

Healing the Ancestral Lines

By Christina Pratt

When people call out to their ancestors, they call out to a diversity of energies. Some people call out by name to the men and women of their bloodline all the way back to the first man and first woman. Others call out to all of their relations; their request reaching out to all life through the interconnectedness of all living things. While others call out to their ancestors and visualize that request reaching from humankind to nature and on through their cosmology until they reach Grandfather Fire, Grandmother Water, and the Void from which the dream of life unfolds.

Though we call out in different ways and mean slightly different things, traditionally “the ancestors” is a universally good thing. The ancestors carry the collective wisdom of all who have gone before us and offer to us all that is good, true, and beautiful in our legacy. We are the manifestation of their dream of a better future so they are invested in our gifts in a way that assures that we manifest them so that the descendants will have what they need. The ancestors often have more patience than our non-human helping spirits for our annoyingly human issues like rent money, job frustration, and problematic in-laws. Having been human themselves they are often more practical and direct in dealing with everyday human life challenges. It is the job of the ancestors to remember and the job of the living to learn, change, forgive, and heal. In this they are our constant allies.

So what are we to think when we diagnose the source of a problem in a shamanic healing session and the answer from spirit is “the ancestors”? Traditionally, the ancestors could become a problem if we weren’t listening to them, or worse, if we were asking for their help and not heeding the answer. Another traditional reason the ancestors can be at the root of disharmony is using the wealth of their assistance and not offering gratitude appropriately or adequately in reciprocal exchange. Most of the traditional reasons that the ancestors would be the source of a problem are some variation of these two themes.

Today something more is going on. Contemporary practitioners all over the world are uncovering “the ancestors” at the root of disharmony and disease in ways not found in traditional practices. I will never forget my confusion the first time “the ancestors” were presented as the cause in one of my diagnostic journeys. A young woman in her early

twenties sat before me with hands gnarled by arthritis. She shared how none of the allopathic or alternative treatments she had tried — and she had tried them all — had even slowed the aggressive progression of the disease. I remember her saying, “My hands look like my great aunt Myra’s hands when she was 89.” This struck me, as if my helping spirit had just bopped me on the head to “pay attention.” She continued about how the women in her family for three generations had manifested this disease to greater and lesser degrees. She was the most progressed of her three sisters.

We discussed the relations between the living and the dead in her family and they actually sounded pretty good for a contemporary American family. It didn’t appear that the living were out of balance with their ancestors. In the diagnostic journey, when the helping spirits said, “the ancestors,” my rational mind said, “How could that be? The ancestors are a good thing!” Then I got the feeling for “stop thinking and buckle your seat belt,” and I knew that this healing would be something I had never done before or even heard of.

What I came to understand on that day was that there are now two distinctly different groups of ancestors. They are each in different stages of crossing over. There are Ancestral Helping Spirits, which are ancestors in the traditional sense: the spirits of our dead relations who have successfully crossed over to the Land of the Dead, been allowed to enter, and have completed their reunion with The Oneness. These ancestors are a voice of The Oneness like any other helping spirit and “return” to us to assist the living. The ancestors who are at the root of much of our disharmony and disease today are the unresolved spirits of our dead relations who are stuck here in the Land of the Living (ghosts) or somewhere between here and the Land of the Dead (which we have no accurate name for), but have not been allowed to enter because their lives remain unresolved and unreconciled.

These unresolved ancestor spirits are no smarter dead than they were alive. They have unfinished business from their lives, but no longer have access to free will to do anything about that unfinished business. It is folly to work with them as helping spirits, even when they offer their help, for two primary reasons. First, they have not yet made it to the Land of the Dead and been allowed entry. They are not a voice of The Oneness and should not be treated as teachers with the same deference we offer our helping spirits. Second and perhaps more important, these unresolved ancestors can't be trusted because ultimately they have their own agenda: the reconciliation of their unresolved lives. To resolve their lives they need to be able to undo the things that they set in motion with their free will while living. Free will is required for the undoing and they no longer have access to it. This is how they become the root of disharmony and disease in the lives of the living. It is important to remember that just being dead doesn't make a spirit an Ancestral Helping Spirit.

If our helping spirits could fix everything they would. If God could fix everything I have no doubt that God would. If our intention and the power of our spirit helpers were enough, we would live in a world in which we could simply intend, ask for help, and it would be so. However, we live in a world in which the inner world is reflected by our outer world. As Sandra Ingerman clearly guides us to see in her *Medicine for the Earth* work our participation in the process is absolutely necessary to clean up the toxicity, disharmony, and disease we have created through the immense power of our free will to manifest consciously and unconsciously. While the helping spirits have immeasurable power and consciousness, their ability to make things manifest here works through us, because we have access to that particular power to manifest. Whether we are in our everyday life or in our journeys we bring with us the power of free will. Because the dead are in spirit, they no longer have access to free will. And, since they have no free will, but need it desperately to reconcile their lives, they are using ours.

We can see from books, published articles, blogs and websites that practitioners all over the world are working with the unresolved energies of the dead through their shamanic cosmologies. Some are doing the work client by client, some are offering retreat experiences, and others are integrating their shamanic work with Hellinger's Family Constellation Therapy. We are all doing the best we can to innovate a solution to a non-traditional problem that is growing in scope decade by decade. In general we are all working with our helping spirits to discover what is necessary to remove the obstacle of unresolved ancestral energy so that our client's innate capacity to heal will prevail. For example, Hank Wesselman offers a practice he used for his own ancestral healing in his book *Spirit Medicine*, written with his wife, Jill Kuykendall.

And with all this good healing going on the burden of these unresolved energies continues to grow larger and gain momentum. The children of today feel the weight of it even more so than we did growing up and they are angry. They should be. So should we. Why should we have to clean up the lives of people who didn't choose to live well or die well? Most of us have our healing hands full dealing with the consequences of our own choices. Now we have to clean up for our parents and grandparents? We have to do the work for people who are possibly the precise reason we have our own healing to do?

Yes, we do. The deeper truth is that the living are in relationship with the dead. The dead are in relationship with the living because of the Big Dream that is dreaming reality into existence. Our human-sized issues of dysfunctional family patterns, generational alcoholism and addiction, and chronic abuse of all kinds do not change the fact that our ancestors dreamt us into existence just as we are dreaming our descendants here. We the living are the link that joins the ancestors with the descendants in the great cycle of life. And this deeper energetic reality trumps the unresolved issues of our human lives. We are in relationship with the ancestors whether we like it or not. Given that, it is in our best interest that the dead — all the dead — get to where they are meant to go.

Pre-contact shamanic peoples worked with skill, precision, and diligence to make sure the spirits of the dead actually got to the Land of the Dead. They understood that one of the most damaging situations for the living is to be surrounded by the dead. Unresolved energies like their weaknesses, obsessions, and misunderstandings of the world give weight to our weaknesses, obsessions, and misunderstandings, increasing our mental unwellness, wearing down our immune systems, and dampening our belief in and hope for the future. Pre-contact shamanic peoples also understood that the dead are of inestimable value as true Ancestral Helping Spirits. In their rightful place they can orchestrate for us on the other side so that what we need comes to us. As they take their place and remember, we are freed to grow, innovate, forgive, and move on. As we move on, the Ancestral Helping Spirits bring all the life lessons of those who lived well and died well, giving us enormous resources to draw on in this life. The wealth of their legacy is priceless, but they must be helping spirits and not ghosts to give it.

We need to take a step back from our clients and our own need for healing in the moment and ask a different question if we are ever going to get ahead of this wave of unwellness. We need to ask why aren't our ancestors becoming Ancestral Helping Spirits? The simple answer is because we no longer tend the dead well or completely. The funeral practices of today, rooted in humanity's great religions, focus more on the needs of the living and hand the responsibility for the soul of the dead over to God, by whatever name "he" is called. There are exceptions to this generality, of course, from the indigenous peoples who haven't actually adopted contemporary practices through a range of practices to the bardos of Buddhism. It is not the intent of this article to disrespect any specific religious tradition or their funerary practices. What is clear is that we must take a step back and be willing to see that something very important isn't working collectively for all of us.

There are traditional reasons that the souls of the dead get stuck. Some of these are accidental or sudden death, unaware that death occurred, unresolved relationships, attachment to a life un-lived, unfinished business, and fear of death/the unknown. All of these things still happen and psychopomp works well to sort these snarled energies out when people ask for it. In traditional funeral practices, which could include psychopomp, these issues were directly and routinely addressed. Through these traditional

practices the living bring their free will and offer it up to the situation so that the issue can be changed, reconciled, and the spirits of the dead can move on.

It is also true that people live well and die well every day. And as their soul leaves their body they accept the exquisite spirit help offered in this time of profound transition. They release the life that they loved and their loved ones to their own destinies. And they go, open hearted into the unknown, and find their way to the Land of the Dead. They receive entry there and find union with The One. And many of them return to us as Ancestral Helping Spirits. Not every death needs intervention or assistance.

These things are going on as they have always been for humans. And there is something else, something in addition, happening now. And it is happening on a scale that we cannot fix one client or psychopomped soul at a time.

When working with spirit, particularly in journeys, the question we ask matters profoundly. How we conceptualize the problem changes how we ask the question. The client who changed the question for me was a woman who remained unable to conceive after years of fertility treatments. She and her husband were young enough to be in robust childbearing years and old enough to offer a stable home and consistent parenting. They were aligned with each other in wanting children and were practicing making children regularly and randomly. Neither had any biological reason for infertility, yet they could not get pregnant.

In a shamanic healing session with the woman, the answer to my diagnostic question was “the ancestors,” and I was taken to her mother, where the energy was cleared. And then the answer to the question was “the ancestors,” and I was taken to her mother’s mother. By the time I was clearing her mother’s mother’s mother’s energy, I knew I had to come up with a different question. I asked to be taken to the source of the client’s inability to bear a healthy child. I felt the surrounding relief from spirit when I finally got to the real question and whoosh, I was off through a realm I had not been in before.

I was taken very, very far back in time to the source of this pattern. The family looked to be “peasants” by today’s standards, but were more likely just regular people of their time. The husband had had a really awful day. He came home to the one room home he shared with this wife and newborn child. His wife who was truly happy to see him unintentionally triggered his already boiling rage. He closed the distance between them in one stride and hit her. Her head slammed into the stone hearth in just the wrong place and she died on the spot, her child witnessing it all. Most ancestral healing is precisely this type of moment: one completely ordinary human having a really, really bad day and making an understandable but horrible choice that they feel they can’t undo. This healing required clearing that event with each family member individually from their perspective and crossing each spirit over. The child had taken in the pattern, “the world is not safe. I don’t want to be here.” This pattern twisted and turned in each generation until it mutated to the pattern held in the client’s ovaries, “the world is not safe so I’m not coming out at all.” After the healing the client shared the various versions of this pattern that her mother and sisters carry. She and her husband bore a healthy child 10 months later and I was given the invaluable lesson to go to the source of the pattern.

Going to the source is coupled with the need to remove the pattern from all the following generations of the ancestors all the way to the living, whose free will prohibits us from removing the pattern from them. In that same healing journey I was told to stand near the one-room home at the graves of the three

ancestors and pull out the pattern all the way through all the generations of other ancestors who were stuck with their version of this pattern until the energetic web reached the living. The patterns of unresolved energies change with every generation they are handed down. They rot a bit, putrefy, pick up momentum, and mutate as they get expressed in different times and cultures. Even with the assistance of helping spirits this is much like the effort needed to pull up a wet, moldy piece of AstroTurf in a field by grasping one corner. Even though it takes great effort and time, removing the pattern completely from the source all the way to the living is a critically important piece in ancestral healing. Without it the pattern is cleared only for the client and not all the ancestors involved, so it will be handed down to the next generations. Similarly, without going to the source of the pattern, the energy will be cleared only for the client and not all the ancestors. It will be handed down because the ancestors must reconcile their lives.

Much of our own ancestral healing work and the good work we are doing for others resolve the issue for the client, but without necessarily resolving the issue for the ancestors and thus for the descendants. It is our responsibility and also our right to assist in clearing the unresolved energy of the ancestors. We cannot force the dead to accept our help, not because we don't have the right to, but because we will be ineffective in the clearing if we attempt to. This work requires our deepest and fullest humanity and compassion. We must be aware of the descendants' need for us to help the ancestors to reconcile in this larger frame even as we are focused on the needs of our client. If we recall my efforts on behalf of the young woman with arthritis, I may have cleared the pattern for her, but I did not necessarily clear the pattern for the ancestors. At that time I did not understand my responsibility to clear the energy for the ancestors. I did not understand that we must ask the question, "Why aren't these ancestors Ancestral Helping Spirits?"

By looking at the functional parts of a traditional funeral in a shamanic culture, we can see some of the answers to that question. The Dagara funeral process, for example, takes many days and involves the village. It weaves together the funeral functions for the living and the "ancestralization" functions for dead that assure the transformation from spirit of the dead to Ancestral Helping Spirit. Everything begins with a "finding" divination. In this divination the shaman finds out from spirit why the person died. One option is that the person got done and left. This is considered great news as it means that the person engaged his or her unique genius and was able to do what they came into this life to do. The funeral and ancestralization processes both move ahead endeavoring to be completed in four days.

The second option is that the person, through the sum of the ordinary reality and non-ordinary reality ramifications of their choices, is so far out of balance with his or her spirit help that they can no longer protect the individual. Without protection the individual succumbs to something opportunistic that kills them. Possible patterns of imbalance include negligence of life purpose, mistakes made in relation to Earth and/or another element, debt owed on an agreement with a helping spirit, or perpetuation of a situation left by other Ancestors that has become pathogenic in the family.

When this cause of death is revealed, the shaman continues in the divination to discern specifically what must be set right and how so that this soul will be allowed to travel to and enter the Land of the Dead. These rituals are usually very focused in intent, highly symbolic, and involve the powerful assistance of an element. They are not and cannot be codified as they are specifically designed to right the precise imbalances of this individual's life, energy by energy. The living then, apart from the bereaved who are relieved of all responsibilities so that they are free to grieve, carry out the rituals on behalf of the dead to

clear the way. The living do ritual after ritual, willing to do whatever is necessary to clear the way, because the cost of not doing it is always greater.

After the way is cleared, the funeral and ancestralization processes can both move ahead. In general the remaining steps of the ancestralization process that creates functional Ancestral Helping Spirits are:

- Release by the living of any energies relating to the dead, which includes open grieving, and energetic cleansing of the living.
- Preparation of ancestral power objects.
- Charging of the power objects and shrines to support the journey of the spirit since they no longer have energy of their own.
- All night vigil at the Fire in support of the spirit's journey all the way to the Land of the Dead and its successful entry and reunion with The One.
- Morning ritual calling the ancestor back to help the living and embodiment in the ancestral power object.
- Introduction of the new Ancestral Helping Spirit to the ancestors already present and installation in the Ancestral Shrine.

Looking at the logic and flow of these ritual steps it is clear that the typical funeral in America isn't anywhere near attending to the actual needs of the dead to get where they are going. We have been led to believe that the dead are being taken care of, but the growing mountain of unresolved energies of the dead is evidence that they are not. It is a painful situation to be trapped between the worlds. In our naiveté we are not stepping up to our part in the process of assuring that the dead are able to return to us as Ancestral Helping Spirits.

These traditional processes help us to see the situation from a larger perspective. We can see that all of the ancestors are in the same process, they are simply in different stages of that process and some are stuck where that process isn't working effectively. These traditions help us to see that we have a role to play and a right to play the role so that the living are free to live their unique destiny without being hijacked by the unresolved issues of their dead relations. Our role when faced with the unresolved issues of the dead is to divine clearly who is stuck, why, and what is needed to help them to unstick themselves. Our role after the healing of the ancestral line is to support the living in clearing their versions of the ancestor's patterns and the dead in returning to us as Ancestral Helping Spirits.

The clearing process described below is developed from the Last Mask Center Cycle Teachings, Year Four, and is given by spirit specifically for healing the ancestral lines today. It is one of several ways this work can be done. It is not meant to replace psychopomp work, but instead to live alongside it and include the essence of it as needed.

This shamanic technique requires the cultivation of strong relationships with human Ancestral Helping Spirits and at least one non-human helping spirit who is willing to do this work. We have found that many helping spirits who ordinarily journey well with us are unwilling or unable to help in this particular

work. Perhaps this is because the unresolved energies being cleared are so often the result of people having been in wrong relationship with their helping spirits in the first place.

The helping spirits who gave us this process also created a way to access this mountain of humanity's unreconciled energies that is not wholly in the Middleworld. It allows us access to the challenging in-between places where much of the unresolved energies of the dead are held. Through this gateway the work is less taxing on our energy and better organized, for lack of a better word, in a way that makes clearing the pattern from the source to the living more possible. Being between the worlds is uncomfortable for both the living and the dead because we aren't supposed to be there. If everything were going well, none of us, living or dead, would need to be there. Using this spirit-given gateway makes these long journeys easier and allows us to be more effective in the time we spend there. The second step in preparing for this work is to cultivate a good relationship with this realm. This involves greeting and coming into right relationship with the Gatekeeper, formally gaining entrance to the realm, and familiarizing oneself with the map and machinations of that realm.

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When a diagnostic journey indicates "the ancestors" are at the root of the client's presenting issues, the practitioner journeys to the Gatekeeper, gains entry to the realm, and connects with the helping spirits for this work. The group then travels into the realm as guided by the intention to go to the source of pattern that is at the root of the client's issue, which must be named. There are ancestors holding the pattern that arise immediately, but it is important to focus on getting to the source of the pattern and the originating ancestral story.

Once at the originating ancestor the story must be observed as it unfolds. Narration from the journey state is most helpful for the client. The story must be seen in its own time without any judgment or contemporary biases, or the energy around which things can pivot will be missed. For example, there was an ancestor with both hands cut off. The practitioner could not get past the missing hands and kept trying to reconcile that loss in spite of the fact that the ancestor explained, "I was a thief and I knew the punishment. I got caught. That's not the issue!" Our task is to ferret out with the help of spirit the decision the story actually hinges upon. Then we offer the ancestor an opportunity to make a different choice there, at the hinge point and to experience what could have been. In experiencing the path not taken, they feel the restoration of their true self and are able to release the fear, envy, jealousy, or grief that kept them from reconciliation in life.

It is not our intent to change history. We are changing how the energy is held by the people who made the history. And in that change we are changing how it is stuck here with the living. We are giving them the chance to make amends, to forgive, to be forgiven, and — by whatever means necessary — to set things right. In a sense our free will gives them the chance to make a new choice and to change how they feel about what they did and could have done. When they feel right relationship with their true self restored and their love for what truly mattered in that life ignited once again, their stuck energies will release.

It is important to understand that though our love and acceptance is essential, it is not our love and acceptance that changes anything. It is the ancestor's love and acceptance that changes things for the ancestor. We are there with spirit to create the conditions for that to happen.

Psychopomp is the next functional step after the energies are released. This presents in several different ways in this process. Some ancestors transform immediately to pure spirit energy as soon as the stuck energies are cleared and they vanish. These are the dead who are held only by this issue and have otherwise resolved their lives. Others are uncertain what to do after the energy clears and simply need to be guided either to the place where they then can complete the reconciliation of their life or to the Land of the Dead. Those who are freed by the energy release, but have not reconciled their life at all must be taken to the place for reconciliation and often need a helping spirit called in to support them and hold them to completing that process. Some remain stuck, which means there is a second story of unresolved energies that must be unfolded and transformed before they can complete their crossing over.

Technically, this is just a long journey. However it is a journey into a realm filled only with the worst that humanity has to offer: rape, incest, murder, slavery, sexism, racism, classism, genocide, broken dreams, in short, all the evil things humans have done with their lives. Everyone there needs the freewill of the living to make the changes needed to get out of their stuck place and the practitioner is the only living person there. And nothing is actually what it appears to be. Entering with new-age ideas of love and light will be shredded in moments. The practitioner must be crazy like a fox, clever as the Trickster, and willing to allow magic in the face of the impossible. The work requires a deep resounding love for all life, especially the messy, chthonic, foolish, heartbreaking parts. It requires an intimate relationship with one's own Shadow and comfort with Death as a working Ally.

To say that this work requires energetic and spirit maturity in the practitioner is an understatement. To be available to be immersed in the worst humanity offers in a way that affects actual clearing requires that practitioners are:

1. Able to bear fair witness. This is the ability to witness the murderer and the murdered truly as equals, the rapist and the raped without bias either way and everything we see without any sense that we "know what needs to be done to fix things."
2. Truly nonjudgmental. We are not in the ancestral healing work to judge what did or didn't happen morally or ethically. We are only there because the legacy the dead have left behind is proof of dissonance in our time and they are not where they belong. It is our right and duty as the living to clean up our realm.
3. Free of a contemporary bias. Our contemporary bias is a huge blinder to understanding what actually happened and more importantly what needs to happen to clear the lines and allow the dead to cross over.
4. Free of altruistic motivation. Doing this "for the good of humanity" sets inappropriate boundaries with the realm that will leave the practitioner at best energetically drained by working with the dead. More importantly an altruistic stance usually involves an emotional distance or aloofness that renders this work ineffective. We have to be there and feel what happened in our hearts to find the point around which things can pivot and change.
5. Emotionally available, without engagement. This requirement is the greatest challenge. The practitioner must be so clear in his/her own emotions and current with personal emotional clearing work that the emotional palate can be used as a tool without the practitioner getting hooked emotionally. We turn our emotions on to be immersed in the ancestor's story so that we can feel what was really going on and stay

in it until we fully understand. Then we turn our emotions off and work with our helping spirits to determine what needs to be done to offer the ancestor the opportunity to do it differently.

The journey ends with the clearing of the pattern from the source story, through all the generations of ancestors to the living. These webs of energy are sometimes like lace that must be removed slowly and carefully, sometimes like rivers that can't wait to be freed, and sometimes like ribbons that need to be rolled up. They all must be transformed in the journey through an elemental ritual or the help of the helping spirits. It is helpful to ask directly for spirit to name the pivotal pattern that was cleared, just to be sure. This will help the client to focus on what they now need to clear in their own lives.

This process avoids some of the hazards in the various processes emerging today. Foremost it clears the energy for the client and the ancestors so that the patterns are not handed down to the descendants. It also allows us to distinguish between actual possession by the random dead and natural influence of the energy patterns of our own unresolved ancestors. We cannot successfully depose an energy from our own blood that belongs there; we are in relationship with our ancestors. It is our responsibility to help them and in that to gain the Ancestral Helping Spirits that are our legacy. In this way we clear their patterns and free them so that we can successfully stop our versions of the same patterns and free ourselves. This process also allows veterans who have forged a similar blood relationship with those they killed to reconcile things in a good way for the living and the dead. It is not unusual for a now-reconciled spirit of the dead to return to a veteran as a helping spirit. In addition, the gateway to the realm creates a directionality in a complex and confusing realm. This helps us to avoid the ever more common problem of clearing the energy for the client, but leaving the dead in a new state of limbo.

The transformation in people's lives from healing the ancestral lines is in some ways like a really good soul retrieval. The client is now able to simply be different and do things easily that once felt impossible. One client's depression was actually her ancestors' belief in a small, gloomy world. She was able to come down off her medications and walk away from decades of depression. Another client's chronic money problems were not the result of the miserly great grandfather, but of his unexpressed grief over the sudden loss of his livelihood, wife, and children in a flood. With his robust relationship with life restored, the client's robust relationship with wealth was restored. Complex family dynamics, like incest and chronic rage that people are sure could not possibly change, evolve and grow as all the family members are freed from the past and the unresolved lives of the ancestors. Healing the Ancestral Lines gives us another way to assist clients who have already had soul retrievals, extractions, rituals, and cleansings, and still find that they are stuck in familiar patterns.

To transform the growing mountain of unresolved ancestral issues is one of the shamanic challenges of our time. This along with generational soul loss and absence of meaningful initiation into adulthood are the epidemics contemporary shamans face in the western world. To stop the rise of the mountain we must change our funerary practices and our cultural values so that we value living energetically debt-free in a way that our relationships are reconciled day by day. In the meantime we can begin the healing of the ancestral lines so that we are freed to make better quality decisions in our own lives. And we can create an ever growing resource of Ancestral Helping Spirits so that we have the rich legacy of our ancestors to guide, support, and protect us.