

The Great Spirit

Black Elk's near-death experience



The near-death experiences of the Native American medicine man Black Elk, of the Lakota Sioux nation, echo with the enchanting poetic language of an ancient society. His story reveals a traditional natural world culture, yet also many of the familiar phenomena of near-death experiences that leap across eras. Living between 1863 and 1950, Black Elk survived the collision of two eras, when the ancient primal world of his people was shattered by the violent invasion of the new industrial culture. This remarkable medicine man did not even speak English when he told his visionary experience to the author John Neihardt, who told it in "Black Elk Speaks" in 1932. In this classic of Native American literature, Black Elk's

near-death experiences glow through his perceptions of a sacred natural world.

The world of the Lakota Sioux is filled not with soulless material objects "out there" but with the manifestations of the presence of being that lies behind all creation: Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery. This spiritual power is not personified as a remote God, but is both transcendent and present in all the world: in thunder, water, blood, birds, buffalo. Since the worldview of industrial society demands the expulsion of these perceptions, they seem like dim archaic memories. But Black Elk's near-death experience was a living, vital way of seeing in a sacred manner.

When Black Elk was a boy of nine, he collapsed with a severe, painful swelling of his legs, arms and face. He lost consciousness and lay in his tipi dying. He was called by two men coming from the clouds, saying "Hurry up, your grandfather is calling you." He was raised up out of his tipi into the clouds, feeling sorry to leave his parents. He was shown an elaborate vision oriented around a classic Native American mandala: the circular hoop, the four directions, and the center of the world on an axis stretching from sky to earth. Numerous neighing, dancing horses, surrounded by lightning and thunder, filled the sky at each direction. He was told to behold this, then to follow a bay horse, which led him to a rainbow door. Inside, sitting on clouds, were six grandfathers, "older than men can ever be - old like hills, old like stars."

The oldest grandfather welcomed the boy and said: "Your Grandfathers all over the world are having a council, and they have called you here to teach you." His voice was very kind, but the boy shook all over with fear now, for he knew that these were not old men, but the Powers of the World.

Each Grandfather gave Black Elk a power. The first Grandfather gave him the power to heal. The second Grandfather then gave the boy the power of cleansing. The third Grandfather gave the boy the power of awakening and its peace. From the fourth Grandfather the boy was given the power of growth. The fifth Grandfather, the Spirit of the Sky, gives the power of transcendent vision. The sixth Grandfather, from a very old man, incredibly grew backwards into youth, until he became the boy Black Elk. Growing older again he said, "My boy, have courage, for my power shall be yours, and you shall need it, for your nation on the earth will have great troubles".

Then the boy hears a great Voice say: "Behold the circle of the nation's hoop, for it is holy, being endless, and thus all powers shall be one power in the people without end." Then Black Elk, standing on the highest mountain, surveying the grand vista of the hoop of the world, said: "I saw more than I can tell and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being."

After returning to the six Grandfathers once again to receive his powers, the boy was sent back to his dying body. When he awoke, his overjoyed parents told him that he had been sick twelve days, lying as if dead the whole time.

Black Elk was afraid to tell his experience, and moped around as a shy, withdrawn boy for eight years. Finally he told a medicine man who helped him reenact the vision as a ritual. At that moment he became a powerful medicine man or shaman, healing, he said, many people of illnesses from tuberculosis to despair. He kept his vision alive with daily practices, such as meditation on the daybreak star. But the great sadness of his life was his inability to stop the destructive onslaught of industrial culture, in search of gold and land, that almost destroyed his people.