Black Elk: Medicine Man and Catholic

"Indigenous Perspectives" - Monthly Broadcast on HealthyLife.Net

 # 26– February 23, 2023

For audio podcast: http://www.ecologia.org/news/26.BlackElk.mp3

View from the top of the Black Elk Peak lookout tower,
Black Elk Wilderness, South Dakota[1]

Segment One

Randy Kritkausky: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. Indigenous Perspectives originates from Vermont in the United States. We're located on lands that the Abenaki people call N'dakinna. This is the unceded traditional territory of

[1] Photograph taken by Trevor Harmon in July 2006. If you look carefully, you can see a rainbow. Creative Commons license (CC BY-SA 3.0). Found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Elk_Peak#/media/File:View_from_the_top_of_Harney_Peak.jpg

the Abenaki, who for thousands of years have been stewards of the lands found here and also across the border in Québec province in Canada.

Today's show is the first of two focusing on Black Elk, a religious leader whose life embodied and transcended the challenges of being on the front lines of conflict between the traditional Indigenous cultures and the Christian cultures of the mainstream newcomers.

Randy: Black Elk was known by his own people, the Oglala Lakota, as Heȟáka Sápa. He was a wičháša wakȟáŋ ("medicine man, holy man") who lived through the turbulent times during the Lakota struggles for their land and culture. He was born in 1863, and lived until 1950. He was a cousin of Crazy Horse *[and]* fought at the Battle of Little Bighorn. And you're going to learn much more about him in a moment from our guest.

This show, and our next show, will examine who Black Elk was, and how he reflected and also shaped his times. Black Elk is fascinating as a unique human being, a religious and political leader within his own society, and also as a focus of mainstream American attempts to take possession of and control his life story.

Carolyn: Today's guest, Damian Costello, is an international expert on the life and legacy of Black Elk. Damian's book is titled ***Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism***[2]. Damian specializes in the intersection of Catholic theology, indigenous spiritual traditions, and colonial history. He has a PhD in theological studies from the University of Dayton in Ohio. He is Director of Postgraduate Studies and a member of the faculty of NAIITS, the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies.

In addition to his book on Black Elk, Damian's work has been published in the National Catholic Reporter and in America Magazine: The Jesuit Review of Faith and Culture. He also appeared in a documentary, "Walking the Good Red Road, Nicholas Black Elk's Journey to Sainthood." So Damian, welcome to the show.

Damian Costello: Thank you so much. It's a real honor to be here with you.

---

[2] Costello, Damian: *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2005.

Randy: So, Damian, we could begin with a very traditional historical biographical introduction of Black Elk. That's the way such shows usually start. But in the spirit of these two shows, we'd like to begin by having you talk about your own personal journey of discovery. After all, Black Elk has a way of being more than a mere historical figure and a black and white photo. He can become a spiritual presence that reaches people today. Can you pick up that theme and run with it?

Damian: Oh, sure can. I feel he was a spiritual presence that reached me. It was probably about exactly 28 years ago. I was a sophomore at a small Catholic school in Maryland, and I was in the library avoiding work. I had a really tough semester, and I pulled a book off the shelf, ***Black Elk Speaks***[3], and proceeded to read that cover to cover, in the next day or two, and it totally captivated me. It gave me voice, for a lot of the issues that I was struggling with and learning about, you know, a very complicated history and the suffering of the world.

And it just so happened that that summer I had an older friend who was moving to Seattle for graduate school and he said, "Damian, come along, you can come with me." And so we drove through South Dakota, through Badlands, Pine Ridge, the Black Hills, and it might have been actually at Mount Rushmore where I picked up an audio version *[of Black Elk Speaks]* on cassette tape way back in the nineties, still using those cassettes.

And so I listened to it on that very landscape and again, just Black Elk's story captivated me and I felt like I was walking along with him. Well, that fall semester, I took my first theology course and I had the book with me and I walked in at some point and the professor saw it and said, "Hey Damian, what a great book, huh?" And I did something like I just did now, and told him all about it, oh yeah, it's such a great book . He said, "Do you know that he was Catholic?" And I had no idea. Like I had heard of Saint Kateri, the Mohawk saint, and so I had a sense that that Native Peoples could be Catholic, but I had no context for an Indigenous holy person, a spiritual leader, becoming Catholic, what could that possibly mean? And so he

---

[3] Neihardt, John G: *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. (First published 1932) Bison Books, 2004.

suggested I do a senior project on that. And so I did spend my whole semester reading everything about Black Elk. And that was the way he really became part of my life and has never let go of me.

Randy: I love the theme of your finding just by "accident" Black Elk on a shelf, because so often these encounters seem to be serendipitous, but they keep happening over and over. And one does begin to wonder after a while if it's just accidents that are taking us back, or as you said, and I said in my intro, if some historical figures and people have a way of taking up a presence in our lives. Can you just back up? I introduced him as a medicine man. And can you kind of flesh that out a little bit for listeners who might not know what that actually entails in Lakota society and in Native American communities.

Damian: Medicine people filled the role, multifaceted role, of healing spiritual leadership, often what we would say political leadership as well. In Lakota context, in many Indigenous contexts, the main aspect of that tradition was singing. They would sing over their patient, oftentimes all night. Or in other traditions multiple nights. And the power of that, of the song, bridged the spirit world and this world here and allowed their spirit helpers to doctor the patient. And so, Black Elk's call to become a medicine person, stemmed from a really important vision he had at the age of nine, probably the most famous vision in all of Indigenous history.

Carolyn: So this is probably a good time for you to tell us more about his great vision, because it - I know it resonated with him throughout his life. It's incredibly powerful. So if you could just start off telling us about it, that would help.

Damian: Well, I think it resonates with the readers as well, and people who discover Black Elk. I think that was the thing that captivated me the most, right? The possibility that somebody could have such a dramatic and overwhelming spiritual encounter that was beyond any sort of question that we might have in everyday life.

And in his *[Black Elk's]* case, he was nine years old; he was following the buffalo with his people. It was summertime, and they stopped - his friends - to get a drink of water. And when he went to get back up, he, he found he couldn't stand. And so they called his family over, they set up a tipi and Black Elk went into a coma.

They thought he would - possibly had - died. But what Black Elk remembered was getting the call he had been receiving for, now a couple years, a sacred voice is calling him.

There were these - these voices calling him. He didn't know what they meant and they scared him. But this time when they called, he got up, he went outside and two men descended from the sky with wings. And there was a little cloud, he got on it and was lifted up into the sky world where he was brought to the cloud tipi of the Six Grandfathers, who in the Lakota way represent all the powers of the universe, the six directions, six sacred directions.

Well, they proceeded to tell him that he was called to renew his people. They gave him a number of gifts and sent him on two long journeys. One down the dangerous Black Road and *[the other]* the Sacred Red Road. And so, on the Black Road, he defeated drought in this dramatic battle, goes on for pages. And then on the Sacred Red Road, he led them to the sacred hoop where there was a flowering tree at its center and there were his people and all of creation, and it turned out all the peoples of the world were renewed.

So after twelve days, he was sent back down to Earth. He woke up. People were understandably, understandably astounded. And Black Elk kept this *[vision]* to himself. He didn't tell anybody. He was, again, very scared and hid that for the next eight years of his life, about.

Randy: So I was astounded when I first read of this to realize that when he finally revealed his vision to his community, you know, it wasn't greeted with open arms, "Oh, tell us more." The first question that his parents had and went to the medicine man with was, "Can you talk to him? We're trying to figure out..." I think they actually used some equivalent in Lakota of the word "…is he having a hallucination?" And it's easy for Westerners, non-Indigenous people, to think that Native Americans are credulous, you know, any kind of story or vision they're going to believe it. But not so! He was scrutinized, and this is a common part of Indigenous life and Lakota life. Can you, can you pick up that and run with that? Because that's going to take us forward to how he's being vetted now for possible sainthood. You know, this is a complicated process as well -

Damian: It is such a great point and something that newcomers, like I was, often don't see. As you point out, like we are captivated by these images and the idea that Native peoples are just, they're so close to nature and the spirits and they have this sort of direct conduit that you can take at face value. And in Lakota tradition, and many, probably all Indigenous traditions on some level, these are experiences that are vetted and discerned in community. So typically you would've been prepared by the elders. You would've gone to sweat. They would've counseled you for your vision quest, where you went up to an isolated place for at least a day, but it's as many as four days in some traditions, and you prayed and fasted asking for a vision, and then you were brought back. And if you did say you had a vision, well, they sort of tested you and they also ask you to interpret what you saw because these are big, dramatic manifestations of the spirits, right?

The word 'vision' is I think also a complicated term to use because it puts us - people in a Western context- with this idea that our vision doesn't always - it fools us sometimes, or we can explain it away from sort of a scientific or a rationalistic perspective. These are first and foremost, from an Indigenous perspective, a manifestation of spirits. And if you are believed to have encountered them, there's no explaining it away with comas or, you know, any other sort of explanation. But it's done in partnership. And so, and back to Black Elk, his parents didn't know this because he hadn't talked about this experience, and they needed that help. They did - they asked, is our son going crazy? I think is one way they put it.

Carolyn: Well, this is really interesting on many levels. We talked with an expert on Mongolian shamanism a while ago on this program. And she made the point that the pattern for Mongolian shamans is that there's a period where they're feeling a tug and a pull, and they're resisting it, you know, and then they have various experiences and everything else, but they're resisting it. They don't just think, don't just anoint themselves. You know, they actually resist it.

And the community evaluates their behavior. You know, are they doing this selflessly? Are they willing to sort of surrender enough to make this connection? And so it's a very - again, I see similar patterns with this whole idea of how you do have a genuine encounter with a spirit world, and how you - how the community vets it in a way.

Damian: Another thing that just when you first encounter this as I did, you know, these sort of starry-eyed non-Native people often show up in, in Native communities, with the assumption that you can sort of create that calling. Like you - maybe you have that feeling, and you greatly desire it. So many people out there have that desire. But it's a very strong theme in Lakota tradition and you know, a lot of religious traditions across the world, that if you don't have a calling, don't ask for it. It's a very demanding , very demanding life that will ask a lot of you. And it's a very big part of the tradition to avoid it very directly. I'll have one traditional healer who avoided his call for 25 years, and they say, at least some people look out to people say, "If you don't accept your calling, you'll be required to give up that which is most important for you."

So it is this complicated tug back and forth of resistance, of calling, of communal vetting, and oftentimes just getting to a point where you cannot resist that call anymore. And that's what happened to Black Elk. He was completely broken down as an adolescent, as a 16 year old, before he finally surrendered, so to speak to the spirits.

Randy: So we should explain to the listeners who might not know the details of American colonial history, and certainly not Lakota history, that these were incredibly turbulent times for the Lakota in particular. They had been previously - not in immediate history, but in a generation - they had been forced out of their homeland. You know, they were not residents for eons in the upper Midwest. They had come out of Ohio. They'd been relocated to a strange new land, and then they were attacked repeatedly. I mean, Black Elk was at the Battle of Little Bighorn with his cousin *[in 1876],* and then he survives the horrific ambush and massacre of Wounded Knee . So these are people who were starving from winter to winter. They were promised rations by the federal government. They didn't come. Their very existence was in peril. And here's this young man who's given a vision that basically instructs him to save his people. That has to be intimidating.

Damian: Oh, talk about a burden. And I think part of the draw of Black Elk is that his life in so many ways personifies that bigger story you're talking about. So he was at the Battle of Little Bighorn as a twelve- year-old where you said his cousin, his second cousin Crazy Horse fought, and Black Elk finished off a couple of soldiers who were wounded. He ended up - after that, after the US Army, you know, tripled

the war effort and shattered Lakota resistance - he went to Canada with Sitting Bull for four years, four very, very difficult years of intense cold and, and starvation. And it was when they - when they surrendered, his family, and had to walk back the 800 or so miles, with only two horses. So they were walking the whole way, surrendered to the US government, that's when he surrendered to the spirits and told his vision.

The medicine man came over, vetted it, and then they recreated the whole vision in ceremony, right? Very important theme in Lakota tradition that you must respond to the spirits with ceremony; that's how they understand that you are listening and hearing and activating the gifts that they have given. And the whole village got together, and they, they recreated the Sacred Red Road to people on their journey, the six grandfathers. And after that, Black Elk was a medicine person from the age of 16.

Randy: He choreographs this performance, which is I mean, it's mind boggling. There are dozens of horses, and then there's a thunderstorm coming to disrupt the whole thing. And Black Elk intervenes, and according to witnesses, the thunderstorm comes to the edge of the performance space and it stops. I mean, this isn't just theater. This is ceremony, and revelation to the community. This is absolutely mind boggling. And it - and it must have affected him deeply.

Carolyn: So is the basic idea that out of all this tremendous change and suffering, Black Elk is called and steps into like a - a vacuum of, of power and belief and sense of what the world is like?

Damian: I think vacuum might be a bit strong of a word, but you're on - you're capturing, I think, the sort of raw existential turmoil that's occurring and the unanswered questions about what is Lakota society and spiritual life going to look like going forward as these things change, and their economy and everything else.

And so Black Elk is somebody who is a medicine person, but also has this bigger call. Like in his - the language of his vision and how he talks about it, he always understood that he was called to something more than just healing individual people, that he was called to heal his people, and on some level, on a cosmic level. And so he's always trying to discern that. And I think when you first come to this as an outsider, you've just sort of assumed Lakota tradition is static; it's just one thing that's always been there.

But Lakota spirituality has been changing and evolving in a very positive way for a long time. You know, when they - before they were on the plains, they didn't practice the Sun Dance. And Black Elk himself, in ***The Sacred Pipe***[4], the other important book that's attributed to him, tells a story where that came from. It came from a vision when the people were becoming weak in their new life on the plains, because they did not connect with the spirits in the same way. They needed a new ceremony. And so that *[the Sun Dance]* was gifted.

So, back to your point, that's where they are now. They were transitioning - unfortunately, but the reality was they were transitioning from their life on the plains as buffalo hunters into this reservation space. And so the question is, what new ceremonies are needed, or how can the ceremonies be renewed in order to make the people live? Which was the essential prayer of Lakota spirituality.

Randy: So lest we leave the listener with the impression that, you know, it's down and out times for the Lakota and they're mere victims of colonialism, I want to remind the reader - and we'll explore this in the next segment - the beauty of your book is you flip the normal narrative of Native Americans as mere victims of colonialism. And you explain how this revitalization of which Black Elk is a leading part, takes elements of the new culture, blends it with Lakota culture and ceremony, and creates something new. That's what I love about your book.

Carolyn: Okay, we'll back in just a few minutes with Segment Two.

Segment Two

Carolyn: Welcome back to our Indigenous Perspectives show on Black Elk with our guest Damian Costello.

Randy: Damian, we ended the last section talking about the resilience and the creativity of Black Elk and his community. But before he engaged in some remarkable developments of ceremonial resilience and spiritual resilience, he took

---

[4] Brown, Joseph Epes: *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux.* University of Oklahoma Press, 1989.

quite a detour in his life. Can you talk about that?

Damian: Well, so he came back to Pine Ridge. He spent, I think a year or two as a traditional healer trying to make a life in a very difficult situation, and had this opportunity to see the world. So Buffalo Bill Cody shows up to Pine Ridge and started recruiting for performers to join his show. And a number of Black Elk's friends signed up and encouraged him to. You could make good money. You made a very good wage compared to your family members on the reservation. You got to see the world and you got to inhabit your culture in a public way. It was a - a very big irony. Like on the reservation, you're starting to be persecuted, cut your hair, don't speak your language, stop doing Indian things. And here you are at the center of these - the biggest cities in the world doing that publicly, being celebrated for it.

B*lack Elk (L) and Elk of the Oglala Lakota photographed in London in their grass dance regalia while touring with Buffalo Bill's Wild West, 1887*[5]

[5] Photograph collected on Pine Ridge Reservation in 1891 by James Mooney . Courtesy National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution". Public Domain. Found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Elk

So Black Elk signed up. And he also said this was a part of his spiritual journey, that he very intentionally wanted to go see the white man's world from the inside to see if there was anything of good to bring back to his people. So this was an extension of his spiritual calling. [6]

So he goes and he spends three years, lots of ups and downs. He gets lost, separated from Buffalo Bill, ends up with another show, falls in love. And this whole time he and the other performers are investigating the white man's spirituality. You know, there's all these great snapshots of these Lakota people showing up and other native people showing up at churches *[in Europe]* and talking with ministers. One of them - it was a wife of a minister in Scotland who said, "Their appetite for hymns is insatiable". That they wanted these new hymns copied down so they could take them.

And they went to Westminster Abbey, 40 performers, and stunned the congregation by singing the Protestant hymn, probably the most popular one at the time, "Nearer My God to Thee" in Lakota. It had been translated into Dakota in Minnesota, and had went ahead of the missionaries. People picked up on this hymn, Lakota nation, Lakota- speaking people, because it seemed to have given them some new language to talk about things, particularly death. Anyway, Black Elk came back *[from Europe]* after three years. And after about six months, he wrote a letter to the Lakota people and described his experience and he said, "You know, the white man's way is incredibly difficult. I didn't find anything good other than some of these ideas about God." And so he quotes First Corinthians 13, which is this long extended passage by Paul about love. And he says, "That's how I want to live now." Right?

And I think, you know, it's easy for Christian people to pick up and say, "Oh, Black Elk discovered something totally new, and now he's been forever changed."

---

[6] For an examination of Black Elk's time in Europe, Ghost Dance experience and vision, and its relationship to his spiritual journey see Damian Costello's article, 'Black Elk's Vision of Waníkiya: The Ghost Dance, Catholic Sacraments, and Lakota Ontology,' 2018, THE JOURNAL OF NAIITS: AN INDIGENOUS LEARNING COMMUNITY UNE COMMUNAUTÉ AUTOCHTONE D'APPRENTISSAGE. https://www.academia.edu/43188779/Black_Elk_s_Vision_of_Wan%C3%ADkiya_The_Ghost_Dance_Catholic_Sacraments_and_Lakota_Ontology

And it should be emphasized that no, he's - love and compassion were incredibly important parts of Lakota tradition. But what I think did happen is he had a slightly new perspective on it. And I think that perspective was, it gave him a new way to understand his enemies, outsiders. Tribal religions, spiritualities are very good for connecting you to people within your tribe, but don't typically talk about those outside them. And I think that's what Black Elk saw in those new spiritualities.

Randy: As a youth, he was taught that it was not only proper but necessary to kill anyone who does not speak the tribal language; they are "others." So he's repudiating this tribal wisdom, this tribal custom, and accepting a point of view that for the time would have been radical and I'm sure put him in an awkward position more than once when he was promulgating this notion.

Carolyn: I'd like to jump in also and mention a part of your book that I thought was really strong. It was when you talked about the importance of language and oral culture in the role of the early Jesuit missionaries meeting with and talking with and attempting to convey their religion to the Lakota among other Indigenous peoples. And what the Jesuits did was, they learned Lakota. They not only translated their holy texts and hymns into Lakota, but they also spoke with the people - could talk with the people in their own language. This is huge as far as making a connection. And I think that's a really important point about the effectiveness of a two-way communication going on.

Damian: And it should be emphasized that this sort of cedes ground or, you know, sort of philosophical and spiritual territory to the Lakota, even in ways that the missionaries probably didn't understand. So they're using the same language or similar language that Lakota people would use for their own ceremonies and prayers and songs and traditions. It is inevitable then, that that understanding flows into the ideas that the Jesuits are trying to pass over to the Lakota people. So Christian theology, Catholic theology, is inherently going to have deep, deep Lakota meaning and resonance and allow Lakota people to sort of have the upper hand in interpreting this. You know, no matter how well you learn to speak a foreign language, it's always foreign and native speakers are going to have the upper hand.

Randy: One of the passages that moved me deeply when I came across it from 17th century Jesuit journals was one Jesuit who was trying to deal with this whole

question of, are these Native American medicine men, are they tricksters? They actually use the word "jongleur" in French, which means juggler or trickster. And you know, he inventories all the different kinds of actions and ceremonies. And then he said: "And then there's this category of where what they're doing really happens. It's for real." And in this case, what happened very often with the Jesuits is they didn't just translate the words. They actually began to entertain the possibility that the spiritual realm of the Lakota was a reality, not a quaint thing for ethnographers to put onto paper, but there was something of real substance there. So you are describing the creative tension that happens at this interface.

Damian: And in the context of today, where we have residential schools, things have been brought forward that are very important to deal with and take at face value, it's hard for us to grapple with the idea that there was this deep sort of interpenetration at times, and understanding in ways that we have a hard time conceptualizing.

Carolyn: Okay, well, Damian, thanks so much and we'll be back with Segment Three in just a minute. Stay tuned.

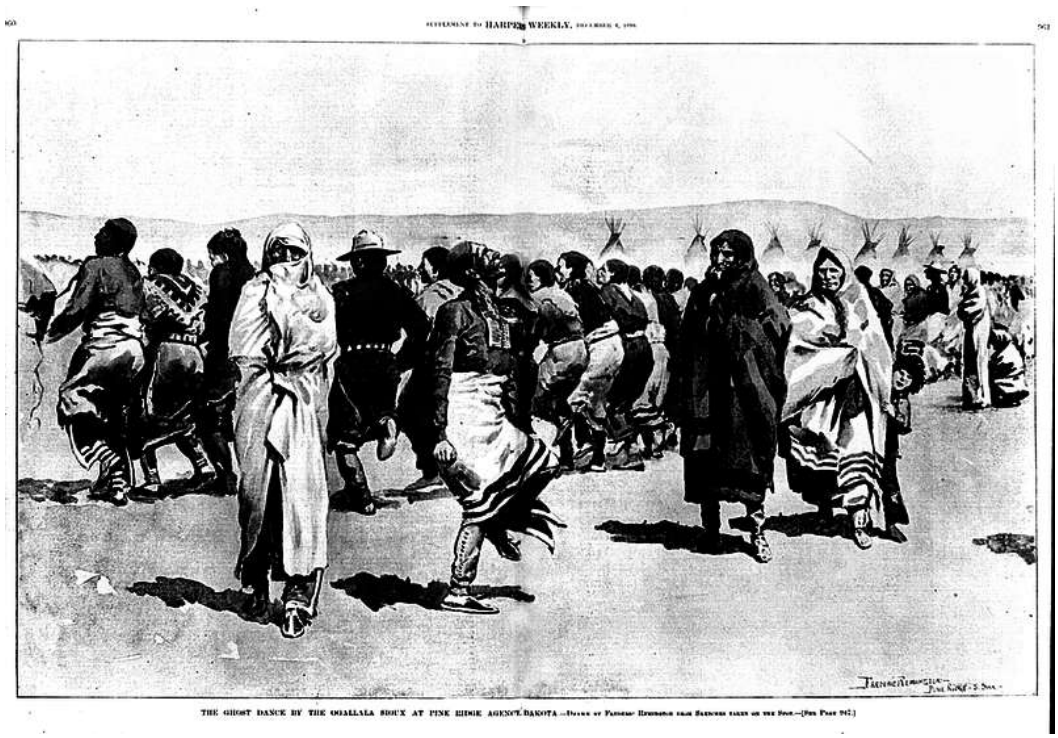
Segment Three

Randy: So we're back with our guest Damian Costello, and we're going to pick up the narrative of Black Elk, whom we left in Europe. And he's now returning to the United States after his time abroad with the Wild West Show, and investigating, you know, the institutions, particularly religious institutions, of the colonizers. And what - what greets him when he comes home, Damian? What opportunities, challenges are there?

Damian: Oh, I think the first challenge that he faced was just the change in pace. And being back on, you know, a very remote part of the world. And being separated. And one thing that US government did very intentionally was to spread the people out. You know, Lakota people, most Indigenous people, were used to living very close, communally. In the communities of Pine Ridge and other reservations, the cabins are spread out so people can't interact in the way they're used to.

But he got a job at a small store because he spoke some English. So he worked there part-time and he came back to his healing practice. When he was away, he

said his power had left him, that the spirits were not with him. It didn't apply where he was in a different land, with different people. But when he returned, it came back. And so he continued his healing practice. And he also got news of the Ghost Dance. He had told the people in that letter he wrote that he had hoped to go to the Holy Land. He wanted to go see where Jesus lived, so that he could sort of see for himself; he's always actively investigating, he has to see for himself. But he couldn't go because it was too expensive. And so this is one these great coincidences happens in his life so often. Jesus came to him, right?



The Ghost dance by the Oglala Lakota at Pine Ridge Agency-
Drawn by [Frederic Remington](#) from sketches taken on the spot[7]

The Ghost Dance was - the message was that the white people had killed Jesus. And he had given a vision to Wovoka, the Paiute holy man in Nevada, that he was coming back as an Indian this time. And that by dancing this new dance, by singing these new songs, by working the jobs that you could have by sending your kids to school and by going to church - he said that that going to church and dancing the new dance were like two churches. That a new world would come, the new heaven

[7] Published in Harpers Weekly, December 6, 1890. Image from the Library of Congress; in Public Domain under US copyright law. Found at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Elk

and new earth, the buffalo would come back, that the dead relatives would come back and things would returned to the way they were.

And so Black Elk was confused by this. He didn't know - this was a new teaching, he was a little bit skeptical. So he went to investigate and he said, well, it does kind of look like my vision. It was a circular dance around a pole, like a tree figure. And he said, well, I'll give it a shot. So he starts to dance and almost immediately, one of the first days he was dancing, he fell down and had probably the last major vision of his life. He was lifted up into the air over the Promised Land, he said. And he came to a tree with twelve men around it, and a man with long hair and an eagle feather in it with pierced hands and pierced feet. He said, everything has been given to me by my father, and you must say this. And Black Elk interpreted that as the Ghost Dance messiah, Wanikiya, "He who makes live." And he became a prominent leader in the Ghost Dance and was with them in the great Battle of Wounded Knee that occurred not too long, too long after that.

Randy: Now, the dominant authorities, the, the colonists, the federal government, state government didn't exactly welcome this dance, did they?

Damian: Not in South Dakota or North Dakota. They did in Oklahoma. In fact, there was, you know, reports of the Army being like, "Wow, this is kind of interesting. It'll help the Indians convert to Christianity." They could see the Christian influence. But up north, they just could not interpret anything that Natives did that was in the old ways or resembled the old ways as anything other than rebellion. So they called in the Army and Custer's old regiment. And on December 29th *[1890],* a band of refugees, coming from Standing Rock, were ambushed. And about 250 men, women and children were killed.

Now Black Elk, he wasn't at the initial massacre of Wounded Knee. But he showed up and fought in the aftermath. And was wounded and says he wanted to die. He was shot in the stomach. They tied him up with a blanket and he said, I wanted to charge out there, I wanted - I didn't want to live anymore. And an elder held him back, and grabbed him and said, "No nephew, we need you, that we may live." They sensed that power in him. And so he was saved.

Randy: So this is another transformational moment for him. And - correct me if I'm wrong - he's still continuing to practice his medicine healing role, correct? And then there is an - and we're going to talk about on the next show - there is an enormous controversy surrounding his - there's no other way of putting it other than in his collision - alleged collision with a Catholic priest who comes in and interrupts him in the middle of a medicine ceremony. And thereby hangs the rest of the tale, which we'll get to in the next show. But do you want to fill in that part of the biography? Because it is a critical point for the historical narrative.

Damian: So Black Elk, after Wounded Knee, there was this period of just total shock for everybody for maybe a year, but the Lakota people were incredibly resilient. They picked up the pieces and they continued on. And Black Elk did the same. He married a survivor of Wounded Knee, and they had some children, three boys at that point, and he continued his medicine practice. Now, that's one of the few jobs you had, roles you could play, that you could make a decent living. But something interesting happened, it seems his wife became Catholic and had their boys baptized.

Now we'll get into more of this later on, but there were only a couple things you could do that would really, really set off any sort of authority outside- authority figure on the outside of the reservation, not Indigenous people. And those two things were dance, which we saw what happened with Wounded Knee. And the other thing was to start curing people. You know, outsiders have no conceptual framework to understand this. This was the time of the height of scientific rationalism. And so whether you were clergy or a scientist, an atheist, military officer - that curing stuff is just unacceptable. And so it seems as if Black Elk is on a collision course with the Catholic Church.

Randy: So a priest actually- allegedly - intervenes in one of these ceremonies and drags Black Elk off. Allegedly, correct?

Damian: Allegedly. I don't want - you know, I don't like over qualifying it too much because, while there is good reason to think that this story is embellished or, not seen as dramatically overpowering as we feel it now, it is true to what a lot of people report being their experience. So I just want to make that clear. But it seems that in the aftermath, Black Elk willingly went with this priest to Holy Rosary Mission,

which is now Red Cloud Indian School, stayed there for a couple of weeks and was baptized on December 6th, the end of that, which is the Feast of St. Nicholas, and thus took the name Nicholas Black Elk.

Carolyn: Okay, so we'll pick up another incredible turn in Black Elk's life in our next segment. Back in a minute.

Segment Four

Carolyn: Welcome back to the last segment of our Indigenous Perspectives show on Black Elk with our guest Damian Costello. And Damian's going to pick up discussing the complex spiritual terrain that Black Elk and his people are living in the time around 1890.

Damian: That's something we can't overemphasize, I think, or can't draw out enough. When we think about how Black Elk engaged his context is how dynamic and in flux so much of a culture, tradition, and community was, and how many different traditions and groups are acting in this terrain. So you had, of course, you had the traditional people, the traditional culture that was still there never went away. It's still here today and coming back stronger. But it was officially publicly outlawed.

You know, it's an irony of our nation that we say it's founded on religious freedom, and it wasn't till I believe 1973, that Natives were allowed to fully practice their religious traditions in public. And so Native people, Lakota, are dealing with this; they can't publicly practice the Sun Dance, the most public of their ceremonies. But it's said that that was still practiced in secret canyons of Pine Ridge and the other reservations. Black Elk is still able to heal underground. And ceremonies go on.

Now, the churches are moving in *[to the reservations],* the different denominations. The Episcopalians were the ones that were supposed to be given control over Pine Ridge. Each agency had a specific church that was supposed to be in power. But Red Cloud and others lobbied for the Jesuits because of their positive interactions with them during the Great Sioux War of 1868, for example. And after that, they said, "Well, if we're going to have somebody teach us and our kids English and how to live in the modern world, we'll take our chances with them." And they

[the Jesuits] seem to be the least of - the least bad option out there. And Lakota people are engaging different churches. So, the Catholics are there, Episcopalians are there, other churches come in. And for a variety of reasons, Lakota people participate in them, because of genuine interest, in part because of the Ghost Dance. So that's one thing we often don't see is that there's a correlation between Ghost Dance participation and participation in denominational life. And in part because Lakota people and others saw them as being the same story. And the best illustration of that is the word used to translate savior and messiah in the Ghost Dance. So in the Ghost Dance, Wanikiya, "He who makes live" is the Ghost Dance messiah. And the word for "savior" in a Catholic context and other denominations is the same word, "wanikiya."

These were spaces that you could publicly gather and have a spiritual life. So even those who maybe had questions or qualifications about their commitment to the ideas of the churches would participate because that's where you could have a spiritual conversation, just where you could engage with the spirits. And people are floating around engaging multiple communities, changing, participating in many at the same times, looking for a way to construct a whole vibrant life as best as you can in this very difficult colonial context. Lakota people never gave up doing what they could, using every resource possible to live, to flourish in this world.

Randy: So again, I think we need to remind the readers that there's a whole narrative, cultural narrative out there about the "disappearing Indian" and it continues today. Even with the revival on many reservations and the great growing interest in Indigenous things, there's still this notion that this is a culture that, you know, was tipping on the vanishing point. And the picture you are portraying is very, very different, radically different. What hope does that offer? What - what avenues forward do you see Black Elk opening for us today?

Damian: Well, I would say, you know, one of the things that has struck me about traveling to and living on reservations is how vibrant their spirituality is. Certainly there's a lot of issues and social problems, but you are having spiritual conversations and being almost forced to think about these things in a way that most people don't in their average modern American life. These are vibrant places that challenge you to think deeply about what it means to be human, or if you're Indigenous, what means to be Indigenous in that particular context.

And so Black Elk is somebody who I think demonstrated the greatest skill, the greatest ability to negotiate all these different traditions, to pick out the best of them, and to do so in an authentic way. Not just borrowing little pieces here and creating something that doesn't quite hold together, but that I think for him showed them the best of who he was and who we can be. I think he's an example of somebody who leads people through a difficult context in seeking to recreate what they had, but not be bound by that. Saying that your future doesn't have to exactly be what was your past, but that doesn't mean you're disconnected from it. A sort of deep thread of continuity in conversation with the spirits - that runs through his life, and I think is a great example for us to think about as we face these questions where we are.

Carolyn: Yes, I think one of the things you mentioned in your book, is that, quote, "Lakota tradition is a changing, evolving body of thought and practice. It was never codified in the way that Christianity had been in the Roman Catholic tradition. The Lakota modified and transformed ceremonies to deal with new problems that they were encountering. These new problems demanded new answers from holy men."[8] So it's part of a tradition of evolving in response and creating something new. And I think a theme is that happens with every - every dynamic culture is doing this all the time.

Damian: And I would add, you know, if there had been a medicine person like Black Elk or you know, a spiritual teacher, they would've said, "Damian, that's a great idea, but maybe you should phrase it this way, that the spirits are calling you and partnering with you and giving you that changing way of being in the world, that you are not alone on that. It's not you who have the primary agency, you have a lot of agency, but we're leading you and we're calling you along this journey."

Randy: So we're going to, in our second show, pick up this theme because it is, as you said at the very beginning of our presentation, an example of Black Elk being a living presence. This is not *[only]* a historical figure. This is someone who has still the ability to captivate our imaginations and seize our spirit and animate it today. But that's, that's another whole show.

[8] Costello, Damian: Black Elk, p. 78.

I want to thank listeners for tuning in. Damian, I want to thank you for being our guest. You've been a wonderful guide through this wonderful person's life.

I hope listeners will take time to give themselves some space to reconnect with their roots and Mother Earth and their ancestral roots and their spiritual roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna and perhaps that even of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence. Capture that moment and hold onto it. And if you will, write to me and let me know about your experience. I can be contacted through my website at www.randykritkausky.com, where you can also find transcripts and supplemental materials for all Indigenous Perspectives shows including today's. Again, I want to thank Damian Costello for being our guest, and thank you for being our listeners.

++

"Indigenous Perspectives" monthly podcast is hosted by Randy Kritkausky and Carolyn Schmidt, and broadcast on the fourth Thursday of each month, 12 noon Eastern Time (US & Canada), on HealthyLife.net.

++