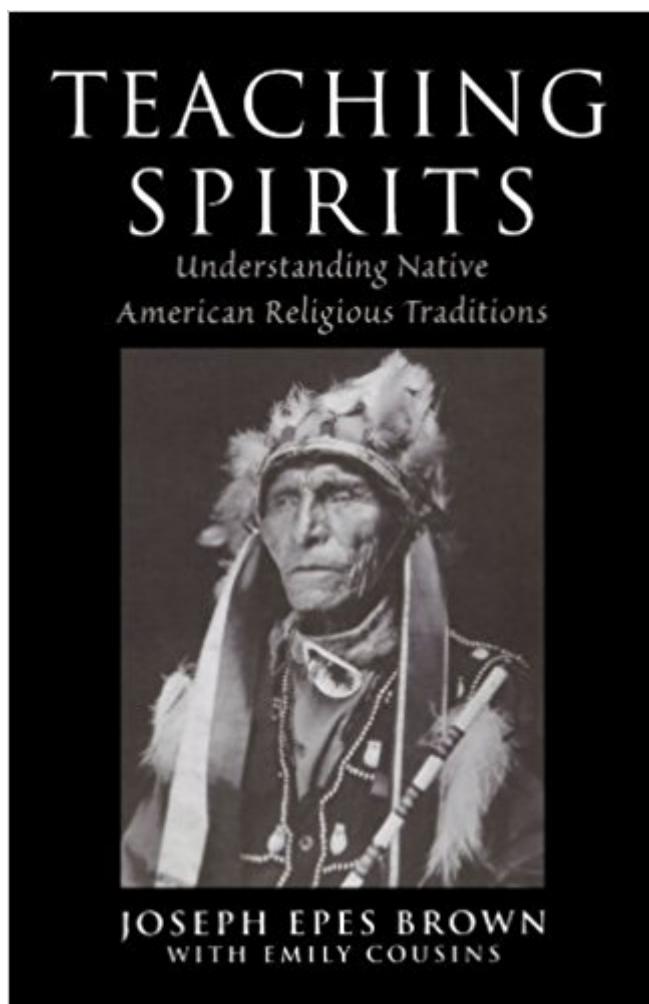


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# Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions



## Synopsis

Teaching Spirits offers a thematic approach to Native American religious traditions. Within the great multiplicity of Native American cultures, Joseph Epes Brown has perceived certain common themes that resonate within many Native traditions. He demonstrates how themes within native traditions connect with each other, at the same time upholding the integrity of individual traditions. Brown illustrates each of these themes with in-depth explorations of specific native cultures including Lakota, Navajo, Apache, Koyukon, and Ojibwe. Brown demonstrates how Native American values provide an alternative metaphysics that stand opposed to modern materialism. He shows how these spiritual values provide material for a serious rethinking of modern attitudes - especially toward the environment - as well as how they may help non-native peoples develop a more sensitive response to native concerns. Throughout, he draws on his extensive personal experience with Black Elk, who came to symbolize for many the greatness of the imperiled native cultures.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A wonderful, clear synthesis-perhaps the best we have-of American Indian spiritual traditions, so precious and so illuminating, because they are not separate from land and life."--Peter Matthiessen, author of *Tigers in the Snow*In this medicine bag of empathetic and insightful essay-lectures, the legacy of a preeminent scholar of American Indian religious traditions is opened for new generations of teachers and students. The late Joseph Brown was a legendary mentor, whose gentility and

grace in person and on the page lent dignity and depth to the indigenous ways of knowledge and ceremony he passed on to others. Here we have Brown's thoughts on themes that preoccupied his scholarly and lecturing life: Indian concepts of time and space, language and song, animals and hunting and nature, and varieties of ritual practice. But Brown is always probing beneath these topics to a deeper, almost wordless realm, where he provokes us to ask how these American Indian ways of knowledge might, in turn, teach us to become more fully human. A long-awaited, marvelous inheritance. --Peter Nabokov, Department of World Arts and Cultures, UCLA --This text refers to the Digital edition.

Former Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Montana

A classic for students of Native American culture and religions. Reading this book is the closest one can get to being in the classroom with Joseph Epes Brown, legendary author, scholar, and teacher of Native American traditional religious studies. In a nutshell captures essential values western society can learn from Indigenous people.

When "Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions" appeared on my monitor screen as a recommended book to go with the book I had just purchased, both my time spent with Joseph and the day I learned of his death flashed, like an electrical shock, through my mind. Due to mental and physical health reasons, I have not kept up with books in my fields of study, and only recently have I started to try reading again. Thus I was unfamiliar with "Teaching Spirits," although I knew Elenita Brown (Joseph's wife), Emily Cousins, and Marina Weatherly Brown (Joseph's daughter and I took one of Joseph's classes together), who together compiled and edited the material presented in this book. I unhesitatingly bought the book and have spent the last two weeks reading and re-reading the book--often having to set the book aside for a while to gather myself from long buried memories brought forth from reading. I first learned of Joseph Epes Brown when I read his seminal book, *The Sacred Pipe: Black Elk's Account of the Seven Rites of the Oglala Sioux* (Civilization of the American Indian Series), in 1972. When I left military duty in September, 1978, I decided to attend the University of Montana because their Native American Studies program was one of the best rated in the country. When I arrived on campus I quickly discovered that Dr. Joseph Epes Brown was teaching in the Religious Studies department, and made sure that I got enrolled into his "Introduction to Native American Religious Traditions" class. By this time, I had read "The Sacred Pipe" four or five times and was eager to learn more. Partially

because the only "textbook" for the class was "The spiritual legacy of the American Indian (Pendle Hill pamphlet)," Joseph handed out a fairly extensive bibliography of suggested readings for the class, which most students circle filed; but I delved into it like a mad man. Within a week I was setting up appointments to meet with Joseph to discuss what I was reading. To the surprise of both of us, by the end of Fall Quarter, I had read every single book on the reading list. More importantly, Joseph asked me to stay at UM and pursue a Masters of Interdisciplinary Studies in Native American Studies under his tutelage. I continued to take classes from Joseph, graded exams for him, and acted as an unpaid teaching assistant until December, 1984. During that time, I not only learned much from Joseph, but participated in discussions with visiting scholars such as Peter Nabokov, Arthur Amiotte, and Rodney Frey (all mentioned in "Teaching Spirits") and visiting tribal elders, including the formidable medicine man, Walter Denny, from the Rocky Boy's Reservation. Needless to say, those were very exciting and invigorating times for me. As I stated above, reading "Teaching Spirits" was frequently difficult for me, because the power of the words--even in their written form--was horrendous. Much to my shame and guilt, I have "forgotten" or "buried" much of what I learned, and have strayed far from the good red road and the traditional ways that I know are powerful. Equally devastating for me were the memories brought to life of Joseph in the classroom, which at times are so vivid in the text of "Teaching Spirits," I was, for all purposes (like a PTSD episode), back in the classroom listening to Joseph "telling stories." I heard his quiet, barely audible voice weaving stories and ideas in a gentle circular path around the point he was trying to get the class to "verstehen." (I use the German word, "verstehen," because, while it is usually translated as "to understand," in German "verstehen" means more than comprehension or understanding.) I could see his slender, gentlemanly stature with a subtle smile "speaking" with his body and hands. For being in Joseph's presence was an experience in itself--if you allowed yourself to open your total awareness to him. Joseph poignantly addresses the value of oral transmission in most chapters of "Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions." He addresses the loss that comes from converting to the written word: "Even our excessive and obsessive fix on the written word, for all its practical advantages, is possessed at great cost, of which we have become tragically unaware....For example, the act of reading itself conditions us to lineality." (p 48-49) Lineality is important to technological cultures, but disconnects the past from both the present and the future. Very few Native American languages have a future tense, and many do not have a past tense. Native American languages, then, seldom view things lineally. Joseph speaks eloquently in "Teaching Spirits" about this tragedy that we've become unaware of, and why language is so critical: This situation may be called tragic, not because of some vague romanticism, but rather

because it impoverishes non-Natives, who are therefore not aware of the remarkable range of sacred values embedded in such languages. A major contributor in the progressive compromising of tribal languages is the prejudicial assumption of the Western world that literacy is an unqualified good and an indispensable prerequisite for culture. The persistence of the prejudice against nonliterate [i.e., not "illiterate"] communication has contributed, perhaps more than any other element, not just to the compromise of most indigenous cultures of America but, in numerous cases, to their extinction, SINCE ULTIMATELY IT IS LANGUAGE THAT BEARS CULTURE. [p 41-42; Emphasis added]Conversely, Joseph Brown points out "Where Native Languages are being thus sustained, oral traditions are communicating core values to all members of the tribe." (p 50) And culture is the source of sacred understanding and traditions. Indeed, language itself is sacred, and should be used cautiously, for even in literate cultures it is taken for granted that words are powerful. Yet, without traditions, the power of words can be weakened to the point that people do not even hear half the words spoken. Like speed reading, verbal communications have come to rely on the "listener" to fill in the missing words; and this often leads to loss of meaningfulness and even emptiness.Unfortunately, as I read "Teaching Spirits," I knew all too well that it was not the same as actually being in the classroom. Nor did I miss the irony of having the written words before me instead of listening to the oral transmission of Native American Religious Traditions. This comprehension of the dialectical nature of "Teaching Spirits" became increasingly burdensome for me as I read the book, because I "knew" that anyone who had not heard Joseph, himself, speak would be missing or misunderstanding too much to fully appreciate it. That is because the oral traditions, so charismatically presented by Joseph, have far greater meaning (like the word "verstehen") than any written words--even his--can exposit. However, "Both Indian and non-Indian are engaged in a quest for the roots of lost heritages now increasingly understood to be essential if we are to reorient our cultures and lives toward values that express real human nature." And for Joseph, this is the essential meaning of "Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions."Tackling this quest requires many things, but first and foremost--in my opinion--is the requirement of having an open and receptive mind. With an open mind, any and all religious traditions, including so called Western and Eastern religions, become paths to understanding. The more spokes in a bike tire, the smother the ride. Thus, for many Native Americans, and an increasing number of non-Native Americans, multiple paths enhance their religious traditions. However, one must be cautious, because simplistic mechanical adaptations loose the sacredness of those traditions: "If ritual acts do not derive from and express the sacred in this [traditional] way, if they are not consciously participated in, then the actions become

pseudosham rites that not only are meaningless but lead to even deeper meaninglessness, the trivial and, at best, empty habit." (p 111) Readers looking for a glimpse of Joseph Brown's wisdom will find that "Teaching Spirits" appropriately has seven chapters that encapsulate the underpinnings of Native American Traditions: 1) Back to Back; 2) Changeless at the Heart of Change--Concepts of Time and Process; 3) Fixing a Center--Native American Sacred Geography; 4) Silence, the Word, and the Sacred--Evoking the Sacred through Language and Song; 5) "There Is No Word for Art"--The Creative Process; 6) Relationships and Reciprocity--A Metaphysics of Nature; and, 7) A Unity of Experience--Purification, Expansion, and Identity through Ritual. As to comments in another review, I can promise you Joseph Brown is beyond proselytizing for any religion. In fact, that is one of the things missing from just reading the book: there is no interaction or clarification, when needed, to allow the student to come to their own conclusions. Yet, based on my experience working with Joseph, there are no correct or incorrect answers (to classroom exam question); rather, there are levels of understanding (basic knowledge; comprehension; application; analysis; and synthesis). In the final analysis, however, I believe "Teaching Spirits" is a commemoration for the greatest scholar of Native American Religious Traditions. The text is drawn from student's class notes and Joseph Brown's written works, and the book is even written as if Joseph is telling the reader the "stories;" but it was not actually written by him. It was, according to the Introduction, written because "Former students repeatedly asked his family if they were publishing his notes and writings. In response, Joseph's family decided to compile a book that could help pass on his teachings." (xix-xx) Moreover, Emily Cousins added references and other supporting information to "augment and underscore" the text. Knowing Joseph fairly well, I can bet that the notes and writings were cryptic, fragmented, and well used. That is, Joseph, to my knowledge, never used any lecture notes, outlines, or other typical teaching aides. He would simply jot a few words down--often at the end of class--for mnemonic purposes in making up the midterm and final exams. As such, he frequently re-used pieces of paper to keep track of things; and, more importantly, his classes were essentially spontaneous--as long as they related to the course itself. This may be why former students were interested in getting more information. Given the wide open nature of his classes, it was more, than less, probable that no two consecutive sections of a course got the same "information." (It certainly made sitting in on the same course more enjoyable!) Given, then, that "Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions" is really a tribute to Joseph Epes Brown and written "primarily" for former students I do not think that it would make a very good college textbook. But it is an excellent supplementary book, and one that many people would enjoy. If you are looking for something more substantial, I would highly recommend *The Sacred: Ways*

of Knowledge Sources of Life, which is available from sellers, both new and used. (As I note in my review of this book, I used to use it as a textbook for introductory level Native American Studies courses.) Thank you Joseph for being you, and for all you shared with others. You are missed, but not forgotten. Please Note: If this review was not helpful to you, I would appreciate learning the reason(s) so I can improve my reviews. My goal is to provide help to potential buyers, not get into any arguments. So, if you only disagree with my opinion, could you please say so in the comments and not indicate that the review was not helpful. Thanks.

Despite the high price I paid for such a small book. I really found it really informative and a good introduction into American Indian religious traditions.

#### EXCELLENTLY WRITTEN

Needed this book for a class. It is a very nice book, I learned a lot about Native American history and culture.

Good book very informational. Covered the detail I hoped for. The price and delivery were exactly as I had hoped for.

Great story to read. I love all stories on Native American religion and teachings.

Because I'm in love with the pure innocence of this indigenous tradition that is slowly beginning to become seen as part of the whole

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