

*Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions*. By Joseph Epes Brown with Emily Cousins. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. 140 pages. \$24.95.

Our elders are not afraid of death. What they are afraid of is having their words and their things used wrong later on.

—Anne Renker, “Knowledge is Not Available to Just Anyone,” in *Native Heritage* (1995)

Had Emily Cousins included an epigraph to Joseph Epes Brown’s *Teaching Spirits: Understanding Native American Religious Traditions*, Renker’s description of Native American (Makah Nation) elders’ perspectives on death and remembrance would have fit the text’s tone, tenor, and themes. Best known for *The Sacred Pipe* (1953), in which he recorded Black Elk’s description of Oglala Sioux ritual life, and *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (1982), Brown taught Native American religious traditions and world religions at the University of Montana. *Teaching Spirits* collects the career of his thoughts in seven thematic chapters.

In the foreword, Cousins explains that each chapter originated in one of Brown’s presentations or writings. Many of his lecture notes, she remarks, were little more than outlines, prompts that guided his extemporaneous discussions of Native American notions of time, space, nature, language, oral culture, aesthetics, rituals, and ceremonies. Working in collaboration with members of Brown’s family and many of his former students, Cousins carefully crafts chapters on time, sacred geography, speech and song, art and creativity, the metaphysics of nature, and the constructive processes of ritual that reflect Brown’s classroom lectures, the marginalia in books from his library, and the stories he told of his own experiences learning from Native American elders. *Teaching Spirits* reads as an artful meditation on Native American religiosities that balances general themes with detailed examples from specific cultural contexts.

In addition to its value as an homage to Joseph Epes Brown and his educational legacy, *Teach-*

*ing Spirits* has three interrelated strengths that recommend it as an introductory text on Native American religious traditions: (1) Cousins and Brown write in an accessible manner that facilitates the reader's understanding of the concepts they present regardless of her/his prior knowledge of Native American cultures; (2) the authors include a variety of specific and relevant examples from many Native American tribes that provide starting points for further study; and (3) they incorporate Brown's personal stories, particularly those of his friendship and work with Black Elk.

Cousins organizes the text around the themes that structured Brown's understanding of Native American religions, and these themes orient the reader to significant concepts in those traditions. More than simply discussing discrete themes, though, Cousins and Brown regularly return to and relate these themes to one another. Their approach reinforces the reader's understanding of each concept while underscoring the essentially unified lifeway that Native Americans experience. For example, the third chapter, "Fixing a Center: Native American Sacred Geography," follows a chapter focused on time and myth, and within the third chapter's first paragraphs, Cousins and Brown reflect on the significance of myth in sacred landscape: "Indeed," they write, "according to most Native American traditions, land is alive. . . . While all land is alive, mythic events can layer certain places with additional spiritual significance. . . . Mythic events can thus be experienced repeatedly through landmarks in each people's immediate natural environment" (23). Interweaving myth, by this point a familiar topic to readers, in their discussion of sacred place reinforces Native American concepts as related parts of a whole that best make sense in the whole rather than as parts. In the authors' words, "These categories of religious experience [myth, time, place, etc.] may make sense to the non-Native, but most Native Americans experience them as whole" (7). Cousins and Brown model the wholeness they observe in Native American cultures by integrating the concepts they discuss throughout the book.

In addition to aiding readers' understanding of Native American religious traditions by both describing them as holistic and reflecting that quality in their text, Cousins and Brown ground their discussions of the categories of religious experience in concrete examples. In the chapter on speech, language and storytelling, Cousins and Brown illustrate some Native Americans' openness to communicating with other (non-human) beings by citing an exchange that anthropologist Alfred Irving Hallowell overheard between an Ojibwe couple. During a thunderstorm, a husband turned to his wife and asked: "'Did you hear what was said?' 'No,' she replied, 'I didn't catch it.' The old man thought that one of the Thunder Birds had said something to him. He was reacting to this sound in the same way as he would respond to a human being, whose words he did not understand" (47). Cousins and Brown include many such vignettes—examples that clarify principles that might be difficult for the reader to grasp in the abstract.

This style also allows them to introduce readers to several Native American cultures, including Ojibwe, Navajo, and Apache. Rather than elaborate on a category (e.g., time) in relation to a particular tradition, as does Suzanne Crawford in her introductory *Native American Religious Traditions* (2009), Cousins and Brown integrate examples from a variety of Native American cultures

to illustrate the concepts they discuss. Using this approach they sacrifice an in-depth study of any single tradition, but they provide readers with a vision of the broad and rich landscape of Native American religiosities.

As the title suggests, the teaching spirits are the powerful presences in this book. Brown tells a number of multilayered stories in *Teaching Spirits*: a narrative of Native American religious traditions; the myths and ritual stories of a number of specific traditions; and his own stories. Brown's stories, especially those of Black Elk, bring a spirited voice to the text. For instance, in his discussion of the effective quality of sacred speech in Native American traditions—that is, the belief that in speaking a name one calls the person or spirit into being—Brown recalls an experience he had on Pine Ridge Reservation where Black Elk and his family resided: “I remember a time when an old man was repairing the roof above us. He was singing a Lakota song as he worked, when all of a sudden, we heard in loud English, ‘God damn it!’ Apparently, he had hit his thumb with the hammer. I soon came to the understanding that for a Lakota to use profanity, it was necessary to branch out into English” (44). From amusing examples like this one to more profound moments of insight or realization, Brown's stories bring a compelling vitality to his interpretations of religions. Indeed, Brown's experiences with and memories of Black Elk and other Native American elders add an intimate and immediate quality to the text that makes it more like a story and less like a book, which as Cousins observes, “are objects that focus on what happened, [whereas] stories are events that are in the process of becoming” (54).

A significant element of Brown's own story—one he and Cousins convey in (and as) *Teaching Spirits*—is his process of becoming a scholar of Native American religions. As Brown came to understand something of Native American religious traditions, he found himself having to reorient his academic mindset. He describes how Black Elk challenged him to reevaluate his expectations and reassess his preparedness to understand religions: “I was eager to hear [Black Elk] talk about religious matters. All he talked about, though, was animals. . . . Finally, it occurred to me that, in talking about animals and birds, the wind and the four directions, he was . . . indeed, speaking a sacred, metaphysical language, but it was phrased in terms of living realities in the immediacy of one's experience” (83). Teaching moments like this one, in which Brown learns from Black Elk and relates the story to his readers so that they might also learn something, are the essence of *Teaching Spirits*.

Molly H. Bassett  
Georgia State University