

Black Elk – A Spiritual/Mystical Journey across Three Epochs of Time

Hermeneutics – the art of interpretation

Two unique hermeneutical challenges in exploring the life of Black Elk

- Black Elk never learned English. During the interviews by Neihardt Black Elk would speak in Lakota, his son Ben Black Elk would translate to English and tell Neihardt. Neihardt would then dictate to his daughter Enid who took shorthand notes that would later be transcribed by Enid and her father into the book *Black Elk Speaks*.
- Black Elk's life not only spanned two centuries, it spanned three great epochs of the development of the human species; Paleolithic hunter gatherer, the Neolithic agrarian, and the Modern industrial.

Chosen becomes Black Elk

Black Elk was a

- Holy man, shaman, or medicine man (*wicasa wakan*)
- Healer, both physical and spiritual (*yuwipi*)
- Contrary or sacred clown (*heyoka*)
- Catholic lay preacher and missionary

Black Elk becomes Nicholas William Black Elk

This is the truth of Black Elk's spirituality and mysticism that many later biographers and interpreters do not understand; he was a non-dual person, combining his indigenous beliefs and his Catholic faith into one road, one path to serve all peoples. He did not lead a double life. As Richard Rohr might say, he held the opposites and they transformed his life.

Every object had a spirit, called *tonwan*; thus every object is holy, or *wakan*. Find a way to use *tonwan* and one found the power to do *wakan* things (Jackson 183). Black Elk was a *wicasa wakan*, a holy shaman or medicine man who tapped that power to the benefit of his people. And who were his people –all people.

Black Elk Quotes for Lectio Divina

- I don't know if the story happened this way but I know this story is true.
- The good road and the road of difficulty you have made to cross; and where they cross, the place is holy.
- The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of men when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan Tanka, and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each one of us.
- Grown men can learn from very little children for the hearts of the little children are pure. Therefore, Wakan Tanka may show to them many things which older people miss.
- Sometimes dreams are wiser than waking.
- There can never be peace between nations until there is first known that true peace that is within the souls of men.
- It is hard to follow one great vision in this world of darkness and of many changing shadows. Among these shadows, men get lost.

For Further Reading

Jackson, Joe, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Neihardt, John, *Black Elk Speaks*. University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Steltenkamp, Michael, *Nicholas Black Elk*. University of Oklahoma Press, 2009.