

Standing Rock Elders Teach Respect and Connection

Chaplain Robert Keim and Irene Keim

UUCIP – July 8, 2018

Circle

The idea of extending the presence of Lakota elders from Standing Rock at our recent annual UUA General Assembly to the entire conference instead on only one day and one workshop came after the programming budget had been set. To cover the additional expenses of an extended stay, UUMFE opened an online Faithify fundraiser with only 8 days and optimism to make it happen. After raising the baseline budget of \$3,500 in 3 days, it was suggested that UUMFE raise the target to \$5,000. In the end, \$5,383 was raised. The success was a hint of the impact that Standing Rock had made on the wider world. The Elders were invited to participate in events every day of General Assembly, as well as separate Sunday evening event.

In the last meeting of the General Assembly on Sunday afternoon, an Action of Immediate Witness was brought before the delegates asking active support for the Lakota water protectors facing legal action by the state of North Dakota. The Lakotas were charged with felonies following their opposition to the pipeline going through the Standing Rock water sources. The action was unanimously approved with no debate – something almost unheard of in UU circles!

On Sunday, following the close of General Assembly, the four Lakota who had traveled from Standing Rock joined with some sixty people at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Kansas City for an evening event. Interestingly, placing them upon the stage at the front of the church made them uncomfortable. In their world, discussions are done in a circle, with agreement coming from all who are there. They gently taught us this idea, and repeated the lesson often through the night. They also addressed each other as Sister or Brother to reflect that we are all one human family. Each told stories as a way to share their experiences before and during the Standing Rock encampment.

One of the elders had moved away from her homeland years ago, and had been teaching in Chicago. Under the auspices of a rather enlightened Principal, she began incorporating native ways of being together and making decisions in her classroom. Her lunchtime rituals of sage smudging and peaceful gathering were especially popular among her students.

Though she was a long way from her homeland, she stayed connected with her Lakota sisters and brothers. Hearing a story about the birth of a white buffalo calf, she called one of her elders in North Dakota, and the two drove all the way to Texas to pay their respect to the calf. They were among the first to arrive, and the rancher had just begun a sacred hoop to commemorate the event.

White Buffalo and Hoop

To Native Americans, the Bison or American Buffalo was a symbol of sacred life and abundance. This symbolic importance was drawn from legend:

One summer long ago, the sacred council fires of the Lakota Sioux came together and camped. The sun was strong and the people were starving, for there was no game. Two young men went out to hunt in the Black Hills of South Dakota.

A beautiful young woman dressed in white appeared to the warriors and said, "Return to your people and tell them I am coming." This holy woman presented the Lakota people with the sacred pipe, showing how all things were connected. She taught the Lakota people the mysteries of the earth. She

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taught them to pray and follow the proper path while on earth. As the woman left the tribe, she rolled upon the earth four times, changing color each time, and finally turning into a white buffalo calf. Then she disappeared. Almost at the same time as her leaving, great herds of buffalo could be seen surrounding the camps. It is said that after that day, the Lakota honored their pipe, and buffalo were plentiful.

This story of the White Buffalo Calf Woman has immense importance to the Lakota and many other tribes. As John Lame Deer, a spiritual leader says, "A white buffalo is the most sacred living thing you could ever encounter."

So, the birth of a male calf on May 12, 2011 amidst a powerful thunderstorm on the ranch in Greenville, TX of Arby Little Soldier who is of Lakota heritage, was nothing short of a miracle. White buffalo are extremely rare; according to the National Bison Association they occur in approximately one out of every 10 million births.

Arby Little Soldier and his wife Patricia were out riding horseback when they spotted a newborn buffalo calf, "His brother was born a couple of days before him and we went to see him. We saw a cow that was fixing' to have a calf, so my wife said, 'let's stay and watch.' But the herd started surrounding us so we left."

The next day when he got home he saw something near his pond running alongside one of the cows that he thought was a coyote or a white dog. He took out his binoculars, but was cut off from getting a direct look at it.

"Finally she stopped and the calf walked ahead of her and peeked his head around the front of her chest. He looked back and up towards me and I could see his face. It was a white face with black eyes and a black nose and he had a black tipped tail," all traits of a truly sacred white buffalo. "It was amazing; he was born to all nations and not just to me."

Now the couple has a full time job with the onslaught of publicity generated over the birth of Lightning Medicine Cloud. This was the name Little Soldier wanted to bestow on the sacred calf, but he had to wait until tribal leaders from around the country gathered at his ranch to determine what prophecy the animal brought.

The official naming ceremony was Wednesday, June 29, 2011 at 9 a.m. This was the official blessing and dedication ceremony performed by the elders and medicine men from North Dakota and South Dakota tribes. All nations, drum groups, and dancers were invited to attend.

Standing Rock Hoop, Circles of Prayer and Impact

Let us understand this event through the history and teaching of Black Elk, second cousin of Crazy Horse, medicine man and holy man of Oglala Lakota Sioux. From his memoir, [Black Elk Speaks](#):

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At the age of nine, Black Elk is eating when he hears a voice telling him to hurry because his Grandfathers are waiting. He grows sick and cannot walk. His legs, arms, and face swell up. His tribe is moving camp, but he is so ill he has to be carried. When he is laid down to rest in his parents' tepee, he sees through the opening in the top the same men he had seen in the sky four years before. They call to him that his Grandfathers are waiting for him. A cloud takes him, following the men, to a place where he beholds an extraordinary, highly symbolic vision. He describes it in precise detail.

The first Grandfather tells Black Elk that his Grandfathers all over the world are having a council and that they will teach him. Black Elk realizes that these are the Powers of the World. Each of the six Grandfathers in turn tells Black Elk something about himself and his people's future and gives him a symbolic object.

The first Grandfather gives Black Elk a wooden cup of water that contains the sky, which is the power to live, and a bow, which is the power to destroy. The second Grandfather gives him an herb. The third Grandfather gives him a peace pipe with a spotted eagle on it. The fourth one gives him a red stick, sprouted and with birds in its branches, saying that it is the living center of a nation. The fifth Grandfather tells Black Elk that the north-south road (the red one) is good and the east-west road (black) is trouble and war.

Black Elk sees a circled village and is told it is his. Everyone in the village seems to be dead or dying, but as he rides through, they revive. A voice tells him that it is the center of the nation's hoop that he has been given that made the people live. The voice tells him to give them the flowering stick, the sacred pipe, and the wing of the white giant. When he plants the stick in the center of the hoop, it grows immediately into a tree, under which all living things live happily. The sacred pipe flies in on eagle's wings, bringing peace. The daybreak star rises and the voice says that it will bring wisdom to all who see it. The entire group, including the spirits of the dead from the past, walk with Black Elk and the bay down the red road; the voice says they are walking in a sacred manner in a good land. They must climb four ascents, each progressively steeper and more difficult. After the first, the people change into animals, and at the second, the animals are restless and the leaves are falling from the tree. The voice says that from here on, Black Elk must remember what he was given because his people will be in difficulties. They begin to walk the black road, and the nation's hoop is broken. The fourth ascent is horrifying, the people and their horses starving, and the voice that has been guiding them seems to weep. At this point, Black Elk sees a man painted red who changes into a bison near which a sacred four-rayed herb springs up. The herb blossoms in four colors that represent the four directions and is growing where the tree had been, in the center of the hoop. Black Elk sees fighting, gunfire, and smoke, and his people fleeing like swallows. His own horse is reduced to skin and bones, but he cures him with the herb.

Four virgins enter, carrying some of the symbolic objects Black Elk has been given by the Grandfathers. They dance and the horses dance. He looks down upon his people and the earth is restored and they are happy once again. Still on his horse, he sees the whole world as one, the hoops of many nations united in one hoop, with one mighty tree sheltering everyone as the children of one father and one mother. He sees that it was holy.

It is apparent that the circle shape is sacred as well. For Black Elk, the number four denotes a circle, not a square, as the four directions denote the earth. The sacred hoop of his nation that he refers to is the

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integrated and united community of his people, imagined as within a circle. The base of the tepee is circular, and an encampment of tepees is usually arranged in a circle.

The cup that contains the sky, the sacred pipe, the four-rayed herb, and the flowering stick – sacred objects that will recur in Black Elk's later visions. He will incorporate them into his healing practices and the rituals he performs for the community as a holy man. The bison, which the Sioux discovered on the plains when they migrated from the woodlands of the upper Midwest, and horses introduced by the Spanish in the early sixteenth century, were sacred animals to the Sioux, as were eagles.

One Year Later

In December 2016, when thousands of Native Americans, environmental activists and their supporters were camped on the high plains of North Dakota hoping to stymie an oil pipeline beneath the drinking water source of the Standing Rock Sioux reservation, Chief Arvol Looking Horse, Lakota spiritual leader, addressed a massive interfaith prayer service. People from Native American nations across the United States had traveled to camp at Standing Rock and on nearby land, the most comprehensive gathering of native people since before the Indian wars of the 1870s. Indigenous people from Hawaii, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico and Honduras arrived at the camps and hoisted their flags beside those of 300 American tribes.

Of special note, among those who arrived were Arby Little Soldier and his wife Patricia, those with the white buffalo calf. One of the elders who joined us was standing on the highest hill in the camp. He saw Arby climbing the hill with the sacred hoop that he had made; this was a very symbolic moment for these two men amongst all the nations and supporters gathered there.

The camps became places to take a stand for the right to clean water and against privatization, contamination and degradation. But they were also a site of pilgrimage, a place of profound prayer where Lakota women walked to the Cannonball River each morning to enact a water ceremony and where chants in the Lakota language, called to the rhythm of round drums, rose from the camp at dawn and Lakota elders tended a sacred fire all day and night. "Water is life," they said. "Defend the sacred."

On a biting cold December day, when fingers went numb if exposed to the air for more than a few minutes, more than 1,000 people gathered for a three-hour prayer service in which a rabbi, a Buddhist monk, various Protestant, Catholic and Unitarian Universalist clergy offered prayers before the fire that Lakota elders had been tending throughout the protest. They spoke of their faiths' common commitment to caring for the earth and their shared belief in the sacredness of the physical world. Looking Horse spoke of the threat to clean water at Standing Rock as only one of millions of attacks on the integrity of the earth's elements. Fighting back would take a particular kind of power, he said. "We will be victorious through tireless, prayer-filled and fearless nonviolent struggle. Standing Rock is everywhere."

One year later, the Lakota Water Protectors showed up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to help resist a pipeline through Amish lands. Now the prayer camp has expanded since the state permitted a pipeline that is

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planned to go through neighboring farms and other private lands, including that of the order of sisters called Adorers of the Blood of Christ. Others are active in places like Hudson Valley, NY and Louisiana. They all see a moral imperative to protect the place they call home, to care for their corner of creation.

In the words of Chief Arvol Looking Horse: “In our tradition, we pray for everything we eat and drink so our minds can be good. When the environment that we live in is sick and suffering, so too are the minds and decisions of our leaders. We must continue to work together for the health and well-being of our water and our Earth.

In the Sacred Hoop of Life, there is no ending and no beginning.”

Amen and Blessed Be.

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