

The White Buffalo Calf Woman and the Sacred Pipe

It was a time when there was little food left in the camp, and the people were hungry. Two young men were sent out to scout for game. They went on foot, for this was a time long before the horses, the great Spirit Dogs, were given to the people. The two young men hunted a long time but had no luck. Finally, they climbed to the top of a hill and looked to the west.

“What is that?” said one of the young men.

“I cannot tell, but it is coming toward us,” said the other.

And so it was. At first they thought that it was an animal, but as the shape drew closer they saw it was a woman. She was dressed in white buffalo skin and carried something in her hands. She walked so lightly that it seemed as if she were not walking at all, but floating with her feet barely touching the Earth.

Then the young men realized that she must be the Holy Person known as the “White Buffalo Calf Woman” and their minds filled with good thoughts.

Then the White Buffalo Calf Woman spoke. “Go to your people,” she said, holding up the bundle in her hands so that the young men could see it. “Tell your people that it is a good thing I am bringing. I am bringing a holy thing to your nation, a message from the Buffalo People. Put up a medicine lodge for me and make it ready. I will come there after four days have passed.”

The young men did as they were told. They went back to their people and gave them the message. Then the crier went through camp and told all the people that something sacred was coming and that all things should be made ready. They built the medicine lodge and made an earth altar that faced the west.

Four days passed and then the people saw something coming toward them. When it came closer, they saw it was the White Buffalo Calf Woman. In her hands she carried the bundle and a bunch of sacred sage. The people welcomed her into the medicine lodge and gave her the seat of honor. Then she unwrapped the bundle to show them what was inside. It was the Sacred Pipe. As she held it out to them, she told them what it meant.

“The bowl of the Sacred Pipe,” she said, “is made of the red stone. It represents the flesh and blood of the Buffalo People and all other Peoples. The wooden stem of the Pipe represents all the trees and plants, all the things green and growing on this Earth. The smoke that passes through the Pipe represents the sacred wind, the breath that carries prayers up to Wakan Tanka, the Creator.”

When she finished showing them the pipe, she told the people how to hold it and how to offer it to Earth and Sky and the Four Sacred Directions. She told them many things to remember.

“The Sacred Pipe,” said the White Buffalo Calf Woman, “will show you the Good Red Road. Follow it and it will take you in the right direction. Now,” she said, “I am going to leave, but you will see me again.”

Then she began to walk toward the setting sun. The people watched her as she went, and they saw her stop and roll once on the Earth. When she stood up she was a black buffalo. Then she went farther and rolled again on the Earth. This time when she stood up she was a brown buffalo. She went farther and rolled a third time and stood up. Now the people saw that she was a red buffalo. Again she walked farther and for a fourth and final time she rolled upon the Earth. This time she became a white calf and continued to walk until she disappeared over the horizon.

As soon as the White Buffalo Calf Woman was gone, herds of buffalo were seen all around the camp. The people were able to hunt them and they gave thanks with the Sacred Pipe for the blessings they had been given. As long as they followed the Good Red Road of the Sacred Pipe and remembered, as the White Buffalo Calf Woman had taught them, that all things were as connected as parts of the Sacred Pipe, they lived happily and well.

(Story adapted from Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac’s *Keepers of the Earth* with permission from Fulcrum Publishing, Inc., 1989.)