

BLACK ELK ⊕ SPEAKS ⊕

Being the Life Story
of a Holy Man of the
OGLALA SIOUX

THE PREMIER EDITION

as told through John G. Neihardt
(Flaming Rainbow)

Annotated by Raymond J. DeMallie
with illustrations by Standing Bear



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Preface to the 1932 Edition

The first time I went out to talk to Black Elk about the Ogala-la Sioux, I found him sitting alone under a shelter of pine boughs near his log cabin that stands on a barren hill about two miles west of Manderson Post Office.

I had learned that Black Elk was related to the great Chief Crazy Horse and had known him intimately; so, in company with my son and an interpreter, I went to see him, expecting no more than the satisfaction of exchanging a few words with one who had, not once but many times, "seen Shelley plain." Nor did I feel certain of even so much; for, on the way, my interpreter said that he had taken another writer to Black Elk that morning without success. "I can see that you are a nice-looking woman," the old man had remarked, "and I can feel that you are good; but I do not want to talk about such things."

Black Elk paid me no compliments, but he talked all that August afternoon, save for frequent brooding silences when he sat hunched up, with folded elbows on his knees, staring upon the ground with half blind eyes.

It was not of worldly matters that he spoke most, but of things that he deemed holy and of "the darkness of men's eyes." Although my acquaintance with the Indian consciousness had been fairly intimate for more than thirty years, the inner world¹ of Black Elk, imperfectly revealed as by flashes that day, was both strange and wonderful to me.

1. Neihardt uses the expression "inner world" only in this preface. He conceptualized Black Elk's traditional religious beliefs and practices as an "entire system of knowledge that his vision represented," knowledge that he kept locked inside himself after accepting the white men's religion and joining the Catholic Church (*The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, 28).

2. The exploration of "higher values" was a central theme of Neihardt's life. See his *Poetic Values: Their Reality and Our Need of Them*.

3. For Neihardt's account of his first meeting with Black Elk, written soon afterward, see *Sixth Grandfather*, 27-28.

4. See Hilda Neihardt, *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt*, for an intimate reminiscence of Neihardt's relationship with Black Elk. For the 1931 interviews, see *Sixth Grandfather*, 101-296.

Also, I was deeply impressed by the scope of the man's life experience. In addition to having lived the common life of his people in the good old times as well as in the tragic and heroic years of their final defeat and degradation, from early youth he had lived in and for a world of higher values² than those of food and shelter, and his years had been one long, passionate devotion to those values as he conceived them. As hunter, warrior, practicing holy man, and indubitable seer, he seemed even then to represent the consciousness of the Plains Indian more fully than any other I had ever known; and when I became well acquainted with his inner world, I knew this to be true.³

The following year, in company with my daughters, Enid and Hilda, I returned to Black Elk's home for an extended visit, that he might relate his life story to me in fulfillment of a duty that he felt incumbent upon him.⁴ The nature of that duty as he conceived it will be apparent to readers who may approach the book in no condescending mood as of a civilized person more or less curious about the "savage" mind, but with the humble desire of one groping human being to understand another and perhaps to learn a little more in a world where so very little can be known. Such a reader should find much in Black Elk's consciousness for earnest pondering, especially in view of the present state of affairs throughout the whole scale of human values as our civilization has dealt with them.

But even those who seek merely to be entertained need not fear to listen when Black Elk speaks. He has been a participating witness to various stirring events, both in the physical and in the spiritual world, and he tells of these with a thoroughly unself-conscious simplicity that makes for easy reading. If at times his insights and poetic reaches approach sublimity, it will be granted that upon occasion his sense of humor is sufficiently lively to keep him in close touch with his fellow men.

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In his intimate every day family life Black Elk may fairly be described as a saint in the deeper meaning of that term, as signifying a rare form of genius. The members of his family and his friends all feel this, and the devotion shown to him by those who know him best is striking. Though a profoundly melancholy man, he is cheerful in all his human contacts and radiates an atmosphere of kindness even when he sits brooding with that look of heart-break in his face that has made at least one white man love him. He longs for the time when he can enter the "Outer World,"⁵ and yet during our extended visit with him and his friends, he was never slow to enter into any sport that might make my daughters happier, and he could remember many a funny story and good joke to liven the spirits of our party in our duller moments. He could enter into a game of hoop-and-spear with the gusto of a care-free boy, and he would dance half the night away with us under the stars to the booming of the drums and the strangely beautiful songs that he knew in his youth.

When I first met Black Elk he was almost blind.⁶ Recently he has become totally so, a fact of which he informed me quite casually and apparently without sense of affliction. Is he not thus released from "the darkness of the eyes," and so a little nearer to his visioned world of reality?

Black Elk is illiterate;⁷ but thoughtful readers will allow that he is none the less an educated man in the fine sense of a term that sometimes seems to have lost its vital meaning for us in this excessively progressive age. For how may an educated man be described correctly, save by saying that in his consciousness racial experience has been recapitulated to build a rich personality? And surely in Black Elk we find the culture of his people in full flower.

I would suggest that this narrative should not only appeal to average human beings with a normal interest in other human beings, but that students of social theory, of essential

5. The expression "outer world" occurs only once in the transcript of Neihardt's conversations with Black Elk: "spirit (outer) world" (Sixth Grandfather, 220). "Outer world" is Neihardt's gloss; in the transcript, Black Elk uses "spirit world" twice and "other world" nine times. See Neihardt's discussion of "outerfield," the fundamental dimension beyond time and space, characterized by images, rather than words (Poetic Values, 111). In his poem, "The Ghostly Brother," based on a childhood dream, Neihardt is beckoned "Through the outer walls of sense" (Collected Poems, 164).

6. Black Elk's impaired vision, according to oral accounts, resulted from his practice as a medicine man. As a demonstration of his power, he would hide charges of gunpowder in a fire, which allowed him to cause seemingly spontaneous explosions; one time the powder exploded in his face (Sixth Grandfather, 13-14).

7. Neihardt likely did not know that Black Elk was literate in his native language. Not only had he read parts of the Bible in Dakota, but beginning in 1888, when he was traveling with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show in England, he wrote letters in Lakota that were published in church newspapers. See Sixth Grandfather, 8-10, 17-21.

religion, and of psychical research especially, should find the book worthy of consideration. Incidentally, those who seek for meaning in the visions, particularly the Great Vision, are likely to be repaid for the effort.

I wish to express gratitude to my friends among the Ogala Sioux for helping me in many ways, and for their human kindness, although most of them will never learn that I have done so. I am especially indebted to Benjamin,⁸ son of Black Elk, for his painstaking and efficient service as my interpreter through many days, and to my daughter, Enid, for the voluminous stenographic record of the conversations out of which this book has been wrought as a labor of love. Government officials were generous in helping me, and I have good reason to be grateful to Secretary of the Interior, Ray Lyman Wilbur; Malcolm McDowell, Secretary of the Board of Indian Commissioners; Flora Warren Seymour, a member of the Board; and to B. G. Courtright, Field Agent in Charge at Pine Ridge.

John G. Neihardt
Branson, Missouri

8. For the transcript of a talk given by Benjamin Black Elk in 1969, see H. Neihardt and Utrecht, *Black Elk Lives*, 3-22.

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Preface to the 1961 Edition

It was during August, 1930, that I first met Black Elk. I was then working on *The Song of the Messiah*, which now stands as the fifth and final narrative poem in my *Cycle of the West*. This Song is concerned with what white men have called the "Messiah craze"—the great Messianic dream that came to the desperate Indians in the middle 80's of the 19th century and ended with the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on December 29, 1890.

With my son, Sigurd, I had gone to Pine Ridge Reservation for the purpose of finding some old medicine man who had been active in the Messiah Movement and who might somehow be induced to talk to me about the deeper spiritual significance of the matter. I had known many of the Oglala Sioux for some years, and had good friends among the old "longhairs."¹ It was not information that was lacking for my purpose. I had the facts, both from the records and from old men who had lived through that time, sharing the great hope and the tragic disillusionment. What I needed for my purpose was something to be experienced through intimate contact, rather than to be received through telling. (Those of my readers who may be familiar with my *Song of the Messiah* will know what is meant.)

Mr. W. B. Courtright, then Field Agent-in-Charge at Pine Ridge Agency, was a "fan" of mine, being especially well acquainted with my *Song of the Indian Wars*, and through him

1. During the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cutting the hair, together with the change to Euro-American style clothing, was symbolic of Lakota men's acceptance of the white men's way of life. When boys attended school their braids were shorn away, their hair was cut short, and they could no longer wear breechcloths and blankets. By the 1930s, only a few men refused to cut their hair. They were called "long hairs," a term that designated not merely their hairstyle but their orientation to traditional Lakota culture.

2. *Wicháša wakhá* 'holy man.' The characterization of Black Elk as a "kind of a preacher" was probably intended to designate his role as a catechist in the Roman Catholic Church, not his identity as a traditional Lakota holy man, but at that time Neihardt would not have understood this.

3. In *Sixth Grandfather*, 26–27, I hypothesized that the interpreter was Emil Afraid of Hawk. That identification now appears to be an error. The interpreter was apparently Flying Hawk (1852–1932), who was a decade older than Black Elk. For Flying Hawk's life story, see McCreight, *Firewater and Forked Tongues: A Sioux Chief Interprets U. S. History*.

I learned of an old Sioux by the name of Black Elk, who lived among the barren hills some twenty miles east of the Agency near the combination store and post office called Manderson. Black Elk was a "kind of a preacher," I was told—that is to say, a *wichasha wakon*² (holy man, priest)—and he had been of some importance in the Messiah affair. Also, he was second cousin to Crazy Horse, the principal hero of my *Song of the Indian Wars*, and had known the great chieftain well.

So my son and I drove over to Manderson to try our luck with the old man. Flying Hawk,³ an interpreter with whom I was slightly acquainted, was living there, and he was willing to go with us to see Black Elk at his home about two miles west of Manderson. On the way over, Flying Hawk remarked that he was afraid the old man would not talk to me. I asked why, adding that I had known Indians for many years and they had always talked to me. "Well," he said, "there's something peculiar about this old man. Last week a lady came up from Lincoln, Nebraska, to see him. She wanted to write an article on Crazy Horse, who was the old man's second cousin. I took her over, but the old man wouldn't talk. He is almost blind, and, after he had squinted at her awhile he said, 'I can see that you are a nice-looking woman, and I can feel that you are good; but I do not care to talk to you about these things.' Maybe he will talk to you, but I doubt it."

I myself began to doubt, for, in the first place, I was aware that the knowledge of a holy man was regarded as sacred. Nevertheless I was eager to meet the old man, if for no other reason than that he knew Crazy Horse; and, being a man, I might have better luck than did the lady mentioned.

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 the sun and moon and stars going over—and there was little for the old men to do but wait for yesterday.

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 supernatural powers.

Shaking hands with Black Elk, I told him that I was well acquainted with the Omaha Indians and with many of the Sioux; that I had come to get acquainted with him and have a little talk about old times.

"Ah-h-h!" he said, indicating that my suggestion was satisfactory. I was well stocked with packages of cigarettes, and I passed these around, giving special attention to our two uninvited guests, who had squatted near their ponies at a respectful distance with their backs to us, not wishing to intrude but none the less eager to share in the meeting. Then we sat down on the ground, smoking and waiting in silence.

Black Elk, with his near-blind stare fixed on the ground, seemed to have forgotten us. I was about to break the silence by way of getting something started, when the old man looked up to Flying Hawk, the interpreter, and said (speaking Sioux, for he knew no English): "As I sit here, I can feel in this 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."

He was silent again for some minutes; then he spoke to

4. Neihardt wrote that it had been used by Black Elk for "a long while in the sun dances in which he has officiated as priest" (Sixth Grandfather, 28). The sacred ornament is a circle with triangular notches cut around the circumference. It was made from a rawhide *parfleche* (that is, a rectangular storage container); the front is painted deep blue, while the back reveals part of the original painted design of the *parfleche*. A dark mottled eagle wing feather is suspended from the center, together with some shed buffalo hair woven with thread to form a pendant.

5. *Wakhá tháka* 'great holy.'

his little grandson, who sat near us, and the boy ran up to the log cabin at the top of the hill. Presently he returned with a sacred ornament which, I learned later, had belonged to Black Elk's father (who also was a holy man) and had been used for many years by both father and son in their sacred ceremonies.⁴ It consists of a leather star tinged with blue, and from the center of the star hangs a strip of hide from the breast of a buffalo, together with a feather from the wing of an eagle. The ornament is suspended from a leather loop to be placed about the neck. Holding the star before us, Black Elk said: "Here you see the Morning Star. Who sees the Morning Star shall see more, for he shall be wise." Then lifting the eagle feather, he said: "This means Wakon Tonka⁵ (the Great Mysterious One); and it also means that our thoughts should rise high as the eagles do." Then, lifting the strip of buffalo hide, he said: "This means all the good things of this world—food and shelter." Handing the ornament to me, he said: "My friend, I wish you all these things. Put it around your neck."

I thanked the old man and did as he directed. Thereafter we all smoked in silence for awhile, Black Elk with bowed head, staring at the ground.

Finally, the old man began talking about a vision that had come to him in his youth. It was his power-vision, as I learned later, and his fragmentary references to it were evidently intended only to arouse my curiosity, for he could not speak freely about a matter so sacred before the assembled company. It was like half seeing, half sensing a strange and beautiful landscape by brief flashes of sheet lightning.

Often I broke the old man's prolonged silences by referring to the old times before the evil days began and the white men possessed the land. I recalled great battles, high moments in Sioux history, and he would respond politely; but it was increasingly clear that his real interest was in "the things of the Other World."

The sun was near to setting when Black Elk said: "There is so much to teach you. What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I shall be under the grass and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so that I can teach you." And I said: "I will come back, Black Elk. When do you want me?" He replied, "In the spring when the grass is so high" (indicating the breadth of a hand).

That winter I corresponded with Black Elk through his son, Ben, who had attended Carlisle⁶ for a year or two, and thus arrangements were made for an extended visit the following spring.

During early May, 1931, in company with my eldest daughter, Enid, who had been my secretary for several years, and my second daughter, Hilda, I returned to Black Elk's home that he might relate his life-story to me in fulfillment of a duty that he felt incumbent upon him. His chief purpose was to "save his Great Vision for men."

Great preparations had been made for our coming. Many small pine trees, brought from a considerable distance, were set up around the log cabin, and a sacred tepee, painted with spiritual symbols, had been erected for our dwelling.

The talks began each day shortly after breakfast and often continued until late at night. There were occasional brief intervals of rest when the old man, without comment or apology, would lie down with his head on his arm and fall asleep almost immediately. In a few minutes he would awaken, evidently greatly refreshed, and continue his narrative as though there had been no interruption. Most of the time old "long-hair" friends of Black Elk, some much older than he, were present, occasionally supplementing his narrative with their own memories.

Black Elk's son, Ben, acted as interpreter throughout the visit, and my daughter, Enid, a skilled stenographer, kept a

6. Carlisle Indian Industrial School, in Carlisle, Penn., a boarding school for Indian students founded in 1879. See Prucha, *The Great Father*, vol. 2, 694-700. Benjamin Black Elk attended the school from 1915-17 (Sixth Grandfather, 23-24).

7. The complete transcript of the shorthand notes is published in *Sixth Grandfather*.

faithful record of the narrative and the conversations.⁷ Her voluminous stenographic notes, together with her transcript thereof, are preserved among my papers in the Western Historical MSS Collections of the University of Missouri.

John G. Neihardt
Columbia, Missouri
December 1, 1960

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Preface to the 1972 Edition

It was my function to translate the old man's story, not only in the factual sense—for it was not the facts that mattered most—but rather to re-create in English the mood and manner of the old man's narrative. This was often a grueling and difficult task, requiring much patient effort and careful questioning of the interpreter.

Always I felt it a sacred obligation to be true to the old man's meaning and manner of expression. I am convinced there were times when we had more than the ordinary means of communication.

For the last forty years it has been my purpose to bring Black Elk's message to the white world as he wished me to do. This book has had, and is still having a remarkable career. First printed in 1932, it received an enthusiastic reception from literary critics who regarded it as a strangely beautiful book, although they had little knowledge of Indians.

The general public, with practically no knowledge of Indians, gave it a very modest reception. In less than two years the publisher "remaindered" the edition at forty-five cents a copy and the book was forgotten.

A generation passed, but the book refused to die.

Somehow a copy found its way to Zurich, Switzerland, and was appreciated by a group of German scholars, including the late Carl Jung, the famous psychologist and philosopher.

The news of the book reached America and found some

friendly appreciators. Copies were obtainable only in rare book stores and sold at premium prices.

In 1961, *Black Elk Speaks* was reissued in paperback and was enthusiastically received, particularly among young people. In the words of the *Christian Herald*, it became "the current youth classic." In 1971, as a result of Dick Cavett's television interview with the author, the book exploded into surprising popularity.

Black Elk Speaks' fame is spreading throughout the United States and also in Europe, having been translated into eight languages.

The old prophet's wish that I bring his message to the world is actually being fulfilled.

Those who are acquainted with *Black Elk Speaks* will remember the old man's prayer on Harney Peak when he wept in the drizzling rain and cried out in desperation to the Grandfathers of the Universe: "A pitiful old man you see me here, and I have fallen away and have done nothing."

Perhaps with his message, spreading across the world he has not failed.

John G. Neihardt
Columbia, Missouri
November 1971