

Miracle
My Amazing Encounter with a White Buffalo
By
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Long ago the Lakota Oyate, the People of the Nation, were in the midst of a terrible famine. Chief Standing Hollow Horn sent two of their best hunters to find food. Along the way, they saw something in the distance coming toward them. Before long they could see it was a *waken*, their word for a *sacred* being. They knew this because it was floating, not walking. When the *waken* was close enough, they saw the most beautiful woman they'd ever seen. She had two red dots of face paint on her cheeks and wore a bright white buckskin outfit, embroidered with colorful designs drawn delicately with a porcupine quill. Her long black hair hung loose, except for a single strand tied back with buffalo fur.

Overcome with lust, one of the young hunters became disrespectful and was immediately struck by lightning. Because the other hunter had treated her well, the *waken* told him to go back to the People of the Great Nation and tell them to prepare for her arrival by constructing a medicine lodge. Four days later the Lakota people saw the *waken*, whom they named, White Buffalo Calf Woman, approaching, carrying a bundle with her. When she arrived, Chief Standing Hollow Horn honored her and said, "Sister, we are glad you are here and happy to hear your instruction."

She then entered the medicine lodge they had constructed and circled its interior like the Sun. After showing them how to make an altar of the red earth, she opened her bundle and removed the *chanupa*, the Sacred Pipe. She filled it with red tobacco and demonstrated the right way to smoke it by walking around the lodge four times, like the great Sun, representing the Sacred Hoop, the circle without end. Its fire is the fire without end, passed from generation to generation, and its smoke is the living breath of Great Grandfather Mystery.

White Buffalo Calf Woman then showed the people the right way to pray by lifting the *chanupa* up toward Grandfather Sky, and down toward Grandmother Earth, then in all four directions, to complete the Sacred Hoop. "With this holy pipe," she told them, "you will walk like a living prayer. With your feet resting upon the earth and the pipe stem reaching into the sky, your body forms a living bridge between the Sacred Beneath and the Sacred Above. Wakan Tanka smiles upon us, because now we are as one: earth, sky, all living things, the two legged, the four legged, the winged ones, the trees, the grasses. Together with the people, they are all related, one family. The pipe holds them all together."

After teaching them more about the sacred pipe and its meaning, she turned to the women of the tribe and said, "You are from the Mother Earth. What you do is as great as what the warriors are doing." She then turned to the children of the tribe and said,

“You are the most important and precious ones of all because you are the coming generation. Someday it will be your responsibility to hold the sacred pipe and pray with it.” She then turned once more to the Chief and to all the people and reminded them to take great care of the sacred pipe and to remember to use it in all their ceremonies. She said, “I am the four ages of creation and will return to you every generation. Every generation I will come back to you. You will see me again.”

She then departed toward the direction she had come, her beautiful shape silhouetted by the orange Sun. As she became more distant, the people saw her take on the shape of a buffalo, turning brown, then red, then yellow, and, finally, she became a white buffalo calf, all the colors of all the people of the world, just before disappearing. For this reason, she is said to have rainbow eyes, because she sees people of all colors as one.

After she vanished, the plain was immediately filled with an enormous buffalo herd, some of which sacrificed themselves so the people could have everything they needed to survive, meat for food, skins for clothing and shelter, and bones to make tools with. This is why the People of the Great Nation believe a white buffalo calf is the most sacred living thing anyone can ever encounter.

The first time I ever saw a white buffalo was in the 1977 film called *The White Buffalo*, starring Charles Bronson as Wild Bill Hickock and Will Samson, from *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, as Crazy Horse. Both men were haunted by the same frightening dream of a gigantic white buffalo, powerful enough to shake the ground and burst through mountains. I was thirteen in '77. Several years later, in my late twenties, I began dreaming of a white buffalo. In one particular dream she appeared to me near the cabin and lake I've long imagined would make my ideal home. Wearing a collar with license tags, she led me to a nearby stream. I took this to mean her story is meant for me too, that she has given me license to be inspired by it, and that her teachings can keep me on the right road that follows alongside the stream of life.

A few years more, when I was in my thirties and still working in television news, I learned a white buffalo had been born, the first since 1933. I felt an immediate and profound desire to visit her. The People of the Nation named her Miracle because it had been presumed the rare genetic mutation required to produce a true white buffalo, not an albino, had been extinguished when bison became nearly extinct at the start of the 19th century, down to less than 500 head. But in August 1994, Miracle was born on the hobby farm of Dave and Valerie Heider in Janesville, Wisconsin, just north of Chicago.

It was almost six years later that I finally had the opportunity answer Miracle's unceasing call. My son, Julian, and my friend, Jim Carter, accompanied me on the journey. I called in advance to ask if we could camp for a night on the farm. A kindly old man answered the phone and gave us permission, adding, “If anyone gives you a problem, just tell them grandpa said it would be okay.”

Upon our arrival, we entered a small gift shop that had been set up on the property and asked where to pitch our tent. Valerie Heider, politely informed us they didn't allow strangers to overnight on their property. She wasn't at all happy when I pulled the grandpa card. She shook her head and said, "Wait here while I go talk to my husband." A few minutes later she returned and instructed us go out and speak with Dave Heider.

When we found him, he was sitting atop his noisy tractor—a tall, thick, rugged, gruff hobby farmer whose day-job was truck driving. He gave us a suspicious once-over before even considering making good on Grandpa's unauthorized promise. Being a staunch Republican, as it turns out, he was especially leery after my friend introduced himself as Jimmy Carter. Upon explaining he's no relation and prefers gong by Jim, and a bit more ice-breaking conversation, Dave agreed to let us stay. He even invited us to stay in a tipi some visiting dignitaries from the Native American community had permanently set up on the site. The idea of spending the night in a real tipi thrilled my little boy.

Before setting up camp, I spoke a bit more with Dave, who told me some of Miracle's story: about the day she'd been born, and how, on a whim, he called the local paper in case they wanted to come take a picture of a rare white buffalo calf, and how surprised and overwhelmed they were, after word got out, to have tens of thousands of Native Americans, among others, coming from all over the world. He also admitted that at first all they could see were dollar signs, but once they realized what Miracle represented, they felt morally obligated to share her, free of charge, with everyone, even though they had offers to buy her from all over the place, including from Ted Nugent and Ted Turner. Dave said the Indian Nation in South Dakota offered to trade every buffalo they had for her.

But he kept her on his humble farm, tucked on the outskirts of one of America's small working-class cities, riding his tractor and driving his truck, because it was the right thing to do. He told me about the many times he'd seen her come down from the hill, stand at the wire fence, and look at one person in a crowd of hundreds. "Inevitably," he said, "that person would come to me afterward and tell me they're dying of cancer, or something like it, and that they wanted to come and visit Miracle before they died."

Astounded by all of this, I said, "I suppose she's the closest thing to a Pope or a Dali Lama we have her in the United States."

"He's been here," Dave replied.

"Who?" I asked.

"Him. That guy you just said."

"The Dali Lama?" I asked in disbelief.

He then told me he'd once noticed, in his words, "a couple of monks running around the place," which wasn't terribly unusual since he'd had visitors from all over the world visit. He remembered this particular occasion, however, because one of the monks eventually came to him and said, "My master wishes to speak with you." That

was an unusual turn of phrase, to say the least, but Dave Heider followed the man to see his master, who told him, "Miracle and I are on the same path this lifetime and it has been very important for me to spend time here with her. I want to thank you for all you and your family are doing for her and for allowing us to come here."

The next day the servant returned and handed Dave a silk scarf, explaining it was a gift from His Holiness, the Dali Lama, who apologized for not being able to reveal his true identity, but he needed to keep his presence concealed because he had risked leaving his bodyguards behind in order to spend sacred time alone with Miracle.

Just before sunset, Julian, Jim, and I sat on a log near the electric fence separating us from Miracle's pasture. The fence was covered with hundreds of ribbons and dreamcatchers past visitors had tied to it. It might surprise you to know Miracle was no longer white. Unless they are albino, white buffalos are born pure white, instead of brown, as other buffalos are, but within their first year turn from white, to yellow, to red, to brown, all the colors of all the people of the world, just like White Buffalo Calf Woman does before disappearing. By the time I met her, she looked like any other buffalo, and was accompanied by a small herd consisting of herself, her own young calf, another female with a slightly older calf, and their bull.

While setting up camp, I had observed her acting like any mother bison might, chasing the bigger calf away from her own when they got to playing too rough. But as we were sitting there, the entire herd came by to briefly check us out, first the bull, then the other female, the two calves, and finally, Miracle. Upon doing so, however, she stopped and stood still before us, within our reach. In that moment, she stopped being the attentive mother I had witnessed earlier, allowing her calf to frolic freely with the other in the distance. It was as if she understood why we were there and decided to personify the goddess we had come to visit.

She wasn't tame. Bison aren't, not even those raised on a farm. She let us know immediately she wouldn't tolerate any physical contact, that it was improper. It reminded me of the ancient belief that touching the sacred is profane, that contact with the totem is a taboo. So, instead, as is my custom when I demonstrate reverence for something I consider sacred, I prostrated myself before her three times. My son and Jim followed my example. Miracle dropped her head low enough for me to feel her breath blow against my face. I pulled some sweetgrass that was beyond her reach and placed it on the ground beneath her as an offering. She ate it. She also remained with us, standing in the same spot, throughout the entire sunset, never departing, or moving, or even turning her attention toward her calf. She didn't leave until we did, sometime after dark. The next morning she came and stood before us again, not leaving us until it was time for us to go.

Miracle's life was full of what Carl Jung would have called synchronicities—referring to uncanny acausal connections between things or events—or what we might simply call lots of weird coincidences. According to the Lakota story, for example, White Buffalo Calf Woman's return is supposed to signal the beginning of world peace.

Miracle was born across the street from a lake called Geneva, the name of the Swiss city where the United Nations is headquartered. And the name of the road she was born on is Avalon, same as the mythological island where a young boy removes Excalibur from a stone to become a legendary king.

A few years after my trip to Janesville, I was having lunch with Huston Smith in Indianapolis. Huston Smith was one of the world's leading experts on world religions, and the subject of Bill Moyers 1996 five-part miniseries, *The Wisdom of Faith with Huston Smith*. Huston, who died at age 97 in 2016, not only studied world religions, he practiced all of them while doing so. During our lunch I told him about Miracle, whom he'd never heard of. "His Holiness was there!" he exclaimed in delight and disbelief. "Wait till I tell Kendra," referring to his spouse. "This is the reason I came here." His thrill upon learning of her story pleased me to no end.

Another sad synchronicity came September 19, 2004, when Miracle unexpectedly died only four days after George W. Bush came to Janesville to address blue collar workers while stumping for his reelection. It was odd given that she hadn't been ill and was only ten years old, just a third of the way through her normal lifespan. I couldn't help but imagine if the death of this peaceful being wasn't some kind of cosmic response to the presence of a man who had begun two unholy wars.

So you can only imagine what I thought when the news came that another white buffalo had been born exactly nine months later, which is the gestation period for buffalos, just as it is for humans. More amazing, the calf was born only a few minutes from my home in Kentucky, not far from the State Capital, on the border of a small town called Bagdad. Just as she was symbolically born in Geneva, a place of world Unity, on a street called Avalon, symbolizing her royalty, she had symbolically been reborn in a warzone: Bagdad. Call it synchronicity, coincidence, a mystery, or just plain weird, this new calf's birth seemed a continuation of Miracle's story and her peaceful purpose.

I went to the new buffalo's naming ceremony, led by a local tribe of Native Americans, who named the still snow-white calf, *Cante Pejute*, which means "Medicine Heart" in the Lakota language, a name that represents their hope she might bring healing to our world.

I can't explain the meaning of all this and would rather just let the mystery be. What I will say is that my encounter with Miracle and her story, has been among the more profound religious experiences of my life. It was an experience of awe and wonder that filled me with hope and gratitude, which I think is what a good religious experience should be. It brought the Lakota legend to life for me. It made it real. And, most importantly, it daily reminds me of my duty to follow the wisdom of White Buffalo Calf Woman, to walk in the same direction as nature, not against it, following the light, and to remember all my relations and responsibility to care for all that is, for the whole sacred hoop of the world. "With this holy pipe you will walk like a living prayer. With your feet resting upon the earth and the pipe stem reaching into the sky,

your body forms a living bridge between the Sacred Beneath and the Sacred Above. Wakan Tanka smiles upon us, because now we are as one: earth, sky, all living things, the two legged, the four legged, the winged ones, the trees, the grasses. Together with the people, they are all related, one family. The pipe holds them all together.” But I think the pipe is meant to be symbolic too, just as Miracle was only symbolically in Geneva, Avalon, and Bagdad. The pipe represents whatever our sacred way is. Whatever our religion and values are, they become sacred when we use them in the sacred way White Buffalo Calf Woman taught the Lakota Oyate, remembering our relationship to the unending sacred hoop of the world and all its beings.

Not long after my encounter, I was inspired enough to write a poem about my experience. It's really meant to be a song, but since I don't write music, I'll just call it a poem.

I went looking for a vision, with Jimmy Carter and my boy.
We met a goddess in Wisconsin, north of Chicago, Illinois.
She came walking off the mountain, through the mists of Avalon.
And though we could never hold her, she touched my friend and touched my son.

She held my heart within her beauty, and pulled this strong man to his knees.
Jim and my boy fell down beside me, and her breath became the breeze.

She came to us white as snow, on the first day of her birth,
Then turned brown and red and yellow, like all people of the Earth.
And she showed us how to live, and she taught us what to give,
To be in harmony with all that is.

She came to us with a mission, and saw the world with rainbow eyes,
You've got to pray in all directions, bless the Earth and bless the sky.
You must see your own reflection, in the face of everyone,
Take what you need each day to live, learn how to love and to forgive,
Walk in peace, wonder and beauty, revere all creatures great and small,
Offer thanks for blessings and bounty, and your heart to one and all.

She fell down her tenth September, days before war in her hometown,
Now our hearts must long remember, the great Miracle we found,
And we'll try to walk in beauty, and we'll try to live in peace,
And fulfill our sacred duty, to help awaken those who sleep,
'Till White Buffalo Calf Woman, returns to roam the Earth again,
We'll pray in thanks, care for our land, and treat all people as friends.

She promised each generation, she'd return to the promised land,
And teach all people of the Nations, how to gather hand in hand.
Who knew that I would live to tell, a new Miracle is born,
Only nine moons after she fell, in a home broken and war torn,

Miracle

Her tears of love and healing heart, can mend the wounds of hate and pain,
Give a violent world a brand-new start, living anew, born again.

She came to us white as snow, on the first day of her birth,
Then turned brown and red and yellow, like all people of the Earth.
And she showed us how to live, and she taught us what to give,
To be in harmony with all that is.