

It a native american
expresses her beliefs



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

It was approaching dusk as the conspicuous line of dark vans entered the reservation. These vehicles served the purpose of furnishing transportation for about 30 members of a Cleveland area youth group, whose mission was “to bring good news to the badlands”.

In short, the group was ministering to the Indian children of the Pine Ridge Reservation, which was in close vicinity to the natural wonder found in the foothills of “the badlands”. The trip became a tradition for my church and I traveled there on three separate occasions. Each year, the team received a welcoming that could be described as anything but inviting.

In fact, the first year the trip fell on the Fourth of July and as we drove in, our vehicles were bombarded with fireworks. I could never really grasp why we were so despised. After all, our intentions were commendable. The matter became clearer after I read Zitkala-sa’s “American Indian Stories”. Within this text, a Native American expresses her beliefs that actions similar to ours serve merely in altering culture. The main character’s civilization had religious beliefs long before the white man presented his ideas. Essentially, the Sioux religion was based on nature. It is difficult to pinpoint the exact beliefs of the group because of the deficiency of information.

However from the text, some aspects can be gathered. First, it appears as though everything in nature is believed to retain a spirit. Zitkala-Sa is observing the flowers and personifies them, assuming they are possessive of a spirit by saying, “Their quaint round faces of varied hue convince the heart which leaps with glad surprise that they too, are living symbols of omnipotent thought.” (102) Everything natural was incorporated into their

religious beliefs. Thus, the people receive refreshment of the soul through companionship with the outdoors. The narrator describes a spiritual experience as, “ to seek the level lands where grow the wild prairie flowers. And they, the lovely little folk, sooth my soul with their perfumed breath.”

(101) The Indian girl turns to nature to have her spiritual needs met, which is reflective of the behavior of her people.

Thus, although the concept of spirituality as the white man understood it was not incorporated into the Indian culture, the Natives did, in fact have a religion, and maintained universal beliefs and practices. With the introduction of the “ paleface” into the Indian culture, he brought with him different ideas about religion, which undoubtedly created tension. Therefore, a significant controversy in the text is over whether the white man’s intent in ministering to the children is actually in the Indian’s best interest. Because of the Quaker’s actions, innocent people had to make numerous sacrifices and deal with senseless hardships. Throughout the “ School Days” section of the text, the main character expresses her feelings relative to going east and encountering a new culture. She speaks of a deprivation of freedom, describing her experience as, “ though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.”(52) Evidently, it was painful for the young girl to be so constricted and cut off from nature and her spirit. She made efforts to break free, but the opposing force was too strong.

Tragically, she had diminutive power over her own destiny. Later in the text, she eludes to the forfeited treasure of faith. Her words are, “...I lost my faith in the dead roots”. (75) The influence of the white culture had clearly effected the developing Indian girl. As stated earlier, the Sioux culture is

essentially based upon a belief in nature and without exposure to such customs, they are bound to diminish. Moreover, the Quakers undoubtedly forced observance of their religion, being that it consumed such a large portion of their culture. The children's constant exposure to the white way of life and beliefs ultimately altered their identity from that of Native American heritage. This is communicated in the words of the main character's mother as she is speaking to Zitkala-sa, " You better give up your slow attempt to learn the white man's ways, and be content to roam over the prairies and find living upon wild roots.

"(95) This is the only lifestyle and conviction that her mother has. She is happy and wants her daughter to enjoy a similar vitality. However, as increasing time is spent in the foreign environment, the girl begins to assimilate into their culture and religion. All of these elements accumulate to transform her identity. This modification is not complete as the young girl is trapped in between the two without membership to either. Unfortunately, Zitkala-sa did not invest enough time in either atmosphere to adapt or accept one in particular, to follow.

As a result, she was denied membership to either group and rather " floated" in an undefined realm. Zitkala-Sa was neither Native American nor White. Vividly this is portrayed in the text as, " Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. This deplorable situation was the effect of my brief course in the East..." (69) In a sense, she created a personal culture including both her Indian heritage and also that of the white man. Judging from the great deal

of anguish and frustration Zitkala-sa encountered, it appears that the work of the Quakers was in vain and only detrimental to the children.

Such was my initial response to their actions with the reading of this book. The feelings and expectations of the Indians became clear. As I look back over my previous experiences on the Reservation, I realize that we were acting in a similar fashion to the Quakers. Our purpose was to influence them to accept our religion, which we believed to be superior, thus altering their culture.

At the time, I could not comprehend the Indians' anger and dismissal. However, from the text, I have begun to understand their response. Similar to the Quakers, our intentions were good but the outcome was not quite as beneficial as we had hoped. I think the message the author is trying to convey are the feelings of the Indians in response to actions of those like the Quakers that have continued to this day.

If such were her intentions, she was quite successful in expressing her convictions.