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## A Ghostly Splendor: John G. Neihardt's Spiritual Preparation for Entry into Black Elk's World

REECE PENDLETON

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*As a great fish swims between the banks of a river as it likes, so does the shining Self move between the states of dreaming and waking.*

— *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*

In March 1932, John G. Neihardt, poet laureate of Nebraska, received an unusual thank you letter from a woman in New York City. It began, "Dear Mr. Neihardt, I have just finished 'Black Elk Speaks.' It makes me happy and sad all at once—sad for the days that are gone, and glad that a white man really lives who can enter into a right understanding of a Dakota's vision, and can translate it into so poetic a form."

The woman writing Neihardt was Ella Deloria, a linguist and ethnographer at Columbia University, who was also a Yankton Indian. She wrote movingly to Neihardt about how her father, Philip Deloria, a Yankton chief and son of a "medicine man," had abandoned his traditional Yankton life and become a Christian clergyman in order to help his people adjust to the social onslaught of the white world. Deloria was deeply impressed by Neihardt's ability to understand an important aspect of Native American spirituality in his book and present it so clearly to the outside world. She closed her letter by saying,

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I have in my texts collected for anthropological studies not a few examples of different people's visions. I find them very inspiring—but I never knew until now how their meaning could be expressed in such a way as to be understandable to people of such a material civilization as this.<sup>1</sup>

The book in question, *Black Elk Speaks*, had recently been published and was enjoying what would turn out to be a brief period of accolades from academics and book reviewers. The book was the result of a series of interviews conducted by John Neihardt in the spring of 1931 with Nicholas Black Elk, a sixty-five-year-old Oglala Sioux holy man. Neihardt, searching for material about the Native American Ghost Dance for an epic poem about the history of the American West, was told of Black Elk's existence, and, in August 1930, he drove to Black Elk's house in Manderson, South Dakota, to see what Black Elk could tell him about the events in question. Black Elk agreed to talk, and what transpired between the two men not only changed their lives but marked a seminal moment in the relationship between the Native American and white American cultures.

Neihardt soon realized that the old man had a remarkable story to tell, one that was worthy of a book in and of itself. Neihardt wrote to Black Elk several weeks later and asked him if he would be willing to meet again for a series of interviews that would culminate in a book about his life:

I feel that the whole story of your life ought to be written truthfully by somebody with the right feeling and understanding of your people and of their great history. . . . This book about you would be written in prose, and I would use as much of your language in it as possible. . . . I do feel that so much is known by you Indians that our white people do not know and should know, that I am very eager to write this book if you will help me. . . . I want to do this book because I want to tell the things that you and your friends know, and I can promise you that it will be an honest and loving book.<sup>2</sup>

Black Elk gladly consented, so Neihardt returned the following spring to begin the interviews for *Black Elk Speaks*.

The book would chronicle the key events of Black Elk's early life, from his stunning spiritual vision in early childhood, which gave him his power as a leader, prophet, and healer, to the collapse of that vision and the massacre of his people at Wounded

Knee in 1890. Central to Black Elk's story is the "Great Vision" which he received during a severe illness at the age of nine. In the vision, which comprises an entire chapter of the book, Black Elk is approached by two figures who come down from the clouds and escort him to a place in the sky where he meets the Six Grandfathers—the Siouan embodiment of the Six Powers of the world—who give him a prophetic vision of the Lakota nation's future.

Neihardt put aside the work on his epic poem for the time being, and began writing the book. He had to cull what he felt were the key aspects of Black Elk's story from the voluminous interview transcripts, weave these words into a coherent narrative, taking the poetic license to make additions where necessary, all the while preserving the essence and tone of Black Elk's story. Neihardt had great hopes for the project, as is reflected in a letter he wrote to Black Elk while he was at work on it. "I have to work hard on the book and be patient too," wrote Neihardt, "and I can do both with a strong heart because I know that the book is wise and good and that thousands of people will find good in it."<sup>3</sup>

Neihardt's belief that "thousands of people" would come to know Black Elk's story would prove to be true, but not in the two years that he had expected. Despite favorable reviews in many newspapers, the book was a commercial failure. Neihardt would have to wait almost four decades before *Black Elk Speaks* struck a chord with a large segment of the American people.

Since its re-publication in 1961, *Black Elk Speaks* has come to be regarded as an American religious classic. It has emerged as a standard introduction to Native American spirituality in many colleges across the country. Perhaps the most important effect of the book, though, has been, as Vine Deloria, Jr. has suggested, the one on "the contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own in the structure of universal reality. . . . They look [to the book] for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight and for affirmation of the continuing substance of tribal life, now badly eroded."<sup>4</sup>

So successful a work is *Black Elk Speaks* that many readers do not realize that the book is not a verbatim transcript of Black Elk's words but rather a creative oral and literary collaboration between two remarkable men. Some of the most moving passages of the book (including the beautiful opening paragraphs) are not Black Elk's words but Neihardt's. As one of Neihardt's biogra-

phers aptly put it, "Though Neihardt says that Black Elk spoke through him, it is equally correct to say that Neihardt speaks through Black Elk."<sup>5</sup> Neihardt himself stated that the book was "a work of art with two collaborators, the chief one being Black Elk."<sup>6</sup>

Numerous scholars have attributed the book's success to Neihardt's skill as a literary craftsman and to his insights as a poet. The fact that Neihardt was able to create a work that faithfully represented the spiritual journey of a Native American man, particularly at a time when most writing about Native Americans was still very much in the "savagist" tradition, does indeed testify to Neihardt's creative literary skills. But the issue of how a white man writing at this juncture in history was able to "cross over" into Black Elk's religious world and, as Ella Deloria put it, "enter into a right understanding" of his vision points to something about Neihardt that goes beyond his literary skills. The technical skills to create (or recreate) Black Elk's story are one thing; the spiritual insights that allowed Neihardt to do so with understanding and integrity are quite another. What were the spiritual and intellectual events in Neihardt's early life that prepared him for an openness to Black Elk's spiritual vision? Where did these insights come from and how did they develop? These are the central questions that I wish to explore in this paper.

I am aware of the continuing controversies surrounding the creation of *Black Elk Speaks*; of claims that Neihardt put words into Black Elk's mouth, as mentioned above, and that he deliberately avoided mentioning Black Elk's work as an active Roman Catholic catechist on the Pine Ridge Reservation at the time of the interviews.<sup>7</sup> Over the past decade, much of the scholarship on *Black Elk Speaks* has increasingly taken on a less favorable view of Neihardt's participation in the project. Perhaps the strongest indictment of Neihardt's participation has come from anthropologist William K. Powers. In an article published in 1990, Powers implied that Neihardt was little more than a literary huckster who was simply looking to make money from Black Elk's story and who, in *Black Elk Speaks*, created a romanticized and fraudulent portrait of Lakota religious life.<sup>8</sup>

Lost in the controversy, however, has been the subject of Neihardt's own religious experiences and how those experiences related to his encounter with Black Elk. This subject, though not new in Neihardt scholarship, has been neglected or too easily glossed over in much of the research and ensuing controversy

surrounding the creation of *Black Elk Speaks* over the past decade. By refocusing attention on Neihardt's early spiritual development, I also hope to show that Neihardt's motivations for writing *Black Elk Speaks* were more complex (and honorable) than the reasons stated by his critics.

John Gneisenau Neihardt, the descendant of German and Irish immigrants, was born on 8 January 1881 on a farm near Sharpsburg, Illinois. His father, Nicholas Neihardt, was a bright, well-read but restless man; in search of employment, he moved the family frequently. When John was ten, Nicholas abandoned the family, and John's mother, Alice Culler, who had been the steady breadwinner and caretaker all along, moved the family to Wayne, Nebraska, soon after the separation.

Neihardt grew up in a social setting that was conducive to both inquisitiveness and openness toward others. Neihardt remembered being aware, by the age of ten, of names like Darwin, Huxley, and Robert Ingersoll, thanks to his father, who shared his wide-ranging literary enthusiasms with Neihardt. John's teachers and elders recognized his bright mind and inquisitive character and encouraged him to pursue his interests whenever possible. The life of a struggling, interdependent Midwestern farm community created a society in which chauvinism and bigotry were uncommon. Neihardt recalled that one of his nearest neighbors in Nebraska was a Black family, and he remembered his grandmother vigorously defending Blacks when anyone spoke ill of them. "'Don't you tell me anything bad about the Negroes,' she would say, 'for I know too much, so I do; I know too much!'"<sup>9</sup>

Little is known about the religious background of Neihardt's immediate family. Except for stating that his grandmother was a "strictly pious woman," Neihardt made no mention in his autobiographies of his family's religious beliefs, and his biographers make no mention of them either. Neihardt's mother owned books by Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy and was, in fact, a Christian Scientist herself, although she did not appear to pass her religious convictions on to her children.<sup>10</sup>

Neihardt's social surroundings provided him with an atmosphere that fostered openness to the world and those in it, but, at the age of eleven, he experienced an event that would expand his horizons to an even greater degree. One afternoon, he was struck with a sudden illness. "It came upon me suddenly and with little or no warning," wrote Neihardt:

The world tottered and began to rotate. Then there was blackness.

When I came to, I was in bed, floating dizzily; and my Mother, grotesquely distorted above me, was holding something cold and wet on my forehead. I tried to speak to her, but she became someone I did not know and slowly dissolved.

Then I was flying face downward, with arms and hands thrust forward like a diver's. There was vastness—terribly empty save for a few lost stars, too dim and wearily remote ever to be reached. And there was dreadful speed, a speed so great that whatever laid beneath me—whether air or ether—turned hard and slick as glass.

I wanted to rest. I wanted to go home. But when I cried out in desperation, it seemed a great Voice filled the hollow vastness and drove me on. There was something dear to leave behind, something yonder to be overtaken. Faster! faster! faster!

Three times the dream recurred; and in the feverish intervals I held fast to my Mother, fearing to be alone again out there.

When I wakened in the morning, the world was still and the fever was gone.<sup>11</sup>

The dream would be the first of two key “mystical” experiences that would have a deep impact on Neihardt’s life. As time went on and the images stayed with him, Neihardt came to see the experience as something more, the start of what he called “dynamic patterns” that would recur throughout his life. The dream also became something of a calling for Neihardt, one that symbolized “the costly rewards of spiritual striving; the urgent obligation to give oneself away, to be lost in something impersonal and bigger than oneself; the conception of living as a process of progressive weaning.”<sup>12</sup> Neihardt referred to the voice in his dream as his “ghostly brother,” a presence that would serve as a constant reminder of his duty. The dream became the first in a series of patterns that would prepare him for a deep understanding of Black Elk’s vision thirty-eight years later. The immediate effect of Neihardt’s “calling,” however, was to prompt him to abandon his desire to become an inventor and turn his creative energies to poetry instead.

Not long after Neihardt’s dream, he entered one of the important dynamic patterns of his life, when he was hired by a local tombstone maker known as “Professor” Durrin to help with the



marble polishing in his shop. The Professor was an eccentric character who encouraged Neihardt's literary aspirations and introduced him to Vedantic philosophy. Neihardt's curiosity was piqued even more when a friend of the Professor's gave the youth a copy of the Upanishads. Whatever Christian teachings may have come his way as a child, none would galvanize Neihardt's spiritual impulses the way Vedantic religious thought did. Some years later, Neihardt would remark that "in my feverishly groping 'teens I had been far more powerfully moved by Vedantist conceptions than by any faith widely held in the Occident."<sup>13</sup>

The lifelong impact of the Upanishads on Neihardt was also reflected in a letter written to an acquaintance: "In my early teens," explained Neihardt, "I came under the influence of Vedanta philosophy. It was my natural way of looking at the world that drew me to this, for I see now that I was always the mystic, and this by no desire to be. . . . This has grown steadily upon me, and it is now my chief dependence, both for living and for working."<sup>14</sup> The philosophy contained in the Upanishads would suggest to Neihardt that there was something more to the world than the merely "visible" and that this "something more" was every bit as real as the visible world.

The Vedantic philosophies gave Neihardt a new and expanded framework through which to interpret his world and the many unusual experiences that he had throughout his life, beginning with his childhood flying dream. Among the special events in his early life were two near-death experiences; the way Neihardt interpreted one of these experiences reveals the influence of Vedantic thought. As Neihardt tells it, he slipped one day as he tried to grab the reins of a team of runaway horses and found himself hanging upside down, his face a few inches from the wagon wheel spokes. Thinking that he was about to die, Neihardt suddenly felt "an overwhelming sense of expanded being and clairvoyant awareness. . . . I could see my predicament and its many implications with vivid luminous clarity and complete acceptance; and somehow it was good."<sup>15</sup>

Neihardt obviously survived the experience, but the sense of expanded awareness at a moment near death was in keeping with the pattern established by his dream experience. "I know that such states may be caused by the injection of adrenaline into the bloodstream under great emotional stress," wrote Neihardt in his autobiography. "But is it not possible that such a state, so induced at the near approach to death, may reveal reality transcending our



common sense world? I have come to think so."<sup>16</sup> As Neihardt also related, this near-death experience would later yield to him a valuable insight into the torturous (and, for many uncomprehending whites at the time, seemingly barbaric) American Indian Sun Dance ceremony:

In feeling about for words to describe the [near-death] experience, I am reminded of what an old Sioux told me about his first sun dance. As he leaned against the torturing thong in his chest, dancing and praying, he said, the whole world went black, and he was lost in endless night. But he kept on dancing and praying; and all at once there was light everywhere, and he could see everything.

"And what *did* you see?" I asked.

"Everything," he said with a look of awe in his face—"Everything!"

Remembering my experience, I think I can feel what he meant but could not tell—and neither could I.<sup>17</sup>

All of the prolonged pain of the dance was seen by Neihardt as an attempt to induce the very same sense of transcendence that he and others had experienced at moments near death.

It was around this time that Neihardt also entered into what he called the "pattern of the Indian consciousness." "It was a new pattern in my experience," he wrote, "that, in large measure, was to condition my thinking and feeling about the world the remainder of my life."<sup>18</sup>

At a time when Neihardt was looking for extra income to supplement his budding literary career, he was approached by J.J. Elkin, a local Indian trader. Elkin hired Neihardt as a bookkeeper and stenographer in his office—a job that put him in regular contact with members of the Omaha Indian community. This exposure gave Neihardt a view of Native Americans that was very different from the commonly held one. "Reservation Indians," wrote Neihardt, "as I first saw them with no historical perspective and out of cultural context, seemed as little noble as they were red. It was two or three years before I came to know and respect the Omaha as an ancient people with a rich culture that was dying out with the old unreconstructed longhairs, to be remembered only as a matter of curious interest."<sup>19</sup> His experiences with the Omaha prompted Neihardt to begin writing the first of a series of stories that he referred to as his "Indian tales," stories woven out of a combination of stories told by the

reservation's old timers and Neihardt's own lively imagination. It was a method that would later aid Neihardt immensely as he put together Black Elk's story.

Sometime within the first couple of years of his marriage to Mona Martinsen in 1908, Neihardt experienced the second and, to my mind, perhaps the most important of his visionary experiences. While working in his garden one summer afternoon, Neihardt, out of the corner of his eye, noticed a peculiar activity occurring around a small syringa bush at the edge of the garden. When he looked directly at it, he saw that the bush

was becoming vibrantly alive with a colorless stuff like a diaphanous flame lacking heat. This oozed from glowing buds along the branches that kindled, glowing with the ghost of fire. Glimmering twig ends swelled with it, stretching outward and upward with a pulse-like motion into emptiness. There it traced what I seemed to know were experimental patterns of branches, twigs, and leaves, later to be realized in the green world of living matter. These shapes flourished briefly, only to fade and fall back, shuddering, into profound vacancy.

With divine persistence the tentative pattern making went on and on—flourishing, fading, falling back to stretch forth again and again, until some of the spectral shapes held fast; and more and more survived in triumph until the little bush burned tall in ghostly splendor.

Then I was leaning on the handle of my hoe and gazing vacantly at the ground.<sup>20</sup>

The experience, said Neihardt years later, "perplexed me [but] seemed to lift me and gave me a great feeling of wonder, and glory, and uplift. . . . Though what it was I don't know. And every time I think of it now, it gives me a happier feeling, a feeling of safety in the universe, as though everything's all right. . . . It was a very vivid experience."<sup>21</sup>

This incident, I would argue, is the second key event in Neihardt's preparation for an understanding of Black Elk's vision. More so than his childhood flying dream, the "burning bush" incident, as he referred to it, was a powerful realization of the central concepts in Neihardt's spiritual philosophy. No longer a child, and in perfect health, Neihardt experienced something that, in his words, "seemed somehow to point to the sort of conception Plato had, of the reality behind the appearances here in this world."<sup>22</sup> Most important, however, was the fact that the

experience would make Black Elk's account of his own spiritual visions quite real to Neihardt when the two spoke with one another several years later. When Black Elk, referring to the experience of his Great Vision, was to say to Neihardt, "This was not a dream—it actually happened,"<sup>23</sup> Neihardt would have no reason to doubt him. And why should he? It was very much in line with what Neihardt himself had experienced while standing wide awake in his garden.

Over the next decade, Neihardt would assemble his evolving spiritual and artistic philosophies into a coherent theory, which he then laid out in a series of popular lectures given in the mid 1920s. The lectures were published under the title *Poetic Values: Their Reality and Our Need of Them*. The lectures were Neihardt's response to a society that had, in his view, come to see scientific materialism as the only way to experience "Truth." Lost in the process, argued Neihardt, was that intangible aspect of life that was as real as anything in the material world but that constituted a vital Truth that was greater than any single scientific perspective. This Truth, Neihardt argued, was experienced and reflected in the creative impulses of human beings, an aspect of human life that he called the "creative dream."

The highest expression of this creative dream, suggested Neihardt, was most keenly realized in the arts. He felt that the truly great works of painting, sculpture, poetry, dance, and music could inspire in the participant the sense of expanded awareness that the Eastern spiritual traditions stressed. "We find," wrote Neihardt,

that at the moment when one experiences the power of any art at its maximum, there is a sense of exaltation, of expanded awareness, and the loss of one's habitual self. In its most intense form, the experience may be likened, in the words of [a] Brahmin friend, to the merging of a raindrop with the sea—losing its own limiting sphericity, but gaining the vaster identity of all water. The intensity of the experience will vary, of course, with the power of the artistic stimulus and the sensitiveness of the psychic equipment upon which it acts, so that some who sincerely care for the arts may never experience more than a pleasing sensation from even the greatest work of art; but always the tendency will be found to be in the direction indicated—toward the loss of self in a larger identity. And there will come in the higher reaches of that mood an ecstatic sense of freedom in a larger understanding, however brief; and this will be strangely colored with the sadness

of what we call beauty—that backward pull toward the familiar and the dear.<sup>24</sup>

Neihardt also took delight in pointing out that, of all the arts, music—perhaps the most universal form of human artistic creation—was the least subject to the kind of measurements cherished by the scientific mindset. Music, the most ethereal of human creations, has no measurable spatial dimensions the way a sculpture or a painting does and does not have to rely on discernible subject matter to sustain itself as a poem does, and yet it is the most popular of the arts. “But how could this be true,” asked Neihardt teasingly, “since we know, having been told by men far ‘smarter’ than we are, that the real is that which can be measured?”<sup>25</sup>

Neihardt reiterated the importance of this concept years later to his biographer, Lucile Aly:

Because of our dependence on the senses in this phase of existence, we are normally obsessed with the idea of quantity, and we tend to relate all our values to quantitative conceptions—length, breadth, thickness, weight are used as measuring sticks for that which cannot be measured in any quantitative sense. It has long been my belief . . . that the universe conceived in the qualitative sense corresponds to our conception of a spiritual universe which is, in so far as we are able to conceive it, the reality to which we are constantly adapting our lives without knowing that we are doing it. It is this attempt at adaptation that results in all that we regard as the higher values and the higher humanness in all aspects. When we say qualitative in this connection we are saying the same thing as when we say spiritual, because we do not understand either term and cannot wholly. We merely experience it. My *Poetic Values* deals with this conception.

As I remarked [there], mystics have always known this, or have been convinced that they knew it, and have acted upon it. It is their belief and has been mine most of my life that all power exercised by man grows out of this “Other”—the qualitative or spiritual universe. The self as we commonly conceive it is related to our conception of the world as material in the naïve sense, and it is only when the self is lost that the material conception of the universe fades away and the qualitative or spiritual takes over.<sup>26</sup>

*Poetic Values* shows that, by the mid-1920s, Neihardt had not only arrived at a clearly articulated literary and spiritual philosophy but that, through his concept of the “creative dream,” he was

able to comfortably integrate his spiritual experiences with his work. Neihardt summed up his central concept of the "creative dream" as "the process of reconstructing the ordinary representation of the world in keeping with an expanded view of it; a creative fusing of two views of the world, each which would normally seem to the other like a dream."<sup>27</sup> This statement, coming just a few short years before his encounter with Black Elk, is of paramount significance, because it goes to the heart of Neihardt's motivation to write *Black Elk Speaks*. Neihardt would see his collaboration with Black Elk as an opportunity to put his creative powers to the highest possible use. Indeed, *Black Elk Speaks* is also an embodiment of Neihardt's definition of the "creative dream." It is, in essence, the "creative fusing of two views of the world," Black Elk's and Neihardt's, worlds so different from one another that they "normally seem to the other like a dream."

One can imagine now the shock of recognition and the excitement that Neihardt felt as Black Elk told him of the life-changing vision he received at the age of nine. The circumstances surrounding both men's visions were similar in many respects. Both occurred during illnesses at an early age, both evoked sadness at leaving familiar surroundings, both were ultimately interpreted as "callings" to something higher in life, and both instilled a lifelong sense of duty.

When Neihardt told Black Elk about his childhood dream during their interviews, Black Elk replied, "This was a power vision that you had. . . when you were eleven years old. It was your brother ghost who had the power to describe that land that you did not see and [that has] been helping you do all these other things. . . [Y]our brother ghost has put you here to do good to your people. . . ."<sup>28</sup>

Writing to a friend shortly after his conversations with Black Elk, Neihardt described the unusual bond that the two men seemed to share. "A strange thing happened often while I was talking with Black Elk," wrote Neihardt. "Over and over he seemed to be quoting from my poems, and sometimes I quoted my stuff to him, which when translated into Sioux could not retain much of their literary character, but the old man immediately recognized the ideas as his own. There was very often an uncanny merging of consciousness between the old fellow and myself. . . ."<sup>29</sup> Neihardt's daughter Enid recorded in her diary Black Elk's statement that "Daddy is what the Indians called a sacred man thinker. Black Elk

explained things and Daddy explained things about this and they seemed to agree with each other."<sup>30</sup>

Black Elk clearly realized that Neihardt had a special insight into his spiritual world. Nothing underscores this more than Black Elk's words to Neihardt at the end of their interviews:

[T]his vision of mine ought to go out, I feel, but somehow I couldn't get anyone to do it. I would think about it and get sad. I wanted the world to know about it. It seems that your ghostly brother has sent you here to do this for me. You are here and have the vision just the way I wanted, and then the tree will bloom again and the people will know the true facts. We want this tree to bloom again in the world of true that doesn't judge.<sup>31</sup>

The tree to which Black Elk referred was the tree the Six Grandfathers had shown him in his Great Vision, which symbolized the life of the Lakota Nation and which, for Black Elk, had withered away at the Wounded Knee massacre. In agreeing to tell his story to Neihardt, Black Elk had entrusted Neihardt with the power to help him renew the spirit of his Great Vision. That Black Elk recognized the kinship between himself and Neihardt was made even more evident when he suggested conducting the ceremony on Harney Peak that later formed the epilogue to *Black Elk Speaks*. "I am just telling you this Mr. Neihardt," said Black Elk.

You know how I felt and what I really wanted to do is for us to make that tree bloom. On this tree we shall prosper. Therefore my children and yours are relative-like and therefore we shall go back into the hoop and here we'll cooperate and stand as one. This is why I want to go to Harney Peak, because here I will send the voices to the six grandfathers. And you remember I saw many happy faces behind those six grandfathers and maybe it will be that Mr. Neihardt['s] and my family['s] will be the happy faces. Our families will multiply and prosper after we get this tree to blooming.<sup>32</sup>

Neihardt took this responsibility seriously and, in the following months, wrote frequently to Black Elk to let him know that he was at work on the book. "It's going to be a really good book," wrote Neihardt in one letter, "and you are going to be happy with it, I know. Keep this in mind when you are feeling lonesome or sad and it will cheer you up. The finest things in your life are going to be saved for other men."<sup>33</sup>



A survey of some of the key spiritual events of John Neihardt's life shows that Neihardt's accomplishments with *Black Elk Speaks* were not merely the work of a clever literary stylist or a creative historian but rather of a man with an intense awareness of the transcendental aspects of all life. That awareness, combined with his earlier encounters with the Indian community, allowed Neihardt to cut through many differences between American Indian and white culture and experience a unique sense of common ground with Black Elk. As Raymond J. DeMallie has remarked, the success of *Black Elk Speaks* is "due in large part to Neihardt's empathetic appreciation of Black Elk's 'other worldliness'—a spiritual quality that set him apart. The mystic in Neihardt and the mystic in Black Elk were kindred souls."<sup>34</sup>

To say that the two men shared a common spiritual bond is not to deny that there were many obvious cultural and personal differences between them. Nor does it imply that Neihardt was an expert on the subject of Lakota religion. What it does suggest, however, is that Neihardt's spiritual experiences allowed him to share with Black Elk a vital recognition of a higher, spiritual reality in life—a recognition that both men felt needed to be shared with the world.

In his later years, Neihardt would often stress the importance of the various "mystical" or "transcendental" experiences that had occurred throughout his life. "In doing this," said Neihardt, "I feel a little apologetic because I don't want to give the impression that I regard myself as a highly exceptional person. I think these things occur to a great many people. . . . But I think . . . anyone who may be interested in my work in future years . . . might find some value in these experiences, so that is why I'm telling them."<sup>35</sup>

John Neihardt's religious beliefs at the time of his meeting with Black Elk had been formed from an eclectic blend of religious traditions. These beliefs, however, were not simply selected in a random, patchwork manner for their intellectual value but rather were informed primarily by the rich series of spiritual events that Neihardt had experienced in the early part of his life. These experiences allowed Neihardt to understand and even embrace many of the core spiritual values of a wide range of religious traditions, but they also steered him away from settling for any one tradition. As Neihardt would write to an acquaintance in 1939, "[T]he religion I have managed to achieve through direct experience seems too profound for dogmatic statement."<sup>36</sup>



Those who dismiss *Black Elk Speaks* as a work “tainted” by a white man’s Christianity or as a case of “literary imperialism” ignore the rich spiritual life of a man whose beliefs defy easy categorization. To ignore this aspect of Neihardt’s life is to miss an important reason for the universal appeal of *Black Elk Speaks*.

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### NOTES

1. Ella Deloria to John G. Neihardt, 18 March 1932, Neihardt Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Ellis Library, University of Missouri, Columbia (hereinafter referred to as “Neihardt Collection”).

2. Neihardt to Nicholas Black Elk, 6 November 1930, transcription by Enid Neihardt Fink from her shorthand steno notes (hereinafter referred to as “transcription”), Neihardt Collection.

3. Neihardt to Nicholas Black Elk, 27 June 1931, transcription, Neihardt Collection.

4. John G. Neihardt, *Black Elk Speaks* (New York: Morrow, 1932; University of Nebraska Press, 1988), xiii.

5. Blair Whitney, *John G. Neihardt*, Twayne’s United States Authors Series (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., Twayne Publishers, 1976), 93.

6. Sally McKlusky, “Black Elk Speaks and So Does John Neihardt,” *Western American Literature* 6 (Winter 1972): 237.

7. For a detailed examination of these issues, see Raymond J. DeMallie’s excellent introduction to Raymond J. DeMallie, ed., *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk’s Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

8. See William K. Powers’s article “When Black Elk Speaks Everybody Listens” in *Religion in Native North America*, ed. Christopher Vecsey (Moscow: University of Idaho Press, 1990). This article is placed by the editor under a section entitled “Musers and Abusers,” and it is clear, after reading Powers’s article, that Neihardt is meant to be seen as one of the latter. Powers’s central claim is that *Black Elk Speaks* is nothing more than a form of “literary imperialism,” in Powers’s words, with Neihardt at the forefront of a movement that

deliberately set about to romanticize Native American religion. This phony image of Native American spirituality has been cultivated and disseminated, according to Powers, by Neihardt's "disciples" and threatens to destroy what is left of authentic Lakota spirituality. While it is certainly true that a romanticized version of the American Indian continues to exist among white Americans, especially where spirituality is concerned, it seems more than a little disingenuous to pin the blame for this on Neihardt. If readers are content to assume that *Black Elk Speaks* is the definitive statement on Native American spirituality, that is through their own negligence and not through the machinations of Neihardt. Neihardt never claimed or presumed that he had written an anthropological or historical examination of Lakota religion. Powers also implies that there was something unethical about Neihardt's attempt to make money from the project. This accusation, however, could be leveled equally at any scholar who is paid for producing work based on research about other human beings.

9. John G. Neihardt, *All Is But a Beginning: Youth Remembered, 1881-1901* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972), 16. Publication rights now held by the University of Nebraska Press.

10. This information was relayed to me by Neihardt's daughter, Hilda Neihardt, via the John Neihardt Center in Nebraska.

11. Neihardt, *All Is But a Beginning*, 48.

12. *Ibid.*, 48-49.

13. John G. Neihardt, *Poetic Values: Their Reality and Our Need of Them* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1925), 20. Publication rights now held by the University of Nebraska Press. Neihardt's interest in Vedantic religion would also lead him to an exploration of Buddhism.

14. Neihardt to Dr. Horst Frens, 6 August 1939, Neihardt Collection.

15. Neihardt, *Patterns and Coincidences: A Sequel to All Is But a Beginning* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 34. Publication rights now held by the University of Nebraska Press.

16. *Ibid.*, 35.

17. *Ibid.*, 34-35.

18. *Ibid.*, 25.

19. *Ibid.*, 36.

20. *Ibid.*, 101.

21. John G. Neihardt, "John G. Neihardt's Power Vision and Early Experiences, Extra Sensory Perception," no date, folder no. 498, Neihardt Collection. This typed, seventeen-page document appears to be an unpublished transcript of Neihardt's recollections about various "mystical" experiences. The rambling and ungrammatical nature of the document, as well as the penciled editorial marks and corrections in Neihardt's own handwriting on the first three pages, lead me to believe that the document was typed from either steno notes or from audio tapes of Neihardt's oral recollections (the document has several breaks that read: "End of *One*," "End of *Two*," etc., possibly indicating side or reel changes). The document is too long to have been a single public speech. Although many of the incidents in it are recounted throughout the two volumes

of his autobiography, it is the only document that I have come across that concentrates specifically on this aspect of Neihardt's life. It testifies to the importance that Neihardt placed on these experiences. There is no date on the document, but internal evidence suggests that it could not have been written before 1941, although I suspect that it was probably written much later than that. It has the tone of an older man looking back on his life.

22. Ibid.
23. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 109.
24. Neihardt, *Poetic Values*, 90–91.
25. Ibid., 88.
26. John G. Neihardt, transcription of dictation to Lucile Aly titled, "Dictation to Lucile Aly in 1958," folder no. 517, Neihardt Collection.
27. Neihardt, *Poetic Values*, 98.
28. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 42–43.
29. Neihardt to Dr. Julius T. House, June 1931, transcription, Neihardt Collection.
30. Transcript of Enid Neihardt's diary entry of 23 May 1931, Neihardt Collection.
31. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 43.
32. Ibid., 294.
33. Neihardt to Nicholas Black Elk, 29 August 1931, transcription, Neihardt Collection.
34. Raymond J. DeMallie, "John G. Neihardt's Lakota Legacy," in *A Sender of Words: Essays in Memory of John G. Neihardt*, ed. Vine Deloria, Jr. (Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers, 1984), 124.
35. Neihardt, "Power Vision and Early Experiences," Neihardt Collection.
36. Neihardt to Horst Frens, 6 August 1939, Neihardt Collection.

