

The Soul of the Indian **Lakota Philosophy and the Vision Quest**

David Martínez

The religion of the Indian is the last thing
about him that the man of another race will
ever understand.

—*Charles Eastman*

I want to emphasize at the outset that, as the subtitle indicates, this is a work of philosophy. As such, my treatment of the vision quest, or *hanbleceya*, will differ substantially from the disciplines that typically define American Indian studies, such as anthropology, history, political science, and literary criticism.¹ I especially want to stress that this is not an exercise in ethnography.² Instead of accumulating data from physical observations or extrapolating conclusions from field interviews, I have analyzed the vision quest for its philosophical content, based on material already published, in which I highlight resources "written by" Lakotas, including works actually composed by Lakota writers and works in which a Lakota played a major collaborative role.³ At the same time, by prioritizing Lakota texts, we cannot assume that the vision quest under examination is in some pure, precolonized form.⁴ After all, virtually all of the current scholarly resources on Lakota culture and history only extend as far back as the nineteenth century.⁵

Consequently, what we are compelled to embrace in order to make this project in Lakota philosophy feasible is a Lakota intellectual tradition that has undergone all the influences and pressures of the Assimilation Period (1890–1934), Reform and Termination (1934–1961), Red Power (1961–1973), and Self-Determination (1973–present). These epochs, of course, define American Indian intellectual history as a whole, not just for the Lakota. Nevertheless, when I describe this essay as “philosophical,” my analyses and reflections are based solely on the Lakota tradition, rather than the Western canon, for determining the direction of my discourse.

The purpose of examining the vision quest through the works of modern Lakota intellectuals is not to demonstrate how Christianized or diluted this ritual has become, but rather to appreciate the extent to which Lakota values are retained *in spite of* the various influences (including outright oppression) that have impinged on Lakota society. This is possible because, as I will argue, the vision quest maintains an inextricable relationship to a given place. More than the result of ritualized fasting and sleep deprivation, the vision quest expresses perceiving the land in mythological terms. More specifically, these mythological terms come from the Lakota oral tradition, in which mythic events are recounted as the order of first things, from which Lakotas derive precedents for their customs and beliefs, and which make a connection between these events and the land in which the Lakota dwell. Engaging in a vision quest, therefore, places one within the nonlinear time of myth, thereby transcending the linear events that have influenced and altered Lakota society.⁶

In order to get to these conclusions, though, we will have to deal with the most influential and controversial work of modern Lakota literature, *Black Elk Speaks*. Furthermore, since we are dealing with the vision quest, we will also have to take into consideration *The Sacred Pipe*, which is a kind of vade mecum of Lakota rituals.⁷ While there have been subsequent and significant works added to the Black Elk scholarly tradition, for example, Raymond DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather*, such works only gain their significance from illuminating the primary works that Black Elk did in collaboration with John G. Neihardt and Joseph Epes Brown, respectively.⁸ *Black Elk Speaks*, in particular, is given primacy not because it is the most authoritative account of the *Lakolwicoun*,⁹ or the Lakota way of life, but because this work is the one that has been canonized across a range of academic disciplines, including philosophy, not to mention being recognized as a major religious work by American Indians across the continent.¹⁰ As Vine Deloria Jr. states in his introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*:

The most important aspect of the book, however, is not its effect on the non-Indian populace who wished to learn

something of the beliefs of the Plains Indians but upon the contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. To them the book has become a North American bible of all tribes. They look to it for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, and for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life, now being badly eroded by the same electronic media which are dissolving other American communities.¹¹

By placing emphasis on what *Black Elk Speaks* means to American Indians, Deloria suggests an agenda for reappropriating this work back from the nonindigenous institutions that have abused Black Elk for their own ends, be it a non-Lakota writer like Neihardt looking for a best seller or the countless anthropology courses that use this text as an "accurate" portrayal of Lakota life and religion.¹² To reappropriate Black Elk's narratives, they must first be placed in the proper context. *Black Elk Speaks*, in particular, is a work of the Assimilation Period, when Indians were struggling against the oppression of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.¹³ Many Indians during this "transition period," as Charles Eastman called it, were compelled to attend boarding schools, where their culture was purged from them, and many became Christians.¹⁴ At the same time, many Indians were quite adept at maintaining a connection to their pre-reservation customs and beliefs, making them adaptable to the political reality that Indians were forced to confront. Reading *Black Elk Speaks* in this context, then, does not mean looking for its universal message to all of mankind; it means instead to read our way back to the source of his stories—the Oglala Lakota and the land they called home.

In *Black Elk Speaks*, Black Elk recounts his own great vision, which he experienced while he was nine years old, when he was struck ill with a deadly fever. Black Elk experienced seeing the world from a bird's-eye view. "Then I was standing on the highest mountain of them all," Black Elk states at the climax of his vision, "and round about beneath me was the whole hoop of the world. And while I stood there 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."¹⁵ Nevertheless, it would be many years before Black Elk could gain some comprehension over what he had experienced. Black Elk would have to grow and mature, which included going through the vision quest as a rite of passage, before his vision could have a practical application.

Indeed, it was years before Black Elk could let anyone know about his experience. Aside from worrying about whether anyone would

believe him, Black Elk simply could not find the right words to describe his vision. As Black Elk put it later, "when the part of me that talks would try to make words for the meaning, it would be like fog and get away from me." Such a great vision required the leavening of years of life experience in order to be understood, if even then. Black Elk, after all, was only nine years old when this happened. "I am sure now," Black Elk states, "that I was then too young to understand it all, and that I only felt it. . . . It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I know that more was shown to me than I can tell."¹⁶ As we shall see, Black Elk could only comprehend his vision with respect to his growing responsibilities as an Oglala Lakota man. Like any other Lakota with a vision, it would be incumbent on Black Elk to use his vision to serve his people.

What Black Elk's accounts make clear is that by ritualizing the pursuit of a vision experience, having a vision becomes a normal part of Lakota personal development. In fact, not only was having a vision normal, but also there were social expectations, or peer pressure, about having such an experience. Indeed, the vision seeker "hoped to see something supernaturally significant," writes Ella Deloria, "that would help him become a worth-while man: a good hunter, a good warrior, an effective and true medicine man, a diviner, or whatever. He wanted power to be useful in his tribe."¹⁷ Frances Densmore writes in turn, "The obligation of a dream was as binding as the necessity of fulfilling a vow, and disregard of either was said to be punished by the forces of nature, usually by a stroke of lightning."¹⁸ The latter fear was especially true of those who received the calling to become a *heyoka*, a sacred clown. However, the fear of lightning that may have been prevalent among the Lakota did not in turn become a fire-and-brimstone dogma. As Raymond J. DeMallie says about Lakota religion in general:

In Lakota society the quest for knowledge of the *wakan*, what Black Elk called "the other world," was largely a personal enterprise and was primarily a male concern. Each individual man formulated a system by and for himself. There was no standardized theology, no dogmatic body of belief. Basic and fundamental concepts were universally shared, but specific knowledge of the spirits was not shared beyond a small number of holy men. Through individual experience, every man had the opportunity to contribute to and resynthesize the general body of knowledge that constituted Lakota belief.¹⁹

One can argue that the emphasis placed on the individual experience in part explains why the vision quest has produced such an impressive array of experiences—and virtually no dogma. The events that

occur during a vision experience, Vine Deloria Jr. concedes in his foreword to Lee Irwin's *The Dream Seekers*, are not "very believable in western intellectual circles, yet it happens, and if the scholar is going to understand the experience, he or she must grant that an event far out of the paradigm of western materialistic science has occurred."²⁰ Luther Standing Bear gives an interesting variety of examples in *Land of the Spotted Eagle*. Standing Bear summarizes, "The Lakotas had some wonderful medicine-men who not only cured the sick, but they looked into the future and prophesied events, located lost or hidden articles, assisted the hunters by coaxing the buffalo near, made themselves invisible when near the enemy, and performed wonderful and magic things."²¹ Obviously, this is the result of the fundamentally different relationship that the Lakota maintained with nature, as compared to their Western counterparts. More specifically, the land and its flora and fauna were ultimately regarded as expressions of Wakan Tanka,²² who is the "great unifying life force that flowed in and through all things." Thus, Standing Bear concludes, "all things were kindred and brought together by the same Great Mystery," which is Wakan Tanka.²³ Implied is the notion that all things are also infused with the intelligence of Wakan Tanka, which is given expression by a range of animal, plant, and mineral consciousnesses in addition to human awareness. Every natural being, in turn, had a Lakota name that placed it within the boundaries of a homeland whose center was located in the Black Hills.

Within the context of the Lakota vision quest, a vision involves something more than the eye's capacity for sight. A vision includes all of the senses as they are transmogrified by the appearance of sacred beings into one's living space. A vision may occur during either the day or night, while sleeping or awake. Nonetheless, visions are commonly described as being "like a dream," suggesting a departure from the world of everyday perceptual habits. Yet, at the same time, it is regarded as an experience, just as any activity in a nonvisionary state is an experience. One is simply opened up to experiencing *more than* the ordinary. At the same time, as Irwin points out, "there is no distinct separation between the world as dreamed and the world as lived. These are states integral to the unifying continuum of mythic description, narration, and enactment."²⁴

For the Lakota, the fact that one cannot always choose one's vision is evidence for the hypothesis that the needs of the people, even the cosmos, and not simply those of the individual, settle one's fate. One does have control over the decision to embark on a vision quest, to see it through to its end, and to accept whatever is revealed. What is not chosen is the vision itself. Nonetheless, as George Sword explains: "When one seeks a vision and receives a communication he must obey as he is told to do. If he does not, all the superior beings will be against him." The virtues of obedience and humility are especially important for a young man seeking a vision so that he may know what to do with

his life.²⁵ Because of the significance of learning one's purpose, the Lakota maintain that visions are not acquired by an ambitious ego, but rather are *given to* a humbled soul. The value placed on humility is borne out by the oral tradition, in which the *Pte Oyate*, the Buffalo People, are obliged to humble themselves as a condition for learning what to do, by means of a holy man's vision quest, to resolve a community crisis. The story in question also demonstrates the autochthonic qualities that are inherent in the Lakota vision quest tradition.

There was a time when the Lakota ancestors, the *Pte Oyate*, lived below the surface of the earth.²⁶ Because Skan, the power that controlled the universe, wanted to know what the people he created were like, he sent Tate, the wind, to live among them in the form of a man. While living with the *Pte* people, Tate—whom the people began calling *kola*, or friend—stayed in the lodge of Wazi and Wakanka. Wazi and Wakanka had a most beautiful daughter, whom they called Ite. Tate quickly became enchanted with Ite's beauty, and soon found himself longing for her. Because of this, Tate spoke very well of the *Pte* people to Skan. Tate then told Skan about Ite and the feelings he experienced as a man. Skan listened carefully to Tate's account, then he told Tate that he could return to the *Pte*, where he would experience the full range of human emotions. Skan also told Tate that he could take Ite as his wife and move into a lodge with her. In return, Tate would teach Skan what he learned about being human, so that Skan might know how to treat these people properly.

After Tate returned to the *Pte* people, trouble erupted when the food the *Pte* needed to feast the Sacred Beings was stolen by Gnaski, a vile creature who did not love the Sacred Beings and who only sought to trick and offend others. While the *Pte* wondered what to do, a man appeared, whom the *Pte* mistook for a wise man named Ksapela. In reality, it was Iya in disguise. Iya was the father and brother of Gnaski and therefore just as disreputable. But in his disguise, the *Pte* did not know who was really before them. Iya, wearing Ksapela's face, took advantage of the *Pte* and advised them to lie to Skan about how the food was lost. This would buy them time, and when they caught the thief they would have vengeance. But the people knew nothing about vengeance. Iya in his disguise sought then to teach them. When Ate, the eldest *Pte* and the first man Skan had created, heard about this, he decided to leave this world rather than see his people shame themselves. His wife, Hunku, soon followed him. The people were distressed by the death of their elders, so when the Sacred Beings came for their feast they told Skan the truth, that it was due to their laxity that the food was stolen. The people wanted to know the right thing to do.

Skan then instructed Ksa, a truly wise man, to show one of the *Pte* how to communicate with Sacred Beings. The *Pte* chose Wazi, the father of Ite, who was now the eldest and wisest among them, to learn

this new way of doing things from Ksa. By virtue of what Wazi would learn, he would become a *wicasa wakan*, a holy man through whom the Sacred Beings would speak to the people. But Wazi must vow to always speak the truth, and the people must vow to accept Wazi's words as those of the Sacred Beings. All agreed. The instruction into the vision quest then went like this:

Ksa said to Wazi, "Cleanse your body and go alone to a place where there is no other living thing. Stay there without eating or drinking, meditating on the message you wish to receive, until it comes to you. Then return and tell your people. If one of the Spirits wishes to speak through you, this message will come to you as in a dream."

Ksa then informed the Pte people that the Sacred Beings would no longer speak directly to the people, but only through these dream-like messages. After Ksa taught the people how to treat the dead, which they did for Ate and Hunku, Wazi did as he was instructed and went away to a solitary place. The message Wazi received told him that everyone must confess his or her folly before all the others. When Wazi returned with this message, the people grumbled because they wanted to be promised food. But Tate stood up and reminded the people of their vow and the people felt ashamed. So they all took turns doing what the Sacred Beings commanded through their holy man.²⁷

Of course, the story of Tate and Ite goes on from here. Tate and Ite had four sons, who became the four winds and found the four directions that oriented the world, preparing it for the Pte people's emergence to the surface. Moreover, the remainder of the story determined the symbolism that became a part of the vision quest. But insofar as this symbolism is derived from the Lakota oral tradition, we need to stop and appreciate the connection between myth and place. For a people's mythology is not simply what they did while they awaited a better, more scientific explanation of things and events, nor was it a means of escape. On the contrary, a people's mythology springs from the earth itself, such that it contains the memories and knowledge of long-ago experiences. With respect to the vision quest, the first time this ritual took place was even before the people reached the surface of the earth. Because it took place below the earth's surface, it means that it took place outside of linear, historical time and that it cannot be attributed to any single, historical individual or group. It is a memory that belongs to every Lakota.

In the creation story, the Lakota came up from below the surface of the earth through a cave. They were enticed by the many wonderful things they could enjoy here, the most appealing of which was the taste of buffalo meat. "Tatanka," who was also a wise man for the people below

the earth's surface, "warned the people that those who passed through the cave could never again find the entrance, and must remain on the world. He said that winds blew on the world and were cold; that game must be hunted, and skins tanned and sewed to make clothes and tipis."²⁸

When the people came up through the cave, they forgot the language of the spirits that they once spoke and how to serve them. Tatanka followed the people to the surface so that he could help them. Upon entering the world, Tatanka turned into a shaggy buffalo, but he remembered the language of the spirits, while the people invented a new tongue for themselves that other creatures could not understand. They were now the *Ikce Oyate*, the Common People. "They were the first people on the world, and the Lakota are their descendants."²⁹ According to legend, the Lakota were once a single community who made their winter camp at Sacred Lake, which James R. Walker suspected was in the Mille Lacs region of Minnesota. This was the original center of the world. Eventually the people grew and divided into various bands, each of which lived within the world founded first by the Four Winds.³⁰ "Our homeland was proportioned on a big scale," Luther Standing Bear describes this country. "There seemed to be nothing small, nothing limited, in our domain. Our home, which covered part of North Dakota, all of South Dakota, and part of Nebraska and Wyoming, was one of Great Plains, large rivers and wooded mountains." Yet, although everything was sacred as far as the eye could see, there are certain places that are especially esteemed by the people. "Of all our domain we loved, perhaps, the Black Hills the most. The Lakota named these hills *He Sapa*, or Black Hills, on account of their color."³¹

"According to a tribal legend," Luther Standing Bear continues, "these hills were a reclining female figure from whose breasts flowed life-giving forces, and to them the Lakota went as a child to its mother's arms."³² It is where they emerged as a people. It is where they learned many things for the first time from Tatanka, Wazi, and Wakanka. The Black Hills, in particular, is where they were reborn as a people after Unktehi flooded the world and killed all of the people except for a lone girl. She was rescued by an eagle who gave her a son and a daughter, who later generated a new people, an eagle nation.

In the end, the Lakota concept of homeland demonstrates that attachment to a given place does not simply depend on being the dominant force in that area. Although the Lakota were once very powerful, politically and militarily, the legitimacy of their claim to a given homeland was based on the amount of care they put into this place. Care is different from labor, which is the Lockean criterion for ownership. Care is an expression of love, a concern for another, as opposed to a desire for exploitation, which only facilitates personal gain. With respect to the Black Hills and the buffalo herds that once roamed through the area, Luther Standing Bear claims, "To the Lakota the magnificent forests and

splendid herds were incomparable in value. To the white man everything was valueless except the gold in the hills."³³ The Lakota care for the land as for a person by recognizing spirits all around them. In turn, they practice a religion that honors these spirits and seeks from them, through such ceremonies as the vision quest, the revivification of themselves and their home. What Edward S. Casey says about the relation between caring and place can be said about the Lakota and the Black Hills: "We care about places as well as people, so much so that we can say that *caring belongs to places*. We care about places in many ways, but in building on them—*building with them*, indeed, *building them*—they become the ongoing 'stars of our life,' that to which we turn when we travel and to which we return when we come back home."³⁴ With this we can return to our analysis of the vision quest, which is an act of care in its own right, specifically for the well-being of the people.

The first order of business, when embarking on a vision quest, is to seek a *wicasa wakan*, a holy man—the first of whom was Wazi—who knows the proper way of conducting this ritual. The onus on the vision seeker, especially if he is young and inexperienced, is to pay particularly close attention to what he is being taught. "From the Lakota perspective," DeMallie asserts, "the power of rituals made them potentially dangerous. Every ritual was composed of three essential components: the *wakan* actions, the *wakan* speech, and the *wakan* songs. If any of these were performed incorrectly, the ritual would fail to produce the desired end and might actually result in doing harm."³⁵ Naturally, this concern led to some uniformity in the way the vision quest was performed. Nonetheless, what Ella Deloria says of the Dakota tradition is also true for the Lakota: "Dakota religious life was purely individual. There was nothing that all must do with reference to God, but only what each man felt as an inner compulsion that could not be denied."³⁶ This individuality is reflected in the vision quest, in which no one really knows beforehand what to expect, only that it should be performed with an abundance of circumspection.

Maintaining the formal ritual actions comprising the vision quest were of utmost importance. It was the proper execution of each component of the overall ritual that generated a visionary experience. Indeed, Irwin observes, the "highest degree of formalization of the vision quest is found among the truly nomadic Plains people, for whom the quest is a central rite in establishing the religious identity of the individual."³⁷ Ultimately, what occurs during the vision quest will be contingent on the true nature of the individual. Black Elk points out, "What is received through the 'lamenting' is determined in part by the character of the person who does this."³⁸ Only an exceptional person will receive a great vision that can alter the fate of the people as a whole. "Thus it was said," as Frances Densmore quotes an unnamed Lakota, "that a young man would not be great in mind so his dream

would not be like that of a chief; it would be ordinary in kind."³⁹ Whatever the vision, though, it must be interpreted by a *wicasa wakan*, a holy man, who will read the vision for the "strength and health" that it may give to all.⁴⁰

As a rite of passage, there is nothing really mystical about the vision quest at this stage in a young person's life.⁴¹ Historically in the Lakota community, it was a natural part of the process of making a young man useful to his family.⁴² "In the natural course of events," Luther Standing Bear explains, "every Lakota boy became a hunter, scout, or warrior." These were once the three most important men's roles in Lakota society, and the vision quest was a way to learn about one's calling, which may or may not include being a medicine or holy man. "Most young men at some time in their lives tried to become medicine-men. They purified themselves and held the vigil hoping for direct communion with spirit powers, but in this few succeeded."⁴³ Still, the vision quest was an essential ingredient in alleviating what could easily be an awkward and difficult time in the individual's life.⁴⁴ But rather than enter an existential crisis, a Lakota, because of his tradition, may pursue a vision quest, complete with the assistance of a holy man, as well as the support of the tribe.

Everything, however, begins with the smoking of the pipe. Given to the Lakota by White Buffalo Woman, the pipe is at the center of every ceremony that is important to the Lakota. It is regarded as an instrument that can connect the heart of the smoker with the power of the *wakan* beings. "When a Lakota does anything in a formal manner," states George Sword, "he should first smoke the pipe." Sword goes on to explain that the smoke from the pipe, which is filled with *kinnikinnick*, a mild and soothing blend of tobacco, is especially pleasing to *Wakan Tanka*. "In any ceremony," Sword proclaims, "this should be the first thing that is done." With respect to the vision quest, the one who wishes to partake in this ritual will go to the home of a holy man, taking him a filled pipe. Together they will smoke from the same pipe and thereby seal their relationship before *Wakan Tanka*.

In the story that Black Elk tells in *The Sacred Pipe*, the next step in the vision quest is building a sweat lodge, or *inipi*, in which a purification ritual will be enacted. Raymond Bucko summarizes the basic ceremonial structure in *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge*, which "includes closing the door, praying, pouring water, singing, opening the door, and then smoking the pipe."⁴⁵ In Black Elk's account, they do this four times. The heat from the steaming rocks not only purifies the vision seeker's body, but also, George Sword claims, the "*Inipi* makes clean everything inside the body. . . . *Inipi* causes a man's *ni* to put out of his body all that makes him tired, or all that causes disease, or all that causes him to think wrong."⁴⁶

When the time comes for the vision seeker to retreat into a spe-

cific place, such as Bear Butte in the Black Hills, assistants who will set up the vision quest site for him accompany him. The space into which the vision seeker enters, however, is no ordinary site. It is at the center of the Lakota cosmos. At the same time, it is a space that is completely concrete for the vision seeker. "Certain buttes," Irwin notes, "were recognized as particularly powerful and inhabited by dream-spirits willing to share their power and knowledge."⁴⁷ Because such a place was created by the wakan beings and is infused with their power, the area of the vision quest is already sacred. But before the vision seeker enters the site, assistants will prepare the ground for him. They must make it a place where the vision seeker can beckon the attention of a wakan being. According to Sword, the ground should be cleared of vegetation, and even the "bugs and worms" ought to be removed before proceeding.⁴⁸ Once a space is cleared, the assistants will plant five willow poles, beginning with the central one, in whose securing hole they will sprinkle kinnikinnick. Then they will walk ten paces to the west and plant the next pole.⁴⁹ Similarly, they will do this for the poles marking the north, east, and south. Between the central and eastern poles, either a bed of sage or a shallow pit covered over with brush will be prepared so that if the vision seeker wishes to rest, he may do so with his head leaning against the central pole, enabling him to face east. Prayer offerings consisting of small bags of tobacco, only "as big as the end of a finger," will be tied to the top of all the poles, as well as strips of colored cloth symbolizing the four directions. Sometimes offerings will be "fastened to the small ends of sprouts of the plum tree."⁵⁰

Once everything is ready for the vision seeker, he arrives on horseback at the base of the hill with the holy man. From there he walks up to the sacred site carrying a pipe and a buffalo robe, weeping on his way up. Because he is venturing into the mountains alone to fast and pray, the vision seeker is instructed to keep hold of his pipe, which was ritually filled during the inipi ritual. If he does this, he is told that no harm will come to him, "although many things may come to visit him to test his strength and bravery."⁵¹ Just as important, the vision seeker is instructed to pray, either out loud or to himself. How many days and nights the vision seeker will remain on his quest is often predetermined before the inipi is built, the average length of time being four days. However, insofar as attaining a vision is paramount, some like Sword stipulate that one should remain "until he receives a vision or until he is nearly perished." Such perseverance is explained by the fact that whether he has successfully had a vision or not he must still return home and account for what has happened to him. Only when "he can endure no longer . . . may he go to his people." If he has a vision, he will return home singing. If he does not, then he ought to return "silently and with his face covered."⁵²

The vision seeker undergoes fasting and sleeplessness and prays

throughout the whole ritual. In light of these conditions, what happens to the vision seeker's mind and body? In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk describes the vision seeker beginning his prayers at the center pole, then moving slowly to the eastern pole, then returning to the center before going through the same maneuver with the poles to the south, west, and north, all the time clutching his pipe and praying to the wakan being from whom he hopes to receive a vision. Since the poles are not set very far apart, it would not take very long at a normal pace to walk from one pole to the next. But keeping in mind that he is trying to contact a wakan being, the vision seeker should conduct himself "slowly and in such a sacred manner that often he may take an hour or even two to make one of these rounds."⁵³ This is to say, the vision seeker must be mindful of what he is doing and why he is doing it. If he has been properly purified, then his thoughts should be more about seeking a blessing for his people than about his own personal gain. Furthermore, Black Elk warns, the vision seeker "must always be careful lest distracting thoughts come to him," such as worrying about his thirst or hunger, or even longing for the comforts of home and family. At the same time, Black Elk continues, "he must be alert to recognize any messenger which the Great Spirit may send to him, for these people often come in the form of an animal, even one as small and as seemingly insignificant as a little ant."⁵⁴

The value Lakotas placed on observing all aspects of nature begins in childhood when, Luther Standing Bear explains, "the child began to realize that wisdom was all about and everywhere and that there were many things to know. There was no such thing as emptiness in the world."⁵⁵ One could say that the result of this kind of child rearing was that the senses were already heightened and during the ritual could be taken to an extreme level. "After he had fasted a long time," Ella Deloria writes, "having begun at home of course, his head became light and his senses became so delicate and acute that even a little bit of stick pricking him was unbearably intensified."⁵⁶ Fundamental to the visionary experience, Irwin affirms, is "crossing a critical threshold from the explicit world of the everyday to the implicit reality of the visionary world."⁵⁷ In concrete terms, one knows one has crossed that threshold when animals begin to talk. "If a bird called," Deloria continues, the vision seeker "might hear a message from the spirit world. If an animal approached him, he might see it as a man to guide him to his vision."⁵⁸

When a messenger decides to appear, usually in the form of an animal, the circumstances are not always idyllic. It is not unusual for the vision seeker to deal with fear as a part of the ritual. While it can be daunting for a young boy to be left by himself to fast and pray on a lonely hill, the real fear arose from the realization that he was defenseless and powerless in a dangerous world. "Having to do his vision quest in a solitary place," Sarah Olden writes in *Singing for a Spirit*, "far from his

people put the boy in much danger of being surrounded by enemies and killed."⁵⁹ Further intensifying the situation was the possibility of having a truly awesome encounter with sacred beings. This happened to Lame Deer, who recounts his vision experience this way:

Sounds came to me through the darkness: the cries of the wind, the whisper of the trees, the voices of nature, animal sounds, the hooting of an owl. Suddenly I felt an overwhelming presence. Down there with me in my cramped hole was a big bird. The pit was only as wide as myself, and I was skinny boy, but that huge bird was flying around me as if he had the whole sky to himself. I could hear his cries, sometimes near and sometimes, far, far away. I felt feathers or a wing touching my back and head. This feeling was so overwhelming that it was just too much for me. I trembled and my bones turned to ice. I grasped the rattle with the forty pieces of my grandmother's flesh. . . . I shook the rattle and it made a soothing sound, like rain falling on rock. It was talking to me, but it did not calm my fears. I took the sacred pipe in my other hand and began to sing and pray. . . . But this did not help. I don't know what got into me, but I was no longer myself. I started to cry.⁶⁰

But fear is a threshold through which the vision seeker must necessarily pass in order to earn his vision. Even while afraid, the vision seeker must demonstrate his commitment to receiving a vision by making a sacrifice, usually in the form of his own suffering. In this context, suffering is not expiation but humiliation—not in the sense of bearing mortal shame, but rather in terms of humbling oneself before a greater power.

Black Elk recounts a vision quest in which a holy man named Few Tails instructed him. He took Black Elk to an area near Pine Ridge called Grass Creek. Black Elk started on his vision quest at the beginning of spring, a time symbolizing the "awakening of the visionary powers and of the revitalization of all living beings."⁶¹ Black Elk and Few Tails arrived just before sunset, when Few Tails prepared the area by first spreading sage, then planting a flowering stick in the middle of the sage bed. At each of the four directions, Few Tails tied "offerings of red willow bark tied into little bundles with scarlet cloth."⁶² The setup is less elaborate than the one Black Elk describes in *The Sacred Pipe*, which may be accounted for by the fact that the Oglala were going through a difficult period in the aftermath of their annihilation of Custer's forces at the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Nevertheless, once the preparations were finished, Black Elk was left alone, wearing little clothing and carrying his pipe for the next two days. What Black Elk does not talk about in either of his descriptions of the vision quest are

the physical symptoms of going without food, drink, or sleep for such long stretches of time. Perhaps what matters more is the demonstration of his powerlessness, not to mention his mindfulness, in the face of a higher calling. After all, the vision seeker is compelled to refrain from thinking only of his personal needs. Consequently, an account of a successful vision quest will not exhibit complaints about thirst, hunger, being light-headed, or lonely.

The only thing over which Black Elk had control was the attitude with which he conducted himself. "The intent of the faster," Irwin reminds us, "was regarded as the most significant and important feature of the fast."⁶³ Still, as Sword indicated, the attitude did not guarantee the outcome, as there have been instances when a vision seeker went home without a vision.⁶⁴ Moreover, Irwin continues, "Even though a particular power [or wakan being] might be addressed or sought, the actual form of empowerment frequently took an altogether different character."⁶⁵ This means that ultimately the wakan power that one truly needs will be the one that appears, if one appears at all. Sometimes, though, as in the case of Black Elk's account, more than one apparition may take place.

What is astounding about all visionary accounts, of which Black Elk's stands out as exceptionally eloquent and poignant, is the concrete quality of the narratives. In Irwin's analysis of the vision quest, he observes that various accounts pinpoint "a discernible beginning" to the vision experience. There is suddenly a voice in the distance, the approach of a shadowy figure, or singing coming from somewhere. In a sense the vision "flows" into being, somewhat in the same manner as one flows into sleep or into a dream, or like the spotted eagle that alighted on a pine tree, then spoke to Black Elk. "Behold these," the eagle said. "They are your people. They are in great difficulty and you shall help them." For most vision seekers, this would be more than a satisfactory experience, but Black Elk's vision goes on to distinguish itself from the norm. After the spotted eagle spoke, a chicken hawk came forward and announced, "Behold! Your Grandfathers shall come forth and you shall hear them." Then a thunderstorm broke, and out of the cloudburst two men shot forth like arrows; as they neared the ground, they kicked up a cloud of dust. From within the dust, Black Elk could see the heads of dogs peeping out.

In *The Sacred Pipe* we get something that is no less dramatic in character. This is not to say that such visions are in any way typical, but they do correspond to the Lakota belief that one's vision can be "no greater than the capacity or maturity of the individual dreamer."⁶⁶ In the case of *The Sacred Pipe* episode, we get a fuller account of what happened during two days of fasting and prayer. In this narrative, an eagle came and went without anything happening. The vision seeker, however, kept his eyes and ears trained on the minutest elements of his surroundings. "An at-

tentive state of mind," Irwin states, "heightened through constant prayer and fasting, is directed toward every nuance of activity and change in the environment."⁶⁷ Such a sustained effort at acuity often led to the enhancement of one's senses, meaning that hearing and seeing became more perceptive as one actively reached out in search of a message. The vision seeker in Black Elk's account found a red-breasted woodpecker, which advised, "Be attentive! and have no fear; but pay no attention to any bad thing that may come and talk to you!"⁶⁸ This was after the first day. When the vision seeker fell asleep he heard and saw his people acting quite happily. Upon awaking before sunrise, he watched the Morning Star change colors from red to blue, then from yellow to white, thereby imparting a lesson, he would later claim, regarding the "four ages." As time pressed on, a white butterfly landed on the pipe that was leaning against the center pole—a sign of the Wakinyan, whose home is atop Okawita Paha⁶⁹ in the Black Hills.⁷⁰ As the sun began to set again, thunderclouds gathered on the horizon. When the thunder and lightning started, the vision seeker admitted to being a "little afraid," but then remembered what the red-breasted woodpecker had told him. He also heard singing and voices that he could not understand, and slowly he became unafraid. Then, after standing with his eyes closed, he found that the storm had passed and that "everything was very bright, brighter even than the day." But the vision does not end here. The vision seeker then saw many people riding horses of different colors, with one of the riders proclaiming, "Young man, you are offering the pipe to *Wakan-Tanka*, we are all very happy that you are doing this!" Finally, after the horsemen had disappeared, the red-breasted woodpecker returned, saying: "Friend, be attentive as you walk."⁷¹

The vision, Irwin describes, "has a holistic structure that moves through visionary space-time from present moment to present moment and from place to place in an unbroken flow."⁷² According to Joseph Epes Brown, the animals that emerge out of this flow mark "a shift to another level of understanding." More to the point, the animals in visions express something beyond their everyday roles in the environment. Perhaps reconnecting to their mythical origins, "the [Lakota] is no longer encountering the phenomenal animal, but rather an archetypal 'essence' appearing in the forms of various animal beings."⁷³

The relationship that ensued in light of an animal's appearance, at least in the case of the Lakota, did not necessarily lead to the vision seeker acquiring a guardian spirit. Rather, depending on what was motivating the vision seeker in the first place, an animal's appearance could signify a wakan being's willingness to avail its power, which could be in the form of either a spoken or a sung message. Gaining such power did not diminish the vision seeker's dependence on the wakan beings. If anything, it reinforced the belief that one is ultimately powerless without Wakan Tanka. Ella Deloria explains it this way:

A man who had gone through such a spiritual experience would ever after hold in reverence the animal whose spirit led him and would feel a kinship with it. Whenever he was in need of supernatural help he could become *en rapport* with that spirit and was thereby suddenly enabled to do what was humanly possible. He was no longer a plain man but one imbued with supernatural strength and power.⁷⁴

It was important to remember, of course, from whom the power came. Humility is a virtue that is not limited to seeking a vision but is applicable to daily life as well, especially once a vision is attained.

At this point we need to emphasize that Black Elk's visions, as Julian Rice argues, were "given to a specifically Lakota consciousness," and their "symbolic associations can flourish only when rooted in the matrix of Lakota culture."⁷⁵ We are asked to remember that the Lakota religion is a locally based set of practices, whose customs and beliefs may only be understood within a limited context. Specifically, a vision gains meaning only for a particular people, who are themselves defined by a unique set of bonds, such as a common homeland, language, and sacred history. DeMallie states: "[Lakota] Religion was not separated out from the rest of social life but was an organic part of the whole. Therefore, a description of . . . Lakota religion may be phrased in terms of beliefs and rituals that permeated everyday life. And we must understand these beliefs and rituals in the context of the whole of Lakota culture."⁷⁶ With respect to Lakota culture, then, we need to move on to the significance of the visions.

Even when a vision experience seems exceptionally mystical, its meaning to the Lakota mentality does not necessarily mark a break from previous custom and belief. For even if a new ritual is inaugurated or an old one altered, the determination is based on traditional attitudes and beliefs regarding the vision quest. But before any of this can be assessed, the vision seeker must return home, where another inipi will be awaiting him and in which he will disclose his experience to the holy man. Because the vision seeker has touched his mouth to the sacred pipe, he is under a heavy obligation to speak the truth. As Patricia Albers and Seymour Parker observe in "The Plains Vision Experience": "If one claimed to possess supernatural powers from visions, he had to validate his right to them through achievement, wealth, and/or ascription. An individual who claimed rights to a vision but was not able to 'validate' his claims was considered a liar, a fool, or a dupe of the supernatural."⁷⁷ This validation came as the vision seeker began participating in the adult roles of the community. Depending on the content of the vision, an individual learned of his calling to a particular "society." This relationship building clearly suggests that the vision quest was not just about individuation—though that feature was there—but about

the role in the community for which one would assume responsibility. Where one belonged in the community, therefore, was a combination of both the content of the vision and how the holy man understood the vision.

In the case of Black Elk's vision, the fact that his vision contained thunder, lightning, and dogs was enough to determine his obligation to join the Heyoka Society. "A dream of the thunderbirds," Densmore states, "was considered the greatest honor which could come to a man from a supernatural source, and for this reason the obligation of the dream was heavier than that of any other."⁷⁸ Of course, even someone as great as Black Elk had to hear this from the elder holy men who listened to his vision. "So after offering and smoking the sacred pipe again," Black Elk recalls this moment, "I told it all to them, and they said that I must perform the dog vision on earth to help the people, and because the people were discouraged and sad, I should do this with heyokas, who are sacred fools, doing everything wrong or backwards to make the people laugh."⁷⁹ Such a vision was a sign of both maturity and spiritual development, as this kind of calling did not come along very often. Moreover, it was a duty that Black Elk was compelled to fulfill. Lame Deer, another heyoka, would recount his own trepidation at receiving a message from the Wakinyan: "Having had that dream, getting up in the morning, at once I would hear this noise in the ground, just under my feet, that rumble of thunder. I'd know that before the day ends that thunder will come through and hit me, unless I perform the dream."⁸⁰ Only after Black Elk and Lame Deer acted out their respective visions in a public ceremony could they honor the Wakinyan and begin serving the people in their new roles. After doing this, they even had the power of the thunderbirds to call upon. Such a power could certainly be useful, not only for amusing the people, but also when going to war, which is corroborated in Lone Man's account, as recorded by Densmore:

Before the riders in the cloud went away they gave me a charm (*wo'tabe*), which I always carried. If I were in great danger and escaped alive I attributed it to the charm and sang a song in its honor. The song relates to the swallow whose flying precedes a thunderstorm. When I sang the song of my charm I fastened the skin of a swallow on my head. This bird is so closely related to the thunderbird that the thunderbird is honored by its use. The action of a swallow is very agile. The greatest aid to a warrior is a good horse, and what a warrior desires most for his horse is that it may be as swift as the swallow in dodging the enemy in direct flight. For this reason my song is in honor of the swallow as well as of my charm.⁸¹

Not all visions, however, lend themselves to clear interpretations. In the vision Black Elk described in *The Sacred Pipe*, the meaning was more ambiguous, despite the obvious gravity of what had occurred. The vision seeker was told that he should keep Wakan Tanka in mind and that he must be attentive to the signs of Wakan Tanka. "If he does this always," the holy man states, "he will become wise and a leader of his people." However, the kind of knowledge that will be attained and the kind of leader this person will become are yet to be determined. In this manner, he is like many of us who only have a hint of our true calling. Unlike most of us, the vision seeker is pursuing his place in the world with the support of relatives, his *tiospaye*, who earnestly believe in the power and relevance of the vision. As the holy man proclaims:

This young man who has cried for a vision for the first time, may perhaps become *wakan*; if he walks with his mind and heart attentive to *Wakan-Tanka* and His Powers, as he has been instructed, he will certainly travel upon the red path which leads to goodness and holiness. But he must cry for a vision a second time, and this time the bad spirits may tempt him, but if he is really a chosen one, he will stand firmly and will conquer all distracting thoughts and will become purified from all that is not good. Then he may receive some great vision that will bring strength to the nation.⁸²

The ultimate proof of whether or not he is a "chosen one" will come later when the vision seeker, with his vision attained, will be expected to test his claim to power. For Black Elk, the test came when he was called on to enact a curing ritual. Specifically, a man named Cuts-to-Pieces asked him to help with his son, who was dying. "I thought about what I had to do," Black Elk recounts, "and I was afraid, because I had never cured anybody yet with my power. . . . I prayed hard for help."⁸³ Black Elk then gives a poignant and vivid description of his first cure, which can be seen at one level to be an interpretation of his visions. At another level, according to DeMallie, Black Elk "followed the common procedures, which he had seen used by other medicine men, and which had been used on him during his illness at the time of his great vision."⁸⁴ What matters most in the end though is whether or not a ritual "works." "Next day," after Black Elk had completed a very arduous healing ceremony, "Cuts-to-Pieces came and told me that his little boy was feeling better and was sitting up and could eat something again. In four days he could walk around. He got well and lived to be thirty years old." Not only did Black Elk prove himself to Cuts-to-Pieces, but he also received confirmation from the people who heard about his cu-

rative powers. "When the people heard about how the little boy was cured, many came to me for help, and I was busy most of the time."⁸⁵

A vision, then, is more than a way of looking at the world; it is also a way of being-in-the-world. For a vision, in addition to expressing a people's worldview, also defines one's responsibility within that world. Albers and Parker observe: "From the vantage point of the individual, the vision may be regarded as a mechanism for identity formation, serving to legitimate his actions and status in the community, providing motivation and initiative to channel his behavior in socially approved directions [e.g., being a warrior or medicine man], and raising his confidence sufficiently for the assumption of valued social positions."⁸⁶ At the root of the vision, though, is humility. It is not a matter of gaining power for its own sake, but of needing power and using it responsibly because one is ultimately powerless.

In conclusion, this analysis of the Lakota hanbleceya demonstrates that the visionary experience is determined not only by the ritual actions the vision seeker performs, but also by a sense of self that is connected to a language, kinship system, sacred history, and homeland held in common with others. The implications of this analysis are twofold. First, as an expression of communal values, one cannot meaningfully participate in the Lakota hanbleceya unless one is a Lakota. The validity of this claim is supported by the observation that there are a variety of indigenous nations that have a vision quest tradition, and each is regarded as the sole provenance of each respective nation, not as an appropriation of the Lakota ritual. Second, the hanbleceya expresses a connection to place that is inextricable by either law or force. This is the case even if the majority of Lakotas do not practice the hanbleceya.⁸⁷ As long as there are Lakotas, the hanbleceya will always be a part of their heritage, meaning that the hanbleceya—and all that it symbolizes—is theirs to inherit.

N O T E S

The author would like to thank the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities Campus, for awarding him a McKnight Summer Fellowship, which made the research for this essay possible.

- 1 See Vine Deloria Jr., "Philosophy and the Tribal Peoples," in *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*, ed. Anne Waters (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003). Deloria observes, about the efforts that American Indians trained in graduate philosophy programs are making toward gaining acceptance in main-

stream philosophy departments: "This last bastion of white male supremacy does not admit members easily and the roadblocks ahead are of such magnitude that it is doubtful that very much will be accomplished" (3).

- 2 As the Lakota reviewer of this article, Lydia Whirlwind Soldier, poignantly states, "One major contribution to the inaccuracies is the translation by non-Lakota who do not understand the nuances and deep culture of the Lakota. They can only translate

what they understand from the surface culture, and then through their own experience and worldview." Whirlwind Soldier (Sicangu Lakota) is the Indian studies coordinator for the Todd County School District, South Dakota.

- 3 Such an approach entails reading these works critically. Just because a Lakota name may be attached to a given work does not necessarily mean that we must accept everything therein as accurate or appropriate expressions of Lakota philosophy. Nevertheless, turning to such works will enable us to engage more fully in a dialogue with Lakota sources, as opposed to relying on non-Lakota "experts."
- 4 As the reader proceeds through this essay, she or he will notice that by "Lakota" I also include Dakota intellectuals as well, such as Ella Deloria. The justification for this is based on the observation that, whatever regional differences there are between Lakota and Dakota communities, such as dialect and environment, they both speak of the same customs and beliefs in a mutually understandable language. After all, as Neil McKay, University of Minnesota professor of American Indian studies and director of the Dakota Language Society, states in an e-mail correspondence to the author: "The term used to address all of the Lakota and Dakota is the Oceti Sakowin or Seven council fires. In English, the Sioux nation. There are some of us who, when we say Dakota or Lakota, we mean all of us, the Oceti Sakowin."
- 5 See "Lakota Dakota Bibliography," <http://puffin.creighton.edu/lakota/biblio.html>. Rev. Raymond A. Bucko maintains this nearly exhaustive site on behalf of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Creighton University.
- 6 At the same time, the vision quest is not a time machine. Although the vision quest may reconnect one with the earth, sacred beings, and timeless Lakota values, the purpose of going on a vision quest is ineluctably tied to one's historical situation. Whereas before, for example, one may have sought a vision before going to do battle with the Crow, today a young man may do a vision quest before being inducted into the U.S. Army. (See also note 87.)
- 7 This represents one of the dangers of putting Lakota rituals into print—they tend to ossify in the mind of the reader. Lakota "rituals" are not rituals in the same sense as, say, the Catholic mass, in which each priest is bound by a set of prescribed rules. As Whirlwind Soldier adroitly explains, "Each medicine person has their own way of performing a ceremony—the way it is given to them in a vision quest. There are basic methods used in ceremony but the ceremonies are not in a prescribed form. This means that there are no rules or prescribed ways of having a ceremony" (in her review of this article).
- 8 See Black Elk, *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). In the foreword, written by Neihardt's widow, Hilda Neihardt Petri, she assesses the value of DeMallie's work with respect to *Black Elk Speaks*, stating: "*The Sixth Grandfather* may well guide the reader to a realization that at first blush seems deceptively simple: *Black Elk Speaks* is authentic; it does convey with faithful sincerity Black Elk's message. But in presenting this message to the reader, Neihardt created a work of art, and true art in all its forms is an intensification and greatly clarified form of communication" (xviii).

- 9 There are many scholars, of course, who argue that *Black Elk Speaks* should not be used as a resource at all. This wave of criticism was largely instigated by *The Sixth Grandfather* in which one could read a vastly different version of the account given in *Black Elk Speaks*. One of the most important factors to come out of this is the acknowledgment of Black Elk's relationship with the Catholic Church. Despite the fact that many Lakota—not to mention American Indians in general—converted to Christianity during the Assimilation Period, Black Elk's hitherto "unknown" life as a Catholic catechist caused many to question the authenticity of the Black Elk narratives. Michael Steltenkamp further exacerbated this debate when he wrote an account of Black Elk's catechist years in *Black Elk: Holy Man of the Oglala* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993). See also William Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens," *Social Text* 24 (1990): 43–56. Powers criticizes *Black Elk Speaks* not because Black Elk the man is a fraud, which Powers assures us he is not, but because there has been a slew of works, beginning with John Neihardt's editorial decisions, that have only served to "obscure Lakota religion rather than explain it" (43).
- 10 See *The Black Elk Reader*, ed. Clyde Holler (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2000). This anthology demonstrates the extent to which the Black Elk narratives have become a vital part of contemporary American Indian studies scholarship.
- 11 Vine Deloria Jr., "Introduction to *Black Elk Speaks*," in *For This Land: Writings on Religion in America* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 232–33.
- 12 See Powers, "When Black Elk Speaks, Everybody Listens."
- Powers advises against using *Black Elk Speaks* altogether because he sees it as a misrepresentation of Lakota culture and history. This is only true if we point to Neihardt's omission of Black Elk's conversion to Catholicism, which is surely integral to understanding Black Elk the man. However, as Whirlwind Soldier stated: "*Black Elk Speaks* is the most authoritative account of Lakota 'religion' because the information is from a Lakota who lived, practiced and experienced Lakota culture. There is some controversy over the ways in which Christianity influenced his story, but his vision occurred before white contact when he was only nine years old. He was raised and lived the Lakota way of life and did spend maybe half his life as a Christian" (in her review of this article).
- 13 By the time *Black Elk Speaks* was first published in 1932, the reformist movement, as exemplified by groups like the Indian Rights Association, the Society of American Indians, and the American Indian Defense Association, was finally making headway with alleviating the reservations of an authoritarian Bureau of Indian Affairs. The most obvious sign of these changes was in the 1928 Meriam Report.
- 14 See Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880–1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- 15 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, As Told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow)* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 43.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 17 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 59.

- 18 Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 157.
- 19 Raymond J. DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," in *Sioux Indian Religion*, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 34.
- 20 Vine Deloria Jr., foreword to *The Dream Seekers*, by Lee Irwin (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), viii.
- 21 Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 206.
- 22 "Wakan Tanka" has too often been translated as "God," as if the Lakota and Christian concepts were isomorphic. Eugene Buechel, for example, in his otherwise useful *A Dictionary of the Teton Dakota Sioux Language* (Pine Ridge, SD: Red Cloud Indian School, Holy Rosary Mission, 1970), perpetuates this misconception by translating "Wakantanka" as "God, the Creator of all things, the Great Spirit." James R. Walker, for his part, had a sense that such a translation was incorrect, even though his Lakota informants kept making that connection. He attributed the supposed errors of the latter to their being young. Walker, in a letter to Clark Wissler dated March 20, 1912, states, "I now find that at the present time, to the younger generation, this term [Wakan Tanka] expresses a concept of Jehova while to the older Indians it expresses a concept of the being that in former times they titled *Taku Skanskan*, and in still older times, in the language of the shamans, was simply *Skán*." Whirlwind Soldier corroborates Walker's analysis when she says, "We do not believe in a god that is in the image of man. . . . Everything comes from the energy of the universe, this is the closest thing to God that we can imagine" (in her review of this article).
- 23 Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, 193.
- 24 Lee Irwin, *The Dream Seekers: Native American Visionary Traditions of the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 18. Irwin's statement, however, is not as self-evident as he makes it appear. As Whirlwind Soldier asserts: "The world as dreamed and the world as lived are known by the Lakota to be completely different realms; there is a distinct separation. The dreamed world is where visions are sought, a place where life goals are established. The lived world is a place where goals are realized" (in her review of this article).
- 25 James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 85.
- 26 While we should always remember that the Lakota oral tradition continues today, making the Lakota community the most appropriate source for their own stories, the most common source among scholars is the work of James R. Walker. Walker was the government physician at Pine Ridge from 1896 to 1914, and took it upon himself to preserve a record of Lakota culture and history, including an account of origin stories, which he collected with the collaboration of George Sword, Left Heron, Bad Wound, Little Wound, No Flesh, and Thomas Tyon. See James R. Walker, *Lakota Myth*, ed. Elaine A. Jahner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).
- 27 James R. Walker, *The Sons of the Wind: The Sacred Stories of the Lakota*, ed. D. M. Dooling (New York: Parabola Books, 1984), 23–27.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 121.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 122.

- 30 See *ibid.*
- 31 Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, 42, 43.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 34 Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 175–76; emphasis in original.
- 35 DeMallie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," 34.
- 36 Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 60.
- 37 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 104.
- 38 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux*, ed. Joseph Epes Brown (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), 44. Brown's translation of *hanbleceya* is generally regarded by Lakota language specialists as peculiar and ultimately incorrect. Although Brown may have been searching for the right English word for capturing what he saw as an emphasis by Black Elk on weeping and humility, the term "lamenting" misleads the reader into thinking that Black Elk is grieving or even atoning for something, which is not the case.
- 39 Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 157.
- 40 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 44.
- 41 Beyond addressing the concerns of adolescence, William K. Powers, in *Oglala Religion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), observed that there were plenty of other reasons for embarking on such an endeavor. First, it could "help prophesy the outcome of a hunting or war expedition." Second, one may do a vision quest whenever an individual feels there is a genuine motivation for doing so (91). Black Elk, in turn, informs us that such personal reasons include preparing oneself for the Sun Dance, praying for the health of a sick relative, or showing thanks for a blessing received. "But perhaps the most important reason," Black Elk proclaims, "is that it helps us to realize our oneness with all things, to know that all things are our relatives" (46).
- 42 Ella Deloria, in *Speaking of Indians*, points out that the Lakota do not limit their notion of family to simply a "father-mother-child unit." On the contrary, "every Lakota exists within a *tiyospaye*, which denotes a group of families, bound together by blood and marriage ties, that lived side by side in the camp-circle" (40).
- 43 Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, 39.
- 44 See Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963). Erikson makes an interesting observation about the "Sioux" and their method of handling potentially "deviant" behavior, stating: "The Sioux, like other primitives, used the dream for the guidance of the strong as well as for the prevention of anarchic deviation. But they did not wait for adult dreams to take care of faulty developments; the adolescent Sioux would go out and seek dreams, or rather visions, while there was still time to decide on a life plan" (150). Aside from the unfortunate remark about the Lakota/Dakota peoples being "primitives," Erikson does go on to appreciate how the vision quest is a more effective way of treating so-called deviant behavior by basically doing away with the notion of deviant behavior in the first place. In fact, it may be because Western society thinks in terms of deviant versus normal (which may be just a new way of saying sin versus virtue) that it has a problem with socially disruptive behavior, especially among its young. See

- also Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, 195.
- 45 Raymond A. Bucko, *The Lakota Ritual of the Sweat Lodge: History and Contemporary Practice* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 54.
- 46 Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 83–84. As William K. Powers points out in *Sacred Language: The Nature of Supernatural Discourse in Lakota* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), the word *ni* is not easily defined. Along with *sicun*, *tun*, and *nagi*, the notion of *ni* is often described as “constituting a belief in four souls, or at least, four aspects of one’s soul.” Powers argues that this is inadequate, not only because of the ethnocentric value placed on “soul” as a criterion for validity, but also because the Lakota concepts describe a life process, rather than static elements. To make the Lakota concepts clearer, Powers makes an analogy between the four Lakota words and creating a fire, in which the *tun* is the tinder, the *sicun* is the spark, the *ni* is the flame, and the *nagi* is the smoke (134–36). In turn, we may say that the tinder is the body, the spark is the breath of life, the fire is the conscious mind, and the smoke is one’s ghost.
- 47 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 106.
- 48 Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 85.
- 49 In *The Sacred Pipe*, Black Elk actually stipulates that the assistants move on to set the pole in the “east.” But since the west was the “first” direction founded by the Four Winds, it would stand to reason that the ritual pacing between the four poles should begin with the western pole. So why does Black Elk start with the eastern pole? It may very well be that Black Elk was being true to his *heyoka* calling, and may have intentionally told Neihardt the opposite to what a non-*heyoka* account would have said.
- 50 Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 85.
- 51 Powers, *Oglala Religion*, 92.
- 52 Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, 85, 86.
- 53 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 57–58.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 58.
- 55 Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*, 14.
- 56 Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 59.
- 57 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 119.
- 58 Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 59.
- 59 Vine Deloria Jr. and Sarah Olden, *Singing for a Spirit: A Portrait of the Dakota Sioux* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 1999), 203.
- 60 John (Fire) Lame Deer, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, ed. Richard Erdoes (New York: Simon Schuster, 1972), 15.
- 61 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 107.
- 62 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 182.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 64 See Beatrice Medicine, “Indian Women and the Renaissance of Traditional Religion,” in *Learning to Be an Anthropologist and Remaining Native: Selected Writings* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001). Medicine argues that the intent of ritual participants is even more important when done in a more complex modern world, stating: “The ritual context is an important one in which to understand individual motivation. We must ask why an individual participates in a naming ceremony or a *bunka* ceremony or a *hanbleceya* (vision quest). Is he doing this for the good of the *tiyospaye*, or does he feel he needs to do this in order to be recognized as a person? Is participation in these ceremonies a sincere attempt to change a person’s life-style, or is it merely a

- sign or ethnic marker?" (166). Medicine then postulates the reason for such pressing questions a little further on: "It is important to understand individuals' reasons for participating in ceremonies if we wish to chart the direction in which our society will be going" (167).
- 65 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 114.
- 66 Ibid., 114. Frances Densmore corroborates this in *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*: "Dreams were sought by the Sioux, but it was recognized that the dream would correspond to the character of the man" (157).
- 67 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 115.
- 68 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 62.
- 69 Today in English this place is called Harney Peak.
- 70 See Walker, *The Sons of the Wind*.
- 71 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 64.
- 72 Irwin, *The Dream Seekers*, 121.
- 73 Joseph Epes Brown, *Animals of the Soul: Sacred Animals of the Oglala Sioux* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992), 56.
- 74 Ella Deloria, *Speaking of Indians*, 60.
- 75 Julian Rice, "Akicita of the Thunder," in *The Black Elk Reader*, ed. Clyde Holler (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 60. See also by the same author, *Black Elk's Story: Distinguishing Its Lakota Purpose* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).
- 76 DeMaillie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," 27.
- 77 Patricia Albers and Seymour Parker, "The Plains Vision Experience: A Study of Power and Privilege," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 27 (Autumn 1971): 206.
- 78 Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 157.
- 79 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 187.
- 80 Lame Deer, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, 242. Frances Densmore says of the Heyoka ceremony that it "was a ceremony of public humiliation in which the man who had been selected by the thunderbirds to receive a manifestation of their presence in a dream voluntarily exposed himself to the ridicule of the lowest element in the tribe. . . . The superficial and unthinking heaped their scorn and derision upon him, but the wise of the tribe understood that, to the end of his life, that man could command the powers of the sky to help him in his undertakings" (*Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 158).
- 81 Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music and Culture*, 161.
- 82 Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe*, 66.
- 83 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 198.
- 84 Raymond J. DeMaillie, "Lakota Belief and Ritual in the Nineteenth Century," 39.
- 85 Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks*, 203.
- 86 Abers and Parker, "The Plains Vision Experience," 207.
- 87 The changing status of the vision quest can be seen in the different accounts of three succeeding generations of Lakota thinkers, beginning with Black Elk. When the already aged holy man reflected on his pre-reservation life for Brown, he claimed: "Every man can cry for a vision, or 'lament', and in the old days we all—men and women—'lamented' all the time" (44). Ella Deloria, in *Speaking of Indians*, observed about the Dakotas on the Standing Rock reservation, in a series of lectures she gave during the 1940s, that "Personally, I have never had a chance to question any but Christian Dakotas" (50). Deloria nevertheless goes on to emphasize that these very same Christian Dakotas

were quite reverential toward their pre-Christian Lakota traditions. Be that as it may, the fact that Lakota/Dakota religion was actively repressed for generations as a consequence of U.S. federal policy may have led Deloria to conclude, "Not every Dakota sought a vision; the majority did not" (60). Lastly, Beatrice Medi-

cine notes, in an essay she published in 1987 regarding alcoholism: "Lakota males have not actively pursued vision quests since belief systems were suppressed in 1882. (There have been attempts at hanbleceya since 1960, but the new experiences are cloaked in secrecy by most participants)" (214).