American Indian quotes

Unit: Animals (Middle and High School)

Entries from *Animals of the Soul*, by J. E. Brown

“It was his custom to let me name all the new birds that I had seen during the day. I would name them according to the color or shape or the bill or their song or the appearance and locality of the nest—in fact everything about the bird that impressed me as characteristics.”

—Charles Eastman, Santee Dakota

“Let a man decide upon his favorite animal and make a study of it…. let him learn to understand its sounds and motions. The animals want to communicate with man, but Wakan-Tanka does not intend they shall do so directly—man must do the greater part in securing an understanding.”

—Brave Buffalo, Sioux

“I have not much to tell you except to help you understand this earth on which you live. If a man is to succeed in the hunt or the warpath, he must not be governed by his inclination, but by understanding the ways of animals and of his natural surroundings, gained through close observation.”

—Brave Buffalo, Sioux

“Early in the morning and late in the morning the deer picks out good things to eat. He goes among the young trees and eats the cherries and the young leaves. He tastes all that is good. So the deer-flesh will strengthen you well.”

—Left-Heron, Oglala (Sioux)

“The bear is quick-tempered and is fierce in many ways, and yet he pays attention to herbs which no other animal notices at all. The bear digs these for his own use. The bear is the only animal which eats roots from the earth and is also especially fond of acorns, Juneberries, and cherries. These three are frequently compounded with other herbs in making medicine and if a person is fond of cherries we say he is like a bear. We consider the bear as chief of all animals in regard to herb medicine, and therefore it is understood that if a man dreams of a bear he will be expert in the use of herbs for curing illnesses. The bear is regarded as an animal well acquainted with herbs because no other animal has such good claws for digging roots.”

—Two Shields, Lakota (Sioux)
Entries from *My Indian Boyhood*, by Chief Luther Standing Bear, Sioux

“Each kind of animal has its habits and manners of living, and the success of the hunter or trapper lies in acquiring knowledge of these ways. One who is in the woods or haunts of animals receives close and intimate views of their lives, and this leads to respect for them, for they have virtues and fine qualities just as people have.”

“The Indian has always been noted for his power to track. This power to tell at a glance the difference in animal tracks comes from close observation. One of our lessons as boys was to study with care any footprints that we came upon. Different animals make tracks that are similar. For instance, the wolf and coyote make footprints that are much alike. A baby bear and a coon will leave imprints that only a skilled eye will see a difference.”

“An animal that we observed a good deal was the beaver. We noticed that, whenever there were beaver and turtles, there was plenty of water, and that if the beaver left a stream, it would not be long before the stream went dry. Little animals like this told us many things, so we watched them.”

“We are brothers and sisters with all living things on this earth. All the animals and fish and birds have red blood just like we do, they breathe the same air that we breathe, they drink the same water that we drink. That’s why we call them our relatives. And that perspective needs to be brought out. It tells about us conveying some kind of knowledge or ability to at least somehow communicate with other species on this earth…”

—Allen Pinkham, Nez Perce, 2002

LaDonna Brave Bull Allard, Lakota (Sioux), 2002

Indian people have a different relationship with everything around them because we spent a lot of time with the animals, not looking at them as a different entity but looking at them as part of who we are. So if this animal got sick over there, you watched, you knew you had to watch whatever that animal was doing, because it would affect you. If your environment was sick your people would be sick. It was all the same, all integrated into one. Like trees their roots grow way down into the earth and you can't separate them. That's why when we lived here everything we did we had to do for future generations.