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Spring 2011  
Exploring the Humanities  
Discussion Questions for *Black Elk Speaks*

**I. Setting the Context**

1. What are the first words that come to your mind when you hear the word *Indian*?
2. Are you Indian? What do you know about your Indian ancestors?
3. What are some common stereotypes of American Indians? What are common stereotypes of several other groups of people, including whites?
4. To what extent has Hollywood influenced mainstream public opinion on what an Indian is, how he dresses, acts, and speaks?
5. What's the relationship between Native American identity and American identity? To what extent is it important for non-Native Americans to know about Native American traditions and history? Why?
6. When was Black Elk born? When did he die?
7. Explain the concept of Manifest Destiny. How does it apply to U.S. territorial expansion in the 1800s?
8. What was the Homestead Act of 1862? What was its general effect on traditionally nomadic groups of Indians?
9. What are some tribes or nations often grouped under the category of Northern Plains Indians? Do these tribes or nations share identical cultures?
10. What was the Dawes Act of 1887?
11. What was the upshot of the U.S. Government's 1868 Treaty with the Lakota? The Allison Commission to obtain the Black Hills? The 1882 prohibition of the practice of American Indian religions by the US Secretary of the Interior?
12. Black Elk declares himself a member of the "Lakota [Sioux] of the Oglala Band." What are the major groups under the Sioux Nation? What are the seven groups under the Lakota?
13. Geographically, in what area of the U.S. do the Lakota Sioux live during Black Elk's lifetime? How does this change during Black Elk's narrative?
14. What are the seven sacred Lakota rites?

**II. Approaching the text**

1. Does anything strike you funny about the cover of the book, when you examine the title and author?
2. Who was John Neihardt? What were his major objectives in interviewing Black Elk?
3. Read Raymond DeMallie's article *John G. Neihardt and Nicholas Black Elk* in the back of the book. What are some of the controversies surrounding *Black Elk Speaks*? What camp do you fall into?
4. What is a biography? An autobiography? Oral history? Were these traditional forms of cultural expression for American Indians or Europeans in the 1800s? Explain. Critic

Herta Wong argues that “the pictographic writing of the Sioux and other Plains tribes tended, like the oral tradition, to tell stories about the self which might be more accurately described as ‘communo-bio-oratory’ (community-life-speaking) rather than ‘auto-bio-graphical’ (self-life-writing)....” Analyze what she means by this in the context of *Black Elk Speaks*.

5. What aspects of Black Elk’s (literary) character does Neihardt emphasize? How does Black Elk come across to you as a human being?
6. Based on the annotations in the book, do all of the words in the text come straight from Black Elk’s mouth? Explain. Does your estimation of the book change as a result of its multiple-authorship?

### III. Black Elk’s Teachings

#### 1. The Offering of the Pipe: Chap 1

- a. Why does Black Elk begin with an offering of the pipe? What does the pipe symbolize according to Lakota tradition? Does this invocation remind you of others you’ve read or heard that come at the beginning of a story? Which?
- b. Summarize the story of White Buffalo Woman included on pages 2-3.

#### 2. Early Boyhood: Chap 2

- a. What is Black Elk’s boyhood like? What are several traditional, tribal ways of life he describes?
- b. What are some of the conflicts that are immediately established?
- c. Give examples of metaphor or other figurative language.

#### 3. The Great Vision: Chap 3

- a. Why does Black Elk receive the vision? How old is he at the time?
- b. What is the meaning of vision in this context?
- c. How would Joseph Campbell analyze Black Elk and his vision according to his ideas of the heroic sequence of action?
- d. What are the major components of the vision? (Draw, map, or plot it out; also, refer to Standing Bear’s drawings at the back of the book.)
- e. What seems to be the purpose of the Grandfathers’ council that Black Elk attends? What do the Grandfathers want to teach him?
- f. Consider the recurrence of the hoop in Black Elk’s vision. What does it symbolize for the Sioux?
- g. How does Black Elk’s vision compare to the motifs present in the Ghost Dance and Wovoka’s vision?

#### 4. The Bison Hunt: Chap 4

- a. What role did (do) bison and buffalo play in traditional Lakota culture?
- b. How did the U.S. government use the killing of bison against American Indians? How did Buffalo Bill Cody come by his name?

- c. What seems to be the relationship between humans and the natural world, according to Lakota tradition as related in *Black Elk Speaks*? How does this dynamic compare to that of mainstream non-Native American society of the 1800s and of 2011?
  
5. At the Soldiers' Town: Chap 5
  - a. Where is Soldiers' Town?
  - b. Who is Crazy Horse? Why doesn't he go to Soldiers' Town?
  - c. Who is Red Cloud?
  
6. High Horse's Courting: Chap 6
  - a. When and how were horses introduced in the "New World"?
  - b. What role do horses play in Lakota culture as described by Black Elk?
  - c. Describe High Horse's courting. What seems to be the relationship between the Lakota and the Crow?
  
7. Wasichus in the Hills: Chap 7
  - a. Where are the Black Hills? What seems to be their significance to the Lakota? And to the Wasichus?
  - b. Who is Pahuska or Long Hair?
  - c. Is the mining described here legal or illegal, according to the 1868 treaty?
  - d. Who are Red Cloud's "Hangs-Around-The-Fort" people? (Also translated as "lives with his wife's relatives" or "loafers.") What is the nature of the tension between the "loafers" and others such as Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull?
  - e. Who is the Grandfather at Washington? What does he want, according to the council?
  - f. How did Crazy Horse get his name?
  - g. Describe the relationship between Black Elk and Crazy Horse.
  - h. Describe the actions of the army under the direction of Brigadier General George Crook as described at the end of the chapter.
  
8. The Fight with Three Stars: Chap 8
  - a. What decision does Black Elk's father make? Why? What would you have done in that situation?
  - b. Summarize Neihardt's description of the sun dance. Why was it held in the Moon of Fatness (June)?
  
9. The Rubbing Out of Long Hair: Chap 9
  - a. How does this account of The Battle at Little Bighorn compare to others you've read or heard?

- b. What are the significant aspects of Lakota warfare, as described here? What role do the women seem to play in this context? What, if any, aspects of war seem universal?
  - c. What is a kill dance? What role does song play in this ceremony?
10. Walking the Black Road: Chap 10
  - a. Per Black Elk's vision, what do the Black and Red Roads symbolize?
  - b. Where has Sitting Bull gone? Why are the people scattering in the Moon of Black Cherries?
  - c. Who is American Horse? What is his fate?
  - d. What seem to be the U.S. Government's overall goals in its campaigns against the Lakota and Plains Indians at this point? What are the various tactics it uses, as evidenced by this and other chapters, as well as outside research? Does the U.S. Government honor the stipulation of the 1868 treaty that future land cessions would require the signatures of three-fourths of the adult Lakota males?
  - e. Describe living conditions at this point according to Black Elk. What compounds the Indians' problems with the U.S. Government?
11. The Killing of Crazy Horse: Chap 11
  - a. What are the circumstances leading up to Crazy Horse's murder? (See annotations on page 111.)
  - b. How does the army convince Crazy Horse to go to Soldiers' Town? Do the soldiers keep their word?
  - c. What is the effect of Crazy Horse's murder on his people?
12. Grandmother's Land: Chap 12
  - a. Where is Grandmother's Land? Explain the name.
  - b. Why do Black Elk and the others go there? How do they find life there?
  - c. Does Black Elk continue to experience visions?
13. The Compelling Fear: Chap 13
  - a. What aspects of traditional, tribal life does the U.S. Government prohibit the Lakota (and others) from practicing? Provide specific examples.
  - b. Why is Black Elk afraid? What do his parents do to help him?
14. The Horse Dance: Chap 14
  - a. What are the significant rituals involved in the Horse Dance? What is the purpose of this dance? How does the community seem to feel afterwards?
15. The Dog Vision: Chap 15
  - a. What is described at the outset of the chapter?
  - b. At this point, where are the Lakota prisoners of war sent?

- c. What is an Indian reservation? What seems to be its purpose? Have you lived on or visited one? What was it like?
- d. Describe the dog vision. What is the symbolic value of the dog?
- e. What is the meaning of this vision for Black Elk?

16. Heyoka Ceremony: Chap 16

- a. What does heyoka mean? Again, what seems to be the symbolic value of the dog? What becomes of the dog at the end?
- b. What seems to be the role of heyoka in this ceremony? And what role does this ceremony seem to play within the Lakota culture?

17. The First Cure: Chap 17

- a. How old is Black Elk when he performs his first cure?
- b. Explain the significance of the hoop for the Lakota. What shape are the homes the Wasichu build for the Lakota?
- c. What do Black Elk and One Side go looking for? Why is it so important?
- d. Whom does Black Elk cure? What does he ask Cuts-to-Pieces to do?
- e. Describe the cure in its different stages.
- f. What is Black Elk's material payment?

18. The Powers of the Bison and the Elk: Chap 18

- a. According to Lakota beliefs, what must a man do before he can use the power of his vision?
- b. How does Black Elk explain the source of his power?
- c. Why does Black Elk feel conflicted about "giving away his vision"?
- d. Describe the ceremony and its meaning.
- e. On page 166, Neihardt writes: "It is from understanding that power comes; and the power in the ceremony was in understanding what it meant; for nothing can live well except in a manner that is suited to the way the sacred Power of the World lives and moves." Does this quotation hold universal appeal, or do you see it as strictly a Lakota belief?
- f. What is a rite of passage? Are you part of a culture that celebrates certain rites of passage? If so, what are they?
- g. What is the symbolic power of elk and bison in Lakota tradition?

19. Across the Big Water: Chap 19

- a. What are the employment options for the Lakota? What hardships do they face on the reservations?
- b. Who is Buffalo Bill (William F. Cody)? How did he acquire his name?
- c. Why does Black Elk decide to see "the great world of the Wasichu"?
- d. How does Black Elk feel about leaving his homeland?
- e. What is the Buffalo Bill Wild West show?

20. The Spirit Journey: Chap 20

- a. Why doesn't Black Elk sail back to his home at the beginning of the chapter? What does he do?
- b. Analyze the spirit journey *Black Elk* takes.
- c. How does he feel about his return at the end of the chapter? What has transpired since he's been gone? By how much was the Great Sioux Reservation reduced with the 1889 treaty?

21. The Messiah: Chap 21

- a. What do you associate with the word Messiah? What is the definition of this word? (Black Elk uses the word *Wanikhiya* or One Who Makes Live.)
- b. In what state are the Lakota people in the late 1880s? Is this a community in crisis?
- c. Who is Jack Wilson or Wovoka?
- d. What is syncretism?
- e. According to Wovoka, what will happen when *Wanikhiya* returns?
- f. At first, what does Black Elk think about the Ghost-Dance religion?

22. Visions of the Other World: Chap 22

- a. Describe the different aspects of the Ghost Dance as described here.
- b. Was the Ghost Dance in part an effort to revitalize traditional Indian cultures? Why, or why not?
- c. Why do you think the Secretary of the Interior condemned the practice of American Indian religions in 1882?

23. Bad Trouble Coming: Chap 23

- a. How widespread was the Ghost Dance by the early 1890s?
- b. Why does the U.S. Government begin to amass troops at this time in the Pine Ridge and Wounded Knee areas? What makes them nervous about the Ghost Dance? What is ironic about its determination to stamp out the Ghost-Dance religion?

24. The Butchering at Wounded Knee: Chap 24

- a. What types of weapons does the Seventh Cavalry bring to Wounded Knee?
- b. How does Black Elk prepare himself for war?
- c. How many were killed at Wounded Knee? Were they male warriors and soldiers only?
- d. Were the Indian dead buried in accordance with traditional ritual?

25. The End of the Dream: Chap 25

- a. Why is Wounded Knee considered such a significant historical incident?
- b. According to Neihardt's summary, how does Black Elk feel at the bitter end?

- c. Explain the debate over the title given to the “incident” at Wounded Knee. Was it a battle? A massacre? A butchering?

26. Neihardt’s Postscript

- a. Where does Black Elk want to go after the conclusion of the narrative?
- b. What is the significance of Harney Peak?
- c. What kind of ceremony does Black Elk perform?
- d. Does the ceremony conclude on a positive note? Why, in some ways, has the narrative come full circle?

**IV. Further reflections.**

1. What happened at Wounded Knee in the 1970s?
2. What is the American Indian Movement?
3. Do you consider the U.S. Government’s campaign against the Lakota and other American Indians as genocide? Why, or why not?
4. What are at least three specific things you have learned from reading this book?
5. Would you consider *Black Elk Speaks* primarily a spiritual work? Why, or why not?

## Vocabulary

1. Wasichu
2. Count coup
3. Sweat bath (*inipi*)
4. *tipi*
5. Spirit or other world
6. Great spirit (*Wakan Tanka*)
7. *akíchita*
8. *Heyoka*
9. Sun Dance
10. Vision quest (crying for a vision or *hanblecheyapi*)
11. Thunder beings
12. Wovoka
13. Ghost Dance
14. Shaman
15. Buffalo Bill's Wild West show
16. Crazy Horse
17. Sitting Bull
18. John Neihardt
19. Assimilation (assimilationists)
20. Battle of Big Horn
21. The Massacre at Wounded Knee
22. Wounded Knee II
23. The American Indian Movement (AIM)