

Sacred Buffalo Song

How is it that people can listen to the truth and not hear it? What they hear doesn't match their perspective of what's logical? Too many emotions attached? They've never heard of such things before?

Such is the case with what really happened at a Buffalo jump. When a child, it seemed to me that having people herding Buffalo into a large V made with some big rocks and bushes to hide behind was not logical. In museums or books some of us may have seen this depicted in a model, or drawn in a picture.

They depict the Buffalo charging by the rocks, bushes, or trees where people hid and were supposed to jump up from behind their hiding place and wave a blanket in the air to keep the Buffalo inside of the large V. Their trap became increasingly narrow forcing the herd together until it got to the edge of a cliff. The Buffalo then ran right off the cliff in a frenzy of fear and died, or were killed at the bottom of the cliff by members of the Native Tribe being depicted.

This might make sense if no buffalo were alive today. Have any of us seen them up close and personal? If not go to Yellowstone National Park, drive around until you pass some on the road. Their backs are often higher than the top of your car. If you are fortunate and a large bull passes by, he will dwarf a car in comparison, and his back may be as high or a bit higher as the top of a regular pickup, or large SUV.

Men of the Crow Tribe who've worked with buffalo have seen them jump over a pickup truck clearing it easily, which was intended as part of a barrier to keep the buffalo together. These are not single instances that never occurred again. Buffalo are an amazing member of the four-legged ones.

These animals, some think of them as brothers or sisters, are not afraid of us. Too often someone visiting Yellowstone Park decides they can just walk up to a buffalo.

Unfortunately, when they get too close the buffalo charges and may gore them with their sharp-tipped horns. The buffalo are the ones in control of this kind of situation, not us. We could jump up and down, wave our arms or clothing, and if a buffalo is determined in its charge things will not end well for the people involved.

There were "buffalo jumps" that consisted of a ledge that dropped off with a depth sufficient to kill or cripple a buffalo, which could be quickly killed thereafter. The area was large enough to drive the buffalo needed for food at that time. The Vore Buffalo Jump in Wyoming, is an example of this type of jump.

The Sacred Buffalo Song we're considering here, however, was used at a very different kind of buffalo jump. It's been an honor for me to stand at the edge of one of these buffalo jumps, and listen to a Tribal Elder explain how it was used. Some reading this may think it impossible, but my friends many Native People had a deeply spiritual relationship with God. A subject for a different time in the future.

It should be enough to say that Dr. Joe Medicine Crow stood next to me as he told a small group about the buffalo jump in which we were standing. Rather than sharing more information about Dr. Joe Medicine Crow it's probably best if each of us searches on the internet to read some of the many articles available.

Here we'll just say he was the historian for the Crow Tribe, an author, had a brilliant mind, loving heart, and attended the First Crow Indian Baptist Church where it was my privilege to pastor for several years. He was also an uncle of mine by adoption into the Crow Tribe, through the Whiteman Runs Him family. Another name you can search. Joe lead my adoption ceremony, and Thomas (Tom) Yellowtail gave me my Crow name. It is difficult to describe the blessing and honor it was to be adopted by this family, and have these wonderful men participate as leaders and relatives.

One summer many years ago, people had gathered on the ranch of Leland Walking Bear to attend a camp meeting of some churches on the Crow Reservation. This was an annual event that we all looked forward to.

During a down-time one afternoon Joe offered to ride along as we drove afar to various points of historic interest among the Crow People in that general area. This was not an opportunity to miss!

One of the terrible things committed by our Nation and its people was the destruction of most all the buffalo. Killed for their hides and tongues, their bodies left to rot in the sun. By the millions they were slaughtered.

It's estimated that in the late 1700s there were 60 million buffalo in North America. By the 1880s there were 541 known to exist. In the early 1800s it could take three days of constant walking for a large herd to pass a person who stayed in one location, and that person would not be able to see the other side of the herd on the far horizon while the buffalo walked by.

Our group was standing in a place that had nothing to do with that atrocity. As each of us took a look over the edge there was a straight drop of at least thirty-five to forty feet. Things look different from that perch. It looked a lot farther, depending on how close to the edge one stood.

Just at the edge was the bottom of the "V" with a gap of about three to four feet wide. That alone made me wonder what went on here? How do many buffalo pass through this small opening to go over the edge of the cliff in the first place?

As we turned our backs to the cliff the ground stretched out before us. A cliff extending out at an angle on the left side, and the land slowly sweeping up into some hills on the right.

Between these two, extending out from the bottom of the V where we stood, were rocks about the size of bowling balls. Many were a bit smaller, stretching out in a V pattern to about the distance of two hundred or more yards before we couldn't see the rocks anymore, as they disappeared behind a gentle swell in the ground.

There was no place to hide. No big rocks or bushes. Standing along the edges of the V with the idea of controlling a stampeding group of buffalo would have been suicide. After we all had a chance to take this in and consider the implications, Joe Medicine Crow started to explain what would happen here before the buffalo were gone.

As a part of a person's personal relationship with God often Crow people, like many Tribes, would go on one or more vision quests. Perhaps most of us have heard about this. Very briefly, this was a time of personal suffering as one made a plea to God for a vision, or a specific request.

Without food or water, a person remained on a high elevated point waiting to receive an answer, or until satisfied they had prayed long enough. While four days might be considered a norm it was a personal matter that might vary by Tribe or individual.

Most of the time the individual longed for a message through a mediator, a winged or four legged being that would come within their vision to give them the gift God wanted them to have. That mediator might be considered as a part of their medicine, or their way of receiving God's direction and the power to do what they should.

The important thing for this story is sometimes the gift given might be the ability to find food through the gift of the four-legged beings. In this specific case a man had been give a song to use for calling the buffalo.

Only when the Crow man knew that he should use this song would he gather things together. That would have been his personal items required, and scouts to provide information.

The man with the sacred buffalo song stood at the bottom of the V near the cliff. He would send out the scouts to keep an eye out for the buffalo so they could tell him when they were coming. There could be several reasons for this including the way the song might be sung at different stages of the overall process.

Then while standing close to the cliff in the V the man would begin to sing, using whatever he'd been given along with the song to call the buffalo. After whatever time was determined by God one of the scouts far away might inform the singer that buffalo were seen on the horizon.

This process was continued as the buffalo came near to the top of the V made of the stones. Once the buffalo entered the V they could not escape while the man sang the sacred song.

Amazingly, even the birds in the sky that flew into the area of the V below were not able to escape. They would fly in circles until the song was finished. This process continued as the buffalo grouped together and stretched out to fit the shape of the V pattern on the ground.

Then those buffalo sent by the song that called them would end up going over the cliff and dying one way or the other. This was not large herds of buffalo. It was the right amount of buffalo needed by the people at that time.

Yes, this was a miracle given as a gift from God through the sources He chose. It defined the role, or a role of the person among the Crow people. This was a way they were to contribute to the good of the People.

It's probably best not to diminish our understanding of this by the limitations of science. We may often remain blind to possibilities by our assumption that we know enough about something that we cannot be wrong. A tendency is to seek to know about something, to the point of being able to define it, and then make the assumption that our knowledge serves as boundaries to what's possible.

Often people allow their scientific perspective to be their god, rather than a relationship with the One True God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Without holding a culture up as being superior, it is a fact that among Native People the central focus of their perspective was spiritual in nature, and remains so for most relationships of many of the People.

Relationships can break the bounds of science. Science is not the answer. It is a means of assisting us as we seek answers, but it was not conceived as the only way of knowing or understanding.

The oral history shared by Dr. Joe Medicine Crow was about a man who was in relationship. He was in a type of relationship with God, the earth, all winged and four legged beings, and who had no limitations to the possibilities where God's work among all created things was concerned.

Perhaps there's a lesson for all of us to contemplate in these verbally recorded events. It's probably something worth praying about. What are our perspectives, and how do they serve to limit our understanding and relationship with God?