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An Application of Lakota Ethics to the Contemporary American Waste Crisis

In reading about the traditions and lifestyles of the Plains Indians, one can't help but observe a stark contrast in the ethical worlds of indigenous peoples and contemporary, non-indigenous Americans. This contrast is perhaps most noticeable in the context of environmental crises. Take American wastefulness, for example; the United States accounts for only about 4 percent of the world's population, yet generates 12 percent of the planet's municipal solid waste. Each American produces nearly 2,000 pounds of this waste annually—and these figures don't even account for the colossal atmospheric contributions to global climate change, nor the damaging implications on human and non-human lives. While many optimists have rested their hopes in a technological solution to modern Western wastefulness, their efforts continue to fall short. This is certainly owing to the overlook of one simple truth with profound implications: our environmental crisis is a *spiritual* crisis.

Recall, for a moment, Black Elk's description of the summer of 1883, when the last of the bison herds was slaughtered by the white man; where there had previously been too many bison to count, the white men came to kill until there were "only heaps of bones scattered where they used to be." Black Elk recalls how "the Wasichus did not kill them to eat; they killed them for the metal that makes them crazy, and they took only the hides," sometimes only taking tongues to sell, and sometimes killing simply because "they liked to" (Neihardt 213). In contrast, Black Elk recalls, "we killed only what we needed" (Neihardt 213). Although this illustration of non-indigenous American wastefulness is not entirely comparable to that of modernity, the Wasichus' driving spiritual deficit is nearly identical to the corruption that underlies our own environmental situation. Greed, gluttony, thoughtlessness, and selfish ambitions—are these not the same traits that lead us to wastefulness today? And in the same way, are not the ways of Black Elk's people just as fitting of a solution to this wastefulness then as they are today? Although we will certainly never be able to understand nor internalize the heart of Lakota spirituality—as this kind of understanding is fostered through a truly holistic immersion and upbringing—we would do well to learn from their ethics of care and kinship. From Lakota methods of harvesting and hunting, to the underlying thought of their material culture, the inevitable result is their characteristic frugality, a reflection of their innermost spiritual stance and worldview.

I recognize the impossibility of adopting Lakota spirituality—something broad, subjective, and ultimately sacred—but see great opportunity in studying the ethical practices of the Lakota—that is, acting according to "good" and moral values of their society. With this, it is certainly true that ethics might be a reflection of one's spirituality; and while it is impossible for us to entirely understand and experience the spiritual heart of Lakota tradition, we would do well to look to the Lakota example in addressing our wastefulness. In the remainder of this essay, I will first detail the contrast in indigenous and non-indigenous worldviews, go on to discuss the consequent manifestations in Lakota practice and material culture, and conclude with a discussion of potential applications and lessons for non-indigenous Americans seeking to correct a wasteful lifestyle.

A Contrast in Worldviews

Considering the differences between Anglo-American and Lakota worldviews is a helpful way to understand why contemporary Americans lead a more wasteful lifestyle. With this, one of the most marked distinctions is linearity versus circularity. In the worlds of Black Elk, "everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle" (Neihardt 194). The earth, the stars, the wind in its whirling, the birds in their circling nests; the sun rises and falls in a circle, as does the moon, and even the seasons. This is reflected in the design of Lakota teepees, as well as in their nation's hoop, their clothing, and their arts. Not only do the Lakota recognize the circularity of natural patterns and forces, but the circularity of life—not only for the cycle of human life, but for all of life, amongst individuals as well as collectively. In

accordance, the Lakota are aware of the natural world's regenerative character. This may contribute to the Lakota value of environmental conservation and discouragement of wastefulness; they seem to understand that although nature is regenerative, this renewal is stifled by anthropogenic wastes and human carelessness. This understanding informs their ethics of land care, as they seek to take only as much as they need and nothing more, as reflected in the story of the Little Plant (which we will touch on later). Whereas non-native American culture invites its practitioners to toss their food and plastic waste away without a second thought, this alternative worldview instills the awareness that there is no "away" in actuality; conversely, "everything comes back upon itself" (Dooling 12). Not only do our wastes come back to harm our own bodies—through the air, water, and land that we pollute and mistreat—but the earth that we draw from, as well. While our Western minds are tempted to believe in the promise of linear progress, in the illusion of some "away" that will happily accept and store our wastes, the wisdom of Lakota spirituality offers a more truthful perspective; *everything comes back upon itself*. Black Elk recalled the strategy of the white men to remove them from their circular ways, namely through putting them in "square boxes," as opposed to their spiritually-circular teepees. "Our power is gone," he remembers, "and we are dying, for the power is not in us any more" (Neihardt 196). This heartbreaking account testifies to the truly pivotal role of their circular worldview. Perhaps internalizing this reality of reciprocity and circularity is a first step towards the rejection of our wasteful ways.

To the Lakota, circles are also reflective of the central theme of *relationship*. Represented in the concentric circle pattern of the universe, as explained by Joseph Brown in *Becoming Part of It*, we observe "the immediate family reaching out to the extended family, to the band, outward again to the clan, to the tribal group; and relationships do not stop there but extend to embrace and relate to the environment; to the land, to the animals, to the plants, and to the clouds, the elements, the heavens, the stars; and ultimately those relationships that people express and live, extend to embrace the entire universe" (Dooling 11). This is, in my belief, one of the strongest reasons for Lakotan environmental mindfulness. Not only do they understand the cyclical patterns of nature, but the familial bonds that unite us with our non-human neighbors, as well. Both their words and lives proclaim "*mitakuye oyasin!*" (We are all relatives!)" (Brown 53). Black Elk asks of us, "is not the sky a father and the earth a mother, and are not all living things with feet or wings or roots their children?" (Neihardt 3). This, of course, contrasts the Western worldview emphasizing individuality and linearity; we fail to recognize the ramifications of our wasteful ways on our brothers and sisters, failing to remember that "the two-leggeds and all the other peoples who stand upon this earth are sacred and should be treated as such" (Brown 7). Just as Black Elk maintains that "only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth" (Neihardt 135), I believe that this same foolishness underlies the contemporary tendency to treat the natural gifts of our Mother Earth without thought. Ultimately, I recognize two faults of the non-native American worldview that contribute to such wastefulness; not only the failure to recognize circularity—that "everything comes back upon itself—but the familial bonds that oblige us to better care for all "peoples" of the earth.

Manifestations in Material Culture

The power of a worldview is found in its manifestations, for "the power of a thing or an act is in the meaning and the understanding" (Brown 32). To relate this to contemporary American wastefulness, our failure to recognize the value of circularity and interconnectedness is foundational to our harmful materialism and wasteful habits. In contrast, this wisdom pervades Lakota material culture, as well as the conservation and gratitude underlying their foodways and harvesting practices. To address the latter, an earlier mentioned passage from Black Elk—concerning the Wasichus' thoughtless massacre of bison—concludes with a line that represents their worldview well: "when we hunted the bison, we killed only what we needed" (Neihardt 213). This, of course, is juxtaposed against the American tendency to hoard and accumulate, and eventually throw away without consideration for these actions' consequences.

Conversely, the Lakota approached their buffalo hunting with an understanding of the hunt's sacred nature in mind. In Black Elk's description of the smoking of the sacred pipe before a great bison hunt, he imparts, "the bison was sacred, [for it] gave us both food and shelter" (Neihardt 55). After the preparation of the meat, people came from "all directions" to share the rewards of the hunt; and "when they had eaten all they could, the crier shouted to the people: 'All come home! It is more than I can eat!' And people from all over the camp came to get a little of the meat that was left over" (Neihardt 58). Not only did Black Elk's community ensure that all of the meat was eaten and shared, but they made use of the carcasses in their clothing, teepees, tools, as well as "sleds made out of bison jaws and ribs tied together with rawhide" (Neihardt 62). Here, we see the circularity and interconnectedness of the Lakota worldview put into practice; their mindful use of the buffalos' bodies ensured that the death of these animals contributed well to the continuity of life through their sustenance, as well as a reverence for the provisions of the buffalo "people." Not only do we see such frugality in the Lakota use of bison, but in their fishing and harvesting, as well. Black Elk recalls, "we always made an offering of bait to the fish, saying: 'You who are down in the water with wings of red, I offer this to you; so come hither.' Then when we caught the first fish we would put it on a forked stick and kiss it" (Neihardt 65). This offering and tender handling perhaps instilled a mindfulness that discouraged wasting the fishes' lives. Likewise, the native tradition of speaking to the first fruits of harvest, as well as practice of gathering only as much as is needed, reflects this respectful conservation, as well. In every stage of Lakota foodways, the recognition of relationality is central; these resources are not objects to be commodified—for *only crazy or very foolish men would sell their Mother Earth*—but gifts to be cherished and treated well. We observe the wastefulness of the Wasichus, who kill buffalo for their tongues and hides alone, casting the rest away to rot. It is tempting to criticize their plunder if we turn away from the ways in which we commit these same crimes of wastefulness today.

Not only is the Lakota appreciation for life and relationality present in their hunt and harvest, but in their material culture, as well. In *Becoming Part of It*, Brown offers the example of a native basketmaker. When she goes out to collect the grasses for her basket, "she prays to the grasses, she enters into a relationship with them as she gathers, and makes offerings in return for having taken their life" (Dooling 15). As she weaves, she will "pass the grass between her lips to moisten it, but also to breathe upon it, to give her life breath into the grass and thus give to the basket a special sacred quality that is always present in its use and tangible presence." Just the same as in the case of the buffalo hunt, the weaver carries her appreciation for the grasses' sacred nature throughout the entirety of the weaving process. Brown goes on to explain how there is "no dichotomy between arts and craft" as in the conventional non-native understanding. Perhaps this is yet another reason for ease by which Americans discard and mistreat their belongings; few of our possessions have this sacred and personal value to us, making it all the easier to toss them away. For the Lakota, however, the beauty of their utilitarian objects makes them worthy of protection, and even worthy of passing on to a neighbor in the ceremonial Give-Aways. "All necessary implements, utensils, and tools in Native American life-ways," Brown imparts, "are of technical excellence and are also beautiful. They must be made in special sacred ways, and the materials of the tools and objects made have to be gathered with prayer and offerings" (Dooling 15). Here, I recognize the central role of intentionality; not only do the Lakota maintain a life-embracing worldview, but the morals that stem from this are seen in their practices and possessions, as well. This happens not by accident, but by deliberation. One of Black Elk's descriptions of the Lakota way encompasses this well: "we regard all created beings as sacred and important, for everything has a *wochangi* or influence which can be given to us, through which we may gain a little more understanding if we are attentive" (Brown 59). "*Be attentive!*" he reminds us (Brown 64). One should be continually and intensely attentive to the Divine presence pervading all lives and objects. An inevitable result of this kind of attention and care is, of course, a denial of wasteful practices and an environmental consciousness that makes this denial all the easier. In my estimation, thoughtlessness is perhaps the greatest contributor to the 239 million tons of municipal waste

that Americans produce on an annual basis. In recent years, Americans have increasingly sought to do away with Styrofoam and single-use plastics, largely owing to the simple recognition of these products' harms. What good might come from a more holistic recognition of our wasteful lifestyles' environmental impact? While it is, of course, encouraging to look to the Lakota value of intentionality in this conversation of waste, we must remind ourselves again: our environmental crisis is a *spiritual* crisis. This is not to suggest that practical solutions are not needed, but, rather, to highlight the spiritual deficiencies that catalyze our wasteful ways. While I have no concrete answers on how we might best learn from the Lakota hunting, harvesting, and craft making, it is clear that addressing our thoughtlessness is an important place to begin.

It is certainly true that the colossal problem of American waste is due, in part, to a lack of political will and social commitment, as well as a failure to invest in proper recycling programs and infrastructures. However, a sustainable, waste-conscious lifestyle cannot be achieved through external means alone. Conversely, we must adopt a new ethics of care, one inspired by the intentionality and understanding of circularity and relationship that distinguishes the Lakota way. In seeking to overcome the wastefulness that has come to define American culture and society, we must recognize and understand the enduring history of the white man's plunder, and face the ways in which this damages not only us as plunderers, but the marginalized peoples and non-human lifeforms that suffer as a result. Although I acknowledge the impossibility of distilling the Lakota way of life down to individual values (as this would negate the holistic nature of their culture), I believe that it is nonetheless possible to draw inspiration for improvement from the aforementioned themes of circularity and familial relationship with non-human life, as well the visible manifestations of these values in Lakota foodways and material culture.

Perhaps one method of "drawing inspiration" to combat waste might be through storytelling—either stories of our own, or stories of the Lakota. Take the story of The Little Plant from Paul White Dress, for example; after a girl and her grandmother move away from their camp due to a sudden sickness, the girl's nightly prayers and expression of continual faithfulness lead her to an encounter with one small plant. Its voice speaks in comforting words, telling her that the Creator will heal her grandmother because of the girl's great faith and strength; but the plant also informs her that her community's sickness was a consequence of them "being very wasteful with the abundance around them," and that the Creator was upset with their greed, failure to share, and habit of "taking more than they needed." They thought only of themselves, and were punished with the sickness as a result. As a gift, the Creator offered the girl a hillside full of medicinal flowers to bring back to her people and to heal her grandmother. White Dress continues, this was "one of the reminders that every living thing that we see, that we yearn for in today's world, material things—televisions, everything that we work so hard for, long for—comes from the earth in one form or another." To address my earlier point, it is impossible to separate Lakota values from their holistic lifestyle, but a story such as this reveals that even non-native Americans can draw much wisdom from the Lakota way. In this case, we find that the indigenous ideal of frugality and denial of selfish motivation are not intrinsic, but, rather, taught. We find that even the Lakota peoples of this legend were tempted to accumulate the wealth of nature, to be wasteful; it is certainly reassuring to find that we are also able to turn away from wasteful practices. Additionally, the plant's reminder that every material thing "comes from the earth in one form another" instills a sense of greater responsibility for all individuals to treat their material possessions with care and concern. Failing to do so ultimately reflects a failure to treat the earth as our mother, as well as a failure to care for one another. Black Elk's reflections from his time with Buffalo Bill come to mind: "I could see that the Wasichus did not care for each other the way our people did before the nation's hoop was broken. They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and maybe were starving. They had forgotten that the earth was their mother. This could

not be better than the old ways of my people” (Neihardt 217). Not only do our wasteful ways harm the earth, but our human brothers and sisters, as well. Wastefulness and justice are evidently incompatible.

While individual Americans overwhelmingly contribute to the modern throw-away culture—from single-use plastic items and food waste, to clothing and electronic appliances manufactured with planned obsolescence—this attention to their natural origins may lead us to more sustainable, minimalistic, and intentional lifestyles. Although it is, of course, impossible to reduce our consumption to levels as minimal as the traditional Lakota, the ideals and methods of cultivating spiritual maturity to avoid waste are nonetheless helpful for our own use. Again, we must recognize not only the contrast in our worldviews, but the tangible ways in which these respective worldviews manifest. Recall Black Elk’s description of the Lakota people before the coming of the Wasichus: “we were happy in our country and we were seldom hungry, for then the two-leggeds and the four-leggeds lived together like relatives, and there was plenty for them and for us” (Neihardt 9). However utopian this anecdote might seem, it speaks volumes to ways in which Lakota frugality and recognition of the sacred made such abundance a possibility. Although there is much to address and overcome in the wake of American wastefulness, looking to the example of the Lakota is a valuable start.

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