Understanding Black Elk - Beyond the Spiritual Binary

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For audio podcast: http://www.ecologia.org/news/27.BlackElkBinary.mp3

Right and Left Turn Only Arrow Sign[1]

Segment One

Randy Kritkausky: Greetings, or may I say Bozho in Potawatomi, to those joining us for today's Indigenous Perspectives show. I'm Randy Kritkausky, an enrolled Potawatomi tribal member, and the co-host of Indigenous Perspectives.

Carolyn Schmidt: And I'm Carolyn Schmidt, the other co-host. Indigenous Perspectives originates from Vermont in the United States. We're located on lands that the Abenaki people call N'Dakinna. This is the unceded traditional territory of

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https://in.pinterest.com/pin/24206916722963866/

the Abenaki, who for thousands of years have been stewards of the lands found here and also across the border in Québec province in Canada.

Today we welcome back Damian Costello, an international expert on the life and legacy of the Lakota Sioux spiritual leader Black Elk. Damian specializes in the intersection of Catholic theology, Indigenous spiritual traditions, and colonial history. His PhD is in theological studies from the University of Dayton in Ohio. He is Director of Postgraduate Studies and a member of the faculty of NAIITS, the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies. So, welcome back, Damian.

Damian Costello: Great to be here again.

Randy: On the last show we discussed the historical Black Elk. By "historical Black Elk" we mean the actual historical figure, his life and times. Because so many books and articles have been written about Black Elk, sorting through the claims of authors who argue that they present a true portrait of the Lakota Sioux medicine man is really a formidable task. Damian has made an important contribution to finding the real Black Elk in a proverbial haystack of distracting narratives.

Damian, your book ***Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism***[2] challenges widespread assumptions in the field of Native American religious studies. First and foremost, you shed new light on the assumption that Native Americans completely abandoned their traditional religious beliefs when they were either forcibly converted to Christianity or when they chose to convert voluntarily. At the heart of this assumption is the widespread assumption that Indigenous people, and by extension mainstream people, can only subscribe to a single religious or spiritual tradition, because such belief systems are hopelessly antagonistic and mutually exclusive. How did you first come to question this assumption?

Damian- Well, I think I first came to challenge that assumption, or I should say question it, is that I never met anybody who lived up to those categories. In all my travels and my own spiritual journey, I continually came across people of all kinds of traditions, whether Indigenous or not, who inhabited multiple ways of knowing that overlapped, that informed each other, that at times were in conflict, but not as

[2] Costello, Damian: *Black Elk: Colonialism and Lakota Catholicism*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2005.

entire systems, just aspects of it. And so at the time, I couldn't claim to have any sort of deep experience in Indigenous communities, but the ones that I talked to seemed very different, and it just seemed so artificial and out of place for lived human experience overall.

Carolyn: Wow. So let's dig more deeply into this assumption - of mutually exclusive ideas and belief systems – which you're saying may not exist with real people in real life.

If we call this assumption a binary, "binary" means needing to make a choice between two alternatives. In sports, this could be choosing which team to root for and which side of the stadium to sit on. In religion, a "binary" could be imposed, if someone feels they have to answer a question like "well, are you a Catholic or not?" When you perceive a binary, by definition it means there's no middle ground or compromise or blending between two opposites.

So, Randy, in your book ***Without Reservation***[3], *y*ou examine how this "binary" – this fundamental belief that you have to "be" either one or the other, and there's a deep division between the two - became deeply embedded in Western logic and thinking but not Indigenous logic and reasoning. Can you elaborate?

Randy: Sure. And our listeners will have to be patient and forgiving for a moment if this sounds like a brief version of Philosophy 101 if they ever took it. But most philosophy courses begin - most of Western philosophy courses, I should say - begin with this notion of Aristotelian logic. And Aristotle said something that's so obvious that when you hear it in a philosophy course, it's like, "duh, of course!" And what he basically said in his principle of identity is that you can assert something like "A" but you can't assert "A" and "Not A" at the same time. Now, that's the way it's taught in philosophy courses.

What that really comes down to in plain English is that if you are a botanist and you look at a plant, you can say it's a rose, but it can't be a "Rose" and a "Not Rose" at the same time. We've spent hundreds of years with taxonomy, putting

[3] Randy Kritkausky: Without Reservation: Awakening to Native American Spirituality and the Ways of Our Ancestors. Rochester Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2020.

things into discrete categories. So we don't have things like roses and chrysanthemums in the same category. We think that the power of Western science is based on our belief to break things up into categories that just exist completely on their own and in isolation.

Chrysanthemum[4]

Rose[5]

And the other corollary of this is that there is an excluded middle. There is no "chrysanthemumrose." That's illogical because you've either got one or the other. You don't blend categories that are absolutely distinct.

So this was driven home to me when I was doing research on my book, and I came across a Native American author who told a very simple and wonderful story about Bear-Boy. Now, for Native Americans, it's possible for a boy on a vision quest to go out in the forest and have an experience whereby he feels that he becomes a part of a bear that he may have seen. Not only does he become part of that, he actually becomes "Bear-Boy" - neither bear nor boy. And he comes back and he tells his elders, and perhaps the medicine man, that "On my vision quest, I became Bear-Boy. And I am Bear-Boy at times in my life; I understand the bear from the inside out. I feel an identity with this 'other' - this other category".

So this, this was actually quite a revelation to me, even though I had experienced these things to some degree, to have it explained that for Native Americans, unlike Western philosophy students, it's completely natural to have an included middle ground, not mutually excluded categories. And I think that's the

[4] CC0 license, Public Domain, rawpixel https://www.rawpixel.com/image/436033/chrysanthemum-flowers-bloom

[5] CC0 license, Public Domain, pexels.com https://www.pexels.com/photo/plant-flower-rose-bloom-39517/

premise of today's program. As, Damian, you said so wonderfully - and it isn't just necessarily Native Americans and Indigenous people - many of us do indulge, adopt, experience, a spirituality that is in more than one category, that much of society views as discrete.

So once we understand the possibility and reality of Bear-Boy, the mystery of Black Elk and Native American religion and spirituality is no longer quite so impossible to grasp. In fact, it is a concept that is the key to unlocking our own logic-stranded world view, whereby we have alienated ourselves from nature - that other "other" in our lives - that we put in a separate box or category. We discussed that on another show, on animism[6].

Carolyn: So Damien, who are the people who are advocating keeping Indigenous spirituality and Christianity in antagonistic and mutually exclusive categories? This is a field of study of your interest.

Damian: Yes. So I would say in relation to Black Elk, the two main camps are sort of secular academics who in their idea of protecting Indigenous traditions want to articulate a Black Elk that rejected any aspect of culture or philosophy or religion that wasn't organically part of Lakota tradition before they encountered European peoples.

And the other sort of energy that talks about Black Elk being sort of exclusively traditional, comes from I would say the more activist types that came out of the sixties and seventies. Primarily Indigenous people who grew up in urban contexts, but also non-Indigenous people who saw Black Elk as a symbol of *[rejecting]* everything that was wrong with Western society. And so the idea that he was in any way influenced *[by]* or partook of Christianity sort of tainted that image.

And I would also say that this is in reaction to those Christian voices that maintained a very hard line when it came to Indigenous cultures. You know, there

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[6] Indigenous Perspectives Show 12. Accessing an Animate World.
https://www.ecologia.org/news/12-AnimateWorld.pdf
See also Show 4. Animism and Intimate Encounters with Mother Earth
https://www.ecologia.org/news/4-Animism.pdf

were a lot of missionaries who were more flexible, who engaged with Lakota language and traditions, but *[on the other hand]* there were a lot who took a very hard line, talked about Lakota traditions being "demonic" or being something you could not participate in any way and often included *[efforts to ban Indigenous]* language. That wasn't the case with Catholics usually, but those voices are still there. And so those are the voices who want to keep these worlds separate because they feel that one or the other are tainted and less than the one that they're trying to keep here.

Carolyn: Well, as I was a child growing up, you start meeting other kids in school, different religious backgrounds, and it's "Are you an 'X' or are you a 'Y'?" You know, okay, some kids are Jews, some kids are Catholic - they go to this catechism school on Thursday evenings - and it sets up in a childish - child's mind, a binary kind of thing, or at least it did for me. But then hopefully you become more aware of nuances as you mature.

So are the advocates today of looking at this "either/or" binary for Black Elk, even conscious of the underpinnings of their thinking?

Damian: That's a good question. I don't know if I could speak to the sort of their inner processing, but I would say that first, those voices are becoming fewer and farther between. I think as we go forward, and even since I wrote my book, more and more people are comfortable with the idea that Indigenous people, and in fact all people, sort of inhabit a continually hybrid space where we're incorporating new ideas, we're addressing new situations, our cultures are dynamically evolving. And that even makes it seem sort of passive. We would say, or we should say, that we are dynamically evolving our cultures and our spiritualities to address changing circumstances.

So I think there's less of those voices *[of advocates of the spiritual binary].* I think there's still a few out there who, for better or worse, are committed to the idea that there are pure traditions. And I tend to give more benefit of the doubt to them. Because, you know, let's face it, Indigenous traditions, there was a massive campaign to eradicate them. And so while I don't agree with that perspective, I've

become more appreciative of why there are some people who err on the side of protecting, or at least in how they look at it.

Randy: So one of the underlying themes here is a bigger notion of the binary, which isn't just Catholic versus Protestant or Catholic versus Traditional or Catholic versus Islamic. It goes to the heart of truth. And that's really sometimes the 800 - pound gorilla in the room when we're dealing with Indigenous religion and spirituality. Because modern science - despite ethnographers and anthropologists and historians being more open-minded, as you're indicating - modern science still poses a formidable obstacle toward looking at religious experience and religious knowledge as actual truth on the same level as scientific knowledge. For the very simple reason that scientists and people in universities are typically trained to apply a very high level of proof to what is truth. And that is that it must be empirically verifiable.

And it's pretty hard to empirically verify a religious or spiritual experience and such wisdom and knowledge. And I constantly encounter this. When people read my book or talk to me about what I'm doing, and I will tell them a story about something that has happened, an intimate experience with ancestors or with my other-than-human kin. And then they will lower their voice and say, "Gee, you know, I wish, I wish I had had that kind of experience." And this, again, it betrays what they will acknowledge is a norm in their profession, which is, don't talk about that stuff because you'll be not viewed as a real scientist.

And this keeps dragging us back to this notion that religion describes only that which science cannot. This is a notion that goes back to the Enlightenment and Voltaire, which is: we have questions science can't answer, like what happens when we die? So religion answers that question. And as science becomes more powerful, the realm of religion and spirituality contracts, because we don't need it anymore. Voltaire applauded this contraction; he saw it as a movement away from superstition toward real knowledge. So that binary between science and knowing reality and religious insight and religious wisdom in that reality, still is in the room with us, isn't it? What do you think, Damian?

Damian: Absolutely. And I think even as science has evolved so radically from its origins, like you look at the science today, you read quantum physics or anything

else, and you're looking at very different claims about reality than what the Enlightenment thinkers thought. And you know, it's - I always felt like when I sat with science and that sort of - what's the right word - that kind of censorship about what you can talk about and what truth is, it felt very much like the same sort of censorship I have felt in the religious communities I'm a part of. Right? That truth is a certain thing, and there's certain ways that you don't look at it, and there's certain things you don't say about the world or about truth. When we look at science, it's really just a very complicated - and very beautiful also, but - system of knowledge production that depends on power dynamics, right?

Scientists define truth because it allows them to have a corner on the market, so to speak. And some people are very active in promoting that, and some just inherit it and don't question it. Not to go down too deep of a rabbit hole, but recently I've been reading a French philosopher, Bruno Latour[7], who, after an experience in the French version of the Peace Corps in Africa, decided he was going to study scientists in the way that anthropologists study tribal peoples. And his conclusions were basically: you know, you *[scientists],* you're a tribal culture and you produce truth in a very similar culturally conditioned and community conditioned way. And there's power dynamics that control that. And you've basically pulled a very fancy trick on the rest of us by saying that your truth is somehow much more elevated than other ways of producing and talking about truth.

Randy: So, Damien, I'm going to ask you the same question again, because your personal journey and your personal experience with this I think is really helpful to listeners who may find themselves stranded in that very world you just described. And you've - you've obviously escaped this and you work at an institution which is engaged in theology. How are the ethics and norms in that world different from the ones you just described?

Damian: Well, in the world I work in, at NAIITS: An Indigenous Learning Community[8] - which is an Indigenous-founded and governed theological graduate school - you know, there are some non-Indigenous people like me that partner in

[7] *Bruno Latour: We Have Never Been Modern. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.*
[8] https://www.naiits.com/

this. But we view truth as inhabiting all facets of life, including science. And we use the wonderful idea of Two-Eyed Seeing that Albert Marshall,[9] the Mi'kmaw elder, has done so much to promote: that we have different ways of looking at the world, different ways of knowing, and each brings beauty and truth and important ways of living in the world. And we have to recognize that they each have their own standards by which we judge truth. And we pair them together. And it takes some discernment; it takes some fluency in learning how to look at multiple traditions. But every tradition gives us an opportunity for a deeper appreciation of truth and more importantly, living in harmony, flourishing as a community of both human beings and the other-than-human world.

Randy: I once wrote a little essay to myself; I've never made it publishable, but it's seasonally appropriate. As we were discussing earlier, when we go out and collect maple sap at this time of year here in Vermont, and the snow is deep, and we wear snowshoes. If we don't we sink in the snow . And the image of what you just gave is if you wear one snowshoe, one foot walks on one level and the other foot what they call "postholes"[10], and you really can't maintain your balance. And I think that's the kind of dynamic that you're describing that can exist in our society - where we walk out of balance and instead of trying to combine these binaries and multiple perspectives, we miss something. And ultimately, maybe we don't get to where we need to go.

Carolyn: Okay, let's hold on to that thought. We'll pick it up in Segment Two. Be back in a minute.

Segment Two

Carolyn: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives, Segment Two. We're speaking with Damien Costello and we're picking it up discussing different views of Black Elk and his achievements.

Damien, in your book, you discuss numerous Native American and religious scholars, and they certainly don't hesitate to explore religion and spirituality on

[9] https://www.mikmawarchives.ca/authors/albert-marshall
[10] That one leg goes straight down deep into the snow, like digging a hole for a post

their own terms as an important part of the human experience, but they still stick to the notion of the spiritual binary. Some like John Neihardt[11] argue that Black Elk was essentially a traditionalist and never really a Christian. Others contend that Black Elk truly and fully converted to Catholicism, and by doing this moved away from and left his traditional beliefs behind. So how accurate is this summary?

Damian: I think that's very accurate of the scholarship up to, I would say even the last ten years. You know, there's a - in part - an understandable sensitivity to the kind of claims that some Christians make and some ways that Christian churches organize their communities, especially in Indian country. There's no question about that. But there's also this - an allegiance to the very power of the book ***Black Elk Speaks.***

I know when I picked it up as a college sophomore off the library when I was avoiding work and read those accounts of Black Elk's visions, that was the kind of direct spiritual engagement that I yearned for in spiritual life. And, you know, to read of a young boy who was given this powerful vision to save his people, to renew all of creation, who went up to the spirit world for twelve days. There's a real power to that, and there's an understandable fear that complicating that too much or associating with a problematic or mixed tradition like Christian churches in Indian country, will take away from that power.

Randy: So, Damien, one of the subtexts of those arguing that Black Elk was and remained a Native American traditionalist permanently steeped in Indigenous culture, is that the individuals making this argument were professional ethnographers or some other form of documenters of Native Americans wedded to the notion of a "Vanishing Indian." It was the official position of the US government. They sent ethnographers out across the country to document this and to try to capture whatever little bits and pieces of the "vanishing culture" were left.

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[11] Neihardt, John G: *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*. (First published 1932) Bison Books, 2004.

For example, the founder really, of American anthropology, Franz Boas, went out and gathered up masks and other artifacts because he felt, well, all that's going to be left are these things, and we can at least put them in museums and dioramas and display them. And of course, Neihardt is out there gathering up the words that he can, the words that he hopes will be some artifacts of the wisdom of Black Elk.

What strikes me as remarkable in these two examples is that Franz Boas first saw the Native Americans dancing in Germany wearing masks, and it completely captured his imagination. What he missed is that the Native Americans who came to Europe brought a dance that was about change and adaptation and embracing Western culture. So, you know, he fell in love with the masks and the idea of pure Indianness and vanishing, but he missed the point, and it's kind of illustrative of the mistake that Neihardt makes in his enthusiasm to try to rescue and salvage the last remaining bits of Indigenous wisdom. He, in a sense, does the same thing to Black Elk who's trying to tell him something really important about the vitality of the culture, but he misses Black Elk's message.

Carolyn: So, Damien, can you give your thoughts as to why this would be, how these folks could miss the mark?

Damian: You know, the more that I've sat with this, the more understandable it's become to me because it's so much the part of, you know, the non-Native seeker who's looking to these other lost worlds to inform their own. You know, we want to go to different worlds. We want to be wowed and transformed by the difference, by the complexity that can speak to our own situation.

And I also know that tragedies are incredibly powerful. I know in my own experience, I came to Black Elk and was captivated by it because it spoke to the tragedy that I felt my civilization was in. And tragedy speaks to us in a powerful way. Like when you break up and you're a teenager, you live in that world of sad songs and you're on a loop, you'll hear it over and over again, and you - you almost want tonprick that sore spot again because there's that sort of odd pleasure that comes with that.

Carolyn: Yes, I think that what you're talking about, the sad song is validating to you your own sort of anguished feelings, and it's letting you know on some level you're not alone.

So it seems that this is all another form of the binary, the Native Americans seen by the mainstream in the growing U.S. as something exotic and apart, needing to be isolated from European influence. Or the flip side is that they're being assimilated and swallowed up by European culture. So this view of Indianness certainly didn't allow for the excluded middle ground that Randy talked about Aristotelian logic saying couldn't exist. They couldn't consider the possibility that Indians could partly adopt and adapt Western ideas just as they had adopted and adapted horses, guns, other forms of Western imports while remaining Indian in their identities and their cores.

Randy: So Damien, you alluded to the fact that Black Elk participated in these Wild West shows that were performed across the United States, and most famously for Black Elk across Europe, where he was an absolute sensation and gave a command performance for the Queen *[Queen Victoria of the British Empire].*

And, these *[Wild West shows]* also were intriguing because they were portrayed as "come and see these Indians before they disappear." It's the exact theme that you mentioned. And one of the multiple ways that this theme is doubly damaging, is that Native Americans learned in time to play that role. I mean, they're literally paid to play that role. As you explain in your book, Black Elk is promised that there's going to be a movie made about him, not just the book, and he's going to share in the proceeds. So in that circumstance, Native Americans are tempted to play back and repeat the theme that is being fed to them as what the movie maker or what the show host wants. What I love about your book is you go far, far beyond this and in a very gentle and very clear manner, you actually go back and look at the sources.

Now, we're not dragging the listener through your detailed analysis of the different sources and comparisons, but I mean, I really have to put in a plug for your book and for a reader who wants to understand Indigenous spirituality and Black Elk to pick up the book and see how nuanced one needs to be and how carefully one

needs to listen to what Indigenous people are trying to say to escape this binary. And I really - I present you as the best possible example in case of this open-mindedness. I thank you again for your book.

Carolyn: So we'll hear more from Damien in the next segment. Be back in a minute.

Segment Three

Carolyn: Welcome back to the third segment of Indigenous Perspectives. And we've been talking with our guest, Damian Costello, about the different views of people like Black Elk and the role of the outsiders studying them, using them - using their experiences and their backgrounds to shape the view of others. So Damian, can you give us some comments on your research on the relationship between John Niehardt, Black Elk's biographer and putting his words into the book, and Black Elk himself - the context in which this was all going down?

Damian: Well, we only really have John Niehardt's perspective on how this relationship developed, and he portrays this on a very spiritual level, very disembodied. So he talks about how Black Elk was waiting for him, and he, after their initial discussion - and John Neihardt shared sort of a similar vision-like experience - Black Elk sort of chose him to tell his story. And Neihardt until his death portrayed this as sort of a mystical soul brother relationship, where there was this meeting of the minds which sort of precluded any sort of cultural misunderstanding or any complications about material issues.

But I don't think we've dug into this relationship as much as we could. You know, there was - financial matters were - as with most everything in human reality - a major part of their relationship. And I think until this day, hardly anybody has asked, how did this shape the conversation and the outcome of the interviews?

Carolyn: So keep - keep going.

Randy: Tell us about some of the promises that Neihardt made to Black Elk. I mean, they're, they're mind boggling -

Carolyn: - and the context of Black Elks and his whole tribe's and reservation's poverty conditions during the Depression.

Damian: Well, this was the Great Depression. Neihardt showed up in 1930, and Pine Ridge was hit especially hard. And Neihardt made a lot of big promises. He had the backing of his publisher. He thought he had the potential to turn this into a movie deal. And so he shared that with Black Elk.

U.S. Congressional Committee at Pine Ridge Reservation, 1925.[12]

And in his excitement *[Neihardt]* sort of gave the impression that there was the potential for unlimited financial reward. Another little detail that's mentioned in Joe Jackson's book[13], but I don't think thought about enough, is that Black Elk actually turned down another author, I think it was a year or two before, because she wouldn't meet the price that he had for the stories he was going to share.

So in the aftermath of the interviews, there's evidence in letters that Black Elk was unhappy with the financial return. Now, the book was not initially successful.

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[12] Public Domain. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Congressional_Committee_at_Pine_Ridge_Reservation_-_NARA_-_285468.jpg?uselang=de

[13] Joe Jackson: Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

Neihardt used all of his advance in just the details of the interview, which included feeding all of Black Elk's family for the time he was there, for a big feast. And *[Neihardt]* had the equivalent of what an average Pine Ridge family made in an entire year at his disposal.

So it seems clear that Black Elk expected some important financial compensation that didn't actually happen. Now, I don't think Neihardt was duplicitous. I think the promises that he made just didn't come to fruition for a number of circumstances. But Black Elk entered into this relationship expecting that, and I think was frustrated in part because of not getting the compensation he expected, and frustrated by the way Neihardt packaged his story.

Carolyn: Well, I think it's very - it's unfortunately easy for people who are financially secure to really underestimate or downplay the tremendous impact on someone who is financially insecure of an opportunity, a vision of some kind of stable base or safety net or, you know, helping hand when they're feeling very down and out. And this is certainly a power dynamic where the person who is not as well off is going to feel under a certain amount of pressure, just from a human point of view, to keep the wealthy person happy to keep the money coming. I think this is not putting down Black Elk or anyone else; it's just a fact of the dynamics of what's going on.

Randy: We encountered this in our international work when we were working with various grant making organizations, and we quickly discovered that the people applying for grants, from former Soviet societies, quickly learned to mouth the words of - we called it "grant speak" - and adapted their English vocabulary phenomenally fast and figured out what it was they were supposed to tell us.

And, you know, in a way it's like the power imbalance with Black Elk. These people were not being disingenuous. They were simply trying to recast what was a survival struggle for many of them in dire environmental circumstances. They were trying to recast it in the words that they thought would resonate with us. And that's in a sense, the trap that Black Elk finds himself in, which is, how can I express who I really am while continuing the dialogue such that Mr. Neihardt is going to remain interested and publish the book.

Damian: And all of those little compromises that are made within that, right? I don't think Black Elk imagined that he was saying something false or being misleading, but that like all of us make these little compromises to negotiate the realities of our situation that we oftentimes look back at and say, you know, maybe that wasn't worth it. There's this great little snapshot of his nephew, Frank Fools Crow, who talked about, in his autobiography, selling a headdress, an eagle feather headdress war bonnet, during the Depression, the same exact time, and regretting it afterwards. Right? That he had compromised an important cultural teaching and a really important spiritual object out of necessity.

Randy: So for the listener, this once again may raise this whole question of the degree to which Christianity was rooted. I just want to insert at this point an important fact for the listener, which is that today amongst Native Americans, 60% approximately, by multiple polls, express or identify their belief system as Christian. Not exclusively Christian, but they feel comfortable identifying with that. So Black Elk is not an outlier; he's not a unique individual. In a sense, I think what the beauty of your book is, is he is a window into the combined belief systems that emerged at this particular point in history. It's certainly not binary - wasn't then, and it isn't today.

Carolyn: So with this, we'll say goodbye for just a minute and we'll come back with the fourth segment, the conclusion of this show.

Segment Four

Randy: Welcome back to Indigenous Perspectives, our fourth segment, and the topic is "Beyond the Spiritual Binary." And we're trying to probe what it is that Native Americans had the ability to do in combining multiple perspectives. And how that challenges a still very deeply rooted Western notion of binaries when it comes to spirituality and logic, as I told in the Bear-Boy story, that Native Americans don't have difficulty going there and understanding it, but many of us in the mainstream do.

Damian, you in your book have examples, and I am sure in your work you have examples, of how ceremony in the time of Black Elk and today combine these different dimensions of spirituality seamlessly. Can you give us a few examples?

Damian: Well, I think that as modern, post-modern, whatever we are - people of the West - we have this understanding that we've been talking about, that we organize knowledge in systems, and we tend to think that they're exclusive and competing. And I think through my experience that Indigenous people tend to have a more ceremonial way of knowing. That how you understand the world connects to and flows out of ceremonial actions that you structure your communal life with. So you're not inclined to think about abstract ideas floating out there in the world, but what emerges out of what you do on the ground and what you do with other people.

Randy: So give us an example from Black Elk's time or books. I mean, Sun Dance or a whole bunch of things that you explore beautifully and in great depth in your book.

Damian: Well, Sun Dance is probably the best example because you know, though we think of it as being the most Lakota of ceremonies, there was a time when Lakotas did not have the Sun Dance. That it emerged at a time through a vision, when the people who came out into the plains had become spiritually weak. That there was this default understanding that the spirits come to you in new ways to give you new power when you're in trouble. And so Kablaya - Black Elk tells this story in ***The Sacred Pipe***[14]- was given a vision of the Sun Dance, and the people practiced it so that they may live on the plains.

That understanding, that ceremonial way of knowing and that dynamic evolution that occurred in partnership with the spirits, I think was a natural extension - or extended into Christian traditions for Black Elk and other people who participated in them. And the main bridge was the Ghost Dance; that was an Indigenous expression of some new Christian ideas. And there's this great example of - again, from Fools Crow - Fools Crow is such an important figure that draws out some of these questions. And I think he's so important because he's not there to talk about how Christianity works in a Lakota or an Indigenous context. He's just talking about being a Lakota traditional healer and spiritual leader. And he talks about, - and then there's other people who talk about - this snapshot of when the Sun Dance was being revived, there were still a lot of elders who participated actively in the

[14] Brown, Joseph Epes: *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux.* University of Oklahoma Press, 1989. According to Black Elk, the Spirits gave Kablaya the vision of the Sun Dance, which was the source of it among the Lakota.

Catholic church. And so they invited a Jesuit to come to say Mass at the Sun Dance tree as part of the ceremony.

Now, it wasn't designed to change the Sun Dance ceremony, and it wasn't designed to change the Mass. There was an understanding that they should inform each other, and that those two ceremonies are important ways of engaging the world that say something slightly different, but that are also deeply congruent. And it's a beautiful demonstration of how knowledge and ways of knowing are woven together as opposed to seen as competing separate and abstract systems.

Randy: So to go back to my metaphor of walking in the Vermont forest and the deep snow with one snowshoe and the other postholing and being off balance and not being able to get to your destination, - how, in your work as a theologian and in your writing and looking at Black Elk, how do you see the potential of getting beyond this binary, not just intellectually, but emotionally and spiritually? How do you see it informing our own journey and where we on this planet in the 21st century need to get?

Damian: I think that part of it is just opening your eyes to what has already happened and has deeply informed us. You know, when I was in college in the nineties, and I don't think this has changed too much, Bob Marley was an incredibly important cultural figure. And there was something about his message, his sound, that was deeply unifying. It was deeply spiritual in a way that wasn't preachy. I never felt like I was getting talked down to.

Well, if you dig into the origins of the Rastafari, you see that in the context of a deeply colonial context, people are yearning for holistic and systematic change. They read the biblical narrative in their own context and come up with this image of the world being turned upside down - of the oppressed people leading the whole globe into the future. And Bob Marley takes that up and adds his own twist and captivates the world.

So I think that's - that happens around us. I think we recognize its beauty, but we don't necessarily recognize how it works. And we don't necessarily recognize that it can help break down those artificial binaries that control how we walk in this

world. Those artificial ways we break up and limit our relationship. Ultimately, this is about relationship; it's relationship with those around us, whether human or non-humans, and relationships to the spirits.

I think so much of this is unlearning this artificial way that we've been trained in, to return to our natural settings. I don't know if we said this in the previous conversation, but all of us descend from Indigenous peoples, right? I'm not Native North American. I don't consider myself an Indigenous person, but I certainly descend from Indigenous peoples who also saw and lived in the world in this deeply ceremonial and holistic way. And I think we're all yearning to return to that.

Randy: So I want to thank you for ending on this note and for bringing up Bob Marley because in our third show on Black Elk, we're going to explore the link between Christianity - Catholicism - and colonialism, which is really the topic of your book, that we've been skirting around the edges. And I think it holds, as you suggested, very optimistic notions of how those who have been beaten down may not be down and out, but may actually provide answers that the rest of us in the mainstream have been looking for.

So let me just conclude by saying, I hope that the listeners will take time to give themselves a few moments to reflect on what we've been saying, to consider their roots with Mother Earth and their own ancestral and spiritual roots. And before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna and perhaps that of your ancestors. Allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it. And if you will, write to me and let me know about your experience. I can be contacted through my website, at www.randykritkausky.com, where you can also find transcripts and related materials for all Indigenous Perspectives shows including today's. Again, I want to thank, we want to thank, Damian Costello for being our guest, and thank you for being our listeners.

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