

# New Light on Black Elk and *The Sacred Pipe*

By Michael Fitzgerald

**B**lack Elk (1863-1950), the Lakota holy man, is beloved by millions of readers around the world. The first book the Indian visionary narrated, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1932), has substantially contributed to our understanding of traditional Plains Indian culture.<sup>1</sup> However, a landmark 1984 book, Raymond J. DeMallie's *The Sixth Grandfather: Black Elk's Teachings Given to John G. Neihardt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska), compared the text of *Black Elk Speaks* to the stenograph field notes and transcripts of Black Elk's original interviews and concluded that the book's author, John Neihardt, materially changed Black Elk's words in multiple places to suit his own personal agenda. DeMallie's work spawned scores of studies that debate the authenticity of Neihardt's editing from different and conflicting points of view.<sup>2</sup> Joseph Epes Brown's (1920-2000) collaboration with Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), significantly contributes to our understanding of traditional Sioux religion and helps to inform the ongoing academic debate about the Lakota visionary. Yet there is surprisingly little information available about Joseph Brown's personal philosophy and his editing process, in stark contrast to the mountain of material on John Neihardt's collaboration with Black Elk. Twenty-four as-of-yet unpublished letters written in the 1940s were recently discovered. Twenty-two letters were written by Joseph Brown and two

<sup>1</sup> Among its myriad praise, in 1999 a panel of experts lists *Black Elk Speaks* as one of the top ten spiritual books of the twentieth century. See Philip Zaleski, "Black Elk Speaks in the Top Ten Spiritual Books of the Century," *Neihardt Journal* 2 (2000):9.

<sup>2</sup> These studies deserve special attention for their comparisons of Neihardt's notes and transcripts to his final text: Sally McCluskey, "Black Elk Speaks: And So Does John Neihardt," *Western American Literature* 6, no. 4 (winter 1972):231-242; and Clyde Holler, "Lakota Religion and Tragedy: The Theology of *Black Elk Speaks*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LII, no. 1, 1984:19-45.

letters by one of his closest friends.<sup>3</sup> Those letters provide important new information that will help readers determine the extent to which Joseph Brown may have left a subjective imprint on Black Elk's testimony. Of perhaps greater importance, Joseph Brown's letters shed new light on the question "who was the real Black Elk and what is his legacy?"

### Joseph Epes Brown: The Spiritual Seeker

A recently published book, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary* by Joe Jackson, promises to be a highly influential work in the discussion on Black Elk's life. This 624 page book claims to be "the definitive biographical account" (dust jacket) of Black Elk's life and legacy. Jackson correctly credits Frithjof Schuon's interest in American Indian spirituality as the origin of Brown's quest to find Black Elk. The author provides this short introduction to Schuon, (1907-1998), a co-founder of the Perennialist School of thought:

One stream then flourishing in European thought sounded very Native American: a transcendent reality underlay all earthly existence, an idea not that different from Black Elk's "truer reality" of the spirit world. One branch of religious philosophy, called the "perennialist" perspective, believed that an "eternal religion" linked all earthly beliefs, be they Christian, Islam [sic], or Hindu: beyond the apparent reality of our earth lay something firmer, purer, more real. . . . The chief figure in the Perennialist School was the Swiss metaphysician Frithjof Schuon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Fifteen of Brown's letters were contemporaneously collected and archived by Frithjof Schuon. Extensive excerpts from thirteen of those letters were published in an appendix to *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian: Commemorative Edition with Letters While Living with Black Elk*, by Joseph Epes Brown, edited by Marina Brown Weatherly, Elenita Brown & Michael O. Fitzgerald (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007). Then in 2016, Paul Verbeeren provided me with sixteen additional letters written by Brown to Father Gall, the brother of Frithjof Schuon, and Joseph Fitzgerald found six of Brown's letters in Whittall Perry's papers. I provided copies of all these letters to the Brown family. Marina Brown Weatherly, who represents the Brown family, hopes to publish a revised edition of *The Sacred Pipe* with an appendix of extensive excerpts from all of her father's letters. She also intends to put copies of all of her father's papers, including his letters, "in a safe archive where many people could have access to the information" (personal correspondence dated November 17, 2016). Brown's remaining original letters are at World Wisdom in Bloomington or at the Abbaye Notre Dame de Scourmont in Belgium. The unpublished letters will remain private until such time as the Brown family makes their final decisions.

<sup>4</sup> Joe Jackson, *Black Elk: The Life of an American Visionary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), 457.

Joseph Brown's own words help to clarify his perspective, including his relationship with Frithjof Schuon and the goals of his trip. The story begins when four men destined to become lifelong friends met during WWII while working as conscientious objectors at a U.S. Forest Service camp in the Sierra Nevadas. Joseph Brown, Whitall Perry, John Murray, and Lester Kanefsky formed what Murray would later call an "informal reading group" to share their respective insights and discoveries as the four spiritual seekers studied the traditional doctrines of the world's religions.<sup>5</sup> Their study of Hinduism led them to the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center in New York City, where they met Swami Nikhilananda and Gerald Heard. In 1945 Heard pointed them to the works of Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947), the Boston-based Hindu scholar who is widely considered a co-founder of the Perennialist School of thought. Coomaraswamy then pointed the young men to the works of René Guénon (1886-1951), the third co-founder of the Perennialist School, and the French language journal *Études Traditionnelles*, which focused on writings by leading Perennialist thinkers.

In March 1946, Perry wrote that his touchstone was "the traditional doctrines of centuries back" and explained: "We now feel as certain as one can feel . . . (1) that the traditional viewpoint starting with principle and a thorough grounding in genuine metaphysic is the one true frame of reference, and (2) that total enlightenment can only come by learning from a *guru* who has himself reached the infallible guidance, the 'trackless trace.'"<sup>6</sup> Two months later Perry wrote, "We have the intention to associate ourselves with some traditional society."<sup>7</sup>

In May 1946, all four friends were living in New York City. Shortly thereafter, their paths diverged with Whitall Perry and Kanefsky moving to Cairo to meet Guénon, who, in turn, referred the four friends to Frithjof Schuon in the autumn of 1946.

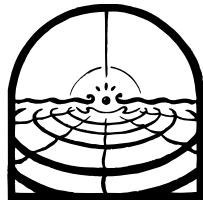
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<sup>5</sup> Whitall N. Perry (1920-2005) became a leading voice in the Perennialist School of thought. He is the author of the monumental anthology *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1971). John M. Murray (1910-1999) was one of Brown's closest friends, evidenced by his closing comment to Murray in a March 12, 1948 letter from Aiken, SC, "I shall end [this letter] as did Old Black Elk in a recent message to me: 'To my brother, with my heart I shake hands with you.' My mother also sends you her very best wishes."

<sup>6</sup> Whitall Perry letter to Gerald Heard, March 14, 1946.

<sup>7</sup> Whitall Perry letter to Mr. Gregg, May 17, 1946.

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