

**Lift Every Voice Book Club
Contemplative Writers of Color
Hosted by Abbey of the Arts
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Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Catechist, Saint

by Jon M. Sweeney

Questions to help guide your reflection

- ❖ This healer came away from this profound religious experience identifying with the spiritual powers of his tradition, emboldened to fight hunger, sickness, and disharmony. (page 26)

What spiritually motivates you?

- ❖ Black Elk came away called to heal more than just his own people, the sacred hoop was a symbol that stood for all people everywhere. This same broader understanding of the sacred – and his own calling – would allow him, later, to see another religious tradition and how it might make sense of himself and his place in the world. (page 26)

What helps you connect with all people, everywhere?

- ❖ Both the Lakota and Christian religions maintain that there is continual contact with the spirit world, at least in a materially supportive way, even though ordinary people are little conscious of it. This is perhaps how all personal communications with the divine take place, if they do at all: only through people who are prepared to receive them, and Black Elk was. (page 28)

How do you connect to the spirit world?

- ❖ He was both a genuine Oglala and a faithful Catholic. When he became Catholic, he decided it was his duty to love and serve his enemies, as Christ taught, and this had an impact on his Oglala worldview. But he still maintained his Native identity. He was able to hold two religious identities together, and his doing so was one of the sources of his profound witness for the Catholic faith among his people. (page 35)

What two, seemingly opposing identities do you hold simultaneously?

- ❖ As we will see in the chapters to come, for Black Elk, “Lakota tradition and Catholicism were not two disparate systems . . . [T]hey composed one way of looking at the world.” This was confusing to many, and it could very well be that we are still unable to fully understand it. (page 64)

What two ideas to you hold in harmony that others might see as disparate?

- ❖ Nick was identity as having the spiritual gifts of a potential catechist. He was personable. He was well organized. He possessed excellent communication skills. And he had a heart for the Gospel: Good News. (page 66)

What are your spiritual gifts?

- ❖ He believed he was improving on his medicine practice by becoming a Catholic. No stranger to healing people, he began to seek to do similar service, only now with the tools of Holy Scripture, prayer, the sign of the cross, and faith in Christ. (page 66)

How has your spirituality grown or evolved over the years?

- ❖ “Believing that *Wakantanka*, the Great Spirit, called him to greater service, he became a Christian and practiced his Lakota ways as well as the Catholic religion. He was comfortable praying with his pipe and his rosary and participated in Mass and Lakota ceremonies on a regular basis. (page 67)

How are you called to greater service?

- ❖ This new faith brought him a deeper sense of sin, as well as a biblical understanding of how and why human beings are, by their very nature, sinful. (page 68)

What hard truths has your spiritual journey taught you about human nature?

- ❖ He soon became known for his dynamic preaching and teaching. Like his skills for storytelling and memorizing, he possessed an extraordinary understanding of this importance of sign and symbol in people’s lives. (pages 69-70)

What spiritual skills to you bring to the service of others?

- ❖ Christians who are troubled by Black Elk’s conversion seem to expect that he will disdain his Native background in ways the clearly did not. They seem upset that he did not see more disconnections between his medicine man practice and his catechetical one. (page 78)

How can we be more accepting of other’s spiritual journey, even ones we might disagree with?

- ❖ This is one of the vestiges of colonialism: a complete deprecation of Native ways, seemingly, in order to make room for Christian faith. (page 79)

How do you honor other spiritual traditions?

- ❖ “I send my people on the straight road that Christ’s church has taught us about. While I live I will never fall from faith in Christ.” – Black Elk (page 81)

How are you a role model or mentor for others?

- ❖ “St. Paul also became better after his conversion. I know that the Catholic religion is good, better than the Sun dance or the Ghost dance. Long ago the Indians performed such dances only for glory. And I want to go straight in the righteous way that the Catholics teach us so my soul will reach heaven. This is the way I wish to be.” – Black Elk (page 81)

How has your spiritual journey differed from the tradition in which you were raised?

- ❖ He also felt that his people were lost and wandering and that the losses weren't only about land and ways of life but about what Christians refer to as a need for salvation. (page 82)

What are some of the struggles you see in yourself and those around you?

- ❖ It was mostly in the area of ethics that Black Elk made changes in his life after becoming a Catholic. The second greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is to love your neighbor s yourself, and this was foreign to Lakota ways. Most of the Beatitudes, as well, struck the Lakota as counterintuitive or even ethically improper. Loving one's enemies made no sense in the tribal wars and Native manner of handling disputes. (page 82)

How has your ethics changed over the course of your life?

- ❖ As a catechist, Nick taught that some of these old ethical ways should be placed by the new ways of Jesus. One could say: “When Black Elk became a Catholic, he converted from a tribal religion to a universal religion.” (pages 82-83)

When was a time that you reframed an old way of thinking/being?

- ❖ Nick Black Elk brought Lakota and Catholic spiritual practice, belief, and ritual into a way of faith that was mostly uninterrupted. He had invoked God's presence scores of times before becoming a Christian, and he would continue to do so after conversion, with only different changes in language and tone. (page 84)

What non-related traditions do you find most in harmony with one another?

- ❖ He had an understanding of God's power in the world – and in human life – before his conversion, as well as after his conversion, and the differences were minor. The Great Spirit, *Wakantanka*, was the object of his devotion, and the Great Spirit, *Wakantanka*, seen through the lens of God the Father, would continue to be his devotion. (page 84)

Where do you most find God's power in the world?

- ❖ When the Jesuits first learned about Lakota ways of life and ritual, they realized the Lakota were already monotheists, and so urged them to Keep prayer to *Wakantanka*, God. They saw no need for them to unlearn, only to expand, how they expressed devotion to the Holy One. (page 84)

What is one thing you admire about another religious tradition from your own?

- ❖ He came to view the Sun Dance, for instance, in light of Christian asceticism – so alike it was, and is, to a Lenten fasting practice of prayer. (page 85)

Is there a practice from another faith tradition that you adapt to your own practice?

- ❖ Both Lakota and Catholic understand the presence of God or Great Spirit in the world around them. This is global as well as personal. Both communities believe in the afterlife and the presence of ancestors or saints, as intercessors for the still living, for the world to come. (page 85)

How do you perceive God or the Great Spirit in the world around you?

- ❖ Even dreams and visions have a shared importance in both traditions. Nick didn't see reason to disconnect from his vision life after converting to Catholicism. (page 85)

How have dreams or visions shaped your spiritual journey?

- ❖ Throughout the second half of his life, Black Elk would often sit beside those who were struggling with coughing sickness and offer comfort as well as medicinal remedies. (page 90)

How do you bring care and comfort to those in need?

- ❖ These years were simpler for him, without the foreign travel, without the intrigue and ambiguity of being a Lakota with public fanfare, without the danger of warring conflict, with less pressure put upon him by wife and children, and without the questioning and self-doubt as to who he was and what purpose his life held. (page 92)

How has your spirituality changed as you've matured?

- ❖ Black Elk had to work harder than others to show the sincerity of his faith, and despite his efforts, he still had trouble, at times, convincing some of his closest coreligionists that he was one of them. (page 93)

Have you struggled to be accepted for your faith?

- ❖ Was he a Saint? It was a special combination of qualities that set Nicholas Black Elk apart from other people. (page 95)

Who are some of the people you consider saints, but are generally recognized as such?

- ❖ Black Elk experienced the kind of suffering that is often associated with lives of the saints. He expresses this in the interviews he gave, speaking about his people, their losses, their land, and their sorrows. For him, these were also first-hand, tangible losses. (page 99)

How have losses shaped your spiritual journey?

- ❖ Some people associate a new age spirituality with Native American ideas and practices of living in tune with the rhythms of the earth, but it is easy to see how this is not new agey at all. To be connected to Mother Earth – to use St. Francis of Assisi’s famous, forgotten expression – is to be part of the circle of life, honoring the creation of which human beings are only a part. (page 99)

How do you connect with/honor Mother Earth?

- ❖ “I believe God spoke to Black Elk at a very early age, and it isn’t likely that this was a message that just came from his village. The Message that we must all live in peace and harmony, it was such a Christian concept that it had to have come from God Himself, and it actually informed him and gave him direction for the rest of his life.”
– Bill White (page 103)

What is a message from early in your spiritual journey that has continued to guide you?