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Handout 1.7 The Orphan – A Ho-Chúhnk Story

The Orphan

From *The Hollow of Echoes* by Felix White Sr. and Kathleen Danker, © 1978, Reprinted by Permission.

This story is from a jointly-created book by the late Felix White Sr, an elder and traditional storyteller of the Ho-Chúhnk (Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska and Iowa) and Dr. Kathleen Danker, now a Professor of English at South Dakota State University in Brookings. It is a “story within a story” that features two members of the fictional Crow family. They are Kunu (means “oldest boy” in English), who is also sometimes called by his American name (Mike) in the story, and his Choka (grandfather), George Crow. The story of the orphan that Mr. Crow tells to Kunu is a very old one that was passed on to Felix White Sr. from his relatives. As is mentioned by Mr. Crow in the story, “The Orphan” may not be a story that is original to the tribe. Instead it may have been borrowed from another culture long before Mr. White learned it. Whatever its history, it has a lot to say to all of us about kindness.

Riding back in the team bus from Decatur, Kuna looked silently out of the window. Night had darkened the view, but as he had no desire to talk or kid around with the others, he let his mind wander over the familiar landscape, picturing it clearly even in the darkness. The hills over which the bus rolled on Highway 73 were green and lovely – they were the bluffs of the great Missouri River which lay a few miles to the right. There were a couple of places not very far out of Decatur where the view from the highway opened out on a panoramic vista of the river as it lay twisted and sleeping like a huge blue serpent, bordering the distant green and yellow checkered quilt which was Iowa.

When he was younger, Mike (Kunu) and his friends from Macy had scrambled many times up and down the timber-shrouded trails and underbrush leading to the river from one of these viewpoints south of Macy known as Blackbird Hill. As the bus moved closer to Winnebago, Kunu envisioned the stands of river timber that sometimes were a mile or so to the right of the highway and sometimes showed themselves to have crept much closer as one came over the crest of a hill. This country was so pretty and clean it gave Kunu a sense of pleasure and freedom which was always new no matter how many times he saw it. Even the houses and farmyards, whether prosperous or poor, seemed fresh and unsullied.

As the bus neared the turnoff to the Winnebago agency, Mike thought with particular pleasure of the tribal Timbers and Big Bear Hollow, and of the stretches of river east of Winnebago where he had spent so much of his youth hunting and exploring. When he was a child, Big Bear Hollow had seemed an immense and uncharted forest. On sunny days the Timbers had sparkled an emerald green and the air was musical with the voices of small birds. When it rained, or fog and mist rolled over the Timbers from the river, every sound seemed muffled and all of nature drank in the moisture, bathing and renewing herself.

The Timbers had always been wonderful and sometimes very frightening to Mike when he was a boy, especially if he happened to be alone or if it was nighttime. At night in Big Bear Hollow, the sound of an owl's cry used to send shivers through his body and make him think of the huge owls that were said to carry off misbehaving or abandoned children. Kunu thought of how his Choka had been born in Big Bear Hollow and lived there part of his childhood. That was before the government Allotment Act had forced most of the tribe out onto the open hills farther west in an effort to make the Winnebagoes give up their clan system of government and start individual family farms.

In spite of the often impassable roads and the lack of running water and electricity, Kunu sometimes wished that his family lived in Big Bear Hollow now, and that he could wake every morning to a world of trees and green plants, the fresh-air smell of soil and growing things, and the sounds of small animals and birds. He felt this all the more strongly as the bus turned to the right onto Highway 77, which runs through the middle of Winnebago. The sight of Winnebago was always quite a change to Mike from the surrounding countryside. He didn't like the narrow, noisy highway which formed Winnebago's main street – a main street that could never be calm or quiet for long because of the trucks and other traffic traveling through on the way the way to Sioux City. Also there were the unpainted little shops and buildings in the center of town, too many of them boarded up and falling into disrepair.

With the dirt and exhaust from the traffic and the mud carried down from the unpaved side streets, Mike found nothing very refreshing about downtown Winnebago. The side streets, too, were a constant aggravation to him since in the spring and fall they were rivers of mud, and in the winter they were often so icy that the steep ones were impossible to drive for days at a time.

Mike was loyal to his school and his community. When he thought of Winnebago his mind turned to family and good friends and to the important experiences he had there which had comprised the main part of his life up until that time. But, as a place to look at, he couldn't help comparing Winnebago to a town like Decatur with its wide paved streets, unmuddy sidewalks, and neat buildings. The mental picture of Decatur flooded Kunu's mind anew with thoughts of his recent disappointment.

In Decatur after the game was over, Kunu's fatigue and discouragement had been complete. With the score Decatur 112 to Winnebago 67, and no more time to alter the difference by even a point, the cheerleaders had come over to talk to the basketball team. Mike hadn't felt one bit like being cheered up and he just gave the girls a dirty look. "Sheei! Mean guy!" Mary Elk had commented to Ramona Fox, and the two of them had walked away from him.

Now as he climbed down from the bus at the high school, put away his things, and walked the dark hills to his house, Mike thought bitterly of how it just didn't seem like anything ever turned out right. This had been the game the team had really wanted to win, but Decatur had outplayed them all the way – and as for himself, Mike had only made six baskets and a free throw. Couldn't the team beat anyone much better than Emerson?

Mike thought bitterly how this season he had tried as hard as he knew how. He had paid close attention to the coach's suggestions and criticisms, and had practiced for hours every one of the four evenings a week that the school gym was free for use by the high school team.

Mike crossed the yard and wiped his snowy feet on the back porch. Once inside the house he dutifully

took out his geometry book to study and sat down at the kitchen table. He had difficulty, however, concentrating on the figures. His mother was mending the beadwork on Hinu's dance moccasins, Wihã was doing the dishes, and George Crow was making a feather bustle for Danny's dance costume.

Everyone knew how much Mike had wanted to win the game that evening and eventually Mr. Crow suggested that the boy stop trying to study and talk about it.

"It's not fair, Choka," the young man explained. "Decatur has a big modern gym for their team to practice and play in. And they don't have to share it with all of the grade school and junior high school P.E. classes. We didn't even start playing basketball until seventh grade, while they've always had fifth and sixth grade teams. It's only been this year that Coach Jones has been having me help him start out the fifth and sixth graders here in Winnebago. I've really enjoyed coaching the little guys, but it's cut down on my practice time and doesn't help the fact that I started late myself."

Mike continued, "It seems that since I've only played and practiced as long as I have, I just can't do the things I want to do with the ball. The only one on our team who's really good is Bill White Buffalo, and his father set him up a hoop and taught him how to play when he was little. I think maybe it was stupid of me to go out for the team in the first place. Do you think it's fair, Choka?"

"Of course it isn't fair," Mr. Crow answered. "Compared to Bill White Buffalo or to the boys on the Decatur team you are at a disadvantage. But advantage or no advantage, you are not going to succeed at everything you try. That doesn't mean you shouldn't try or that one failure means you will always fail. I noticed tonight that you scored higher than Bill White Buffalo did whether he's actually better at the game than you or not. I think he decided ahead of time that the team didn't have a chance, and so he was defeated before he even when out on the floor. It's important that you keep trying if you want to change things."

"Oh, nothing ever changes around here," muttered Kunu.

"That's not true," Mr. Crow said. "This coming summer they're going to start building a new high school wing onto the school. When it's done, all the grades won't have to share space any more. Also, do you know those abandoned buildings along main street just across from the jail and the sweet shop? Next year they're going to be cleared away and the town is going to build a new community center in their place. It's going to house the tribal offices, a library, kitchens, a new jail and post office, and meeting rooms for dances and assemblies. It took years of effort by a lot of people to get the proposals for the community center and the school expansion approved and funded. But that effort has finally begun to pay off.

"I know you feel bad about your experience with the team this year, Kunu, but not everyone else does. I met Coach Jones down at the post office last week and he told me what a fine team member you are. He said that when he tells you things to try, you listen, that you work well with the other boys, that you practice hard, and that your game has improved a lot this year. It made me feel proud and happy to hear those things about you. If you always go about what you try in such a way I am sure that you will accomplish much of what you want in life.

"The Coach also told me how pleased he is that you've been willing to help him teach the younger

boys this year. Without your help he couldn't have started the program since he didn't have time to undertake it single-handed. He said that you were the one he especially wanted as an assistant, because you not only have a good grasp of the basic elements of basketball, but also you've got the ability to work with people that makes for good coaching.

"I want you to remember that regardless of advantages or disadvantages your mother and I feel that it is very important that you kids be kind and helpful to people in this way. You need to be strong in this world, and it is in kindness, the show of kindliness, that the strength of a person is shown. You must keep your mind on kindness at all times, for the days have not passed when Winnebagoes need to grow up to be strong warriors.

"I remember my uncle telling me a story of how many years ago when the world was new, there was a grandmother who was raising her grandson who was an orphan. The little grandson's father may have been killed in battle. His mother may have died when he was a baby. But it was the grandmother's responsibility to raise this grandson. So, as a young lad, she taught him to be kind to all people regardless of the treatment he received from them.

"She taught him to be kind to those things that could not do him harm and to those that could do him harm. She explained to him that he should respect all of creation, that he shouldn't trample on the plants or kill anything unnecessarily. She told him to live and let live. One thing she pointed out was that he shouldn't be afraid of wild animals like rattlesnakes or cougars. If he was frightened, the animal would pick up on his fear and strike at him in self defense. Above all the grandmother wanted her grandson to be a kind man. She believed that a strong man is gentle and that through self-discipline in kindness the orphan would show his strength. She reared the little orphan to keep his mind on kindness at all times for he had to grow up to be a brave warrior some day."

So the orphan grew up, and as he was growing he had all of the problems that other little boys had, with the exception that, unlike them, he had only to contend with his grandmother. He was obedient to her teachings and so he grew to be a kind lad. In those days, when a boy reached a certain age, about nine on up, he had to go out and fast. The belief of the tribe was that a youth needed to fast in order to seek a totem, so that when he grew up to be a warrior he would have a guiding spirit to call upon when he was in dire need of help. Boys were encouraged to fast for other reasons, too. Fasting taught self-discipline. Also, alone in the wilderness, a youth was forced to observe what was going on around him in order to pass the time. In this way he learned to pay close attention to nature and to Māuna's creation.

So it was that the orphan used to blacken his face with charcoal and go to the woods and fast like the boys did at that time. This fasting consisted of going without water and food and concentrating for four days and four nights in the forest. A faster was supposed to cry out to the spirits, but he was not to talk to any human beings. He blackened his face so that if any people came by and saw the markings they would know that he was fasting and concentrating and they would leave him alone.

Time after time the orphan fasted four days and four nights and then returned to his grandmother who would ask, "Did you have a vision? Did you have a dream? Have you received a blessing?" Each time the answer was no. The orphan began to think that maybe

the spirits were something like the people of his village where they called him the orphan. “Wynuhnika,” they would say – which means ‘the little orphan’ in Winnebago. They would say, “O Wynuhika ixuhjilena – the little orphan is going by again.” In this way they would make fun of him.

There came a time when the orphan grew to be a young man, about the time when the other young men of his age had become warriors. He went up to fast again. This time he had a feeling that the spirits probably looked on him like he was a little orphan, that they were almost human and had the same human feeling about orphans, and wouldn’t bless him. He cried out, seeking a blessing from the thunder spirits, or thunder birds, the emblem of whom we wear in our beadwork today. He spent his last fast of four days and four nights crying out in this manner. Then at dawn on the fifth day he broke his fast, and being very thirsty, headed for the spring where he and his grandmother got water. He was so thirsty because he was an honest faster and had not even put a pebble in his mouth.

As the orphan neared the spring, he saw that a short distance away there lay a very bony horse covered with mud. A horse was something the youth had always desired to have. But since he was an orphan and his grandmother did not have the means, he had never been able to have one. As the orphan came closer the horse spoke in a horse language, as many a horse will do, he made the noise, “hrr-hrr-hrr-hrr-hrr.”

The youth went up to the animal and, looking, saw that his lips were parched. He immediately went and drew water for him and the horse probably thanked the lad by repeating the same noise. Then the orphan set about pulling grass by hand and carrying it over to the horse by armloads. He tried to groom him by brushing the mud and dirt off his body and he watered him again. The orphan promised the horse that he would be back again to take care of his needs then went on to see his grandmother.

Upon his getting home the grandmother of course put the question to the youth, “Did you receive a blessing? Did you have a dream? Did you have a vision?”

As usual, the orphan boy answered no. But he said, “I have found a horse.” He explained to his grandmother how he had fasted four days and nights and did not cheat, that he had cried out to the thunder people, the thunder bird, for a blessing and he didn’t even have a vision. He told her how upon waking the fifth day the first thing he had thought of was to walk to the spring to get a drink of water, and how there he had found the horse. He told her everything he did and what the horse looked like. It was not too handsome of a horse, but it was a horse.

The grandmother, again being very patient, spoke to the young man advising him to be kind and helpful to those who can’t help themselves. The lad told his grandmother that he had promised the horse he would return again later that day. He did so, and in the fashion I have told you he nourished the horse back to health and strength so that he could lead him back to the tent.

When the people saw how skinny a horse it was that the orphan was leading to his grandmother’s tent they said in Winnebago, “Oh, the orphan now owns a horse.” The words they picked to say this were used in a taunting fashion, and in this way they teased him about

his horse. Time went on and it seemed like the bony horse did not fatten up no matter how much the boy gathered feed for it. The animal just remained in an ugly state, as if his hip bones were about to pierce his hide.

It happened that some of the hunters were gone from the village for a number of days and then returned with the news that a herd of buffalo was coming. The buffalo were about four nights away. Other scouts went out to determine when the buffalo would be in a place where the hunters could have a big kill. Later one of the scouts came running back to camp and said that there was a white buffalo in the herd – a snow white buffalo!

At this time there was a powerful leader in the tribe. I wouldn't call him the chief because I don't believe the Winnebagoes had the kind of absolute rulers who could be called chiefs. This leader had a daughter who he put up for a prize. He said that whoever brought him the hide of that white buffalo could have her in marriage. Now, it so happened that the orphan boy was in love with this leader's daughter, and she had observed the orphan as a kind lad and was somewhat secretly in love with him, too.

The orphan's grandmother said to him, "Now the men are going to go and hunt. They are going to try and get that white buffalo, and whoever gets the white buffalo is also going to get himself a wife. Ah, she is a very beautiful girl, fitting for any warrior to have for a wife. What are you going to do about it?"

"Well," the orphan said, "I am going to try."

The buffalo came closer. The hunters decided to wait until the buffalo were just one night's travel away, and then on the next day they were going to go out and round up the buffalo for their needs. The orphan boy had his horse now, and he decided to get in on this hunt. The day before the hunt he took the horse to water, as usual. But he himself was in a very pensive mood; he wasn't as talkative as usual.

The young man watered the horse and he was taking him out to graze in a nice pasture when all of a sudden the horse spoke. The horse said, "Well nephew, why are you so quiet?" Of course this was a surprise to the orphan. He didn't believe his ears at first. He decided that maybe he had spoken his thoughts out loud without knowing it.

So he said, "Well, I was thinking about the hunt. I want to get that white buffalo."

The horse spoke again and said, "Nephew, if that is your desire, we'll get it."

This time the boy heard where the voice was coming from and he thought to himself, "My! If this horse can talk to me, he must be really something."

That day he looked for more pasture for the horse, nice pasture because on the morrow they were going on the hunt. When they were returning to the grandmother's lodge, the horse spoke again and said, "Nephew, what you have heard you have heard and no one else has heard. So say nothing about it."

The orphan just said, “Ha-uh,” which was his way of expressing his agreement to the pact of secrecy between the horse and himself. So it was.

On the dawn all the hunters got together. Of course they hunted according to the tribal rules. One of these rules was that the Bear Clan people would say when the hunt should begin. When the orphan went out to get on his bony horse, the horse said to him, “Nephew, when you get on, you sit yourself tight, whatever you do just sit like you should.” The appointed members of the Bear Clan gave the word and all of the hunters on their horses started off. In the twinkling of an eye, the orphan and his horse were gone. In fact, no one even thought to look for the orphan and his horse or to wonder how they were doing. But when the hunters got to the herd, there was the orphan on his mount returning, and he had with him the hide off that white buffalo. He had already been there and got him.

So it was that the orphan won the prize. The rest of the men went on hunting and killed many buffalo, so that there was plenty of meat and great rejoicing in the village. After they all got home and celebrated for a while, the lad went out to look for his horse and entered into conversation with him. He said, “Uncle, or Grandfather, who are you?”

“Ha, ha!” the horse said, “you have fasted many days and nights, time and time again, and we have watched you. We tried your patience. Thus it was that I came to you to bless you. And now you ask who I am. I am going to leave you today just like I appeared to you. But at sundown I will show you who I am. You will look towards the setting sun and observe.” Then the horse vanished.

Later that day just at sundown a black cloud formed in the sky to the west which colored the setting sun. The cloud grew into a terrific storm of huge black ominous clouds and the people became alarmed. It was very scary and there was that quiet before a bad storm which might mean a tornado or whirlwind of sorts. Lightning began to flash and you could hear the thunder. The clouds grew until they covered the sun and everything became dark. The orphan, still wanting to know who had blessed him, all of a sudden saw a great white horse break out of the dark clouds. Bolts of lightning flashed out from the horse’s eyes as he blinked, and he raced across the dark heavens with terrific speed. So it was that the orphan learned that he had been blessed by the Thunder People.

“And so it is always said,” concluded George Crow, “that some of our greatest blessings are disguised when we have them.”

Mr. Crow looked thoughtful for awhile after he finished the story. He said, “My Dega told me that one, but I’m not real sure it’s originally a Winnebago story. It doesn’t fit into any of the main groups of Winnebago tales, so maybe we borrowed it a long time ago. That’s O.K., though. It’s a good story, and I told it to you to let you know that I think you’ve been doing well this year, trying hard, and we’ve been proud of you.”

The next week Mike came home from school with some news for his grandfather. “The coach asked me today if sometime I’d like to go up with him to Vermillion where he went to school, to check out the university’s P.E. department. He thinks I should go to college next fall and work for a teaching degree

in coaching. What do you think of that?”

Mr. Crow kind of laughed. “Well, I thought he probably had an idea like that up his sleeve when he collared me last week about your being such a good coaching assistant. Now I guess the question is up to you whether you want to go to school to be a coach or not. You know that I think, myself, that if you go to college you could major in just about anything. Winnebago could really use an Indian lawyer, and if you put your mind to it, I’m sure you could go through law school.”

“I don’t know,” said Mike. “I’ll have to think about it. But I don’t suppose it would hurt to check out some coaching departments while I’m making up my mind.”

“No,” said Mr. Crow, “it wouldn’t hurt at all.”

Vocabulary Words From the Story

Choka - grandfather

Decatur – Decatur Nebraska, a town on the Missouri River just south of the Winnebago and Omaha reservations.

Dega - uncle

Hinu – eldest daughter

Ho-Chúhnik (also spelled Ho Tcâk or Ho-Chunk) – meaning “the voice of praise” in English. The name that the Winnebago people call themselves in their own language.

Kunu – eldest son

Macy – Macy Nebraska, a small town on the Omaha Tribe’s reservation where their school, a campus of the Nebraska Indian Community College, a medical clinic, their powwow grounds, and the Omaha tribal offices are located. The Omaha powwow is held there every year on the weekend of the full moon in August.

Mãuna – The Earthmaker; the deity who created the world in the Ho-Chúhnik creation stories.

Wihã – second daughter

Winnebago – Name by which the neighboring Fox Tribe called the Ho-Chúhnik people when they all still lived in Wisconsin. The a portion of the Ho-Chúhnik tribe arrived in Nebraska in the mid 1800s. Also the name of a small town on the Winnebago reservation where the community’s schools, Little Priest College, a hospital, their powwow grounds, and the tribal offices are located. The Winnebago powwow is held there the last full weekend in July every year.

Wynuhnika – the little orphan