

Heyoka: A Man Taller than his Shadow

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From the south, up above, a threatening mass of dark thunderclouds moved swiftly towards the direction of a Lakota camp. A storm coming from the South was much feared by the people for the devastation it could bring. Noting the signs, the people fearfully gathered around their Protector, the old Holy Man. As a Thunder Dreamer, this sacred clown or Heyoka was much more than just an ordinary man. He was the Defender of his Red People as well as their sanctuary and stronghold from the storms of life.

The old Heyoka with people around him, stood and faced the West, the direction of his vision. The sky darkened all around. With tears in his eyes and his arms raised, palms held upwards to the heavens, he prayed in a strong clear voice, "Wakan Tanka, from the clouds you gave me a bow. But my aim has been poor and my resolve has faltered. Hear my pitiful voice that the Wakinyan (Thunder Beings) who bring this storm from the South will listen to me. Cleanse this place so new life may bloom upon the earth once more. We are few and I am one, but I pray to you with faith. Spare my people and make us new again."

As he finished this powerful prayer, the old Heyoka parted the clouds with a waving upward motion of his hands. The people watched as the massive thunderstorm so near them, miraculously divided in half, leaving the people safely in the middle. That evening around the campfire, there was laughter, soup and prayers of thanksgiving, for once again the peoples' faith in Wakan Tanka was strengthened. They had seen their beloved old Heyoka "charge" the heavens and use his sacred vision to save his Red People, thereby giving them hope for the future.

The Heyoka is a man taller than his shadow. The extraordinary power to part clouds is seldom used unless lives are threatened. The Heyoka is a creature of faith but at the same time, he is a "rebel" because he stubbornly refuses to accept defeat even when he faces impossible odds. Cancer is a foe which many believe is impossible to defeat, yet some of our fearless Heyoka have faced and defeated cancer, Joe Eagle Elk and my son as well as others in the past. In western society, most doctors would have given up, telling the patient that cancer is incurable.

Today our brother the buffalo is nearly gone, just as the Heyoka is near extinction too. Both were part of the "Golden Age" of the Heyoka, when our people were strong physically, spiritually and culturally. This was a time when our people walked the Red Road and our Lakota virtues of honesty, courage, fortitude, wisdom, humility, generosity and loyalty were practiced, not just spoken of. Our Heyoka, including Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse were proud members of leadership and Akicita (warrior) Societies such as the Strong Heart Society and Kit Fox Society. These warriors pledged that in battle, they would stake themselves down with a sash and never retreat even if death was a certainty. This was courage which seems to also have become extinct in our leadership today, for who is willing to die for their people?

In order to survive these past centuries, we Lakota have had to be tough and resilient people. Many of us today follow in the bloody footprints left by our ancestors. Stubbornly, in the spirit of the Heyoka, our ancestors refused to give up during the Trail

of Tears, after the Sand Creek Massacre, and in spite of Wounded Knee, our people still live. Let us call back that “Heyoka rebel spirit” which is a part of our Red Identity and our Red Indigenous Pride so that we do not become a caricature of the true Lakota spirit.

The Heyoka is much misunderstood even by our own Lakota today. By being around two Lakota Heyoka, my Grandfather, Chief Lame Deer, Tahca Uste, and my son, I have learned several things. The Heyoka is a brotherhood of those in the present as well as those Heyoka who have gone on. A Heyoka is the human hand as well as the spiritual warrior of the Wakinyan, the Thunder Beings. Though favored and protected by Wakan Tanka, with great power but an even greater responsibility, the Heyoka’s life is never his own. Some of the Heyoka such as Chief Frank Fools Crow, were able to lead exemplary lives. He was fortunate to have been raised from early childhood in a family which was steeped in Lakota tradition, culture and knowledge about spirituality.

By his own account, Chief Frank Fools Crow had the support, understanding and assistance from his family and the spiritual community who understood his calling. However other Heyoka have not been as fortunate to have this support system. Not all Heyoka fully understood this calling from which they could not run. As a result, some were humbled and suffered personal tragedy until they agreed to do what was asked of them. Joseph Eagle Elk, a great Heyoka, who is no longer with us today, gave a very poignant account of his own personal struggle in his autobiography, *The Price of a Gift*. Ultimately, whether the Heyoka lives an exemplary life or not, there is no denying that all Heyoka are mysteriously and spiritually gifted by Wakan Tanka and the Wakinyan (Thunder Beings) and remain a Heyoka even beyond death.

The words of the Heyoka are like a lightning bolt which can pierce the heart, for the Heyoka’s words can have a “sharp edge.” However, if one looks beyond the initial sting, one may realize that the words which make a person the angriest, usually have truth to them. Sometimes, “the truth hurts.” But one never really knows the true intention of the Heyoka if we listen to the literal meaning of the words. Something which is said today by a Heyoka may actually pertain to an event yet to come in the future. Or a Heyoka may not reveal all he knows for his existence is in faith. If a person is told everything, this person may give up. A Heyoka has a higher calling and must be strong enough to go against human instinct in order to hold out hope for the people to keep them going during times of difficulty.

One of the greatest misconceptions is that one “chooses” to be a Heyoka. This is not true. Just as a buffalo cannot “choose” to become a goat, and vice versa, neither can an ordinary person wake up one day and “choose” to become a Heyoka. One cannot take classes to learn to become a Heyoka or “train” to become a Heyoka. There is no way to become “certified” or “apprentice” to become a Heyoka. One cannot go up on the hill on a vision quest and dream it up and one certainly cannot make it up. It is Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery, who chooses the Heyoka before he or she is ever born. Who in their right mind would willingly choose such a life of hardship and sacrifice?

In today’s plastic world, there are many fakes who are driven by greed or desire to become notorious. But there are ways to tell the real Heyoka from a fake. Can this person handle fire or pick up hot stones with his bare hands without being burned? Can he prophesy? There are spiritual consequences for those who lie about such things. For

the Thunder Beings fiercely protect their own and their helpers. Long ago, each tribe had their own Heyoka or sacred clowns who were their protectors and defenders. Now, just as the eagle and the buffalo are disappearing, so are the Heyoka.

“One Heyoka always knows another Heyoka when he meets one,” according to Richard Erdoes, co-author of the book on Grandpa John’s life, *Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions*, while reminiscing about a time when two Lakota Heyoka, Grandpa John Fire and Henry Crow Dog, who were friends, were both guests at Erdoes’ New York apartment at the same time during a civil rights march in the late 1960s. According to Erdoes, these two Heyoka enjoyed each other’s company but due to the Heyoka nature to be “contrary,” they enjoyed verbal jousting and argued through the night into the early morning hours.

According to Grandpa John and my son, the Heyoka power tends to stay within the bloodline of a particular family although it might skip a generation or two, the power is always there. Notably, the Eagle Elk family was one such family. Another one of our most noted Heyoka was Tasunka Witko, Chief Crazy Horse, whose life was a continual battle to save his people, for a warrior’s work never ends, especially not the “half-man, half-spirit” warrior that he was. Chief Crazy Horse’s heart was a stronghold for his Red People, big enough to include other tribes beyond his own tribal affiliation. Today, at Pine Ridge, Northern Cheyenne Chief Dull Knife’s descendants, who were protected by this great man, still live among our people. Though short in stature, Chief Crazy Horse, the Heyoka, was a man taller than his shadow. I dedicate this story to our beloved Lakota Heyoka, past and present, including my son Wiconi who have had the courage to keep the “rebel” Heyoka spirit alive, “hecel Oyate kin nipi kte” so that our people should live.

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