
Black Elk's Vision

Most anthropologists who study acculturation assume that all aspects of Native American culture have, or will become, "Americanized" without examining to what extent aspects of Euro-American culture have become "Indianized." The tenacity of Oglala cultural values, however, seems to negate that assumption and affirm the validity of the latter approach.

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Visions and foretelling prophecies are not uncommon among my people, the Oglala. The demanding Vision Quest—in which the seeker stays alone, up on an isolated mountain top or badland butte—the Sun Dance ritual, and the powerful *Yuwipi* (Spirit-calling) Ceremony have resulted in strong foretelling power for our holy men and holy women.

Long ago, a holy man called Drinks Water envisioned that the animals, primarily the buffalo, would go back into the earth—that is, they would be killed. He saw that the Sioux would be ruled by a different race of people, who would make the Indians live in square, gray houses on a barren land, and that they would starve. His vision was true. History shows that in the 1890s the Sioux were, indeed, forced to live on reservations in square, gray houses and that many starved to death.

The Sioux had yet to win the Battle of the Little Big Horn, when a young boy, who was destined to be a Lakota holy man, received a vision from the spirit world. Black Elk saw two men descend with flaming spears. They took him, on a cloud, to a great plain. There a bay horse greeted him, accompanied by prancing horses of different colors: black, white, sorrel (red), and buckskin (yellow). (Later, the colors of these horses would represent the four directions.) Leaving the horses, Black

Elk went into a rainbow-covered lodge, the lodge of the Six Grandfathers (the powers of the four quarters, or four directions, of the universe and of Mother Earth and Father Sky).

The first Grandfather, the power of the west, gave Black Elk a cup of water, the power to sustain life. From the black west, thunder beings release the life-giving rain. Then the grandfather handed him a bow and told him he would also have the power to destroy.

The second Grandfather, the power of the north, gave him a white wing and a sacred herb of sage. The wing, like the northern snow, exemplified the power of cleansing, endurance, and courage. The herb provided truth and honesty, strong, healing sustenance for our bodies, Mother Earth, even world governments and leadership.

The third Grandfather, the power of the red dawn rising in the east, gave Black Elk the sacred pipe, the power of peace. The daybreak star appeared, and he was told he would have the power to awaken others. Powerful knowledge would come to this land, and peace would come, through knowledge and wisdom.

The fourth Grandfather, the power of the south, gave him a bright red stick sprouting leaves. The Grandfather said that a tree would grow in the center of the nation. A yellow hoop appeared, symbolizing in its color, growth and physical healing, in its circle, the unity of all things.

The fifth Grandfather, the spirit of the sky, became an eagle. He spoke, saying that all things of the sky—the winged, the winds, and the stars—would be as relatives and would come to Black Elk and help him.

The sixth Grandfather was really Mother Earth, the Earth Spirit. The Earth Spirit took Black Elk outside the lodge and told him the Earth Power would be with him. In time, the two-leggeds would desperately need Mother Earth's help.

Black Elk was instructed to set the red stick in the center of the yellow hoop. There, the tree was to grow, and around it people would gather. In time the tree would bloom.

Black Elk saw the earth becoming sick. The animals, the winged ones, and the four-legged ones grew frightened. All living things became gaunt and poor. The air and the waters dirtied and smelled foul. Below, Black Elk saw a blue man living in and empowering the sickness. The powers of the four directions, represented by four horses, charged the blue man, but were beaten back. The Grandfathers called upon Black Elk. His bow changed into a spear, and he swooped down on the blue man, killing him. When the blue man fell, all life came back upon the earth; all things became fresh and healthy again.