What Does It Mean To Be A People of Ancestry

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.

— Ralph Ellison, American writer

Our faith agrees with Ellison: there is a difference between relatives and ancestors. Relatives give us our brown eyes and bowed legs; ancestors bless and burden us with a legacy. Relatives are those we tell stories about; ancestors call us to carry the story forward. Our relatives allowed us to be here; our ancestors tell us why we are here and why being here right now matters. The difference is huge. It is — as Ellison also points out — all about choosing to see yourself differently and live by a different set of values.

Take success. There’s an old line that challenges the hubris of some people with privilege: “He was born on third base but believes that he hit a triple.” People who choose to see their lives through the lens of ancestry constantly remind themselves how they really got there. Instead of talking with puffed up chests about how they hit a triple, you will hear them speak of “the shoulders on which I stand.” Hubris or humility? Ancestors never let us forget the latter.

You will also hear ancestor-conscious people speak of blessings differently. People of ancestry look at their blessings and choose to see not only a gift, but also a responsibility. It’s one thing to gratefully celebrate the blessings passed on to us; it’s quite another to be so grateful for those blessings that we can’t help but ensure they get passed on to others. Simply put, ancestors pass on obligations. To be a people of ancestry means recognizing that something of value has been entrusted to you and that there is a long line of people behind you counting on you to pass it on. Even expecting this of you.

And whether that expectation feels to you like a blessing or a burden, it most surely also reminds you that you are part of something larger. Ancestors don’t simply tell you that you are obligated; they tell you that you are obligated to something larger. And not just that you are obligated to it, but that it is dependent on you. Whether the story continues to be told is up to you! Whether the family tradition continues to be done is up to you! Whether the family cycles of health are strengthened or the family cycles of dysfunction are stopped is up to you! Ancestors plop these incomplete and intimidating endeavors in our laps and say, “We’ve done our part and taken it as far as we can. The next step of the journey is in your hands.”

Which of course also means that our hands are connected. They handed the precious gift to us. We are asked to hand it on to those who follow. And they will hopefully continue the sacred chain.

And in the end, maybe it all boils down to that: seeing ourselves as part of a sacred chain. We are not small. Our lives are not insignificant or independent. Our choices are not without consequence to others. We are part of a story, not just a set of random happenings. Our choices tell the next chapter. Our choices connect the next link. Our choices pass on that which is precious and remind us we are preciously connected. This is what choosing to be a people of ancestry means. This is how it asks us to see our lives.

So, this month, let us all be grateful for those brown eyes, but choose to be part of the precious chain.
QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Below is a reflection and a list of questions to open the mind’s gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our everyday ordinary lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won’t let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone meet along the way.

1. Would your ancestors be proud?
2. How are your ancestors speaking today? Are you making the time to listen?
3. Is it time to question the ancestors’ wisdom?
4. Is it time to tell the ancestors’ secrets?
5. Have you passed on what the ancestors entrusted you with?
6. What wisdom of the elders did you ignore at your peril? Are you sure you can’t start over and try to follow it anew?
7. It is true that you are burdened by an ancestry that you can’t control or change? Are you using your ancestry as an excuse?
9. What happened to that tradition you so loved as a kid? Why did you let it go? Are you sure there is no way to creatively bring it back?
10. How does Thanksgiving need to change this year? What ritual or tradition needs brought back? What needs to go?
11. And while we are on Thanksgiving, who needs to go? Is it finally time to assert some say over who you are sitting with this year?
12. What’s your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. or oneself. Is it time to let go of being so hard on yourself?

Opening Words
We meet for worship in a world of wonder and plenty, but a world shadowed by folly and wickedness. May our worship not forget the shadow, but by the power of the spirit, rise above it.

~ Cliff Road

Closing Words
May the flame of faith never die.
May we keep our love of life,
our delight in friendship,
our hunger for new knowledge,
our hatred of a lie.
above all may we keep our wonder at great and noble acts.

~ Jacob Trapp (alt)
**Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences**

**Option A:**

**Bring it Back**

Being a people of ancestry means passing on traditions. And it doesn’t take much to notice that so many family traditions are in danger of extinction. The recipe that was required at every Thanksgiving but now no one bothers with. The outdated and supposedly tedious task of writing a handwritten letter. Passing on a family heirloom. Bedtime stories. Family game night. Marking the height of your kids on the kitchen doorway wall. Even sitting down at the dinner table to eat together. Slowly disappearing. Maybe even already gone.

This exercise simply asks you to bring one of them back. Here’s your task, put simply: **Dust off an old, forgotten family tradition and protect it from extinction.**

For inspiration, you might want to check out one of these links:

- [http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/16/60-family-tradition-ideas/](http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/16/60-family-tradition-ideas/)

**Option B:**

**When the Story Changed**

Being a people of ancestry sometimes means putting an end to what’s been passed on. We are all working in one way or another to break family cycles of dysfunction. We also know that we are not the first to struggle with changing our ancestral storyline. This exercise invites you to honor this work that has gone before.

You can approach this from multiple angles:

- Identify a family member who you know has been central to the cycles of your family changing. Find a way to thank them and talk to them about what it was like for them.
- If you are a writer, make the time this month to journal or write a poem in honor of a family member who helped pass on a new storyline to you.
- Sit down with your child and tell them the story of the relative that gifted your family with “new ancestry.”

**Option :**

**Embracing All of Our Relations**

There is spiritual power in embracing the ancestors that inspire us, but there is spiritual necessity in embracing our ancestors who fell short. To fail to embrace the dark parts of our ancestral past is to set ourselves up for the inability to embrace (and move past) the dark parts of ourselves. This is sometimes called “shadow work” and this exercise asks us to do some of that work this month. Here are your instructions:

1. Set aside time to listen multiple times to the following song/meditation by the Native American women’s acapella group, Ulali. Make sure you are centered and prepared to listen not only to the words but to the rhythmic beat that invites us to connect to the larger “heartbeat” of which we are a part. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBeCixbql_c&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBeCixbql_c&feature=youtu.be)
2. Pay particular attention to the phrases that focus on those ancestors who have fallen short, caused pain and continue to perpetuate harm.
3. Let this focus on these difficult-to-embrace ancestors bring to mind the ancestors in your own life that you would prefer to “disown.”
4. From there decide what your own personal work is. Is there room for a new perspective on them and their actions? For their sake or for yours? What does “embrace them” mean to you? What might be your way of embracing them authentically?
5. Come to your group ready to share the invitation you heard in the song and how you responded to that invitation.
They Are With Us Still
by Kathleen McTigue

In the struggles we choose for ourselves, in the ways we move forward in our lives and bring our world forward with us,

It is right to remember the names of those who gave us strength in this choice of living. It is right to name the power of hard lives well-lived.

We share a history with those lives. We belong to the same motion.

They too were strengthened by what had gone before. They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.

Those who lived before us, who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us, have not melted into the dust, and have not disappeared.

They are with us still. The lives they lived hold us steady.

Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves. Their courage and love evoke our own.

We, the living, carry them with us: we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

We take them with us, and with them choose the deeper path of living.

Other Wise Words...

Prayers fall on us or
Rise up through archeological debris.
No place is free of them.
And we in turn are free to absorb them -- Not their tenets, Not their rules, Not the evil that may have lurked around the edges But the spirit -- The shards of light.
We are responsible for transmitting that light, Moving it through the universe, Giving it to each other.

— Mim Neal, writer, poet & Soul Matters member

Spiritual History
Let my body remember. Let my hands and feet remember. Let my breath remember those who have come before me, those who have come before us. Didn’t Muhammad wait quietly in his cave? And didn’t Jesus sigh silently by the blue lake? And Guan Yin, didn’t she sit in silence thinking about what to do before doing it? And what was Siddhartha the Buddha doing anyway under that tree if not just sitting quietly? And Susan B. Anthony, didn’t she push back from her desk, and take a breath now and then? And Florence Nightingale, didn’t she put down her nurse’s hat and think silently about what to write in her essay on mysticism before she actually wrote it? And Sophia Fahs, didn’t she stop telling stories sometimes and just sit there? And didn’t Black Elk just notice the sunlight glancing off his chair sometimes? And Starhawk, does she only talk and write, or does she too keep silence? Let us remember them all with our bodies. Let us remember them with the silence they too knew.

— Mark Belletini