



HONOUR YOUR ANCESTORS, *heal yourself*

Connecting to your forebears can help you heal any invisible fault lines that run through your life as well as tap into a deep intergenerational wisdom.

WORDS / ROSAMUND BURTON

At Halloween, when children dressed as witches, ghouls or ghosts knock on people's doors and ask for a trick or treat, they are re-enacting an old pagan belief. Halloween is known as *Samhain* in the pagan Celtic calendar, the night when the veil between the living and the dead was thought to be at its thinnest and when it was believed that the ancestral spirits would come knocking on families' doors and ask to be welcomed in.

Most people in the Western world have lost the tradition of honouring their ancestors and see no benefit in it, but ancestors are very significant in traditional cultures. Connecting to your departed family members can help you tap into their deep wisdom as well as heal any invisible fault lines that run through your life.

HEALING LOSS & GRIEF

Rosemary Wanganeen is a loss and grief counsellor based in Adelaide. Until the age of five, she lived on an Aboriginal mission. Then her parents gained an exemption under the Aborigines Protection Act in the hope of making a better life for themselves and their family. This was the only way they could legally live outside the mission and it required cutting all ties with their Aboriginal culture as well as not speaking their traditional languages. The family moved to the town of Clare, where they were the only Aboriginal family. Rosemary grew up never hearing her parents talking in language and, despite her grandmother being fluent in Kokatha, she never heard her speak it.

The death of her mother, when Wanganeen was 10 years old, meant that five of her siblings and she were

separated from one another and put into children's homes. At 17 she got married. Both her marriages were to white men who were drinkers.

Her second husband beat her severely and she was taken to a women's shelter. Wanganeen describes this as her "rock bottom". But one day, as she was looking at her battered face in the mirror, it transformed into an old traditional Aboriginal woman's face. This woman told her she was about to find faith and trust in her own abilities. This was 1987 and the start of a five-year healing process.

Wanganeen began to look at all her "inner children" who had been victimised when she was a child and a teenager. Then she looked at how she was taken away from her family and became part of the Stolen Generation. Asking why anyone had the right to do that to her led her to look into Australian history, English history and as far back as the Greek and Roman empires. She discovered that Plato, after the loss of his beloved teacher Socrates, coined the idea that grief was a weakness. From then on, she believes, people started to shut down and suppress their grief because they didn't want to be seen as weak.

Says Wanganeen, "If you suppress your grief it's got to go somewhere, so it becomes externalised, and the grief anger, which is a normal part of the grieving process, can turn to rage, which can become violence."

As she gained understanding of her own trauma and that of her ancestors, Wanganeen believes she released the suppressed contemporary and unresolved intergenerational grief inside her. She also became more connected to her ancestors. "I was

seeing, feeling and hearing them, and then putting into practice what they were telling me to do."

In 1992, she had a dream, which precipitated packing up her home and driving with her son to Amata in Central Australia. It was there that her son had been born 10 years earlier.

"Intuitively, I got told to go back up there and sit down in peace and wait to be told what to do. Because my body was emptied out of all that grief energy, it was light enough now to be able to see, feel and hear things on a spiritual level. So I was able to see, feel, hear and meet my grandfather — my mother's father — in the form of a crow."

Wanganeen is three-quarters Kurna, the Aboriginal tribe from the Adelaide plains, and part Kokatha and Wirangu, who are from the west of South Australia. She is also part English, several generations back. Wanganeen had not grown up in a traditional culture but, instinctively, she had found her way back to her roots.

Rosemary Wanganeen does counselling and loss and grief work with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal clients. She firmly believes what's missing from the human consciousness at this time is a relationship with our ancestors.

"In Aboriginal culture we never had one god," she emphasises, "but we have our spiritual ancestors. They have all the power, knowledge and awareness because they have walked this earth, so they know what it's like to be a human being."

FAMILY CONSTELLATIONS

Although many people may feel little connection to their ancestors, according to Sydney-based Family



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Constellations therapist Maria Dolenc the departed exhort a huge influence on us. "We are part of our ancestors," she says. "My mother's and grandfather's genes are in me."

Family Constellation Therapy is an innovative method of healing family dynamics. It was developed by Bert Hellinger, a German psychologist and former priest, in the 1990s while working as a family therapist. It is now being practised throughout Europe, America and Asia and also in Australia.

Family Constellation work can be experienced one-on-one with a therapist but is particularly effective

when done in a group. One person's issue is the focus of a session and other attendees are asked to represent different members of that person's family. This therapy works at an extraordinary energetic level. Workshop participants who have never met one another before find themselves experiencing the emotions of the family members they have been asked to represent.

Bert Hellinger believes there is a natural order within family systems. Every member has an equal right to belong to the whole and has a rightful place, which ensures that the family

is healthy and that love flows freely between them.

Slovenian-born Maria Dolenc is one of eight children but never felt as though she was connected to her mother or belonged in her family. Her mother was one of nine children and, at the age of three, had been given away to her aunt. According to Hellinger, if somebody in a previous generation has been given away as a child, then often in a later generation a person will not feel part of the family.

Dolenc always felt angry with her grandmother for giving her mother away. But in Dolenc's Family Constellation session the representative of her grandmother said, regarding giving her three-year-old daughter away, "Times are difficult. I am doing what I believe is best for this girl."

"I would have kept that story that she was terrible but, since then, I feel more loving towards my grandmother," Dolenc confides. "I no longer see my mother as a victim and now I do feel a sense of belonging to my family."

Sometimes, events that occurred several generations before a person was born are not acknowledged or accepted by the family. So the individual takes on the family burden of guilt and shame, which can result in mental or physical illness, addictive behaviour or relationship difficulties.

Family Constellations work gives people the chance to decide to not carry this onus any longer. "We are training now to be the best ancestors," Dolenc says. "I can respect what happened, leave behind what doesn't belong to me, take the goodness which was there and honour the lives from which I came."

THE ANCESTRAL CONTINUUM

Natalia O'Sullivan and Nicola Graydon are authors of *The Ancestral Continuum* (Simon & Schuster). As a child and in her late teens, O'Sullivan, who is of part Spanish heritage, had a recurring dream that she was blindfolded and walking towards a door. Years later she was taken by her cousin to the prison where her grandfather was held during the Spanish Civil War, before he was blindfolded and executed. It was exactly the same as in her dream.

O'Sullivan's dream of her heroic grandfather, known for his fairness and philanthropic nature, has inspired her to help others to discover their own extraordinary ancestors and also to help people heal the trauma that is often passed down through the generations.





“Ever since I was a child I could see my ancestors and the ancestors would tell me their stories,” O’Sullivan admits. “So I realised that there was a lot that I was drawing to myself, which was not my story but the story of other people in my family.”

O’Sullivan has worked for the past 20 years as a holistic therapist and psychic and spiritual counsellor. Often, she says, when clients are struggling with aspects of their lives, “one of their deceased relations will come through and shed some light on their issue, a bit like a guardian angel”.

She believes everyone has a guardian ancestor who cares about, guides and encourages them on a spiritual level. But there are also ancestors whose actions have caused problems down a family line for generations. To heal these, she says, connect with those ancestors and talk about them with the rest of the family. If those ancestors have been heard, there is usually a release that creates an energy shift and healing for everyone.

Nicola Graydon, the book’s co-author, is a journalist who specialises in writing about indigenous cultures. She is of Afrikaans and English heritage and was born in Africa. In West African and South African traditional cultures, she says, people wake up early every morning and connect to their ancestors. They talk to their ancestors out loud, as if they were on the other end of a telephone.

“It’s not worshipping the ancestors; it’s talking to them as if they are in the room,” she explains. “There is a reverence to the elders but it’s very personal, emotional and connected. These people have very little on a material level but they have an incredible richness in their relationships and their communities,

The ancestral altar is a place of prayer, ritual and meditation. You can make a shrine in the garden or use a windowsill or a small table. But it needs to be somewhere you can spend some quiet time alone.

and a deep understanding of the dead and the yet-to-be.

“It always struck me when I came home to England that there was this cut-off,” she continues. “The ancestors are dead and gone. We’ll celebrate them on their birthdays, but there’s no incorporating them into our daily lives and experiences.”

CREATING AN ANCESTRAL ALTAR

One way to form a stronger connection with your ancestors is to create an altar, explains Natalia O’Sullivan. Often people do this subconsciously, putting all the family pictures in a corner. Because you see the photographs of family every day and send them thoughts and feelings, you are acknowledging them, and sometimes that’s all that is needed.

But for people wanting to communicate with their ancestors, rather than just acknowledging them, O’Sullivan recommends creating an ancestral altar. The ancestral altar is a place of prayer, ritual and meditation. You can make a shrine in the garden or use a windowsill or a small table. But it needs to be somewhere you can spend some quiet time alone.

Place photos of your ancestors on the altar as well as mementoes of them, such as letters, jewellery and objects they treasured. You can include statues that represent your ancestral deities, such as Buddha, the Virgin Mary or Krishna. Add some stones or crystals or anything else that represents the natural world and your ancestors’ origins.

Next, purify the space and the objects. This can be done by burning incense or using a sage stick. Or you can use sound, such as drums, bells or chimes. Your altar should be cleansed in this way at least once a year, either on a day relevant to you or, O’Sullivan suggests, Halloween, October 31, the Celtic Festival of Samhain.

Put fresh flowers on the altar and make offerings of fruit, nuts or sweets.

PRAYING TO YOUR ANCESTORS

Another way to connect with your ancestors is to set aside 10 minutes every day for that purpose. Light a candle on your altar, then talk to them, say a prayer, sing a sacred song or hymn, or chant a mantra. Ask your ancestors for what you need at this time. Then give thanks. You can close by saying “Amen” or “Blessed be” or chanting “Aum”.

Another way to connect to your ancestors is through meditation. Light a candle and say a prayer to the ancestors, asking for guidance and help. Then focus on your breath and become more and more relaxed. Ask to receive light, pure compassion and love from your ancestors. Once you feel their light and love surrounding your body and filling your mind with peace, you can begin to ask for inspiration and intuitive answers to personal issues.

Do this on a regular basis and keep a record in your diary of what you have seen and felt. While it may seem that not much is happening each day, looking back through the journal over the weeks and months, you’ll become aware of the ancestral connection you have made. 🍷

RESOURCES

■ **The Australian Institute for Loss**

& **Grief**, lossandgrief.com.au

■ **Maria Dolenc**, mariadolenc.com.au

■ **The Ancestral Continuum**, by Natalia O’Sullivan and Nicola Graydon

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