



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 13: “The Compelling Fear”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

As they attempt to secure freedom, food, and safety, Black Elk’s ever-shrinking band traverses the extensive geography of the US and Canadian plains. In this chapter, for example, they travel south, mostly on foot, from All-Gone-Tree Creek to the mouth of the Poplar River, located near present-day Poplar, Montana, then cross the Missouri by steamboat, eventually arriving at Fort Keogh, yet another Soldiers’ Town, located near today’s Miles City, Montana. The journey is long, arduous, and fraught with danger. (The reader will benefit from three maps included in *The Sixth Grandfather* by Raymond J. DeMallie.)

Soon after they leave All-Gone-Tree Creek, Black Elk hears yet another voice, this one telling him to beware. Climbing to a tall bluff, he sees two Blackfeet (not to be confused with Blackfeet Sioux) and concludes that an attack is imminent. He warns his people, who must flee so quickly they cannot take even their tepees. As they escape, a thundercloud appears—

a sign that the thunder beings will provide protection. Black Elk knows now that his power is real.

At Fort Keogh on the Tongue River, the band joins other Lakota who have also left the reservations. After a sun dance, Black Elk thinks of little but his vision. Though sixteen years old, he is still uncertain about the Grandfathers' expectations. Each time he sees a cloud, he is afraid. The thunder beings—and the birds, crows, and coyotes—seem to be telling him to hurry and do something. But what? Black Elk's fear grows, and he becomes increasingly isolated from his people. His parents believe he has again contracted the "sickness" and ask Black Road, a medicine man, to help their son. Black Elk is "afraid of being afraid."

Black Road tells Black Elk, now 17, that he must perform his vision for his people, particularly the part spoken to him by the bay horse. Only then can Black Elk free himself from fear.

Study questions:

1. How many families now compose Black Elk's band?
2. Black Elk believes he could have killed the two Blackfeet if he had something. Identify something.
3. Black Elk prays to someone for help. Identify someone.
4. How does the band cross the Missouri River?
5. The Soldiers' Town mentioned in this chapter is located near a certain river. Name that river.
6. The soldiers take something from the Lakota in this chapter. What? (two answers)
7. Besides the thunder beings, certain animals call to Black Elk. Name these animals.
8. Something sings a song "in the silence." Identify something.
9. Which bird appears to make fun of Black Elk?
10. During which season of the year is Black Elk's fear "not so great"?
11. Who advises Black Elk about a way to overcome his fear? Name this way.

Prompts for student writing:

1. The Grandfathers seem to communicate with Black Elk in a variety of ways, one of which is the thunder beings. Discuss some of the other ways. Comment on why these ways are appropriate for the spirit world to communicate with a young Lakota.

2. Fear is a strong emotion. Discuss Black Elk's fear. Provide examples from this chapter. At the end of your paragraph, you might also comment on how this fear affects Black Elk's life.
3. Discuss the ways that Black Elk's vision imposes a great responsibility on him. (Remember that he turns 16 in this chapter.)