



JOHN G.
NEIHARDT
STATE HISTORIC SITE

LESSON PLAN: Black Elk Speaks, by John G. Neihardt
Chapter 17: “The First Cure”
Includes: Summary, Study Questions, Writing Prompts

Developed by: Joe Green, Neihardt Board of Directors; retired high school English teacher from Minden, Nebraska; recipient Nebraska Rural Community Schools Association (NRCSA) 2014 Outstanding Secondary Teacher Award.

Copyright: John G. Neihardt Foundation.

Use: Copyright holder grants permission for educational use.

Summary:

The circle, says Black Elk, is the dominant symbol of the Lakota world. The flowering tree sits in the midst of the sacred hoop of the nation at the center of the four directions. The hoop itself consists of quarter circles: the East provides peace and light; the South warmth; the West rain; and the North cold and wind. These directions, the sky, the earth, the stars, the sun, the moon, the nests made by birds, the seasons, the lives of humans, the tepees—everything assumes the form of a circle or moves in a circular pattern. Unfortunately, as Black Elk points out, the power of the circle is waning and so are his people.

Confined in a square world—the shape of his new house—Black Elk likens his people to prisoners of war. However, he believes “there is another world” from which he can find strength. An illustration of this belief is the focus of this chapter.

Accompanied by One Side, Black Elk locates a four-colored herb like the one he has seen earlier in his dog vision. This sacred herb, he believes, is essential if he is to cure others.

Asked to heal Cuts-to-Pieces' sick son, Black Elk feels apprehensive at first, for he has never cured anyone before. With One Side's help, Black Elk carries out an intricate ritual involving the herb, a pipe with an eagle feather on it, prayers to the Six Powers, a drum, a wooden cup of water, an eagle bone whistle, red willow bark, and a young girl. A day later the boy is healthy.

Other Lakota now come to Black Elk to be healed, and he honors their requests. The power of his vision seems strong.

Some important questions emerge from this chapter. If Black Elk can cure one sick boy, and perhaps other Lakota as well, will he have enough power to save an entire Lakota nation? Is it reasonable of the Grandfathers to expect Black Elk to restore the sacred hoop of his people? Can he remake the circle?

Study questions:

1. Describe the houses in which Black Elk and other Lakota must now live?
2. Why does he call these houses "a bad way to live"?
3. List three or four important ways that the circle serves as the great symbol of Lakota culture.
4. Black Elk asks One Side to help him find something important. Identify something.
5. Where has Black Elk seen this object before?
6. At the beginning of the healing ceremony, Black Elk offers the pipe to someone before passing it to others. Identify someone.
7. Why is a drum an important part of the healing ritual?
8. From which of the four directions does the flowering stick come?
9. Describe the physical condition of the sick boy.
10. From which direction does the good red road begin?
11. Black Elk puts something in the water and gives it to the boy. Identify something.
12. What gift does Black Elk receive from Cuts-to-Pieces for healing the boy?

Prompts for student writing:

1. Black Elk provides several examples to demonstrate that the circle is an important symbol in Lakota culture. Identify and discuss three of these examples in a single paragraph.
2. Yes, Black Elk cures one boy, but will he be able to cure (save) his people? Your topic sentence should present your answer. Support this topic sentence with reasons that tell why he may or may not be successful.