NEW PERSPECTIVES ON NICHOLAS BLACK ELK, OGLALA SIOUX HOLY MAN

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In 1984, two important books and two critical articles appeared, which, taken together, pose new questions and open new possibilities for our comprehension of that classic in western regional and native American literature, *Black Elk Speaks*, and of the two men, John Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk, who stand behind that text. Even though we still do not have a full-scale biography of the Oglala holy man, long promised from Joseph Epes Brown, these new writings begin to fill in some of the gaps in the life-story, and to give us a more accurate picture of the man himself, his role as a visionary and intercessor for his people, and his -- for want of a better word -- theology.

The most important source of all is anthropologist, Raymond DeMallie's edition of the Neihardt interviews with Black Elk, entitled, *The Sixth Grandfather*, and published by the University of Nebraska Press. Besides a detailed introduction of over seventy pages and eleven marvelous photographs, the book provides the transcriptions of the conversations in May, 1931, between Neihardt, Black Elk and several other Sioux elders. They were taken down in four spiral notebooks using shorthand, by Enid Neihardt. A second version of the text is Enid's typed manuscript from the shorthand, where a first level of editing was done. That manuscript was the basis for John Neihardt's construction of the book, *Black Elk Speaks*. DeMallie's version combines both shorthand and typed transcriptions, making simple

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corrections and adjusting slightly some material to bring it into closer chronological sequence. (Black Elk was, by the way, remarkably consistent in relating the story in order.) DeMallie has also grouped non-chronological material in a separate text at the end, providing headings and dates throughout in order to identify narrator, topics and periodization. He also silently corrected tenses and number, regularized spelling and punctuation and arranged paragraphing. For some of the editing he was aided by access to Enid Neihardt's private diary from 1931 -- a source separate from the interviews.

In a third part DeMallie has presented another less well known round of interviews, conducted for seven days between December 5-13, 1944, when Black Elk was 81 years old. This material represents Black Elk's version of Lakota oral literature, including origin stories, anecdotes, prophecies, accounts of historic events, tales which spoke of the active presence of the sacred in daily life. For purposes of this paper, these materials are not relevant, even though they formed the basis for Neihardt's novel, *When the Tree Flowered*, which appeared in 1951.

As part of the appendices for *The Sixth Grandfather*, DeMallie has provided a short concordance for comparing and contrasting *Black Elk Speaks* and the original transcriptions as edited by him. The correlation is to the pagination of the University of Nebraska Press edition of 1961, updated with a new introduction by Vine Deloria, Jr., in 1979 when it was expanded to include some photographs from Black Elk's life and of Enid Neihardt's handwritten text. (The Pocket Books edition has different pagination so that the correlations won't work with it.) DeMallie has, in addition, provided a stage by stage comparison in notes on the Great Vision with the account Neihardt gives of it in *Black Elk Speaks*. The absence of parallel annotation throughout is disappointing but that omission creates a task for other scholars.

Besides the new perpectives which emerge about Black Elk from DeMallie's volume, three other items from 1984 contribute to

our reconsideration of the career and significance of Nicholas Black Elk. A second book is a collection of essays, edited by Deloria. It is a collective tribute to Neihardt, the man and his work, entitled, *A Sender of Words*, which was the name Black Elk gave to Neihardt. The fourteen essayists range from the well known native American writers like Deloria and N. Scott Momaday, to the historian Dee Brown, to the Indian lorist Frank Waters, to DeMallie (whose essay is similar to his introduction to *The Sixth Grandfather*), to a singer, Bobby Bridger. Western writers and literary critics also contribute. As much as a third of the book concentrates on Neihardt's other writings unrelated to his books on and about Black Elk. Despite its focus on Neihardt, the anthology illustrates the on-going battle for the legacy and memory of Black Elk, a conflict complicated by the many-faceted nature of the man himself. Black Elk was indeed a Sioux Heyoka, as Joseph Eppes Brown has stated in his essay, "The Wisdom of the Contrary."[1] The dialectical, clown-like, trickster nature of his character inevitably suggests a debate about the true Black Elk not unlike the quest for the historical Jesus in biblical studies.

Within the book, two essays, besides DeMallie's informative chapter, stand out. Momaday's "To Save a Great Vision" is powerful and eloquent, as one has come to expect of him. A passage to which there is occasion to return to below demonstrates:

> It is sufficient that *Black Elk Speaks* is an extraordinary human document -- and beyond that the record of a profoundly spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of a people towards their historical fulfillment and culmination, towards the accomplishment of a worthy destiny. That the pilgrimage was in a tragic sense abruptly ended at Wounded Knee in 1890, that Black Elk's words at last take a tragic turn -- "There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead" -- is of little consequence in the long run, I believe. For in that sudden and absolute investment in the tragic, in the whole

1 *Parabola*, IV (February, 1979), 54-65.

assumption of a tragic sense, there is immeasureable vindication, the achievement of a profound and permanent dignity, an irreducible impression on the records of human history.[2]

Another exquisite and brilliant article is Roger Dunsmore's "Nicholas Black Elk: Holy Man in History." Like Momaday, Dunsmore is a poet, who teaches in Humanities, Wilderness and Environmental Studies at the University of Montana. After focusing for much of his argument on the nature of Black Elk's great vision, the struggle to live it out and out of it, Dunsmore concludes:

> He never doubted that what he had experienced was real and powerful and true. He never felt that his vision and the sacred powers of the world were empty because they did not save his nation from a terrible destruction. Nor did he escape from the painful historical reality of that destruction into his vision, calling it the only abiding reality and regarding the world and what happens in it as insignificant by comparison. He startles us by his capacity to maintain the necessary interconnectedness between the physical, historical world and the world of sacred powers of his vision. Black Elk maintained this interconnectedness under the pressure of the greatest possible historical terror and despair.[3]

Two articles by a young scholar at the Indiana University-Purdue University complex at Fort Wayne, Clyde Holler (Boston University, 1981) complete the sources from 1984 which revise our perspectives on Black Elk. The first, published in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, is entitled "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*." It is an intricately argued paper, and a sound contribution to the debate, even if its conclusions tease the reader more than they fully satisfy. Basically, Holler's starting point echoes one general tendency in the range of interpretations given to *Black Elk Speaks*. That tendency disassociates the text from Black Elk and attributes it to Neihardt, whose role was not merely editor and (with the help of his daughter) scribe, but interpreter and creator of perspectives which are his own but which he puts into

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2 In Vine Deloria, Jr., ed., *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt* (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1984), 31.

3 In ibid., 156.

the mouth of Black Elk. (Students from New Testament studies will be familiar with this problem.) The tendency has a more extreme expression than Holler's in the work of H. David Brumble, who, in 1980, contended that Neihardt exploited Black Elk and the sacred materials which the old holy man shared.[4] (The tendency is not all that recent, since Sally McCluskey wrote an article along the same lines thirteen years ago entitled "*Black Elk Speaks*: And So Does John Neihardt.")[5]

An opposite tendency has persisted in popular readings of *Black Elk Speaks* which fused the two men together, or saw Neihardt's role only as editor of the authentic words of Black Elk. With the appearance of *The Sixth Grandfather*, and with the critical perspectives emerging in the scholarly literature, that tendency can only live at the level of artistic appreciation. That is appropriate, since the book, apart from the critical problems addressed here, is a powerful work, as Momaday's essay cited above argues. It is also a continuing resource for comparative symbology and transcultural spirituality, even as we must heed DeMallie's sharp warning that the book cannot be taken uncritically as an example (he means "pure" example) of Oglala religion.

In this piece, Holler's argument can be summarized in this way: Neihardt's revisions from the interviews (to which Holler had access before DeMallie's work appeared) sacrificed Black Elk's theological views to his own, hence creating a distinction between what the old holy man ultimately believed and what is attributed to him by Neihardt. Holler does not agree with Brumble that Neihardt tricked Black Elk. He accepts Black Elk's initiative in arranging for the interviews, in adopting Neihardt in formal ceremony in order to reveal the sacred material, in agreeing to the process that brought the book to the public.

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4 H. David Brumble, III, "Anthropologists, Novelists and Indian Sacred Materials," *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, 11 (1980), 31-38.

5 In *Western American Literature*, 6 (1971-72), 231-42.

Indeed, Holler emphasizes that the elaborate ritualization of the interview experience itself was in keeping with Black Elk's real intention and a signal of the final differences in perspective between him and Neihardt.

Holler recollects for us that Neihardt came to Black Elk out of his own quest for oral history sources of the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890, the event he was to make so crucial in the epic, *The Song of the Messiah* which is part of his poetic *magnum opus, A Cycle of the West*. His agenda, Holler contends, explains why *Black Elk Speaks* ends formally with the Wounded Knee tragedy, and why Neihardt composed the most often quoted passage of the text on the final page before the epilogue:

> And so it was over.
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> I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in a blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream.
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> And I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth, -- you see me now a pitiful old man who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.[6]

Neihardt admitted that he did not take these words from the transcripts, but defended himself by saying that the quotation was in the spirit of Black Elk, and thus true to him. Holler's point is exactly the opposite. He contends that Neihardt's own agenda intrudes here, with its emphasis on the tragic, on the failure of Black Elk to realize his vision. It is difficult to square that sense of failure with the question why Black Elk would tell the story to the rest of the world. Implicit in the decision to share the story was a kind of hopefulness, a possibility that the vision might have further meaning. Many non-

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6 *Black Elk Speaks Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow). Illustrated by Standing Bear* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961; copyright, 1932), 276.

Indian admirers of the book have been quick to claim the vision as a contribution to spiritual insight available to anyone. Holler's orientation is less transcendental than that. He sees Black Elk as the enduring holy man, changing roles but always with his mission as intercessor for his people, whether as a catechist for the Catholic faith (as he was) or as source for Neihardt. Holler makes much of the implied theology of the rituals which Black Elk performed as part of the interviews -- practices of the old religion which later got Black Elk into some difficulty with the local Christian priests who demanded afterwards that he sign a letter disavowing any intent to renew the ancient faith.[7]

In the end Holler juxtaposes Black Elk's continuing role as a holy man with his theology of renewal and hope against Neihardt's tragic motif. Black Elk, in effect, moves beyond tragedy, both in the ritual action, in the process of telling, and in the content of what he says in prayers and stories, content which Neihardt consciously altered or unconsciously suppressed. Momaday, who accepted uncritically the concluding passage of the main text of *Black Elk Speaks* as authentic, has another angle on the same point, thus formulating an answer to the question why Black Elk would want to tell a story of failure. "To the extent that Black Elk recreates his vision in words," Momaday writes,

> he re-creates himself and in so doing re-affirms himself. He also affirms that he has existence in the element of language, and this affirmation is preeminently creative. He declares, in effect: *Behold, I give you my vision in these terms, and in the process I give you myself.* ...It is an act of sheer transcendence. Spiritually, he will survive as long as his words survive. He inhabits his vision, and in the telling his vision becomes timeless. The storyteller and the story are one.[8]

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7 Holler could make more of this than he did, which possibility is enhanced by DeMallie's additional information in his introduction. We will return to the point below.

8 "To Save a Great Vision," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words*, 36.

Dunsmore, who is also concerned about the rationale for sharing the Great Vision, attributes to Black Elk a similar self-consciousness. He was, Dunsmore contends, acknowledging that any vision "must not be frozen into some static truth-form" but it must be left "free to direct one's life."[9]

Taken by itself, this first article by Holler represents an exciting proposition, but he fails to specify very much of the real "theology" of Black Elk in the interviews. He gives more attention to process than to content. One is left with the sense that more study, especially of the materials which Neihardt expurgated, is going to be necessary. That might begin by paying attention to the omissions which Holler himself has listed:

> the part of Black Elk's account of the giving of the sacred pipe to the Lakota that describes the birth of an old woman from a buffalo, some of the kill talks, a story of a priest who died soon after interfering with a traditional ritual, a portion of Black Elk's account of his vision dealing with a 'soldier weed' to be used to wipe out the whites, and Black Elk's mention of Catholicism.[10]

A second article by Holler, in *The American Indian Quarterly*, begins to specify more of Black Elk's "theology," as part of a consideration of his relation to Christianity. In it, Holler is especially critical of the orientation to native American studies, shaped by anthropologist Franz Boaz, with its "desire to reconstruct an aboriginal Indian past." Instead, the Purdue professor begins from the fact of perennial change for all living religions, thus focusing his attention less on pre-contact traditional forms of native American religions and more on their change, adaptability, continuity in the middle of transitions. Black Elk becomes the example of Holler's approach, in that he actively responded to Christian missionary efforts. Some kind of response, Holler avers, was inevitable, if Black Elk was to remain a leader of his people. The question becomes how did

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9 "Nicholas Black Elk: Holy Man in History," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words*, 146.

10 Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*," 52 (March, 1984), 30.

Black Elk see the relation of Lakota tradition and Christianity. On the one hand, the two classic texts, *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sacred Pipe,* make no mention of Black Elk's conversion to Christianity in 1904.[11] On the other hand, Black Elk is a catechist among several Indian tribes, in which role he made no overt attempts to revitalize his people's traditions.

Black Elk was no nominal Christian, Holler admonishes those who would see him too simply taking on a role without seriously engaging the heart of the religion. He especially found communion to be a sacred ritual, and he was, according to Holler, baptized into three denominations. Because of the seriousness of his Christian commitment, Jesuit scholar Paul B. Steinmetz has contended that there could be no objective integration of his Christianity with his Lakota tradition. For Steinmetz, Black Elk did harmonize the two traditions "on a deep emotional and even unconscious level," but "only in a preliminary way in his conscious life."[12]

In contrast, Holler insists that Black Elk's conversion was neither "capitulation" nor "substitution of one religion for another" but a different kind of "theological bi-culturalism." That means, for Holler, that conversion has to be redefined for those native Americans who have integrated Christianity with their own traditions. For Black Elk, Holler argues, this view means that he is not "a passive informant on the traditional past" but "a creative theologian, open to the possibilities of his situation, to new ideas and symbols, and to a dialogue between the two traditions."[13] Moving beyond either/or dichotomies

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11 *The Sacred Pipe. Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux,* recorded and edited by Joseph Epes Brown (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971; copyright, 1953).

12 Paul B. Steinmetz, S.J., *Pipe, Bible and Peyote among the Oglala Lakota: A Study in Religious Identity,* (Stockholm, 1980) as quoted in Clyde Holler, "Black Elk's Relationship to Christianity," *American Indian Quarterly,* Winter, 1984, 41.

13 Holler, "Black Elk's Relationship to Christianity," 47.

about the problem of continuity and change, Black Elk's version of both/ and suggests another form of what Albert J. Raboteau has found in Afro-American religion during the era of slavery. Not all contacts between differing traditions, even under the severe conditions of oppression in African slavery, are hostile, Raboteau has argued.[14]

Even though he does not work with the interview texts for giving more content to Black Elk's theology, Holler does in this article begin to specify how native and Christian elements came together for the old holy man. Citing the opening passages of *The Sacred Pipe*, especially page xx in the introduction, Holler finds the White Buffalo Cow Woman who brings the Sacred Pipe to be identified with Christ. Likewise, Black Elk's depiction of the Sun Dance -- still prohibited during his life time but resurrected with the piercing practices two years after his death -- makes connections with the sufferings of Christ in his crucifixion. Those efforts at symbolic comparison and analysis point the way to a more substantial consideration of Black Elk's integrative theology, especially as expressed in the Neihardt interview transcripts.

In conclusion, two questions: what new or different perspectives emerge about Black Elk from the transcripts and from the critical dialogue we have surveyed? And secondly, what pedagogical uses, problems and potentialities are present now concerning *Black Elk Speaks* in Religious Studies?

First, a much fuller sense of the biography of Black Elk is now available, obviously from the period 1890-1950, but, because of the more accurate dating of events in *Black Elk Speaks*, also of the first twenty-seven years of his life. In addition, DeMallie has unearthed some letters from 1888-89 from Black Elk during the time of his Buffalo Bill Wild West Show and European travels. The period after the story in *Black Elk Speaks*, is worth a brief summary to demonstrate the importance of the personal history to the issues of this paper.

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14 Raboteau, *Slave Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 48-60, 86, 89.

Black Elk was first married to Katie War Bonnet in 1892, who bore him Never Showed Off (William) in 1893 (who died in 1897), Good Voice Star (John) in 1895 and Benjamin (the translator for the Neihardt interviews) in 1899. Katie died in 1903, and a year later Black Elk converted to Catholicism.

Of the conversion, his later daughter Lucy is the source of the story of how Black Elk came into confrontation with Jesuit Father Joseph Lindebner. Both men had come to treat a seriously ill boy -- Black Elk as native healer, the Christian priest to give last rites to his baptized convert. Lindebner seized Black Elk's sacred objects and threw them from the tent. Next he grabbed the shaman by the throat, and exorcised him by saying, "Satan, get out!" Defeated, Black Elk took two weeks of instruction from the missionary and converted, being baptized with the Christian name, Nicholas, on December 6.[15]

Two years later, Black Elk remarried. His wife, Anna Brings White, had been a widow. By her, Black Elk fathered Lucy in 1906 and Nick, Junior in 1914. As a lay catechist, Black Elk went on missions to the Wind River and Winnebago reservations in 1908 and to the Sisseton reservation in 1910. Two years later he underwent his first treatment for tuberculosis. During the twenties Black Elk may have done some Indian shows in the Black Hills and around Pine Ridge. If so, he was experienced in that role when he joined the Duhamel Pageant in 1935. Between the interviews with Neihardt, 1931 and 1944, Black Elk kept in contact with his collaborator, as evidenced by a letter DeMallie uncovered from 1940.[16]

In the last decade of his life, Black Elk lost his second wife in 1941. He was again hospitalized for tuberculosis in the Sioux Sanitorium in Rapid City. He hosted Joseph Epes Brown first in the winter of 1947-48, then for the summers of 1948 and 1949. Sometime during those visits the two visited Denver, as

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15 DeMallie summarizes the account in *The Sixth Grandfather. Black Elk's Teachings as Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 14.

16 Ibid., 67-68.

recounted in Brown's essay, cited above. In his eighty-seventh year, Black Elk died on August 19, 1950, at Manderson.

Besides the new biographical perspective about Black Elk, there is a fresh opportunity, as Holler's second article indicates, to rethink the problem of Black Elk's bi-religious situation. Re-entering that debate reminded me of the first time I heard Joseph Epes Brown at the University of Colorado in Boulder, share the fact of Black Elk's Catholicism. Nobody had mentioned it in print, I believe, until Frank Fools Crow (Black Elk's nephew and aged holy man at Pine Ridge today) spoke of it in his autobiography dictated to Thomas Mails and Dallas Chief Eagle in the late seventies. [17]

DeMallie's account accepts Black Elk's rejection of the old traditions for nearly three decades up to the time of the Neihardt interviews. He emphasizes Black Elk's realism, quoting the old man to say, "My children had to live in this world."[18] DeMallie believes that Black Elk never publicly conducted the old rites after 1904 until he sponsored the dances and prayers with Neihardt in 1931 -- the process surrounding the interviews in which Holler was so interested. He reprints the disavowal, elicited by the missionaries, of any intent by Black Elk to renew the old traditions. He died in the embrace of the church, DeMallie reminds us, and most old residents of the reservation remember him as a Catholic catechist and not as a traditional shaman. There is one account, which DeMallie records, from 1948 of a white visitor who was told by Ben Black Elk that the old man regretted giving up the native traditions for Christianity. Surely it is a question he must have pondered often, especially after he opened up the old traditions to a wider audience, native and non-Indian, through Neihardt.[19]

At the same time, DeMallie insists that Black Elk struggled

17 Thomas E. Mails. *Fools Crow.* New York: Doubleday & Co., 1979.
18 DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather,* 47.
19 Ibid., 14, 28, 59-61, 63, 66, 71-72, 74.

valiantly to get the Catholic evangelists to respect the old ways, to refrain from associating them with the devil, to honor the native spirituality. For that reason, DeMallie believes that Black Elk submitted to the ambiguous role of summer actor for Anglo audiences coming to see demonstrations of Indian ritual. He attributes to Black Elk the intent to teach non-Indians the authenticity of his people's heritage.[20]

The problem of Black Elk's pluralist religious orientation is certainly evident after 1931. He continues his Christian practice while adding the "secular" participation in the Duhamel dances to his collaboration with Neihardt (on two occasions) and Brown. One resolution, already suggested but not fully developed by Holler, is to draw on Brown's depiction of Black Elk as the Sioux Heyoka -- always changing roles, moving in and out of several worlds as shamans were wont to do, ever able to combine seriousness with humor and to give persistent attention to "the wisdom of the contrary." In his role, he can be the enduring holy man, searching for ever more relevant ways to serve his people, to keep his vision alive, to provide a normative account of the sacred rites for the sake of future generations rather than for some antique remembrance of a pre-contact past.[21]

We have an expanded knowledge of Black Elk's full life story. We have new sources to explore his bi-religious orientation. Thirdly, *Black Elk Speaks* now becomes another kind of document, a collaborative effort by two men who shared a special attraction to each other. Rather than treating Neihardt as some conspirator, he becomes scribe and mediator of Black Elk's vision and the creative poet and novelist. It is difficult to make Neihardt out to be the scapegoat in this drama. He was not a simple assimilationist, as Holler seems to assume in his first piece. Peter Iverson demonstrates otherwise in his essay

20 Ibid., 66.
21 Holler, "Black Elk's Relationship to Christianity," 43-45.

in *A Sender of Words*, calling attention to his support of John Collier, Commission of Indian Affairs, who, together with Neihardt, was deeply committed to continuity of Indian tradition.[22]

Finally, these investigations belong to the major theme in American religious history of religious and social change, of cross-cultural contact and influence, of interaction between oppressed and oppressor under conditions of political dominance. Following Raboteau's warning against reducing all such interactions to simple models of assimilationism or resistance, it may be appropriate to see Black Elk's conversion to Christianity not as a tribute to the effectiveness of the missionaries nor of the inevitable outcome of the links of cross and sword but to the spiritual discernment of Black Elk. He, as the shaman, may be beyond most of us in being able to apprehend the Great Mysterious through, within and beyond more than a single tradition.

Nonetheless, as Holler and Dunsmore have observed, such discernment was not merely otherworldly or spiritual as distinct from historical and concrete. In the expurgated materials from the interviews, Black Elk does not regret his part in Wounded Knee. He regrets only that he did not use his Great Vision against the American military, in place of his messianic vision from the Ghost Dance. He does not apologize for his resistance, for he knew that the spiritual life and the freedom, politically and spatially, of his people were bound up together. He knew that it was the military which arrested and imprisoned spiritual leaders who tried to resurrect the old ways after 1890. He knew the American government had committed deicide in prohibiting the Sun Dance. It was this same realism, however, which governed his decision no longer to fight, and particularly not to implement the medicine weed of the Black Road part of the vision that would lead to further destruction. His was a nonviolent position, but on the other side of his having been a warrior. He rejects the option because it presented itself to him, not because he never

22 Iverson, "Neihardt, Collier and the Continuity of Indian Life," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words*, 100-09.

had it, as Neihardt's omission of that part of the Great Vision would have it. Even his interest in Wasichu power, if one may speak so, in going on the trip with Buffalo Bill extending all the way to Queen Victoria, came in relation to a declining situation on the reservation. In joining the church, in telling his story on three significant occasions producing three books, in insuring that the old tradition would be kept alive at least on the printed page, Black Elk was trying to comprehend a way to help his people live. In the end, then, he is a heroic as much as tragic figure, for what he did from 1890-1950 as much as for what he did during the plot of *Black Elk Speaks*. His own longevity may be taken as a symbol for it all, what with tuberculosis and bad health, there was the strong will to live, to endure in the face of the white world which only kept one promise to the Indians, according to Red Cloud, "He promised to take my land, and he took it."[23]

How may *Black Elk Speaks* and Black Elk be treated in Religious Studies, as a result of this new scholarship? First, his role as a shaman is powerfully depicted in the classic text, from the time of his Great Vision and vocational call from the Six Grandfathers. The Neihardt text remains rich in symbolic material, in the Great Vision, in the myth of the sacred pipe, in the rituals. The book, with the addition of the recent scholarly perspectives, illustrates all those problems of moving from oral tradition to written version, of editing and of getting at the original words behind the text.

Black Elk Speaks may also be seen as a document of spiritual connection and of transcultural philosophy. If "The Sixth Grandfather" is humankind, as DeMallie suggests, the collaboration of two men with such strong feelings for each other, aided by the coincidences and synchronicities that surrounded their

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23 Quoted from Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winton, 1970), 449, in Bobby Bridger, "The Enduring Presence of John Neihart," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words*, 55.

project, embodies the symbol. The white American in search of survivors of Wounded Knee links up with the shaman-catechist who was there. Neihardt listens to and records the Great Vision and Black Elk helps Neihardt interpret a dream from the boyhood age of eleven. There is a healing in their interaction for those willing to ponder the event of their coming together.[24] If Religious Studies is about anything other than being another formal academic discipline, it looks for such moments of reconciliation and transformation in human experience.

In the more formal sense of areas in Religious Studies relevant to this investigation, what new possibilities are there for studying and teaching Black Elk? First, the book can now be set in the comparative context of indigenous American holy books, *The Book of Mormon, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,* Ellen G. White's writings, Elijah Muhammad's reinterpretation of *The Qu'ran,* at the popular level *In His Steps* and, God save us in this weird time, maybe even *The Late Great Planet Earth.* Deloria thinks that *Black Elk Speaks* can become a text for a native American theology and perhaps canon, along the lines of Black Theology though more universalistic. At a different level, western writer Frederick Manfred calls the text the first American Bible, coming out of the western landscape and requiring both Indian and Euro-American contributions.[25]

Jungians and others interested in transcultural spirituality will have a field day working in the interviews. The Black Road in the Great Vision suggests the dark God motif, for instance, Frank Waters and Father Carl J. Starkloff in their contributions to the Neihardt memorial volume begin that process.[26]

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24 DeMallie, "John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words,* 116-19 summarizes the connections of the two men.

25 Deloria, "Introduction" to 1979 edition of *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), xiii; Manfred, "Those Western American Darks," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words,* 45.

26 Waters, "Neihardt and the Vision of Black Elk," and Carl J. Starkloff, S.J., "Renewing the Sacred Hoop," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words, 20-23, 160.*

There is much to explore here. The process partakes of the spirit of the other long-lived figure intimately associated with all these issues, John Neihardt. Having just turned ninety, he wrote his last book, an autobiography of the first twenty years of his life, *All Is But a Beginning*. It concludes, Peter Iverson has noted, with"'a slogan that I wish to leave with my young friends to be recalled with courage, like a battle cry, in times of stress.'

> It derived from a Sioux friend who as a youth had undertaken a vision quest. He had fasted and prayed, but no vision came. He despaired. But finally, "a great cry came from overhead like a fearless warrior hailing his wavering comrade in the heat of battle. 'Hoka-hey, brother -- Hold fast, hold fast, there is more!' Looking up, he saw an eagle soaring yonder on a spread of mighty wings -- and it was the eagle's voice he heard." 27

Indeed, "there is more" to reflect about in the saga of Nicholas Black Elk -- Oglala holy man, Christian catechist, American spiritual teacher.

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27 Iverson, "Neihardt, Collier and the Continuity of Indian Life," in Deloria, ed., *A Sender of Words*, 109.