buffalo rite. Having performed her mission, the maiden transformed herself into a white buffalo calf and disappeared.

The old Lakota believe White Buffalo Calf Woman to be Wohpe, or Falling Star, the daughter of Sun and Moon who falls to earth and lives in the lodge of the south wind. To lend credence to the veracity of her appearance, apart from the winter counts we also have records of the recent practice of the Sun Dance: High Dog gives the years 1820-21 as the date of the first performed Sun Dance.[4]

It is in the sacred vision ritual that the central element of Lakota spirituality becomes apparent. Through the vision, religion becomes both traditional and innovative. It was traditional in honoring the old visions, which had become externalized rituals. It was innovative because it sought to unite the contents of tradition with the individual powers of perception attained in the vision quest.

Seeking a vision implies the admission of the individual's powerlessness in front of the supernatural beings. It is an appeal to receive new relationships, meaning a living communion with the supersensible. If the sought-for results are achieved in the vision— and this is far from automatic—the seeker stands in the world with new power, but also with new responsibilities towards himself, the gods, and his people.

The vision itself is not complete without a living interpretation of its meaning that awakens a new understanding. The vision quest requires a long personal preparation, abstention from sexual intercourse, and the stage of purification of the sweat lodge. Two other elements are paramount to the quest itself. The petitioner needs to humble himself—he needs to cry for a vision, pray, and supplicate. In order to achieve the vision it is also necessary to sharpen the faculties of observation. Everything that occurs during a vision quest can have a meaning, but it has to be faithfully observed and trimmed of any possible embellishment. Everything in nature, be it animals, plants, or weather patterns, could set the stage and offer important elements for a vision that most often occurs in a very vivid dream. The faculty of observation becomes crucial in the later telling of the vision to the holy man who directs the ceremony. Interpretation of the vision follows, and this stage can take many years. Significant visions, such as Black Elk's, were enacted in a ritual fashion. Black Elk's interviews exemplify the care for detail and the accurate recording of conflicting feelings required of the earnest Lakota seeker. They are a unique document in which nothing is insignificant for an understanding of Black Elk's life and mission.

The absorption within the power of the living moment is aptly summarized in the emblematic statement, "walking the earth in a sacred manner," central to Lakota spirituality. This was also the intent of Black Elk's biography, notwithstanding the admissions of his own frailties and his departures from the good "red road."

Between Tradition and Innovation: Black Elk's Life Path

Black Elk's challenging mission lies in the enormous transitions faced by his culture at the time when the Medicine Man was an adolescent and youth. Black Elk was born most likely in 1862. His boyhood name—Kahnigapi—bears the revealing meaning of "choice." Black Elk was the fourth of his line to bear that name. His father and paternal grandfather had been medicine men of renown before him. He was aware of the powers that ran down the line of generations when he revealed to Neihardt: "I am just a common man, but I have the 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." (De Mallie 27)

Black Elk experienced the buffalo hunt just before his twenties, but by 1883 the buffalo were practically extinct. This was the time of transition to reservation life, the beginning of the strife with the whites that would culminate in 1890 with the battle of Wounded Knee. In his Great Vision at age nine the young Lakota received a revelation of a new nature for his culture—hence the difficulty of matching these contents with the knowledge proceeding from tradition.

The famous vision was vouchsafed by the spiritual world while the young Lakota lay in bed as if dead, afflicted by a mysterious illness for twelve days. This experience had in fact been ushered in by an earlier vision when Black Elk was only four, in which the first elements of the Great Vision were already present. Similar, unsolicited revelations have been reported by other Lakota. What is unique in Black Elk's instance is the scope and breadth of the revelations. The challenge to integrate the contents of the revelation accompanied Black Elk throughout his life.

With the benefit of hindsight Black Elk's life task can be seen inscribed within the images of the Great Vision. It is as if we were to look at a landscape from the vantage point of a mountaintop. Down below lies the valley, and Black Elk's life is defined by the river meandering through it. The river meanders in an irregular fashion, eventually being diverted from its intended course, only to gather more strength and resume its rush towards the lower valley and the ocean. The Great Vision defines the major forward direction of the river's course, and the lesser movements of the river can be found in the lesser visions and other spiritual practices that marked different parts of Black Elk's life. It is remarkable that his biography is completely inscribed by a search for meaning that was to be found in a line of spiritual practices of different natures. It was not a uniform progress: there were hesitations and setbacks, times of doubt, and times to resume forward.

Black Elk showed himself to be a man of our times in the way he interpreted his Great Vision. He was often poised between a literal and a symbolic interpretation of his vision. In the literal understanding the Lakota tradition of warfare played a seductive role. However, the Great Vision had a truly universal content. All the images of the vision have a transformative power. Each awe-inspiring symbol of the vision can metamorphose into an innocuous animal or beneficial herb. Black

Elk struggled between seeing himself as a war leader to his people, or a purely spiritual leader for many more nations than just the Lakota. It was the latter possibility that finally gained the upper hand, after some very trying experiences.

Black Elk's life can be divided roughly into four parts. In his youth destiny allowed Black Elk to know the last of the Lakota's traditional way of life. He participated in the buffalo hunt, prior to the encroachments of the white settlers. This period was short-lived.

From 1875—the date he joined Crazy Horse's band—Black Elk started a long period of ambivalence towards the *wasichu*, the name that the natives gave to the white people. He was present a year later at the battle of Little Big Horn. In the year following Crazy Horse's death, parts of the Sioux bands went towards Canada, Black Elk among them. He then joined the Pine Ridge Reservation in 1880. His desire to learn from the white man led him to join the Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, enabling him to visit France, Italy, Germany.

The European tour (1886-9) was a disappointment for Black Elk, even though certain seeds were planted in his soul at that time. When he returned to Pine Ridge he found his people in a condition of despair, plagued by famine. With many hesitations he joined the Ghost Dance movement at the epilogue of Wounded Knee. It was the beginning of a very understandable retreat from and hostility towards the white race. At this stage Black Elk practiced as a medicine man and he took on the practice of *yuwipi,* which we will describe in more detail later. The year 1904—Black Elk was then forty-one—marked the beginning of a third period. The marriage to Katie War Bonnet, a Catholic Lakota, may have initiated part of the process. Steltenkamp is our only source of information in the matter. While practicing yuwipi on a dying child, Black Elk was confronted by the Jesuit Father Lindebner, who had come to baptize the child. It was a rough meeting and the occasion of Black Elk's conversion. After this time he would be known as a holy man. Black Elk's adoption of the new faith is unequivocal. In fact he became a devoted catechist and missionary to other native tribes.

The meeting with Neihardt in 1930 initiates (or most likely only makes visible) a phase of dialogue between Black Elk's Native American spirituality and his own understanding of Christianity. This

appears much more clearly from the interviews than from Neihardt's literary rendition. From the year 1935 to the end of his life, Black Elk was part of the Indian Pageant organized by Patrice Duhamel in Rapid City, South Dakota. There he taught the white people about Native American culture, spirituality, and rituals, as for example through the reenactments of Sun Dances. These contacts were followed in 1947 by the meeting with John Epes Brown and the publication in 1953 of *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*.[5] In this effort Black Elk fully reclaimed his Lakota heritage. We can also detect the attempt to form a bridge with Christianity, if nothing else in the parallel between the seven rituals and the seven sacraments. This attempt can be felt and sensed in the descriptions of witnesses of how Black Elk united Christian holidays with Native American traditions: for example, he initiated the idea of Christmas night dancing. To the end of his life he kept intact the tradition of the sacred pipe, and saw no contradiction between it and the teachings of Christianity.

The Great Vision

Noticeable differences exist between the Great Vision told by Black Elk in the stenographic interviews and John Neihardt's famous literary rendition. For our purpose only the interviews can provide a genuine feeling for the striking imaginative nature of the vision. The main elements will be mentioned here; the reader can find the original in DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather* (111-142).

Throughout the vision Black Elk is told that he is to enact the will of the powers of the west—the thunder-beings—powers that bring destruction and renewal. In his journey he is led by two men. These are the same two men "coming down headfirst like arrows slanting down" that Black Elk first saw in his vision at age four. They announce to him that his Grandfathers are calling him. He is then shown the horses of the four directions: twelve black horses of the west, twelve white horses of the north, twelve sorrel horses of the east, twelve buckskin horses of the south. The horses multiply in number and circle around Black Elk, until he describes a "sky full of horses." They finally metamorphose into buffalo, elk, and all kinds of animals and fowls, and disperse to the four quarters.

The bay horse that he is riding takes him to the six Grandfathers, sitting under a rainbow door. He is taken to a cloud teepee, under a rainbow gate, the traditional house of the thunder-beings of the west. There he meets the six Grandfathers. These are the powers of the four directions, the supreme being Wakan Tanka, and Mother Earth. From the first four Grandfathers he receives gifts. From the powers of the west he receives a cup of water and a bow and arrow, and he is told: "behold him, whom you shall represent…He is your spirit and you are his body." He is further given the name "Eagle Wing Stretches." At this stage the powers of the west also announce to him that they will take him to the center of the earth. From the north he receives an herb that allows him to cure a sick horse of the west. The Eastern Grandfather gives him the holy pipe and the southern one a flowering stick with all kinds of singing birds.

The Fifth Grandfather turns into a spotted eagle and announces to Black Elk that he shall commune with the stars and have power to fight an enemy that the Grandfathers cannot fight. In meeting with the Sixth Grandfather Black Elk sees an old man with a spear in his hand turning younger, until he becomes a child. Black Elk, frightened at first, comes to recognize himself in the young Grandfather. This spear will appear later in Black Elk's fight against the blue man.

With the power of the bow and arrow Black Elk now walks the Black Sacred Road from west to east. He is sent to fight the "man standing amid a flame" in a place that Black Elk identifies as the forks of the Missouri River. Later on he sees this man as a "man painted blue" who destroys everything. In his fight Black Elk is assisted by twelve riders, one of them called Left Hand Charger (later associated with the powers of the west).

The riders of the four directions charge but fail to vanquish the blue man. Finally, Black Elk charges with bow and arrow transformed into a big spear and stabs him through the heart. The man turns into a turtle, and now "everything that had been dead came back to life and cheered me for killing that enemy."

Black Elk is now given power to lead his nation on the Sacred Road from south to north. Passing in front of a tipi he sees women and children and men dying. He mentions a "man whose body was turning gray and whose mouth had red flames coming out of it" and at that

moment he knows he will become a holy man (*wakan wikasa*). From the Grandfathers of the four directions he is entrusted to give his nation the sacred pipe, the sacred sprouting stick, and the sacred herb. The northern Grandfather also asks him: "give them (your people) your sacred wind so they shall face the wind with courage."

Black Elk is now to lead his people in the four ascents that he sees as the ordeals of four generations: "I was to raise a nation either in prosperity or difficulty." As they proceed toward the ascents, the spirits of the deceased follow the people. The notes concerning the first three ascents are rather obscure, most likely because the interviews move back and forth between the vision and historical present-day considerations.

The first ascent begins with a song about the people increasing, a call to the unborn children of the coming generations. The journey starts on a note of rejoicing, mirrored by the joy of all creatures of the earth and the air.

In the second ascent the people are transformed into animals, taking on their virtues and strengths. The animals start to be afraid and call upon their chiefs. Of the third ascent we are only told that the people start to walk with difficulty, and Black Elk comments: "perhaps we are in that time now" (the early 1930s). The fourth ascent occupies most of the rest of the vision, before Black Elk's personal journey back into his body.

From this moment the animals transform back into humans and are all very poor (sick). Towards the north Black Elk sees a man painted red all over his body. Undergoing a typical process of transformation, the man rolls to the ground, rising as a buffalo, which in turn rolls to the ground leaving in its place the healing herb of the north. A breeze rises, of which it is said: "the wind was in the form of a spirit and as it went over the people all the dead things came to life." At this point the flowering stick reappears in the middle of the nation's hoop. Of the meaning of the hoop Black Elk specifies that: "the continents of the world and the people shall stand as one." The people move on the red road again and Black Elk hands them the sacred relics (the gifts of the four Grandfathers) anew.

Proceeding further, Black Elk sees a flame coming up from the earth; he can hear the crashing of lightning and thunder. After Left Hand Charger makes a vain attempt to kill it, a spirit calls: "Eagle

Wing Stretches take courage. Your time has come." Black Elk kills the enemy who now appears to be a dog, half white and half black (the colors of west and north). Again, as in the first meeting with the Grandfathers, he is given a healing herb, but this time from the west, with which he can heal a sick black horse. Again—as in the first episode—the horses neigh and out of a dust cloud appear a million horses. The Western Grandfather returns and after him follow four virgins, one holding the sacred pipe. The scene ends with the rejoicing of all living creatures.

The western spirit now takes the nation's leader to the top of a high mountain, then to the center of the earth. Of this experience Black Elk relates: "They had taken me all over the world and shown me all the powers. They took me to the center of the earth and to the top of the peak they took me to review it all…I was to see the bad and the good. I was to see what is good for humans and what is not good for humans."

Out of the east come two men with wings and a bright star on their breast. They give Black Elk the healing herb of the east, which he drops on the earth where it grows and flowers. Again, looking around him, he sees sick people towards the south and the west, with a white cloud over them. He is told by the western spirit: "Behold them who need help." And there he sees what he understands to be the white people.

Still on the fourth ascent the black rider of the west shows Black Elk a "man with power." What Black Elk sees is a flame in which he could surmise a man that he cannot clearly distinguish. Around him voices moan. When he can finally distinguish the shapes he relates: "They (western powers) showed me the bad in the form of this man who was all in black and (had) lightning flashes going all over his body when he moved. He had horns." He is also told: "Behold him. Someday there will be dispute all over the universe." At this same moment the man transforms into a gopher, then into an herb, and finally into a skeleton. Black Elk is instructed to use the herb to defend his people. Four apocalyptic riders appear; they are warriors going up the fourth ascent. Now there is war all over the world. Again, Black Elk is reminded that "there shall be a dispute of the winds, and then you shall depend upon the herb." From the transcript it appears that

this episode is mentioned twice (there is twice the war landscape, and twice the black men are transformed into an herb).

This episode marks the end of the fourth ascent, an ascent yet to come at that time (1930s) according to the Lakota holy man. Black Elk's soul is starting the journey back towards the earth. He now returns to the cloud tipi of the six Grandfathers, who address him in turns. The First Grandfather entrusts him a cup of water in which he can see buffaloes.. He raises his head towards the people and he sees that: "there were some animals [people] in there of different tribes that I was to get along with on earth." The meeting with the Second Grandfather is closely bound with Black Elk's personal destiny. The Grandfather announces to him that his people will need him. In recognizing his tribe he sees everybody happy, except a sick child: he knows that it is himself and that he has been sick for twelve days. The Grandfather gives him a cup in which he sees a man painted blue, with bow and arrow, who is in distress and wants to get out of the water. Ordered to drink it down, Black Elk relates: "This blue spirit was a fish and I had drunk it down. From this I received strong power…"

The Third Grandfather hands Black Elk a cup of water with the morning star. The fourth Grandfather gives him a cup of water with a road across it, and sings a song to revive him. The cup of the Fifth Grandfather shows a spotted eagle with wings outstretched.

The Sixth Grandfather's cup, full of water, shows many small human beings. Black Elk is told: "Behold them, with great difficulty they shall walk and you shall go among them. You shall make six centers of the nation's hoop." Again he notices that he is the Sixth Grandfather "who represented the spirit of mankind." When he comes out of the rainbow tipi he now occupies the place of the Sixth Grandfather, who is gone. The spotted eagle escorts Black Elk to his village, where he first recognizes his body and then reenters it. At that moment he recognizes his parents and knows that it is the vision that has brought him back to life.

Walking the Black Road

Already from the onset of the vision two elements are emphasized. Black Elk was to work through the power granted by the thunder-beings, the beings of the west who bring destruction and renewal. He

was meant to represent the Sixth Grandfather—generally speaking Mother Earth, or more specifically the spirit of humanity—as the end of the vision shows us. From these premises we can sense that the Lakota man had a universal task, one that required confrontation and transformation. It was meant to be of benefit to all, not just the Lakota or red race.

In spiritual terms Black Elk's life was situated close in time to the end of the so-called Kali Yuga (Age of Darkness), around the year 1899, a time that began to challenge humanity towards a perception of the spiritual world and a universal vision of the human being, no longer bound to a particular race, religion and culture. To bring things into perspective: the Great Vision occurred in 1871, in 1880 Black Elk became a holy man and in 1883 the buffalo became extinct, changing forever the life of the tribes of the Great Plains. Wounded Knee followed in 1890.

Walking the Black Road is the first task outlined by the vision. The Black Road meant taking on the warpath. In Black Elk's case, being a holy man not an actual warrior, it can be understood as a personal confrontation brought on by his personal destiny. It is intimately connected with the so-called blue man. After meeting this blue man and subduing him, Black Elk offered three possible explanations of his task: he was to take the warpath and fight an enemy in battle, he was to come down from the heavens and fight the drought, or he was to conquer the power of the water in fighting the adversary spirit.

What Black Elk lets us know about the spirit called blue man offers us an insight into the nature of the fight he has to wage. The blue man was in fact part of the Oglala man's psychological make-up. This is made explicit in the meeting with the Grandfather of the North just before Black Elk's return to his body. At this point he had to swallow the blue man. We gather that the entity had an aggressive nature but was also in distress. Through the interviews, we are privy to the fact that it was the blue man who conferred on Black Elk the strange powers that he could use, particularly in the yuwipi ceremonies. He further specified that he could make the blue man come out and swim in the cup of water he used in the rituals. The exactness and methodical recording of Black Elk's feelings and details

associated with particular events allows us to trace the "story" of the blue man.

The being first appeared when Black Elk, at age fourteen, was chosen for the enactment of the part of a bear cub in a bear medicine ceremony called for the healing of a wounded man, one that he describes as "impossible to heal." The young man, participating in the ceremony, was asked to look into the cup in which he was expected to see the blue man. He also foresaw that someday he would have to perform the ceremony as a medicine man. After that (much to his surprise) he began acting like a bear cub and making genuine bear sounds. The healed man was strong enough to fight the very next day (DeMallie 178-9).

At age sixteen Black Elk enacted the initial part of his Great Vision, involving the horses of the four directions and culminating with the horses neighing and rejoicing. On this occasion he experienced his vision again just as he was carrying it out. He also sensed the presence of the blue man in the following terms: "I found this little blue man was in my body and I was to have power from him." The presence of the being was accompanied with queer feelings in his legs and the sensation of being raised off the ground. The blue man lived in his chest, echoing the feelings that he had earlier on in the bear medicine ceremony (DeMallie 88).

Finally, as he had foretold, at age eighteen Black Elk performed as a medicine man on a sick boy. He experienced the same feelings and body sensations as earlier in his life. This time he also had an initial desire to cry. When he went on to perform the healing he "[drew] the north wind through him. At the same time the blue man was also in my mouth for I could feel him there." Black Elk called this the first time he ever conjured (DeMallie 238-239).

During his time in Europe Black Elk had the feeling that his special powers abandoned him, but upon his return to North America they reappeared. The presence of the blue man, or rather the feelings associated with him, resurfaced during the Ghost Dance. In this instance they were accompanied by panting and queer feelings in the heart. These last side effects could simply be associated with the strain of the prolonged efforts of uninterrupted dancing that characterized the Ghost Dance.

In the years after the Wounded Knee massacre Black Elk took on the practice of yuwipi. What is most properly called yuwipi corresponds to a shamanistic ceremony that is found from Siberia throughout sub-arctic North America to the Great Lakes. The word means something like "to wrap" or "they wrap him up." The ritual is performed in the darkness, and the medicine man calls on spirits and sacred stones to perform healing, foretell the future, or find lost objects.[6] The presence of spirits is known through rattles glowing in a green-blue light, flying around the room, often striking walls, floors, and ceilings. Additionally, moans and noises can be heard.[7] Objects that attract lightning—watches, glasses, or mirrors—are removed. The medicine man, initially wrapped in robes and tied with thongs, is released by the spirits during the ceremony (DeMallie 13). Also during these ceremonies the blue man granted Black Elk special powers

What motivated Black Elk to take on the paths of the Ghost Dance and the yuwipi ceremonies stems from a whole set of circumstances that will be fully explored in the next section. Suffice to say that the wise man had to undergo extreme trials and face depths of despair hardly imaginable, before he accepted the two spiritual practices.

Finally, in 1904 the confrontation with the blue man came to a resolution in Black Elk's life. It was at one of the yuwipi ceremonies performed on a dying child that Black Elk had the climactic encounter with Father Lindebner mentioned earlier (Steltenkamp 33-34). The fact that Black Elk so readily abandoned the practice of yuwipi at Lindebner's instigation—actually accepting his rude treatment—indicates his readiness to give up a ritual that seems to have been detrimental to his health. Black Elk had persistent stomach disorders and inner turmoil according to his daughter Lucy (Steltenkamp 36). Lucy also relates that her father felt like a magician trying to fool others (Steltenkamp 26).

That a chapter in Black Elk's life came to a close is indicated by a few telling symptoms. Black Elk refers to his conversion as "turning himself around" (DeMallie 92). While he never renounced his Native American heritage, he certainly gave up the practice of yuwipi. The same is true of the Ghost Dance, as we will see in the next section. Black Elk steadfastly refused Neihardt's request to perform a yuwipi ceremony (DeMallie 15n), although he had no such reservations for

any other Lakota ceremony. Neither yuwipi nor the Ghost Dance was included in the mature legacy of the holy man's worldview—*The Sacred Pipe*, edited by J. E. Brown. In essence it would seem that Black Elk had to cleanse himself of the spiritual influence of the blue man. This was most likely the inner battle that he had intuited among the three different possibilities.

Meeting the World of the White Man

The recurring concern to meet the world of the white man is foretold in the content of Black Elk's vision. In accordance with the universalistic content of the images, the holy man strove to move beyond his immediate cultural circles from a very early age. Black Elk's repeated efforts to meet the white race in order to mutually enrich each other are coherent parts of his biography, not just mere accidental detours or unaccountable years.

The universalistic tone of the vision is further amplified by Black Elk's commentary. The fourth ascent in particular shows a continuous evolution of Black Elk's role, first within his nation and then beyond it. Thus, for instance, after being taken to the center of the earth he saw that "the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father" (DeMallie 97). During the same episode he received the intuition that he would offer help to white people with the "herb from the east" (DeMallie 134). This most likely occurred through the teaching of Native American wisdom by means of the publication of *The Sacred Pipe* and the Duhamel Show in Rapid City.

Before starting the journey back from the fourth ascent, Black Elk mentioned that the people were rejoicing. Upon looking at them carefully he noticed people of different tribes. The vision is amplified by Black Elk's comments in the interviews: "What I saw there actually happened, for now I have friends of all the different tribes, even the whites" (DeMallie 139). Again, in relation to the Great Vision, the aging Lakota man reaffirms the knowledge that he was liked by the red and white races alike (DeMallie 124).

If this is the epilogue of the holy man's life, the path leading to it was all but straight. The continuous encroachments upon Lakota territory, the unscrupulous disregard for the peace treaties, the

extermination of the buffalo, the murder of Crazy Horse, and all the other excesses left very little alternative to the Lakota but either total surrender or strenuous but futile warfare.

Even though he went on the warpath, Black Elk did not lose sight of his vision. In this sense his participation in the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show was another attempt to build these bridges. What moved Black Elk toward this first decision was the hope of finding something that could help his people. The first immediate result was an admission of failure. In his own words, he "felt like a man who had never had a vision".[8] Disillusioned though he was, a few seeds were nevertheless planted that would later come to blossom on better ground.

By contractual stipulation Black Elk had to be baptized in the Episcopal Church. He was also instructed in the gospel. Upon his return in 1889 he wrote a letter to the December issue of *Iapi Oaye* (Word Carrier). There he stated that his sole interest had been to find out about the "white men's beliefs about God's will." Without transition he quoted the first three verses of the famous I Corinthians 13. That the Bible had left some marks on his soul is even clearer when he informed the reader of his wish to go to the Holy Land ("where they killed Jesus"), which was left unrealized because of the distance and most likely lack of funds.

In fact a few white people formed strong bonds with the Lakota holy man. One of them was Buffalo Bill himself, the others a family in Paris who witnessed Black Elk's second near-death experience (the first being the Great Vision), called by Neihardt the "spirit journey."

Clearly, Black Elk was wavering in his feelings about the white man and the universal content of his vision. Those were very hard times for the Lakota, and the hardest time of trial for the one who was one of their greatest spiritual leaders. Life in the reservation brought famine and disease, but even worse than that was the loss of cultural identity caused by the transition from nomadic to sedentary life. Added to this was the loss of many of the traditional points of reference, such as the prohibition placed on the practice of the Sun Dance. Deeply entrenched fears permeated the relationships between the white people and the Lakota. Wounded Knee was only the ultimate expression of such radicalization. Black Elk was facing his darkest

hour; in that year he had also lost his father and he remembers being unable to stop crying.

The Ghost Dance brought new hope to the Sioux and other tribes. Black Elk kept very much to the periphery of these events, at least for a time. He did not meet the prophet Wovoka—a Paiute from Nevada and originator of the dance—nor did he go to the first meetings and dances. However, from the nature of the prophet's vision he could certainly ask himself if this was the link he was looking for, a bridge between Native American spirituality and the white man's religion. This element is in effect a recurrent motif in Wovoka's new religion, but one that is overshadowed by darker overtones, as we will see further on.

A closer look at Wovoka and the Ghost Dance will throw light on the nature of the new religion. The prophet's vision was fundamentally different from Black Elk's Great Vision. The Paiute prophet had received the revelation that a great mass of mud would roll over the earth and bury the white men. The red men would be spared and taken up in the new world that would come up like a cloud. In this new world the dead would come back to life, and there would be plenty of meat and happiness without end. The new religion was clearly a mix of Native American and Christian themes. Wovoka prophesied of a separation of races, last judgment, and New Jerusalem.

The Ghost Dance was a slow shuffling dance, different for the most part from all other Sioux practices. The participants, their eyes closed, danced for days and nights until they would swoon, faint, and have visions. Once they returned to themselves they shared their visions with the others. Such revelations also came to Black Elk once he joined the movement; they provide us an insight into the nature of the new religion.

During his second and longest vision Black Elk was taken over a ridgetop by a spotted eagle. Below he could see flames and hear sounds. Soon after he was flying over a series of villages and landed at the sixth one. Twelve men came to meet him and brought him into the presence of a mysterious individual, whom Black Elk describes in very ambivalent terms. He could not tell whether he was red or white. While at one point he declared that he did not resemble the Christ, at another time he mentioned that there seemed to be wounds in his

hands. In the end the being acquired a whole spectrum of colors, becoming very beautiful.

Black Elk had a third vision. This time the flaming rainbow reappeared as in the Great Vision. A spotted eagle warned him: "Behold them, the thunder-being nation, you are relative-like to them. Hence remember this." After this last vision the Lakota wise man comments: "All through this I depended on my Messiah vision [Ghost Dance vision], whereas perhaps I should have depended on my first Great Vision, which had more power, and this might have been where I made my great mistake" (DeMallie 266). Before taking part in the Wounded Knee massacre Black Elk candidly admits he had doubts: "I just thought it over and I thought I should not fight. I doubted about this Messiah business… If (I) turned back the people would think it funny, so I just decided to go anyway" (DeMallie 272). This is further restated later in the interviews: "I did not recall the vision that I should have recalled at this time" (DeMallie 275).

We now see different elements on the subject of the Ghost Dance. What did Black Elk perceive about it, and how does that correspond to reality? Let us look at Wovoka and the Ghost Dance more closely. The new messiah was the son of Tavibo, already a holy man and follower of the Paiute prophet Wodziwob, the founder of a previous Ghost Dance that spread throughout the Mason Valley, Nevada, in 1870. Many of the elements of the later Ghost Dances were already present in its forerunner, such as the return of the dead and regeneration of the depleted earth. [9]

At age fourteen Wovoka was adopted by a white family, the Wilsons. He developed a friendship with the son David and a deep interest in the figure of Jesus. However, at age seventeen he broke off with the Wilsons, feeling the need to reclaim his spiritual heritage. He became interested in the Indian Shaker movement of Slocum. The idea started to germinate in his mind of a way to regenerate his people's faith. To this end he resorted to questionable techniques. In the first "act of magic," he declared that ice would float down the Walker River in July. This he accomplished with the help of David Wilson who released ice stored in the lake above from the previous winter. Since this had not been enough to convince everybody he declared that ice would fall down from the sky. This time his friend placed a block

of ice on top of a tree; the heat melted it enough to release it in time for the expected effect.

At age twenty-seven Wovoka fell ill with a high fever during a total eclipse of the sun. The prophet was still ill many days after the almost hour-long eclipse. When he came back to consciousness he described having talked with God. At this point he disclosed the apocalyptic visions associated with the Ghost Dance: earthquakes and floods followed by a new paradise for the Indians. The buffalo would return and the people would be forever young. This led to the first Ghost Dance in January 1889.

Just before the Ghost Dance Wovoka made contact with the Mormons. The Millennialist movement within the Mormons believed Christ would return by the year 1890. It was by that time that the prophet started calling himself no longer the "Old Man's deputy" but the "Old Man's son." The rumor spread among various Indian nations that a redeemer had appeared. A Ghost Dance camp was held in which not only representatives of sixteen tribes but also Mormons danced together. On the occasion Wovoka showed stigmata that were in reality self-inflicted injuries.

It was through a detour of circumstances that the Ghost Dance added the ghost shirts to its repertoire. The Mormons of higher ranks wear under their robes a holy undergarment called the Endowment Robe, reputed to protect them from evil. Wovoka's ghost shirt was a long white shirt decorated with symbols of eagle, sun, and moon. The prophet staged another hoax in order to prove that he could survive a bullet shot by his brother from ten feet away. He did not anticipate that this would generate the reputation of invincibility for those who wore the garments.

It is all the more remarkable that Black Elk sensed the deceptive nature of the Ghost Dance. The being that he saw in his second vision had wounds in his hands, although he did not resemble the Christ. The holy man had seen into the nature of the deception of Wovoka, although he did not fully realize it. In his feelings, however, doubt was heightened. As in other occasions Black Elk's intuition was an accurate instrument of perception. However, the Oglala wise man still had to attain the degree of discrimination necessary in order to attain spiritual certainty.

Once Black Elk found himself involved into the Wounded Knee massacre, the impact of the carnage he witnessed caused him to move into quite the opposite mood from the one that the Ghost Dance generated. Now he was no more seeking escape but revenge. In the interviews he mentions: "revenge is sweet" and "I did not want to have peace" (DeMallie 281). During the massacre he engaged in battle with the feeling of invulnerability that he attributed to the power of his vision. It was only when fear returned that he was wounded. After being healed by a bear medicine man he returned into battle with the same feeling of invulnerability.

Wounded Knee was a turning point. The communication between the races was tenuous at best. Black Elk's task was rendered more difficult from both sides of the conflict. After first embracing the escapist message of the Ghost Dance, he had now taken a much more earthbound path and fallen into the call to hatred and revenge, at least temporarily. This built a transition from the role that Black Elk had assumed within the practice of yuwipi and finally led to this meeting with Father Lindebner more than ten years later.

After the meeting with Father Lindebner Black Elk completely gave up the yuwipi ceremonies. He was also cured of his ulcers some time after (Steltenkamp 35). From that time onward he was not only a devout Catholic but also an active catechist. In this function he had the opportunity to communicate daily with the Jesuit fathers. He would serve at mass, and when the priest could not celebrate mass he would read the scriptures, make sermons, and even administer baptism (Steltenkamp 55). In later years Black Elk became a missionary to the Arapaho, Winnebago, Omaha, Shoshone, and others (Steltenkamp 62, 65), realizing in this way some of the indications of the vision.

This brief review of Black Elk's life after his adoption of Catholicism should suffice to prove that this was more than a token conversion. However, even in this realm Black Elk was more than a mere copier. Never did he deny his spiritual tradition, however. Significant in this regard is the testimony of Ben Marrowbone about words spoken by the holy man: "That (sacred) pipe—it's a road to take—a road to honesty—a road to heaven. It teaches how to lead a good life, like the Ten Commandments. They understood what that woman was saying, and that worship was my foundation. But my foundation is deepening…God made me to know him, love him, serve

him. To make sure I do this, God sent us his son. The old way is good. God prepared before the missionaries came. Our ancestors used the pipe to know God. That's a foundation. But from the old country came Christ from heaven—a wonderful thing—the Son of God. And the Indian cares about this" (Steltenkamp 105) Thus, before the meeting with John Neihardt, the old man—now called Nick Black Elk—managed to integrate the contents of both traditions to quite a degree.

The Fourth Ascent: the Unfinished Task

The elder generations embraced the different denominations of Christianity with eagerness. With the coming generations the enthusiasm waned, and Black Elk noticed this with concern. It is logical to ask oneself whether the contents of the two traditions could just stand side by side or whether a true synthesis needed to be sought at a higher level. It would have been a spirituality that could bring the essence of Christ and his being, not just the externals of Christian doctrine, into the Lakota ways.

Certainly Black Elk tried it to some degree, first through the collaboration with Neihardt, then with John Epes Brown in the writing of *The Sacred Pipe*. Neither of them did full justice to the depth of Black Elk's spirituality and the promise of his Great Vision, but probably only the old Lakota could have done it. It is legitimate to wonder whether Black Elk could have given his people a new Christ-imbued Lakota spirituality, in the same way that the Iroquois Handsome Lake had done with quite a success through his Gaiwijo or New Religion in the year 1800.

Black Elk had to promote his vision without the full support of his natural allies. The relationship with Neihardt illustrates the point. When the writer first visited the holy man in Manderson (Pine Ridge) in August of 1930, Black Elk sensed a powerful presence (DeMallie 26). The relationship also struck the poet as a wholly new experience. Neihardt felt that Black Elk had telepathic knowledge of his thoughts: "Black Elk seemed to be expecting me and welcomed me as though he had seen me often" (DeMallie 27). He was surprised at Black Elk's quoting from the friend's poems, which he had not heard yet. Conversely, when Neihardt recited his poems, Black Elk thought of them as his own. The depth of this relationship culminated in Black Elk naming the poet Flaming Rainbow, from a central image of the

Great Vision. He had de facto transferred part of the task of carrying his spiritual message to Neihardt. The latter certainly reciprocated the friendship of his elder. Had it not been for the lack of funds during the years of the Great Depression, he would have bought property close to Manderson.

Neihardt did much in fact to spread Black Elk's message, even though the book was only a posthumous success. However, on a closer look at *Black Elk Speaks* one cannot help but feel a growing discomfort. It will reveal itself completely upon comparing Neihardt's version of the Great Vision with the vision itself as it appears in the interviews. What may seem just minor omissions and change becomes, with the cumulative effect of their consistency, a distortion of Black Elk's message.

In *Black Elk Speaks* the Great Vision keeps all the "traditional" aspects and is systematically trimmed of its universal message. Both when Black Elk walks the sacred road and when he is taken to the center of the earth, Neihardt refers to the sacred hoop as the hoop of the nation, whereas Black Elk means it in a larger sense as the hoop of all nations. Neihardt does not mention Black Elk's feeling of a mission to the white race, or the vision of the unity of the people, reflected in the cup of the Western Grandfather. Later, in the so-called Dog Vision, where Black Elk speaks of the dog's head and heart transforming into a man's head and heart, Neihardt speaks of the dog's head turning onto a white man's head. This was the dog that had been threatening the Lakota people.

Black Elk Speaks cast the Lakota holy man in the role of the heroic figure of the past, swept away by changes that he could not understand nor face. It conceded him wisdom, only to make it the relic of an extinguished tradition. Finally, it did not do justice to the last thirty years of the holy man's life or his beliefs. Later in life Neihardt wrote *The Song of the Messiah*, in which he spoke of the triumph of the spirit even through apparent defeat, and allowed for the same longing for happiness in all the races. However, this remained a shallow, abstract recognition of Black Elk's message. Understandably, after the publication of Neihardt's book, Black Elk felt the need to restate his Christian beliefs (letters of 26 January 1934 and 20 September 1934. See Steltenkamp 82-85). In the second letter he expressed himself thus: "In the last thirty years I am different from

what the white man wrote about me. I am a Christian" (Steltenkamp 83).

Even though the intended process of this partnership did not reach its fruition, Black Elk continued to "offer help" to the white man. This was done through the Duhamel Indian Pageant in Rapid City, every year starting from 1935. Although primarily a tourist attraction, the show also aimed at being educational. A wooden dance house was built according to the elder Lakota's specifications. It served for the pageant in winter and rainy weather. Black Elk reenacted traditional rituals, such as the offering of the sacred pipe and the Sun Dance. In the summer of 1936, during a formal visit to Mount Rushmore, Black Elk, addressing the six Grandfathers with the sacred pipe, prayed for the future of his people and "for unity of my people and the whites in the name of brotherhood" (DeMallie 65). Once more Black Elk's life bore witness to the desire of building a bridge between the Lakota and Native Americans and the white race.

Finally, in 1947, the aging man met with John Epes Brown. The outcome of the interviews was published in *The Sacred Pipe*. It was a sort of spiritual testament of the Oglala wise man, claiming a spirituality of service that stresses man's dependence on the spiritual world. Individual souls need purification through the rituals of the sweat lodge. Likewise, the departed souls need the process of purification of our grief in order to continue their journeys to the other world, free of attachments. Black Elk's religion seeks to bring about a state of communion and direct perception of the spiritual world. In this degree it is a religion that complements the modern Christian religion of revelation, or of the written word, which Black Elk met through the Jesuits. True communion is also the central role of the vision quest, there called "crying for a vision." In the same way as we have relatives on earth, Black Elk stresses the need to have relatives on the other side—the need for spiritual communion. Interestingly, neither yuwipi nor Ghost Dance is included among the seven rituals. The seven rituals of the book can only be performed after the individual purifies his soul and humbles himself to seek for help and be of service.

All of the above examples eloquently testify to Black Elk's sincere desire to enrich each race's spiritual traditions. He could walk across the cultural boundaries at ease. His acceptance of the reality of Christ probably stemmed from a high degree of supersensible

awareness. Hints of it appear in the more apocalyptic part of the vision, when Black Elk was taken to the mountain peak and to the center of the earth in order to experience the highest of goods and the depths of evil. The time of the fourth ascent was the time Black Elk lived on during the end of his life. The man in the flame with lightning flashes and horns over his body later transformed into a gopher and then into the "most powerful herb of all" (DeMallie 135). This was the herb that Black Elk was afraid to use; he called it the "soldier weed of destruction," but the words did not come from the vision. They denote a personal interpretation. In the vision he was told: "Behold the herb; with it everything you face will be like it and the world will tremble…There shall be a dispute of winds and you shall depend upon this herb" (DeMallie 137). With this last part of the vision something could be hinted at of the possibility for man in the future to transform the most destructive powers of earth.

Black Elk united in a unique way two views of the spiritual world. He preserved the tradition of direct access to and communication with the spiritual world that his people inherited from times immemorial. Native American religion—certainly of the Lakota—is a spirituality based primarily on direct perception. Communion with the spiritual world is sought in order to guide and direct many levels of practical life decisions. It is the way to "walk the earth in a sacred manner." Catholic religion is a religion of the written word, later become dogma. On the other hand it is also the preserved fruit of direct spiritual perception that the prophets, patriarchs, and writers of the Gospels preserved. In it comes the revelation of the being of Christ. The apocalypse further embodies in images the revelation of ages to come. Clearly—as it appears in his own words—Black Elk wanted to incorporate the being of Christ into the American tradition that has no historical record of the events of Palestine.

In the attempt of bringing about a synthesis, Black Elk became one of the first American pioneers in ushering in a new approach to spirituality. Emerson had already inaugurated a similar (though also quite different) approach by studying the treasures of world religions and intuiting that the human being can elevate modern scientific thinking to a level of intuition that forms a gateway towards perception of the spiritual world. Black Elk brought as a given this perception. He owed it to the heredity of the Lakota bloodline, and even more so to

the gifts of spiritual perception that already lived in his forefathers—holy men or medicine men themselves. The Great Vision revealed to him that he had a universal mission to accomplish, one not bound to race or religion. After great inner and outer trials he managed to accommodate side by side Christianity and Lakota religion, intuiting that it was the task of modern man to find access to the revelation of sacred texts through our own inner effort.

At Black Elk's death, Michael Steltenkamp records the natural phenomena occurring during the night wake. The Lakota of the reservation, as well as the Jesuit fathers, both agree about unusual events in the night sky. Black Elk's daughter reported that the northern lights were brighter than ever, and mentioned a luminous circle and figure of eight. The Jesuit William Seihr confirms that he had never seen anything quite like it ever before. He gives us a lengthy description: "something like a display on a fountain of water…whole horizon seemed ablaze…different formations in the sky that night, which, to me, looked like spires," and more. Could this have been a last eloquent testimony to the man and his mission?

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BLACK ELK'S UNIVERSAL MISSION

Black Elk, one of the most well known Native American leaders, is in many degrees one of the least understood. Until his death he was a faithful preserver and promoter of the Lakota ways. However, the medicine man became a Roman Catholic in 1904. From then, until his death in 1950, he remained faithful to this choice too.

Black Elk preserved all the best elements of his cultural heritage in his testament of The Sacred Pipe. He also continued to bring to his people and other tribes the teachings of the historical Jesus. Truly the elder Lakota found himself at home in both cultures and worlds, becoming a representative of a new humanity, beyond races and creeds. In struggling towards a personal understanding of spiritual reality, he overcame both the Lakota warfare tradition and the limitations of a dogmatic religious faith.

The controversy that has endured about Black Elk's spiritual allegiances can be put to rest through the content of Black Elk's great vision and in the Holy Man's own words and biography. His life is the enactment of the Great Vision.