By Diana Quinn Inlak’ech, ND

In traditional cultures worldwide, the honoring of ancestors has existed in some form throughout human history. Traditional cultures wove cosmologies around relationship with their ancestors, the natural world, and cycles of life and death. In the span of human evolution it is only in the relatively recent period that ancestor worship has become less widespread. In the West, this shift is intertwined with cultural fear of and avoidance of death and poor cultural competency with processing grief. However, in recent years, the human need to connect with our ancestors has found a new outlet through modern developments in science and technology. These advancements offer new insights to interconnection with our ancestors for contemporary Westerners who are often skeptical of the non-material and unscientific.

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Who are the ancestors? They are the people in our family trees who are remembered and whose names are known from the previous generations. The ancestors are also those to whom we have been joined through chosen family, adoption, and deep heartfelt connection. In addition, they are the unnamed distant relatives in those family lineages from beyond recorded history. Our deep ancestry connects us all from the beginnings of humankind through our shared origins on the African continent with "mitochondrial Eve." Ancestral awareness connects us to all of those who have gone before.

The call to deepen my own ancestral practice grew alongside my study of the clinical application of epigenetic science. The emergent field of epigenetics has settled the debate for once and for all: human development is shaped by both nature AND nurture. The term epigenetics means "above the genome," and is the study of how genes interact with the environment to determine their expression. Epigenetic research reveals that aspects of lived experience are heritable, influencing genetic expression by turning genes "on" or "off." This revelation has tremendous clinical value because we understand that genes are not one's destiny, but rather, gene expression can be modified. It has become quite accessible to test one's DNA via kits ordered on the internet and then use the raw data in analysis for epigenetic markers and single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). Single nucleotide polymorphisms are the most common type of genetic variation among humans. These epigenetic factors determine genetic expression and many can be influenced by modifiable lifestyle factors like diet and exercise. In my clinical practice I often assess epigenetic variables to formulate an individualized health plan with patients in order to optimize wellness and minimize disease risk.

Epigenetic factors are also shaped by stressful experiences, emotions, and even more subtle factors that influence our lives. As Tolstoy wrote, "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Family shadows such as divorce, addiction, and abuse generate adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and are known to produce epigenetic changes that impact future health outcomes. The results of the CDC-Kaiser ACE Study revealed not only the correlation of adverse childhood experiences with poor health later in life, but also the widespread prevalence of the continuation of adverse childhood experiences in the following generations. Of the 17,000 people who were interviewed for the original study, 64% reported that they had experienced at least one ACE. Traumatic ancestral experiences affect the health and happiness of future generations. In studies of descendants of Holocaust survivors and survivors of the Dutch famine, researchers discovered physiologic changes which occurred as the result of trauma experienced generations before. According to Dr. Rachel Yehuda, principle investigator of epigenetic research on intergenerational trauma, rather than interpreting the findings with resignation, the data can be empowering. The fluidity of genetic expression revealed through epigenetic research also highlights the potential of therapeutic modalities to shift health outcomes.

In the United States, there is a profound legacy of intergenerational trauma from colonialism, Native genocide, and slavery, which informs contemporary systems of oppression. In our current shifting political climate, the surfacing of these wounds—which have always existed, but were previously marginalized by the dominant culture—invites an opportunity for healing. We live in a world of disconnection and division by race, gender, class, religion, and national borders, all of which are human constructs. What are the ways that our ancestral lineages embodied these experiences? How were they harmed, or how did they uphold these constructs? Ancestral work is social justice work, and we each have a role to play. Acknowledging and healing our collective cultural and historical trauma is a critical form of social justice activism. We do this work in our lifetime to transmute unresolved ancestral and cultural baggage so it is not carried forward, so we can dream a better dream for future generations.

As is the case for many of us, my heritage is a complex blend of intersections that can be confusing to grapple with: British colonial settlers, Spanish conquistadors, and Indigenous peoples of Mexico. Although the majority of my genetic makeup is European (from the United Kingdom and Spain), the 22% of my ancestry that is Native American is the part that garners the inquiry, "Where are you from?"

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Healing Our Ancestors

The Importance of Ancestral Relationships

By Diana Quinn Inlak’ech, ND

Fred and Angeline Mireles

Diana’s maternal grandmother, Angeline Mireles with her children, Rosemary, Angie, and Ray.

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grandmother’s great pride in her Castilian Spanish ancestry which set her apart from the indio background of my grandfather’s line. Ancestor work is complex and can give us opportunity to reckon with the echoes of how individual family patterns resonate with the current of wider historical conflicts. All of these and more are alive within each of us.

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Ancestral work is an act of radical self-care and self-love. By putting our attention on our ancestral lineage we connect to the resilience, beauty, and brilliance of those who came before. We receive the help and support from our healthy and loving ancestors of the distant past. We integrate these gifts and provide care and healing for ourselves as we extend care and healing to our ancestors. When we engage in ancestral repair, time is non-linear. In living our fullest embodied lives, we are healing those who came before and those who will come after. We honor the cycle of life and death and acknowledge that we will become the ancestors of the future. When we as a culture restore our relationship with our nonliving relations, our capacity for kinship expands to the other-than-human, whom we can also consider our relations and ancestors. We weave ourselves back into the web of life and the natural world. To paraphrase botanist, and member of Citizen Potawatomi Nation, Robin Wall Kimmerer, how do we engage with the lands on which we live as if they are the lands from which we will be the ancestors, lands that we want to remember us with gratitude?

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To be a good ancestor in training, we can begin with establishing an ancestral practice. One route to this work is through prayer, meditation, and visualization. If there are ancestral reverence practices in the tradition of your bloodline, exploring and practicing those is a great place to begin. Raised Catholic, I grew up lighting candles for family members who had passed and honoring All Saint’s Day by visiting grave sites with flowers and cemetery candles that would be kept burning for the entire month of November. Later in life I reclaimed my ancestral tradition of celebrating Dia de Muertos, or perhaps my Mexican ancestors reclaimed me. Over the years my celebration of this holiday has expanded to last several weeks with an elaborate ofrenda altar and preparation of special meals. The ofrenda is an altar space with photographs and relics of my ancestors, with offerings of their favorite foods and beverages, and flowers. Altar creation is a simple practice for ancestral reverence, designating a physical space in your home with a representation of your lineage and sitting with an open mind and heart. Ancestral connection is also available through formal ritual; spiritual traditions worldwide include the role of ceremonial ritual in ancestral practices. In his book Ritual: Power, Healing and Community, Malidoma Somé calls ritual the “anti-machine”, restoring our psychic foundation and our need to live in relationship with other human beings and the natural world. Through ritual we create room for the sacred, which holds us in the work that we cannot do alone. Ritual has a reparative function, mending the fabric of our souls and restoring aspects of our psyche that have been fragmented, allowing reintegration. Whether done individually or in community, ritual is a powerful component of ancestral work for transformation and for mending ruptures in our lineage. Ancestral work is often grief work, and it is the work of attention and care. Dedication to these practices can bring about healing for oneself and one’s lineage in both directions, transforming the narrative of the past as well as what is left behind.

I believe that ancestral connection is a critical component of restoring balance in these times. This work has been central in my own healing journey and is a component of the healing work I do with others. So often the physical, mental/ emotional, and spiritual malaise that people are living with have a root in inherited ancestral patterns. Regardless of one’s religion, spiritual tradition, or lack thereof, there are many accessible ways to reconnect with ancestry. For the practical and scientifically minded, exploring genealogy or doing DNA testing opens up connection with one’s lineage. Don’t be surprised if after opening the line of communication, synchronicities and family ties come out of the woodwork. Ancestor work provides individual and collective healing that is an essential part of planetary healing, and reconnects us to cycles of life and death and our part in the natural world. It is our gift, our birthright, and ultimately our sacred responsibility.

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