

Neither Wolf Nor Dog – Kent Nerburn
Discussion Questions

NOVEMBER 17

Introduction

- Nerburn writes, “My eyes have changed,” because he had the privilege of living and working with Native Americans. He’s suggesting that proximity with people changes our understanding of them. What sort of proximity is he talking about?
- Is it possible the metaphor he shares on page 3 is a result of proximity?
- Page three also gives a glimpse into Lakota spirituality; the nature of Creator and the nature of human response. What do you see here? Watch in future chapters as Nerburn fills out the dimensions of Lakota spirituality.
- Indian and non-Indian alike have a shared heritage in the land. Discuss

Chapter 1

- We begin to see Nerburn’s discomfort as he gets acquainted with Dan, his friends and family. That discomfort started with stepping onto the reservation. Why was he uncomfortable? Do you have a similar response when you go to Neah Bay? What do you think about reservations as a concept and policy?
- What is Dan saying when he tells Nerburn that he must love his own people?

Chapter 2

- Is it true that white people don’t want real Indians, just storybook Indians? Why/whynot?
- Nerburn, who has been invited by Dan, finds it difficult to be part of the conversation with Dan and his guests. What do you make of Dan’s “hospitality” and his social discourse with friends?

Chapter 3

- “Silence is the lie of a good man.” Discuss
- Is there a parallel in Christianity to Dan’s comment about tobacco and truth (tobacco as a promise to Creator, p. 41)?
- On page 43 Dan reflects on the white man’s religion. How might his observations on communion and vows be a bridge to Christianity?
- Page 45 starts a discourse on “how we lost the land.” Describe why the land was so important to Native Americans. How is that same/different of our view of the land? What is the land’s role in Indian identity? (property vs. land). How does loss of land impact their identity? Note his observation on a “portable religion” vs. a religion of the land.
- “You did something we did not think was possible. You killed us without even taking our lives.” Discuss.
- Page 51. “You better hope your God is right.” What is Dan talking about?

Chapter 4

- Discuss Dan’s views on what to call the First People.
- What does Dan think about using Indian names, false or otherwise, on things to “honor” them? Why do we continue to use these constructs even after they have been recognized and condemned as offensive?
- Why does Dan state on page 60: “But you’ve got to understand we are still at war?” With whom and for what?
- Page 59-60. Why do white people want to have Indian blood?

DECEMBER 1

Chapter 5

- What does Dan have to say about silence? Give some examples. Do you agree with him? Are there any parallels in Christianity?

Chapter 6

- What was Nerburn's reaction to what he saw on the drive across the reservation? How did he explain what he saw? Is your reaction similar when you enter a reservation?
- Respond to the assertion, "Owning things is what white people's lives are all about" and "We measured people by how they shared."? In what ways does Dan think the Indian way is better?
- Explain why all the stuff in people's yards makes Dan proud?

Chapter 7

- Did anything in this chapter about "Rooting for the Cowboys" surprise you?
- What are some of the causes for inaccurate Indian stereotypes? Why do we perpetuate them?
- Where sort of ideas did you have about Native Americans when you were growing up? How have those ideas changed for you as you have matured?

Chapter 8

- Nerburn is faced with the sense that he's "in over his head;" that the cultural divide is too great and that he cannot live up to Dan and Grover's expectations. What is his response? What is his justification for that response?
- Then Nerburn gets angry. What "ticks him off?" Is he justified in being angry? Is his anger a function of the situation or of his whiteness? What is his rationale for his anger? (page 99)
- Where is Nerburn emotionally after Wenonah "calls him out"? Does he see his complicity?

DECEMBER 8

Chapters 9, 10, 11

- If Chapter 8 accentuates the cultural divide between Native Americans and Whites, these chapters begin to show us the dimensions of that divide. In chapter 9, the simple act of getting his truck fixed on the rez is an event that fills Nerburn with anxiety and distrust. Even the kids laugh at him. "Wannabe" Indians and rich white folk who purchase Indian art objects show how superficial white fascination is with Indian culture in Chapter 10.
- In Chapter 11, Dan gets at the core of what it means to be Indian and how fragile that identity is. In the middle of page 125 Dan launches a discourse on the nature of what is sacred and how it is being lost. Discuss.
- How does the simple juxtaposition of Indian culture with the dominant white culture intentionally and unintentionally erode Indian identity?
- To what extent do you believe that Indians just need to learn to adapt to the larger society?

Chapter 12

- What points did Dan try to make to Nerburn about how his people saw the Earth and time differently than the white man does?
- Describe the importance of Dan's comment, "The Creator has given you a task, just as he gave me a task." What were the tasks (gifts)? How did Nerburn react? What did Nerburn come to realize Dan wanted from him?
- Why does Dan think Nerburn needs to write the book and why now?
- What is the significance of Dan's song? What does he say about anger and why he needs to give it up (p. 138)? What is the real enemy?
- How and why does Dan welcome Nerburn to their land?

Chapter 13

- Grover shows disrespect for women on p. 145. Do you think inclusion of this in the book is Nerburn's way of honoring his request to "just write like he would describe Fatback"?

- How did Dan “see” Tatanka? What does his relationship with Fatback say about his ability to communicate with animals?

DECEMBER 15

Chapter 14

- Dan claims that Indian people value honor whereas white people value freedom? Do you agree? How can different values explain the resulting conflicts?
- What does Dan mean when he sees the white man’s world as made of cages?
- Do you think that white people were jealous of what Indians had, as Dan claims on p. 159?
- Why does Dan say that the English language is like a weapon that is used against his people? Give some examples.
- Explain the Indian view of American history vs what you learned in school (p. 164-165).
- Dan was training Nerburn to see with both eyes. What did he mean by that? What did he mean when he said, “You will use your gift well if you stop being afraid of other people’s anger”? Grover reinforced this idea by telling him the “keepers of the fire” cannot be cowards because they are carrying the light? Does this have any application to Christians sharing their faith?

Chapters 15

- Read up on the Dawes Act https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dawes_Act The threesome in what is described as an “ordered” town. Why was this town in the middle of the reservation?
- Summarize the purpose and unintended consequences of the Act on Indian life, culture and identity.
- If Indians presented their losses through the Dawes Act in a civil court, do you think the jury would agree with their grievances and award them remuneration for “pain and suffering?” So what about reparations?
- Who was more embarrassed over the drunk Indian incident, Nerburn or Dan and Grover? Why?
- When have you felt like Nerburn? (read bottom paragraph, p. 178)
- Do you agree/disagree with Dan’s portrayal of Indian victimization? (p. 181, 183, 185)
- “You want to know how to be like Indians? Live close to the earth. Get rid of some of your things. Help each other. Talk to the Creator. Be quiet more. Listen to the earth instead of buildings things on it all the time.” Discuss.

Chapter 16

- On the way to the Sitting Bull Monument, Grover picks up an Indian man and Nerburn endures “Indian silence.” In an attempt to be polite, Nerburn asks the stranger, “Going up to the gravesite?” Dan is angry. Why?
- Why can’t Dan forgive the descendants of the Indian police who killed Sitting Bull?
- Forgiveness vs. honor. Do you agree with Dan’s analysis? (p. 195)
- What does “neither wolf nor dog” refer to?
- Nerburn concludes that there are ‘bones that should not be dug up.’ Examples?

Chapter 17

- What distinctions does Dan make regarding leaders vs. rulers? Do you agree/disagree?
- Could Dan’s argument make a good case for term limits on congressmen?

Chapter 18

- As background for this chapter, see what you can find about the Ghost Dance. Here’s one source: <https://www.legendsofamerica.com/na-ghostdance/>
- While Dan says he “loves Jesus”, he is saddened when he sees Indians “standing in front of crosses” (going to church). Why?

- Whites thought the Ghost Dance was a cult. Dan thought the Ghost Dance was “making Jesus our own.” What is involved in making Jesus “our own”? Is there only one way to do that? Can Christianity look different in different cultural contexts? What needs to be constant?
- Dan believed the Ghost Dance gave hope to the Indians (“if you have hope, you come alive”). Whites feared the Ghost Dance would lead to revolt (which it did at Wounded Knee). Think of examples of where the dynamics of fear and hope are playing out in today’s cultural and political landscape. What does the gospel have to say about fear and hope?
- Can you feel Dan’s sense of loss?

DECEMBER 22

Chapter 19

- In this chapter Dan is distraught about the plight of his people: “We are struggling, and there are never any answers. Every generation has to struggle. Maybe we just have to leave it in the hands of the Great Spirit,” p. 217. Nerburn questions whether that approach has gotten them anywhere. How does Dan respond?
- How has pushing of the Indian people changed over the years? How does Dan articulate the difference between white culture and Indian culture? Do you agree? Does Dan make the brush too broad as Nerburn puts it (p.220)?
- When Grover stops and lets Dan out, Nerburn becomes very uncomfortable with worry about Dan’s mood and safety. What is Grover’s reaction?

Chapter 20

- Dan’s family fills Nerburn in on Dan’s history. Nerburn is irritated because he feels Dan could have explained some of this history himself. Could this be Dan’s (and Grover’s) way of filling in some of his background that was difficult for Dan to talk about? Were there any social interactions in this chapter that you found unusual? Could this reflect cultural differences?
- Who is Annie? How does Nerburn figure out her connection to Dan?
- What was significant about the way Delvin and Danelle introduced themselves to Nerburn? What did he learn about Dan from talking to them?
- What was Danelle’s reaction to Nerburn? What is her concern when she hears he is writing a book? Have other women expressed this concern as well? Explain how Dannie feels about her Grandpa?
- According to Dannie what is the role of Indian women in the family? How does she explain/defend the silence and bruises?
- What is Dannie’s parting barb to Nerburn?

Chapter 21

- Nerburn’s interaction with Dannie’s children, Myron, April, and Eugene, set Dan off on a long conversation about race and the struggles of “half-breeds.” What did Dan accuse Nerburn of preferentially doing? Was he justified? Is it possible that we do not see how we react differently based on racial differences? Did April’s picture appear to confirm Dan’s argument?

Chapter 22

- What are the key elements of how Dan understands his past (his history) in contrast with how he believes white people understand history?
- How is Dan’s way of understanding history related to his view of honor and Indian identity?
- Is history more than just facts? If yes, how?
- Is your faith predicated on the accurateness of the facts about Jesus or, as Dan says, because Jesus is “Wakan?” Is the honor you hold for Jesus a function of facts or “wakan?”

DECEMBER 29

Chapter 23

- Is it possible that Nerburn uses the beautiful and terrifying description of the storm as a metaphor for Dan's inexplicable sense of loss?
- What is the nature of that loss?
- What do you think life would be like without a sense of the sacred?
- Any reaction to Dan's desire to run a bulldozer through one of our cemeteries, bag up the bones and charge admission to see them?

Chapter 24, 26, 26

- All of Nerburn's experiences with Dan and Grover culminate in these chapters. What was Dan hoping to achieve with Nerburn through these experiences? How did Nerburn's sense of the history between Indians and Whites change? Can you truly understand history objectively?
- Nerburn seems to be moving through a kind of liturgy at the Wounded Knee monument. Describe the elements of that liturgy. What was the effect of that process on Nerburn and why did Dan think he was ready to write?
- What do you think of Dan's rationale for the suffering of Indian people at the hands of Whites? (Bottom of p. 316 and top of p. 317)
- How would you compare Nerburn's "conversion" experience with your own? Did the "facts" of Christ's life, death and resurrection become a living reality in that process?

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

- Throughout the book, Nerburn contrasts Indian culture and values with White culture and values. Summarize those differences. Which were the most significant to you? Why? Do any of the differences described tend create barriers for you in establishing a relationship with a Native American?
- In what way did this book impact you? Your faith?