

Earth-Centered Traditions

Lesson 6: Good and Evil

3.13.2022

Objectives: Exploring the nature of good and evil in Lakota religion.

Materials: Fly swatters and cards, flipchart, wakan flashcards.

Time allotments: Suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 20 minute closing service (end class around 9:50/11:50 to begin chapel 9:55/11:55).

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins):

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ In film, who is the best “bad guy”?
 - ▶ What helps you decide whether something is good or bad?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: “Swat-Off Opposites (5 minutes max)

Youth gather in circle on the floor. Spread words (attached) around the floor in the center of the circle. Give two youth sitting opposite each other flyswatters. Say the OPPOSITE of one of the words below (in parentheses). The first youth to swat the opposite word gets to keep his or her flyswatter for another turn. The slower of the youth passes their flyswatter to the person on the left. Keep reading and swatting, passing the flyswatter around and dueling different youth.

Swat-off words: (teacher reads the word in parentheses; repeating is fine)

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| • Clean (Dirty) | • Light (Dark) | • Narrow (Wide) |
| • Cold (Hot) | • Loud (Quiet) | • Kind (Mean) |
| • Easy (Difficult) | • Old (Young) | • Male (Female) |
| • Wealthy (Poor) | • Slow (Fast) | • Start (Finish) |
| • Death (Life) | • Small (Large) | • Sick (Healthy) |
| • High (Low) | • True (False) | • Safe (Dangerous) |
| • Weak (Strong) | • Tall (Short) | • Wise (Foolish) |

3. **Chalice Lighting:** Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith; the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (from Letakos-Lesa, Pawnee chief)

“All things in the world are two. In our minds we are two, good and evil. With our eyes we see two things, things that are fair and things that are ugly... We have the right hand that strikes and makes for evil, and we have the left hand full of kindness, near the heart. One foot may lead us to an evil way, the other foot may lead us to a good. So are all things two, all two.”

4. **Lakota Perspective on Good and Evil** (10 minutes)

Teacher summarizes and writes up following vocabulary that helps understand Lakota spirituality:

WAKAN: In the Lakota worldview, the Universe is composed of a finite amount of energy; good and evil are thus two aspects of the same energy. This animating energy is referred to as *wakan* and the nature of *wakan* is seen in its cause and effect. The Lakota, however, acknowledge that human beings cannot always see cause or effect of good and evil *wakan* energy.

The word *wakan* is difficult to translate, though many use the phrase “of the sacred mystery” to sum up its vast meaning in Lakota spirituality. *Wakan* itself is not always clearly good or evil. For example, the roots of certain plants are *wakan* because they are poisonous, or some reptiles are considered *wakan* because the stories handed down from generation to generation have said the *wakan* beings made them so. A person acting out of the norm, appearing “crazy” is *wakan*. Even alcohol, which makes one “crazy,” is *wakan*. On the other hand, food is *wakan* because it gives life. Very old things are *wakan* because their origin is a mystery. Babies are *wakan* because they do not speak. Every object in the world has a spirit and that spirit is *wakan*, good or evil, put there by *Wakan Tanka*.

WAKAN TANKA: The good aspects of energy are controlled by *Wakan Tanka* (*tanka* means “great”). Among non-Lakota people, *Wakan Tanka* is most commonly named “The Great Spirit.” Evil aspects are controlled by *Wakan šica* (pronounced *wakan sheecha*, meaning “evil sacred”) or the Devil. Human beings may harness good energy toward their own ends by pleasing the Great Spirit/*Wakan Tanka* with prayers, offerings, and right action. They may harness evil energy by pleasing *Wakan šica* through misdeeds and ignoring ritual actions. *Wakan šica* is subordinate to *Wakan Tanka*, and humans are subordinate to both.

TON: Energy also has two aspects: visible and invisible. The potential to transform visible energy into invisible energy, and the reverse, is called *ton*. The word *ton* can mean “power to do the natural and the supernatural.” The *ton* of every invisible aspect is its

visible aspect. Invisible aspects are to be feared. Evil invisible aspects are the causes of sickness and misfortune.

ŠICUN: A human being becomes spiritually powerful through visions with the supernatural. To increase power, one must accumulate the *šicun* (soul or spirit energy) of as many animate and inanimate objects as possible. To help other people ward off sickness and evil, one must invest them with some of their own accumulated *šicun*. Thus a paradox: the more people they help, the more *šicun* they give away, the more power they lose.

5. Activity: What is *wakan*? (20 minutes)

- Use set of flashcards of objects that are considered *wakan* or “part of the sacred mystery.”

***Note:** Being *wakan* does not readily indicate whether something is good or evil, or how we should treat it. That remains acquired knowledge in the Lakota tradition. But we can still get a sense of Lakota ideas of good/evil.

- Pair youth and give each pair one or more flashcards (distribute as many as time allows). Have youth decide whether the *wakan* item is good or evil by reflecting on questions on the back of the photo.

- Leave enough time to regather youth and share back in the larger group.

***Note:** Teachers will have some of the “right” answers about what is good and evil (see the following), but **resist framing it as simply “right” versus “wrong.”** Rather, **ask where we get our ideas about good and evil and why the Lakota might think differently.**

Answers:

- **PIPES** are *wakan* and were given to the Lakota by Wakan Tanka and the White Buffalo Calf Woman at the time of creation. They are used in all rituals, including healing. The chief of the tribe must have the pipe to lead well. When friends argue, the *ton* of the pipe helps them make peace. The pipe is smoked before war, signaling its good energy. If someone rudely walks right in front of someone smoking the *wakan* pipe, the smoker will empty the bowl, clean it out, and start with fresh tobacco.
- **BEARS** are *wakan* goodness. If a man dreams of a bear, he is very likely to be a healer/doctor. Bear’s power can heal wounded warriors.
- **TOADS** are good *wakan*. They have healing wisdom. If a man dreams of a toad, he is given the power to suck out poison and bad blood.
- **BLACK TAILED DEER** are evil *wakan*. If a man tries to hunt one, all his arrows will miss; and frustrated, the hunter may go crazy. The deer can make hunters sick by “shooting” back evil energy. Charcoal is the only cure and only strong men survive encounters with black-tailed deer *šicun*.

- **HORSES** are powerful *wakan*. If a man is honest with his horse and cares for it, the horse will give him good *wakan*. If a man mistreats his horse, the *wakan* is evil. (For example: If a man's horse is too lean, there is not enough grazing. The man will promise the horse "No one will ride you for one month so that you may get fat." If someone rides the horse before the month is up, breaking the promise, that man will fall from the horse and break his neck.) Women must not ride fast horses; a woman's energy will slow the horse down forever.
 - **MOUNTAIN LIONS** and all cats are *wakan* and their good or evil depends on how they are treated. If a man hunts or mutilates the body of a mountain lion, terrible things will happen to him. His hand or foot may break or become dislocated so he can never hunt again.
 - **GOPHERS** are terrible *wakan šicun* energy. No one goes near gophers' burrows, lest the animals attack them with unseen evil power. *Scrofula* (or tuberculosis of the lymph nodes in the neck) is the result of gopher evil burrowing into the body. Badger fat can cure *scrofula* because badgers are one of the few animals that can kill gophers in their burrows.
 - **SPIDERS** are *wakan* and deserve respect. They are clever and trick people into believing what is not true. When a person has to kill a spider, they must say aloud, "Grandfather, the Thunder Spirits are killing you." A man who follows this rule will never be bitten by spiders. If you offend a spider, it will bite you.
 - **NATURAL SPRINGS** have both good and evil *wakan*. Lakota never drink from a spring at night, as springs attack at night with evil power.
 - **INFANTS** are *wakan* because they do not speak but embody sacred mystery.
 - **QUARRY at PIPESTONE, MN** are good *wakan*. This stone is flesh and blood of the first people, ancestors of the Lakota. Only this stone is used to make *wakan* pipes, and only registered Lakota tribal members may enter the quarries at Pipestone National Monument (in southwestern Minnesota).
 - **WHITE BUFFALO CALF** born into the world is a powerful and good *wakan*, and perhaps the most sacred symbol in Lakota tradition. The birth of a white buffalo calf fulfills prophecies of a time of hope and peace. A white calf was born in Janesville, WI, in 1994!
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6. Questions for Discussion (15 minutes)

- Reflecting on this exercise, how do you imagine Lakota people derive their sense of good and evil? (How might good and evil be constantly reshaped by ongoing experience and changing understanding? Could what is evil one moment turn out to be good the next?)
- How does this compare to our own cultural take on good and evil? (Think of static, preset notions of Good and Evil in contrast with “good” and “evil” as determined in ongoing relationships from situation to situation.)
- Imagine as the Lakota, that good and evil belong together as part of a greater unity and wholeness. How then do we respond to good and evil? What are we to make of good and evil? Can/Should we ever get rid of “evil”?

7. Say goodbye until next time: Extinguish the chalice, saying together: *“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”*

8. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets