

Typescript copy of *Private Letter from Black Elk to Father Gall*, translated and published by Charlotte Black Elk, March 4, 1948.

Manderson, South Dakota
March 4, 1948

Where the Holy Father sits.¹
My holy son, pity the Lakota of this first letter I am writing.

I have received your letter and have it here.
Your Holy Father knows me.
Now I too call him "the Great Holy Father"
because that is a sacred relationship.²
Indeed, he is the one who is fastened with iron chains,³
because he is the keeper of Wakan Tanka's thoughts and laws,
he is the other sacred flower.⁴
That is why I keep him in my heart.
Now my heart is getting sad - but my heart will never turn bad.
Ever since Wakan Tanka gave light to my heart,⁵
it stands in light without end.
And now from your own thoughts,
a flower will grow in my heart.
Yes - that is how it is.
My people now stand in suffering
but the people are growing again
they will start to live again
that I believe.
The reason this will happen
there is a growing remembering of the sacred pipe.
I am Lakota alone, that is what I am named,
and Lakota, all of them, the hardest suffering of men
stand strong facing Wakan Tanka
that is why you defend them
That I know.

Now I am writing a book about the Ikce Wicasa⁶
So now you will see my heart and mind,
you will see them fully.
That is how it is.

Yes - now in this house is a young man
he is called Canupa Yuha Mani.⁷
I stayed with him three months.
My son lives here and now we are staying with him.
I went with him to a feast
I ate with him.
And with him I smoked the sacred pipe.
Whenever we are going to make a writing
we first pray
and we send a voice remembering you.
Canupa Yuha Mani has gone home now
It has been one month.
Ho - that is the way it is.

I have three children, two sons and one daughter.
The men have wives and the woman has a husband.
My first born son has six children, three daughters and one son,
My youngest son has four children, two daughter and two sons.
That is how it is.
These are my children
and I want them to live well on this earth.
Remember them in your prayers,

and when you say mass
we want you to remember us.

Now I believe in the black robes⁸
and it is 30 years now that I have been a Catechist,
and I, along with my children, am catholic.
Ho - and so it is that the Ikce Wicasa from long ago
have known Wakan Tanka's thoughts and his rules.
They do Wakan Tanka's will on this earth.
What is done in the heavens - that too - in the same way
they do on earth.

And so because Wakan Tanka made everything
they believe these things are sacred.
That which you call "worship adore" -⁹
we don't do that,
however what Wakan Tanka made, that is sacred,
and so, we speak to what Wakan Tanka made in ceremony.
As I see it - we Lakota now have a hard life
and I saw how people lived long ago.
And so I know they lived well long ago.
Indeed, Wakan Tanka gave this whole world to the Ikce Wicasa
and to the people of the four relations.¹⁰
It is so they could send a voice
that he gave it to them.
Ho - with these ceremonies
they could walk with their generations
on the sacred road.

They believed everything Wakan Tanka made was sacred
and with these things, they walk in a dancing manner.
The Ikce Wicasa know that
and they walk in the same manner.

Everything is sacred - sacred everywhere.
It belongs to Wakan Tanka because he touches it.
What he touches, they pray to
This is Wakan Tanka.

That's how they pray with the sacred pipe
and they use it to send a voice.
Everything that has been made,
everything that flies
and the two leggeds
and the four leggeds
and everything that moves on the earth,
All these are put into the sacred pipe
and together with these
they send a voice,
because they too are people
and they want to live.

We don't send a voice by ourselves,
all things made belong to Wakan Tanka
and together with them we are walking.
Now - my son - I am going to say this:
The way that I am and how I am,
Canupa Yuha Mani knows well.
I am here with my son who is named Ben.
On this day we are sitting so sickly,
my son broke his leg and we can't go anywhere,
so here we sit.

Whatever Wakan Tanka wishes for us
that's how we live.

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*typescript copy of
Private Letter to Fr. Gall,
continued*

And so you, remembering the wishes of our people
defend them,
because of that we ask Wakan Tanka for help
and we ask Him to hold us with pity in His heart
in order that the people will live again
and that whatever we do will be right -
That is what I want.
You have help for us from Wakan Tanka
that will be right
That is what I want.

Now that is all the talking I am going to do,
but first I want Wakan Tanka's help for you
Yes - that is what I want.
With my heart and my children's hearts together
with our hearts - we shake your hand.
May Wakan Tanka give you whatever help you need.

Your Father,
Nick Black Elk.

Endnotes written by Charlotte A. Black Elk, 1983

1. Rome, Italy, the residence of the Pope.
2. Apparent reference to the Hunka rite.
3. Apparent reference to the symbolism of piercing during the Sun Dance, when the dancer-symbolic of all the people - prays for the entire universe to live.
4. Apparent reference to the "day-break flower of understanding" in Black Elk's great vision (see 'Black Elk Speaks').
5. Apparent reference to the light of understanding, usually symbolized by the red and blue days.
6. The name the Lakota call themselves - a common man in the world of the four relations - symbolic of the Lakota view that none is above the other.
7. The name given by Black Elk to Joseph Epes Brown, author of 'The Sacred Pipe'.
8. Name used for Catholics, particularly the Jesuits.
9. Written in English in letter.
10. The four leggeds, two leggeds, the winged and taku skan skan.

A Letter from Black Elk

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Letters of Black Elk

I have noted, with great interest, the various letters regarding Lakota religion, culture and attitudes in the Lakota Times since your paper has been in circulation. I thought it would be nice to share with you and your readers the enclosed translation of a letter written in 1948 by my great-grandfather, Nick Black Elk. I have copyrighted the translation and am allowing the Lakota Times to print it, with the notation that it is copyrighted, so it would be accessible to the Lakota people and other people who walk the good red road.

It is unfortunate that we have been forced, as Lakota

people, to get permission from non-Indian individuals and institutions to use information about ourselves. In light of the many persons who are postulating theories, in many cases establishing careers, and earning personal incomes on the writings of Black Elk, it is appropriate that information from the source be available.

Nick dictated the letter and my grandfather, Ben, did the transcribing in Lakota. My father, Henry, kept the letter for thirty years and gave it to me in 1978. The letter was written to a Trappist Monk who taught himself to write Lakota and corresponded with Nick. Nick came to regard him as a son and named him "Lakota Isnala."

The translation was done by me, although I am not an ethnologist, anthro, or other person trained in the study of cultures; I do read, write and speak Lakota and believe the translation is accurate.

There are many individuals who believe that Black Elk discarded all things Lakota, except the language, when he became a Catholic. I think the letter shows that Nick Black Elk was a man who knew prayer and could rise above the dogma of both Lakota and Christian philosophy and theology, finding the real truths. My father told me his grandfather once said "when you throw aside all of the 'household' (unessential) portions of religion, you would know and understand that there is a higher order of truth." The letter is possibly the last written by Black Elk before his death in 1950.

I really appreciate the forum your paper offers to all of us, both in the search for understanding and the sharing of information.

Thank you,

/s/ Charlotte A. Black Elk
Manderson, S. D.

Manderson, South Dakota
March 4, 1948

Where the Holy Father sits. (1)
My holy son, pity the Lakota of this first letter I am writing.

I have received your letter and have it here.
Your Holy Father knows me.
Now I too call him "the Great Holy Father"
because that is a sacred relationship. (2)
Indeed, he is the one who is fastened with iron chains, (3)
because he is the keeper of Wakan Tanka's thoughts and laws,
he is the other sacred flower. (4)
That is why I keep him in my heart.
Now my heart is getting sad - but my heart will never turn bad.
Ever since Wakan Tanka gave light to my heart, (5)
it stands in light without end.

And now from your own thoughts,
a flower will grow in my heart.
Yes - that is how it is.

My people now stand in suffering
but the people are growing again
they will start to live again
that I believe.

The reason this will happen is
there is a growing remembering of the sacred pipe.
I am Lakota alone, that is what I am named,
and Lakota all of them, the hardest suffering of men
stand strong facing Wakan Tanka
that is why you defend them
That I know.

Now I am writing a book about the Ikce Wicasa (6)
So now you will see my heart and my mind,
you will see them fully.
That is how it is.

Yes - now in this house is a young man
he is called Canupa Yuba Mani (7)
I stayed with him three months.
My son lives here and now we are staying with him.
I went with him to a feast
I ate with him
and with him I smoked the sacred pipe.
Whenever we are going to make a writing
we first pray,
and we send a voice remembering you.
Canupa Yuba Mani has gone home now
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The men have wives and the woman has a husband.
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My daughter has four children, three daughters and one son,
My youngest son has four children, two daughters and two sons.
That is how it is -
These are my children
and I want them to live well on this earth.
Remember them in your prayers,
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Now I believe in the black robes (8)
and it is 30 years now that I have been a Catechist.
and I, along with my children, am catholic.
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They do Wakan Tanka's will on this earth.
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And so I know they lived well long ago.
Indeed, Wakan Tanka gave this whole world to the Ikce Wicasa
and to the people of the four relations (10)
It is so they could send a voice
that he gave it to them.
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defend them,
because of that we ask Wakan Tanka for help
and we ask Him to hold us with pity in His heart
in order that the people will live again
and that whatever we do will be right -
That is what I want.
You have help for us from Wakan Tanka
that will be right
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Now that is all the talking I am going to do,
but first I want Wakan Tanka's help for you
Yes - that is what I want.
With my heart and my children's hearts together
with our hearts - we shake your hand.
May Wakan Tanka give you whatever help you need.

Your Father,
Nick Black Elk

Private letter of Black Elk to Father Gall O.C.S.O. (his adopted son Lakota Isnala, aka Erich Schuon) March 4, 1948. Translated & published by his granddaughter Charlotte Black Elk in The Lakota Times, Nov. 2 1983. Copy in Marquette University Archives MUA_HRM-RCISS01-1_09-03_1948

Key to Foot Notes: 1. Rome, Italy, the residence of the Pope; 2. apparent reference to the Hunka (Hunk); 3. apparent reference to the symbolism of pinning during the Sun Dance, when the dancer - symbolic of all the people - prays for entire universe to hear; 4. apparent reference to the "day break flower of understanding" in Black Elk's great vision (see "Black Elk Speaks"); 5. apparent reference to the light of understanding, usually symbolized by the red and blue days; 6. the name the Lakota call themselves - a common name in the world of the four relations - symbolic of the Lakota view that none is above the other; 7. the name given by Black Elk to Joseph Epes Brown, author of "The Sacred Pipe"; 8. name used for Catholics, particularly the Jesuits; 9. written in English in letter; and 10. the four leggeds, two leggeds, the winged and taksi skin skin.

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