

TWO

WHO ARE THE ANCESTORS?

Genetics, family, and blood lineage are ways to approach the question “Who are the ancestors?” Blood kin are the first way in which most people think of and experience the ancestors, and they’re also the focus of much of this book. Like Russian nested dolls, our experience of recent family ancestors rests within larger patterns of lineage, culture, and human prehistory. Our oldest ancestors lived in Africa at least two hundred thousand years ago. In this way, the ancestors express the collective wisdom of humanity. They are elders who remember our full evolutionary journey as human beings, and they are custodians of our genetic and cultural memory.

This chapter introduces key beliefs shared by many different cultures about the ancestors and their relationship with the living. You’ll learn to distinguish between recent family ancestors and the older, collective dead, and to tell the difference between healthy ancestors and troubled ghosts. You’ll also learn about challenges and positive effects you’re likely to encounter when engaging with ancestors. Chapter 2 concludes with an exercise to reflect on your perception of family and older ancestors. As you read, assume that some of these souls are deeply at peace, while others may still be working things through. Unless you already have a practice of relating directly to your ancestors, again I encourage you to read through the whole book before seeking intentionally to make contact.

The Dead Are Not Dead

I believe that most indigenous peoples, animists, shamans, pagans, spiritual healers, and others who intentionally relate to the dead would agree with the following four assertions. These beliefs are the foundations of my approach to ancestor reverence and ritual, and they inform the exercises and rituals in this book. As you read, see which perspectives feel natural to you, and where your beliefs and experiences may differ.

1. Consciousness continues after death.
2. Not all of the dead are equally well.
3. The living and the dead can communicate.
4. The living and the dead can strongly affect one another.

Consciousness Continues after Death

Traditions of ancestor reverence assume that the ancestors are as metaphysically real as you or me. Like far-off galaxies or microscopic bacteria, the souls or spirits of the deceased exist whether or not you believe in them or can perceive them. Several factors influence a person's degree of openness to the subject of the ancestors: *religious or spiritual views*, *direct personal experience*, and what I would call *gut feeling* or *instinctual belief*. Any one of these is enough to foster a stance of openness toward the spirits of the dead. As you read, notice how open you are to the reality of the ancestors and where this receptivity comes from.

When people think of the ancestors, they often picture older people, black-and-white photographs, and deceased family members. It's true: the ancestors include those who have lived and died before us; however, as religious scholar Graham Harvey writes, "To be an ancestor is to continue relating."¹ When a loved one who has died pays a visit to the living, this is an event, an encounter *in the present moment* between an incarnate human and an ancestral spirit who previously walked the Earth. From this perspective, the dead are still

alive. Ancient Egyptians sometimes referred to their beloved dead as “the living ones” and to Osiris, steward over of the dead, as “Lord of the Living.” Why emphasize that the dead are in fact alive? If we allow that the souls or spirits of the dead can relate to the living, it’s worth being clear about what we mean when we describe someone or something as “dead.” Could this mean that this soul continues to exist while we have ceased to consciously relate to them, and that they may be in that way dead *to us*?

Insofar as ancestral spirits may continue to relate with the living, they are no more “dead” than angels, gods, the spirits of plants and animals, or other unseen forces. Instead of thinking about the living and the dead, it may be more accurate to distinguish between human souls who are currently incarnate (the living) and souls who were previously incarnate but whom we may still relate to in the present (the ancestors). Like incarnate humans, the ancestors live and dwell in the present, even if they have their own communities and places of dwelling distinct from our lives on Earth. In the words of Senegalese poet Birago Diop in his poem “Spirits,” “The dead are not dead.”

The existence of ancestral spirits hinges on the fact that some aspect of what we are continues after death. Nearly all faiths affirm some type of postmortem continuity of consciousness. This doesn’t necessarily mean that all “believers” have direct, personal experiences with the dead. Research shows that 64 percent of Americans believe in life after death and 45 percent believe in ghosts, even though most haven’t had a near-death experience and many report never having seen a ghost personally.² If your faith tells you that some aspect of the soul continues after death, belief in the ancestors naturally follows. Likewise, if you’ve personally experienced contact from the ancestors, then “belief” in the spirits of the dead is a function of direct knowing. But why do millions of Americans who don’t identify as especially spiritual or religious *and* who don’t report direct encounters still act as if the ancestors are real?

Consider the multibillion-dollar funeral and cemetery industry

in the United States as one example of what I would call *gut feeling* or *instinctual belief* in the ancestors—acting as if they are real. People invest in funerals, cremation urns, and grave plots to honor the memory of the deceased and also to show love and respect to them as ongoing realities in the present. U.S. laws prohibiting the desecration of cemeteries and human remains enforce the widespread taboo against disturbing human remains, a view that hinges upon a presumed link between the remains and the soul of the deceased. Hollywood understands the power of belief in this topic. Films like *Poltergeist*, in which construction over a cemetery leads to paranormal trouble, and the idea of the “curse of the pharaohs,” believed to kill anyone who disturbs the tombs of ancient Egyptian rulers, play on the association between the spirit of the deceased and their remains. Popular TV shows like *Ghost Hunter*, *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and *Crossing Over* rest on the widespread belief that soul or consciousness—in some form—continues after death. Stories like this continue to sell because most Americans tend to act as if the ancestors are real. Just in case.

Not All of the Dead Are Equally Well

When we accept that some aspect of what we are might carry on after death, then questions naturally arise about where exactly we’re headed. Most religious traditions assert the existence of an unseen or spirit world: some other aspect of reality (and of who we are) that is not fully circumscribed by the physical world. This is closely related to belief in continuity of consciousness after death: if some part of what we are endures when the body dies, there must be at least two places or dimensions, a metaphysical “here” and “there.” Where we go after life on Earth would be the existential “there,” the place where other ancestors dwell, the spirit world or otherworld.

Many traditions describe this “otherworld” in ways that imply structural integrity of the overall system. The Yorùbá people of southwest Nigeria and other practitioners of Yorùbá traditional religion (also known as Ifá/Òrìṣà) sometimes use the image of the spherical calabash or gourd

to convey duality within a greater wholeness. In observable reality, the upper half of the calabash is the dome of the sky (*òrun*), and the lower half that of the earth (*ayé*). Often translated as *heaven*, *òrun* also refers to the unseen realm that surrounds and intersects the physical world or *ayé*. The journey from the ancestral realm (prebirth) to incarnate life and back again (post-death) is a journey from *òrun* to *ayé* to *òrun*. One divination verse (*odù Ìrosùn-Ìwòrì*) from Yorùbá culture states, “People will continue to go to heaven and return to earth after death until everyone attains the good position.”³ The verse implies that at any given moment some human souls reside in the otherworld and some on Earth, but all participate in the greater story of human consciousness that is playing out in the great calabash of the world, both seen and unseen.

The pairing of heaven (there) and Earth (here) also runs throughout Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and can be viewed in terms of the following dichotomies:

The Living — The Ancestors

Earth — Heaven

This World — The Otherworld

Physically Perceivable Reality — The Unseen or Spirit World

Many traditions also believe that the condition of the dead mirrors or parallels that of living humans on Earth. Some people are wise and kind, while others are dangerous and tormented; depictions of the otherworld often reflect this full spectrum. To account for these differences, maps of the ancestral realms often elaborate two or more locations, with some being distinctly more comfortable than others. For example, Christian sources depict heaven and hell in radically different ways, yet both are dwelling places, and perhaps states of consciousness, for souls after death. Buddhism recognizes the existence of a hungry ghost realm populated by suffering souls; it also acknowledges the existence of benevolent ancestral teachers. Sometimes traditions say that the troubled dead remain here among the living as earthbound spirits,

ghosts in need of assistance to make their belated transition to join the ancestors in the otherworld.

The teachings presented in this book are consistent with traditional lore by acknowledging that the levels of awareness among the souls of the dead run the full spectrum from loving, wise, and inspired ancestors to dangerous and ill-intentioned ghosts. This fact requires practitioners of ancestor reverence to demonstrate discernment like that required when meeting new living humans. If we fail to distinguish between levels of awareness among the dead, we risk viewing the ancestors either as entirely frightening and dangerous or as an idealized source of love and light, when the reality is more nuanced. Throughout this book I refer to “the ancestors” interchangeably with “the dead” (meaning all human souls not incarnate on Earth at this time), but I sometimes use the term ancestor more narrowly to refer to those souls who are well in spirit. In the second usage, ancestor is a kind of compliment. It refers to an earned or acquired status and contrasts with ghosts, the troubled dead, or those who are not yet ancestors.

A related, and important, assumption is that, like us, the souls of the dead change. When a parent or relative dies, our memories and psychological filters may distort the connection or attempt to freeze the relationship in the past. Malidoma Somé, a teacher and ritual leader from the Dagara people of Burkina Faso, West Africa, spoke to this problem:

In this dimension, once you make a mistake you are always referred to from the perspective of that mistake. There is an unspoken assumption of the irredeemability of the human being. That is why criminals remain criminals the rest of their lives. That is why people live their lives trying to avoid having a record. The problem with that is that this eventually stretches itself to the other world, so that ancestors, the dead forebears who during their lives were less than wise, made mistakes that a lot of other people paid for, are still kept within that kind of framework as if even death didn't redeem them.⁴

Somé emphasized how the same ancestors whose lives were most troubled during their time on Earth may actually be highly motivated to work for good after their death. The ghost of Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* beautifully embodies this wisdom by warning Ebenezer Scrooge to change his ways and avoid making Marley's mistakes. Even Christianity and Islam, which tend to view heaven and hell as relatively enduring states, recognize that after death the soul undergoes purification, reckoning, or some type of further refinement or growth.

In my experience of supporting others in making repairs with recent ancestors, I have encountered situations in which the spirit of the deceased seemed to be bright, loving, and available for connection, while the living—often adult children of the deceased—were not able to move beyond memories of their parent during life. Ideally, people work through their issues with a family member in life or in the period of time after the individual's death. However, unhealed emotional pain from a past relationship can keep a living person from relating to supportive ancestral spirits in the present.

The Living and the Dead Can Communicate

Contact between the living and the dead can take many forms. Sometimes the deceased come unsolicited as visitors in our dreams. Sometimes they speak through waking visions or synchronicities, or at times when our psychological defenses are thin (e.g., near-death experiences, altered states). When people who have no framework for this contact have such experiences, they may be unsettled or wonder if they're "going crazy." In most cases, experiences of spontaneous ancestral contact are no more a sign of psychosis than are spontaneous interactions with living humans here on Earth. In fact, some people engage in spiritual traditions precisely because they're seeking to make sense of spontaneous, unsolicited, or even unwanted contact from the dead.

Many also seek to contact the dead through practices of ancestor reverence. These can include ancestor-focused prayer, meditation,

inspired song, and creative expression; psychic and mediumship practices; some types of divination; and any other practice that facilitates communication. In nearly every ancestor-focused ritual I have participated in over the past two decades, living participants have attempted to communicate with the deceased. Of course spontaneous contact and intentional contact with the ancestors are not mutually exclusive. Those who intentionally relate to the ancestors also tend to report occasional instances of spontaneous contact (e.g., dreams, synchronicities). For those who do succeed in making contact, it's important, over time, to seek to refine the accuracy of the communication.

When thinking about communication between the living and the dead, remember what you know about relationships between living humans—that contact is not necessarily either conscious or beneficial. People may be aware of you before you are aware of them, and they may have helpful or harmful intentions toward you. For example, many people enjoy the support of loving ancestors whether or not they are aware of or even believe in the existence of these unseen friends and protectors. Contact in this case can be considered unconscious but beneficial. When the dead who are not yet at peace weigh on those with no awareness of the unseen, this would be an instance of unconscious and unhelpful contact between the living and the dead. Practitioners of ancestor-focused ritual also know that it's possible to turn our attention toward beings in the unseen realm, including the ancestors, without drawing their attention to us. In brief, we can reach out intentionally to the ancestors, or they may communicate with us by their own volition. The resulting contact may, for either party involved, be helpful or harmful, conscious or unconscious.

The Living and the Dead Can Strongly Affect One Another

Of the four key assumptions, this is perhaps the most foreign to modern Western people. Yet without this consideration, practices to engage the ancestors wouldn't be important. Practitioners of ancestor reverence generally assume that the ancestors influence us to a degree that truly

matters and that we also affect them in important ways; mutual impact is more than just a given. What *is* an option is whether the influence will be conscious or unconscious, beneficial or harmful. Many rituals focus on maintaining positive relations between the living and the dead precisely to ensure that their influence is beneficial rather than harmful. In a conversation, a Haitian Vodun priest, Manbo Maude, gave me the image of one of the Guédé (ancestral spirits) digging your grave while another tries to fill it in. The ancestors can confer blessings of health and longevity, or they can send us to an early grave.

Consider first some of the helpful ways in which the ancestors may influence the living. On the most fundamental level, healthy ancestors can bestow a legacy of good health, prosperity, and rootedness in place and culture. Ancestors who embodied kindness and integrity during life can serve as sources of inspiration and motivation for living relatives. The loving dead can also work to guide, uplift, and protect their descendants, whether or not the living family is conscious of this support. In my experience, the ancestors who are strong and bright in spirit are also the best guides and allies for living family members who seek to transform and end difficult intergenerational burdens. We are their eyes and hands in this dimension, and they are deeply invested in good outcomes. Ancestors who are well in spirit bring added blessings to major life events like birth, weddings, and the return of the living to their ranks at the time of death. In brief, when we enjoy the active support of our loving ancestors, life tends to go more smoothly, with higher levels of luck, ease, and vitality.

We on Earth can also benefit the ancestors. Like any other type of being in any dimension, they need to eat. When we speak well of them and feed them through heartfelt offerings (e.g., food, drink, flowers), they receive the pleasure of nourishment and remembrance. We also bring honor and joy to our ancestors when we heal intergenerational challenges, support healthy families, and live as good and ethical people on Earth. Remember that death in our world is the start of a rite of passage for the recently deceased. This journey is completed only when

they fully join the ranks of ancestors. The living can play an important role in this transformation. When we assist the recently dead and those who are not yet well in spirit to complete their transition, we support the ancestors' health. Generally, any act of service that encourages healthy families, children, and a future for humans here on Earth also reverberates in positive ways among the ancestors. Can you think of other ways in which you benefit from ancestral support or bring honor and blessings to your people?

What about the dead who are “digging your grave,” the ones who are not yet at peace? Remember, the three maxims given above assert that the ancestors are real, they're not all equally well, and they can communicate with us (even if we don't seek out the contact). Good news: if you ever have the sense that a beloved grandparent or parent is looking out for you, there's a good chance they are. Bad news: if you get the sense that the souls of family ancestors are not at peace or are interfering with the living family, there's also a good chance that you're right. We can't have it both ways, any more than we can believe that only nice, friendly people exist on Earth. When the ancestors are not well in spirit, living elders may often feel physically and psychologically unwell, and so on down the generations. Manifestations may include legacies of illness, addiction, physical and emotional abuse, isolation, poverty, and early death. Destructive actions by recent ancestors can reverberate through the living family for generations, functioning as a kind of ancestral curse, oppressive intergenerational karma, or pervasive bad luck. What are your beliefs about the troubled dead and their effect on the living? The impact of ghosts or the unwell dead will be explored at length in following chapters, and the repair process at the heart of this book emphasizes ways to transform and heal these difficult legacies.

Although living family members are often downstream from ancestral trouble, actions taken (or avoided) by the living can harm the ancestors. As in many types of relationships, the most common way that living people do this is by failing to observe basic respect or to show up for the connection. Many contemporary communities (religious and

otherwise) reject the existence or relevance of the ancestors; this lack of consideration functions as a kind of ancestral amnesia with respect to family, heritage, and culture. When we forget our origins, we're more likely to enact and reinforce unhelpful intergenerational patterns, if only because no one has warned us about family burdens. Insofar as the ancestors look to us to heal the troubles passed down along the bloodlines, unwillingness to heal can keep them from fulfilling their role in the repair work. Repeating old, harmful patterns can keep the ancestors stuck along with us. Lack of consideration for family members after death also increases the risk that they will fail to be fully elevated and arrive as ancestors. Moreover, the living may also cause disruption for the dead when desecrating places important to them, such as cemeteries, ancestor shrines, and natural sanctuaries. Can you think of other ways that people on Earth have an unhealthy relationship with the deceased?

Building on those four underlying assumptions or tenets of ancestor reverence and ritual, the following section explores:

- Different types of ancestors based on how recently they lived on Earth
- Distinctions between individual ancestors, lineages, and the collective dead
- Common challenges when relating with different types of ancestors

When reading, reflect or make notes on how these perspectives align or differ from your personal beliefs and experiences. The chapter concludes with an invitation to personal reflection on how you feel about your ancestors.

Family and Remembered Ancestors

Family can be a source of great joy as well as devastating pain, and our family, whether by presence or absence, profoundly shapes our identity

and outlook on life. Your experience of family likely also informs your perception of your much earlier ancestors.

Family Ancestors

When you think of family, maybe you think of your birth parents—particularly if they are the ones who raised you from childhood. For adoptees, individuals who have never met their birth parents, and those from blended or chosen families, the subject of family ancestors can be complicated. Perhaps the narrowest lens through which to think about ancestors is DNA—blood relation. Many physical features and health predispositions derive directly from blood ancestors, and their impact can be life-altering. The ancestors can bestow gifts such as longevity, fertility, and an even temperament, just as they can pass along vulnerabilities to physical and mental illness. Individuals who are adopted, orphaned, or estranged from their blood relatives may not know their genetic predispositions. They may also lack access to the stories of their biological ancestors. Nevertheless, those with no living connection to blood family can engage with the spirits of their beloved dead and blood ancestors through practices of honoring and ritual. In addition to direct lineage elders (e.g., grandparents, parents), family ancestors can include children, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, and anyone linked through the same blood lineages.

Family can also include *chosen family*, even if we are not always the one making the choices. In this sense, genetically unrelated individuals become blood relations, often through formal adoption rituals. For example, some North American Native tribes have ceremonies for making relations, after which adopted individuals are understood to be family, with all the accompanying privileges and responsibilities. Legal adoption can function as a kind of contemporary ritual of making relations, and some adoptees find that their new family and ancestors carry the same psychological weight as biological ancestors. In my own experience of becoming “blood brothers” with a childhood friend, I continued to dream of him years after ceasing to be in regular contact. Blood

in this way is also symbolic, and the family you choose or are chosen by may influence not only your identity but also your blood and body. Family ancestors may also include genetically unrelated loved ones who at some point transitioned from friend to family member. Although this book emphasizes lineage repair with our biological ancestors, you can extend some of those same principles and practices to other types of ancestors and lineages.

The Remembered Dead

No matter whom we consider family, it's our memory of those people that determines the reach of the remembered ancestors. The recent or remembered dead include deceased parents, grandparents, children, siblings, and other kin who knew us during their lives on Earth. They may also include earlier generations of ancestors remembered through family lore or genealogy research. Think of these ancestors as those remembered by name, face, or deed.

Practitioners of ancestor reverence sometimes encourage knowing the names of ancestors back to seven generations. If this is taken to heart, seven generations along every bloodline calls for memorizing the names of 254 ancestors. Most people I meet know the names of their grandparents and maybe one or two great-grandparents. This lack of knowledge is understandable, as family research is not for the faint of heart. For example, Native Americans and people of African ancestry who are able to trace their family history through recent generations inevitably confront a historical wall where documented names give way to the less personalized records of slavery, forced occupation, and genocide. Those with recent disruptions in ancestral knowledge (e.g., adoption, war and dislocation, conception through violence, sudden migrations) often have even more limited knowledge of family history. In my case, years of research revealed names and knowledge of family ancestors back more than three hundred years along a few bloodlines, but for others only to four generations. If you know the names of your ancestors, even along just one lineage, to seven generations, that's

a blessing! Remember that any effort to understand family history or research your genealogy can help awaken your relationship with ancestors, both known and unknown (see chapter 5 for research suggestions).

Relating to Family and Remembered Ancestors

What obstacles can come up around relating to recent ancestors? First, you may simply have little or no information about them. Second, you might have negative experiences and perceptions of family members that hinder your enthusiasm for engaging that family line. Third, there may be problems that source from the ancestral spirits themselves.

Let's look at each of these three challenges. Although you may feel discouraged because you have limited information about your recent family ancestors, you can still connect directly with them in spirit. Genetic ancestors are no farther from you than your blood and bones. In fact those with no experience of a biological family are less likely to project memories of the deceased onto their present relationships with the ancestors. To adoptees and those in similar circumstances, I suggest trusting your intuition and ability when interacting with both your blood and your adoptive ancestors.

Another common question I hear goes something like this: "If my living family or recent ancestors are abusive, unloving, dysfunctional, absent, or otherwise uninspiring, why in the world would I want to connect with them?" One reason is to make sure that they're not already connecting with you unhelpfully. Until the deceased join the ranks of the loving ancestors, they can weigh on the living relatives' connections with each other and with the older ancestors. Conversely, their successful transition may free up old blockages and support personal and family healing. *But at no point does relating with your ancestors call for opening yourself to harmful or abusive energies from your family, living or deceased.* To the contrary, positive change may call for you to establish healthy boundaries, both with your living relatives and with any of the deceased who are troubled in spirit.

Another reason to communicate with recent ancestors is to help

facilitate a better way for them, for your living family, and for yourself. The family we knew during their lives on Earth are also the ancestors most likely to affect us in the present. This makes it in our self-interest to be sure that all is well for them. Occasionally people realize that their beloved dead are already well in spirit, even though our perception of them remains negative and rooted in the past. (For more on ways to determine if your ancestors are well, see chapter 5, pages 88–95.) Malidoma Somé has encouraged those seeking family healing through ancestor work to “detach themselves from the thought that ancestors who once had a record [of harmful behavior] in this dimension are still carrying that same frequency in the other world.”⁵ Ancestors whose lives on Earth were troubled may be strongly invested in making repairs in our world as part of their own journey of healing, and they may have already joined the wise and loving ancestors sometime after death. When any given family ancestor is well in spirit, the conditions support forgiveness and reconciliation between the living and this ancestor, and we have the opportunity for a mutually supportive relationship that may not have been possible during life. If all of your recent ancestors are already bright and well in spirit, you can work with them to maintain the health and vitality of your family and community.

Unfortunately, not all those who have died have fully settled into their status as supportive family ancestors. Without proper precautions, relating to the troubled dead or not-yet-ancestors can cause disruption and disequilibrium for the living. Unless you feel confident that any given family ancestor is well in spirit, consider first relating instead with older ancestral guides and initiating the lineage repair process described in chapters 5 through 9. In this way, any of the recent dead who are not yet well may “graduate” over time to become elevated ancestors themselves.

Some signs that this process of engagement is “working” include more conscious relationships with your living family members, a greater connection to lineage and ancestral support, and the elevation

of the spirits of the remembered dead. Feeling the support of loving ancestors can help you update old perceptions, establish healthy boundaries, forgive past harms, and show up in more conscious ways with your living family. Even if you have no contact with or knowledge of your biological family or you are the last of your lineage, you can still call upon the assistance of loving ancestors and strengthen this relationship over time. Loving and forgiving our recent blood ancestors also helps them arrive at peace and, in turn, better support us from their world.

Older Ancestors and the Collective Dead

Contrast the light of a candle to a bonfire. With little knowledge of family history, the night beyond memory dwells close to the present, while for those with extensive records or oral history, memory burns brighter and reaches farther back in time. Even so, along all lineages, there is a threshold beyond which names, faces, and family stories are forgotten. Bloodlines among the older, collective dead include the most recent ancestor along any given lineage whose name is lost to memory (usually someone in the last few generations), through the last few thousand years of history, back to the first humans who walked the Earth at least two hundred thousand years ago. The dead whose names are forgotten include the vast majority of our ancestors.

No longer tethered to Earth by name or living memory, these older ancestors often appear to living people as a group or a collective energy. Nonetheless, you may experience ancestors from any period of time as individual spirits, as a distinct lineage, or as a collective presence. Ideally you will feel loved and supported by your older ancestors; however, accessing their support can call for healing and repair with living family and with recent ancestors. If you feel connection with older lineage ancestors whose names are now forgotten, how far back in time does this reach? Even practitioners of ancestor reverence seem to relate mostly to ancestors from the past two to three thousand years.

Consider the following four categories as a generalized starting point for distinguishing the ancestors whose names are forgotten:

- Ancient human ancestors: 200,000–10,000 years ago
- First agriculturalists and urban folk: 10,000–2,000 years ago
- Earlier ancestors known to history: 2,000–500 years ago
- Recent ancestors known to history: 500 years ago–named family

My comments above are not meant to imply that agriculturalists, urbanites, or those who write history are somehow better or that human culture progresses in any particular direction. Rather I am emphasizing that, as memory recedes into the past, specific knowledge gives way to broader and broader strokes of history and prehistory. The following section addresses some of the obstacles and the indicators of healing when relating with older ancestors.

Ancient Human Ancestors

Evolutionary biologists and paleoanthropologists generally place our emergence as a distinct species as far back as two hundred thousand years ago in East Africa,⁶ and our arrival at full behavioral modernity around fifty thousand years ago, also in Africa.⁷ This refers to the time when human beings established cultural universals such as language, story, art, toolmaking, cooking, dance, jokes, and music. According to this dominant “out of Africa” theory, all of our human ancestors originate in ancient Africa, as do the qualities that we most associate with humanity. Roughly fifty thousand to ten thousand years ago, some humans migrated out of Africa to inhabit most other regions of Earth. For thousands and thousands of years, nearly all of our ancestors, all around the world, lived in communities of a few hundred to a few thousand people and practiced some form of hunter-gatherer, seminomadic, or small-scale agricultural lifestyle. What do you know about the lives of your ancestors during this early span of time? In my case, I know that the earliest known human remains in Europe date to

about forty-five thousand years ago⁸ and that at least some of my personal ancestors migrated from northern Africa into southern Europe sometime after. I also know that, like others of European ancestry, I am 1 to 4 percent Neanderthal by genetic composition, meaning that some of my early human ancestors had children with and lived alongside our Neanderthal relatives in Europe until the extinction of the latter about twenty-five thousand years ago.

Over the past ten thousand years—only the most recent 5 percent of our history as a species—cultures around the world underwent major changes through adoption of large-scale agriculture, written language, and intensive mining and metallurgy. These innovations led to the emergence of larger cities and modern civilizations. As of 2014, over half of all human beings now live in urban areas.⁹ Although some of our lineages shifted away from tribal ways of life thousands of years ago, a small handful of indigenous cultures to this day still lack a written language and live close to the land in more traditional ways. How long has it been since your people lived in a tribal culture or practiced an indigenous way of life? What do you know about the tribal, preimperial, precolonial strata of your blood ancestry?

As someone of northern European ancestry, my people ceased to practice tribal, Earth-honoring ways of life roughly one to two thousand years ago. Although I relate in spirit to these older ancestors who would have been “indigenous” by today’s standards, I do not claim to be an indigenous person; rather, I am a practicing animist, cultivating Earth-honoring wisdoms.

Ancestors of the Past Two Thousand Years

When do your older ancestors first emerge in your awareness of history as distinct peoples? For me, this transition centers on the conquest and conversion of pre-Christian Europe by the Roman and later Christian empires. Before this, my ancestors lived by and large as tribal, indigenous people, and this is the stratum of my history that I most resonate with. If you are African-American, what do you know or imagine of the

lives of your ancestors in the generations before the disruptions of the transatlantic slave trade? What about those ancestors who lived before the arrival of Christianity and Islam to sub-Saharan Africa? If you are a member of one of the hundreds of Native North American nations, do you have knowledge and a felt sense of the lives of your people before the arrival of Europeans to the continent? If your people hail from Asia, how much do you know of their history before regular European contact with Asia began in earnest in the sixteenth century?

The most psychologically influential of the forgotten dead are often those just beyond the reach of remembered names. You might consider these ancestors as forgotten by name but known to history. Their impact reverberates through shared culture and habits, historical and national identity, and body-level epigenetic influence. Insofar as the legacy of European colonialism over the past five centuries has been challenging for much of the world, this period of trouble continues to reverberate and inform many peoples' experiences of their ancestors in the present. But even if your people have experienced acute hardship over the past few centuries, be sure also to remember those who lived before these troubles and to not allow hardship to fully define your perception of your ancestors. Each of our bloodlines includes thousands of years of human history, with plenty of time spent as oppressor, oppressed, and every other configuration.

Individual, Lineage, and Collective Ancestors

Individual ancestral spirits are most often people we knew during their life on Earth. My grandparents and several friends who have passed are like this for me. Usually when people claim to talk to dead people, this is how they are experiencing the ancestors—as individual spirits who died sometime in the last century. Any ancestral spirit may be in a loving and peaceful state or in a state of restlessness and pain. The troubled dead usually appear as individual spirits. They may or may not be considered ancestors, as some reserve the term *ancestors* for those who are aware that they are dead and are reasonably well in spirit. The

important distinction here is that you're relating to the spirit of one specific ancestor as opposed to a collective.

Lineage can be experienced as a kind of collective consciousness composed of the individual ancestral spirits in any given line. Recent family ancestors may take on the quality of lineage, such as a deceased parent who seems connected in spirit with their parents and grandparents. When the spirit of a recent ancestor merges with the greater lineage, communication through that ancestor, for example during a dream, can appear to be infused with the weight or authority of lineage and the feeling of being in the presence of a larger energy.

Lineage can also include older ancestral guides who present themselves as individual spirits. The family lineage repair process at the heart of this book (see chapters 5 through 9) calls for connecting with ancestral guides and working with them to make any needed repairs among both older and more recent family ancestors. For example, I have experienced connection with an ancestor along my paternal grandfather's line who lived in northern Europe about two thousand years ago. For me, this guide embodies lineage as a group consciousness, a face that the lineage puts on to facilitate dialogue with me. Behind the mask of the individual ancestor is the spirit of the lineage.

Just as individual spirits can present themselves as the face of a larger lineage, different ancestral lineages can be further harmonized into a collective embodiment of ancestral consciousness. In this way, lineage can function as an intermediate concept between the souls of recent individual ancestors and the collective dead. When the individual ancestors along your family bloodlines are vibrant and well in spirit, you have the possibility of harmonizing these different lineages in your body and experience (see chapter 9). Throughout this book, I weave relatively freely between a focus on individual spirits, ancestral lineages, and the collective dead. Different traditions and practitioners have their own styles and protocols for honoring these distinctions. If your family has a recent history of ancestor reverence, how do you understand the different types of human ancestors? If you practice a

tradition that includes ancestor reverence, how does your path view the ancestors whose names are now forgotten?

Relating to Lineages and Older Ancestors

We can experience challenges when relating to our older ancestors. These include distrust in our ability to communicate safely with them, negative perceptions of our history, and unresolved issues among the ancestors themselves.

Because few people in the modern West were raised within a framework of relating to ancestors, I often hear questions such as: “How do I know I’m not making this all up?” This is an important question. Even those who talk to dead people on a regular basis recognize that it’s possible to make things up, to think you’re in connection when you’re not, or to just be intuitively off the mark. One common concern centers on distinguishing imagination, fantasy, or daydreaming from spirit contact—a refinement that I’ve found comes only with a balance of faith and healthy skepticism, combined with practice over time. Remain patient as you gradually learn to trust your intuition when relating with the unseen realms, and see chapter 6 for further suggestions.

Another common concern is the fear of not being able to close a door once it is opened—a worry that talking with dead people either will lead others to see you as crazy or will actually destabilize your life. Talking to dead people, even if they’re *your* dead people, does tend to raise a few eyebrows. And although it’s not usually the case, it is entirely possible that such work will destabilize your life. Certain psychological conditions or backgrounds may not blend well with direct ancestor work; however, I rarely see people destabilized merely by engaging in practices to honor and get to know their loving ancestors.

Seeking to relate with older ancestors can bring to awareness previously unconscious, multigenerational avoidance of painful periods of family history. This can manifest as the rejection or devaluation of personal history and past, including holding certain groups as unforgiven and perhaps even unforgivable. Holding negative perceptions of ancestors

(e.g., abusive people, soldiers on the wrong side of history, slave owners, zealots, conquistadors) highlights an opportunity for personal and cultural healing. Those we hold in judgment or contempt may already be well in spirit, in which case the work of forgiveness and reconciliation can proceed more easily. If you have reason to believe these ancestors whom you take issue with may be in a state of suffering themselves, connect first with loving and wise ancestral guides (see chapter 6).

What are the signs of healing and improved relations with your collective ancestors? For one, you may be more able to perceive their lives with greater clarity and compassion. In your own life, you may feel a greater sense of ancestral support and a willingness to engage and mend family and collective wounds. Remember: your loving and elevated ancestors have a vested interest in your well-being, and the more you begin to know them in the spirit of forgiveness, the more you can access (or draw upon) their support.

One of the best ways to honor these older ancestors is to transform inherited pain and dysfunction and to embody instead the blessings and gifts you inherit from your people. This includes mending collective wounds as they live in your family and communities and inside your own body and soul. Those committed to inner healing already know that family patterns, including the less helpful variety, can sometimes seem like “a gift that just keeps on giving.” For example, the men along my father’s lineage have not always been the most emotionally expressive people on Earth, and I am still reminded at times that I need to express my feelings more. Addictions or tendencies toward violence can also function as intergenerational legacies. If your ancestors struggled with alcohol, chances are someone in your family, or even you, will confront that same issue—and will either overcome it or succumb to it.

This chapter began with the question “Who are the ancestors?” To summarize, our ancestors include both the remembered dead and those ancestors whose names are forgotten. Both our recent and our older, collective ancestors influence our identity and sense of place in the world; ideally we will include both in our practices of ancestor

reverence. While this book focuses on relationships with family ancestors, it's important to remember that we are all kin and that we all share common ancestry in Africa.



EXERCISE ONE

How Do You Feel About Your Ancestors?

INTENT: Reflect personally or with a friend on what you know and how you feel about your ancestors

WHAT YOU NEED: A journal, someone you can talk with, or some way to express your reflections

Give yourself plenty of space to reflect on each set of questions, pausing also to make space for feelings, intuitions, and insights. This process of reflection and “taking inventory” is the groundwork for any subsequent engagement with your ancestors.

RECENT FAMILY ANCESTORS

Do you know the names of your ancestors? How many generations of your ancestors' names do you know? How does this knowledge or lack of knowledge feel? Are their names available to you from family members or through research?

What stories have you heard about your recent ancestors? Who from your family has shared stories about recent generations with you? How do these stories affect the way that you view these ancestors?

Have you visited the graves of your recent ancestors? If you know where they were buried (or memorialized) and you have visited these sites, did you take the opportunity to connect with them in spirit as well? If so, how was this for you?

Do you have any physical objects from their lives? Is there anything in your home or storage that physically links you to recent family ancestors? If so, how do you feel about these objects and their place in your life today?

How well do you know the history of your people over the last few centuries? Have you sought to better understand the life and times of your recent ancestors? From your knowledge, in what ways has recent ancestral history shaped your family, circumstances, and worldview?

Is there anything that needs to be forgiven between you and your recent ancestors? Are your feelings toward your ancestors mostly positive, mostly negative, or somewhere in between? How would you feel about the opportunity to meet with them directly? Are there issues that feel unresolved, unforgiven, or otherwise in need of repair?

 ANCESTORS OF HISTORY AND PREHISTORY 

What do you know of the story of your ancestors over the past two thousand years? At what point does your record of names give way to groupings of people and historical speculation about lineage? Among the people you claim, how well do you know their story? Have you explored the time when your ancestors lived in traditional, tribal ways?

What do you know of your ancestors' traditions and ways of life? Have you connected on an intuitive, heart level with the ways of life your people practiced before industrialization and modernity? How about before the time of the major organized religions? Do any of these older ways still inform your approach to spirit or to life in the present?

Have you visited or do you live on the lands of some older ancestors? If you traveled to some of your ancestral lands, how was this for you? If you still live there, how does this inform your experience of home, your sense of place, and your feeling of rootedness?

Do you have anything in your daily life that connects you to these ancestors? In addition to the DNA in each cell of your body, what physical things, practices, symbols, movies, songs, or interests still connect you to these older ancestors?

How do you feel about being descended from these people? Do you feel proud, ashamed, inspired, or indifferent about your older ancestors? How do your current culture, community, and family view

your ancestral people? If you got to choose your ancestors, would you choose the same ones?

Is there anything that needs to be forgiven between you and your older ancestors? Are there historical actions that cause you to judge them? Do you identify more with certain ancestors because of these judgments? If so, have you ever explored the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation with your less valued ancestors?