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LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 15: "The Dog Vision"
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

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Summary:

Although the horse dance of the previous chapter takes place in the small world of Black Elk's Lakota village, it embraces the very cosmos. Looking at a cloud in the West, Black Elk perceives a tepee, the flaming rainbow door, the Grandfathers, the dancing horses, and himself upon his bay. The people sing of "A horse nation all over the universe." Earth and spirit are interconnected.

Black Elk's spirit journey continues for several chapters and appears to offer a temporary escape from the worsening threats of starvation, of soldiers, of reservations. However, Black Elk's vision is actually a direct response to these serious problems. It reveals the extent to which he longs for order and understanding to replace the chaos and confusion that now dominate his life.

Will Black Elk's vision, and the ceremonies that accompany that vision, help him to defeat the world's darkness, to find salvation? The titles of three upcoming chapters—"Bad Trouble Coming," "The Butchering at Wounded Knee," and "The End of the Dream"—suggest a troubling answer.

In chapter 15 Black Elk continues his vision-quest. After a month-long encampment on the Tongue River, he travels to Fort Yates and the Standing Rock Agency. Eventually, he reaches White Clay Creek near the Pine Ridge Agency. This difficult journey, one of many, is undertaken because the "soldier chief," General Nelson Miles, notifies the Lakota that they no longer possess any land.

Near total despair consumes the Oglala, and Black Elk, age 18, feels pity for their suffering.

He then interrupts his narrative of the past to speak briefly of the present: as he speaks to Niehardt, he feels old and helpless, he says, for he has done nothing to save his dying nation. He adds, though, that, when he was young, his vision gave him power and confidence.

The story of the past now resumes.

The thunder beings return with spring, and Black Elk prepares for yet another ritual—this time with the aid of an old medicine man named Few Tails. This ceremony involves a lament, or "crying for a dream" (See Raymond J. DeMallie, *The Sixth Grandfather*, 319).

With a flowering stick set at the center of a sacred place, Black Elk begs the Great Spirit to accept his gifts and to help him understand. Black Elk sees first an eagle, then a hawk, followed by a swallow. He walks to the South, weeping profusely and contemplating his dead relatives, including Crazy Horse. He feels the sadness of his people.

In one of the most moving moments in this book, butterflies now swarm over Black Elk, sharing in his sorrow. But the butterflies transform into a great cloud, which follows two riders in pursuit of the dogs (Wasichus) as the "whole west roar[s] with cheering." Once this vision is complete, and the dogs have been killed, Black Elk is again afraid, and he asks the Grandfathers to save him. He claims that he now understands his purpose on earth.

Having fallen asleep after this powerful vision, Black Elk sees his suffering people but also rays of light and leaves growing on a scared herb. A voice reminds him that his people need his help.

The appearance of the daybreak star accompanies Black Elk's awakening into understanding. Stars turn beautiful colors, birds sing, horses nicker; even deer and bison join in the celebration.

Black Elk is now obligated to reenact his remarkable dog vision for his people—the subject of the next chapter.

Study questions:

1. What promise does the Great Father in Washington make to the Lakota?
2. Why does Black Elk's party of travelers have only bows and arrows as weapons?
3. At sundown, while standing on a bluff, Black Elk hears the song of a spirit? What is this short song? When has Black Elk heard it before?
4. During the winter the thunder beings are absent. How does their absence make Black Elk feel?
5. Describe how Black Elk feels about his vision when he speaks as an old man.
6. After Few Tails rubs Black Elk with sage, he unbraids (the text incorrectly says "braided") his hair. How does he clothe himself? What is the only object he carries?
7. Something in Black Elk's vision apparently represents his people. Identify something.
8. Who cheers as the two riders attack the dogs?
9. The dogs seem to represent which group of people?
10. As Black Elk looks at something, he hears a voice telling him that his people need him. Identify something.
11. A certain star reappears in this chapter. Identify it.
12. Who is the first group to hear about Black Elk's dog vision? What do they tell him to do?
13. Briefly describe the heyokas.

Prompts for student writing:

1. Dreams, fantasies, or visions are often wish-fulfillments. In other words, we often fantasize about things we *want* to happen. Think about Black Elk's dog vision. How is it a vision of what Black Elk wants to occur?
2. Birds are frequently used in literature as symbols of the spirit world. In a paragraph, discuss the specific roles of the various birds in this chapter. What do they each do? How do they contribute to Black Elk's vision?
3. Is understanding (or knowledge) a gift or a burden for Black Elk? Or both? Consider Black Elk's situation. Support your answer with details from the text.
4. At the same time that Black Elk and his people are moving from place to place, Black Elk is making a personal journey—a vision-quest for understanding. Think about the theme of journeys. Does this theme relate to your life? Are you on a journey, too? If so, where on your journey are you? Have you been changed by certain events or people? If so, how? Where do you think your journey will take you? (Think about other possible questions, too.) Write a one or two-page essay on this topic.