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The Practice of Learning from our ancestors' experiences

Meaning Making Project Nov 2025

Meeting this Moment with Love & Justice

WELCOME

Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

These questions are well-known to many of us thanks to the UU Hymn #1003 "Where Do We Come From?" But whether we know the hymn or not, they're questions that are central to the human journey.

Chances are, we've all asked them from time to time and perhaps from a very early age. They speak to the subject of ancestry: our understanding of who (and what) came before us, from what location (whether geographical or spiritual), and how we might carry that legacy into the future.

The month of November is traditionally a time of honouring ancestors. It begins with Samhain, the ancient Celtic festival in which the veil between the living and the dead is thought to be thinnest. As well, the Day of the Dead (Dia de los Muertos) and Hallowe'en invite us to pause and consider our connection with those who have gone before, through personal ritual or in community. That said, we can remember our ancestors at every time of year, and indeed it is helpful to us to do so, as we navigate the many challenges of today's complex world.

We can include in our circle of ancestors those people who are not related to us by recent genetic history but whose example as justice-makers inspires us in our life and work. As well, following the wisdom of Indigenous teachers, we can consider all our relations within the great chain of evolutionary being. Our cosmic family tree is more vast than we often consider.

For some, the subject of ancestry may be a challenging one. If our relatives are associated with a history of trauma, or if we've been denied information about our genetic heritage, it may be difficult to reflect on the role ancestry plays in our lives. Yet with compassion and kindness for ourselves and others, we can open up the subject of "Learning From Ancestors" and welcome new understandings that can enrich our lives, as individuals and within UU community.

Love and blessings,

Lynn

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

The Practice of Learning from our Ancestors

- How does your understanding of ancestry influence your life's journey?
- How do you name your lineage?
- Who are your cultural and spiritual ancestors? How are they distinct from each other?
- Who are the ancestors that provide guidance for you (or might do so)?
- What do your ancestors offer at this moment, to you and the wider community?
- How does your body speak to you as an ancestor?
- How does the Earth speak to you as an ancestor?
- Does your ancestry raise tensions or challenges and how do you respond to them?

QUOTES

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

Something about the way my father held the mirror, saying If it's a storm, You're the lightning his sparkling sunken eyes waiting above the backwards me.

Cole Arthur Riley Black Liturgies Our ancestors do not dwell in the past, they dwell inside our brains as well as in every cell of our bodies. By giving our predecessors a place of honor in our hearts, we are acknowledging the gifts that have been given to us by them. No matter what definition you choose to identify your ancestors, finding ways to honor them can empower that place in yourself where your spirit dwells.

Denise Linn, Sacred Legacies

Walking, I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.

Linda Hogan

QUOTES

What has been an ancient spiritual truth is now increasingly verified by science: We are all indivisibly part of one another. We share a common ancestry with everyone and everything alive on earth. The air we breathe contains atoms that have passed through the lungs of ancestors long dead. Our bodies are composed of the same elements created deep inside the furnaces of long-dead stars. We can look upon the face of anyone or anything around us and say—as a moral declaration and a spiritual, cosmological, and biological fact: You are a part of me I do not yet know.

Richard Rohr

I try to practice in a way that allows me to touch my blood ancestors and my spiritual ancestors every day. Whenever I feel sad or a little fragile, I invoke their presence for support, and they never fail to be there.

Thich Nhat Hanh

The longer each of us lives, the greater the likelihood that we will absorb atoms that were once part of Joan of Arc and Jesus Christ, of Neanderthal people and woolly mammoths. As we have breathed in our forebears, so our grandchildren and their grandchildren will take us in with their breath. We are bound up inseparably with the past and the future by the spirit we share. Every breath is a sacrament, an affirmation of our connection with all other living things, a renewal of our link with our ancestors and a contribution to generations yet to come. David Suzuki

Seeing a person or piece of creation trampled should always disrupt something in us. It should always do something to the soul. And when you trace that trampling back across generations and systems and powers, a quiet sorrow is born in you. Cole Arthur Riley

So when I think of the land as my mother or if I think of it as a familial relationship, I don't hate my mother because she's sick, or because she's been abused. I don't stop visiting her because she's been in an abusive relationship and she has scars and bruises. If anything, you need to intensify that relationship because it's a relationship of nurturing and caring.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave. I rise. I rise. I rise. Maya Angelou

MORE QUOTES

When I think about how my ancestors lived, I remember that they were acutely aware of their presence in the present, in the web of relationships of living beings that made up their world, and they lived within this idea in a global sense and through time. Life was practiced as a methodology that led to the creation of more opportunities for the reproduction of life and living things, and not just humans, but plants and animals, and all of the life that makes up the world. I believe that I need to live in a similar manner — being acutely aware of my presence in the present, finding opportunities to create and live beyond the rubric of violence colonialism provides, and I think I need to do this not as an individual, but as a being in commune with other living beings.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

I am my ancestors' wildest dream come true, and I would not be here if it weren't for their dreamings, their hopes, and most importantly their living. None of us would be here were it not for those who lived and won a fight that they were not meant to survive.

Rev. Daniel Gregoire, UU Society of Grafton and Upton, Grafton MA

To be Black in Canada is to live in slavery's 'afterlife.' Robyn Maynard

People use these arguments as reasons for not doing what is right or just. It never occurs to them that they live on the cumulative hurt of others. They want to start the clock of social justice only when they arrived. But one is born into history, one isn't born into a void."

Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return

Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast.

Dionne Brand, A Map to the Door of No Return

I carry the dreams of my ancestors, my peoples and my descendents with me, so I do not come to this honour alone.

William Commanda

When we illuminate the road back to our ancestors, they have a way of reaching out, of manifesting themselves...sometimes even physically."

Raquel Cepeda, Bird of Paradise: How I Became Latina

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: CREATING AN ALTAR TO YOUR ANCESTORS

Altars are (or have been) widely used in many cultures to recognise ancestors and deities, including across Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. This month consider making an altar - this can be personal to you, your family or can be a congregation, group, or organization.

- Think about the purpose of your altar. You can create one with a specific theme for example, family ancestors (biological and/or chosen), spiritual ancestors, ancestors who inspired you creatively, cultural ancestors, queer and trans ancestors (there may be overlaps in any of these categories). Or you can have a general one that includes anyone who is important to you. If you have a cultural connection to a specific way of building altars, use that as a guide you can do some research in advance if you haven't done this before.
- Once you have chosen your theme, think about who you would like to include and what you know about them. You can include non-human relatives (animals, plants, etc) and the people who are important but who are unknown to you personally (for example, people who are too far back in time, family disruption, people whose stories were not shared)
- Think about what you can use to represent each person. This can include
 photos, favourite foods, toys that represent special interests, items that belong
 to that person, natural objects, art, and anything else that resonates with
 you.Gather these items.
- Depending on the scope of your altar, find a suitable place for it. This could be a table, a shelf, a window sill, in a garden. Place a cloth on the surface to mark the space.
- Begin to place objects on the altar:
 - If you are alone: spend a moment with each object and reflect on why you chose and the role of that person on your life
 - If you are with your family or a small group: take turns placing objects, sharing a little about each one and the person it represents.
 - If you are with a larger group: Invite each person to bring one object. When placing it on the altar they can share the name of the person or share a word or short phrase about why they chose it. In large groups you may want to invite people to place their objects in silence and then call out the names in a cacophony (at the same time, over lapping).

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Creating an altar, continued:

- Once everything is placed on the altar, light a candle and spend some time in meditation or prayer looking at all that is there. You can also sing songs those important to the people you have chosen or others that are relevant.
- Thank your ancestors and extinguish the candle.



Photo: Saikat Guchhait / Unsplash

GENOGRAM

Create a Genogram

A genogram is a more detailed version of a family tree, using symbols to provide more detail about family relationships going back through time. It's a tool that's often used in psychospiritual care with examples and background available online. A genogram can often provide helpful insight into patterns of connection and challenge that extend through personal ancestry.

Here's a downloadable sheet of symbols you can use to draw your own genogram.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: MEDITATION

This is a simplified and adapted version of the first three of <u>Thich Nhat Hanh's five</u> <u>earth touchings from the Plum Village community</u>, which connects you with your blood, spiritual and land ancestors.

You are welcome to write your own words: <u>Plum Village</u> writes "we encourage you to write your own, so that you can go even deeper into your practice." Feel free to name particular ancestors.

Sit comfortably on the floor or in a chair. If you have created an altar to your ancestors, face the altar, or a lighted chalice. If you have a bell, place it near by.

Place your phone/laptop somewhere where you can see the words easily without holding your device.

Place your hands in prayer position.

Speak out loud.

In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my blood and chosen family. (and bow as is comfortable for you or nod your head and ring the bell)

I see my parents, whose life and vitality are circulating in my own veins and nourishing every cell in me.

Through them I see my grandparents and all the parents before. [I see all those who I call family, whose love and care hold me.]

I carry in me the life, experience, wisdom, happiness, and sorrow of all generations. The suffering and all the elements that need to be transformed, I am practicing to transform.

I open my heart, flesh, and bones to receive the energy of insight, love, and experience transmitted to me by my ancestors. Please support, protect, and transmit to me your energy.

As a continuation of my ancestors, I allow their energy to flow through me, and ask for their support, protection, and strength.

In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my blood and chosen family. (and bow as is comfortable for you or nod your head and ring the bell) (take three deep breaths)

In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my spiritual family. (and bow as is comfortable for you or nod your head and ring the bell)

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: MEDITATION, CONTINUED

I see in myself my teachers, the ones who show me the way of love and understanding, the way to breathe, smile, forgive, and live deeply in the present moment.

I see the Buddha, Christ, [Confucius, Lao Tzu, Mohammad], as my teachers and spiritual ancestors. [I see all the wise yet flawed people whose teachings have shaped me and held me in the mystery.]

I see that their energy and that of many generations of teachers has entered me and is creating peace, joy, understanding, and loving kindness in me. I know that the energy of these teachers has deeply transformed the world.

I open my heart and my body to receive the energy of understanding, loving kindness, and protection from all those I claim as ancestors.

I am their continuation. I ask these spiritual ancestors to transmit to me their infinite source of energy, peace, stability, understanding, and love.

In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my spiritual family. (and bow as is comfortable for you or nod your head and ring the bell) (take three deep breaths)

In gratitude, I bow to this land and all of the ancestors who lived here.

I see that I am whole, protected, and nourished by this land and all the living beings that have been here and made life worthwhile and possible for me through all of their efforts.

I see all those known and unknown [who have cared for this land, in particular the indigenous people who lost so much so that I may be here].

I see all those who have made this country a refuge for people of so many origins and colors, by their talent, perseverance, and love — those who have worked hard [to teach and create and care, to build safety nets for all, to fight for and protect human rights].

I feel the energy of this land penetrating my body and soul, supporting and accepting me. I will use this energy to continue to repair and restore the earth and my relationships with indigenous people.

I vow to cultivate and maintain this energy and transmit it to future generations. With humility, I ask this land for its protection and support. In gratitude, I bow to this land and all of the ancestors who lived here. (and bow as is comfortable for you or nod your head and ring the bell) (take three deep breaths)



IN COMMUNITY

A meaningful way to reflect on ancestors of the body and of place is to include them in introductions when in a group.

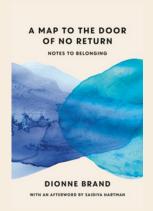
The facilitator might ask one of the following:

- Introduce yourself with your name, the places where you were born/raised, and the land/s of your ancestors.
- Please say your name and the names of those you consider your parents and grandparents.
- Please say your name and the name and homeland of the oldest ancestor that you are aware of.
- Please share the name of one ancestor and something you have learned from that ancestor. (This is good for spiritual ancestors!)

The facilitator might then reflect back some commonalities or differences that they heard, or invite further conversation about issues that surface – possibly immigration, colonization, poverty, oppression, economic privilege.

WE'RE ALL GHOSTS. WE ALL CARRY, INSIDE US, PEOPLE WHO CAME BEFORE US." LIAM CALLANAN, THE CLOUD ATLAS

The Bookshelf



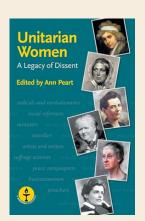
A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (2001) Dionne Brand

In her groundbreaking exploration of life in the Black diaspora, considered a modern classic, Dionne Brand reveals this door as "a point of rupture where the ancestors…departed one world for another: the place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast." (Penguin Canada)



Invisible Influence: Claiming Canadian Unitarian and Universalist Women's History (2011)
Jean Pfleiderer, Heather Fraser Fawcett and Kathy Sage, Editors.

Profiles six fascinating women who impacted our religious tradition in the nineteenth century, including the Rev. Fidelia Gillette, who in 1888, was the first ordained female minister to be called to an Ontario congregation – the now defunct First Universalist Society in Prince Edward County.



Unitarian Women: A Legacy of Dissent (2019) Ann Peart, Editor.

A celebration of the pioneering achievements of British Unitarian women who made a difference to their world – as writers and artists, social reformers, suffrage activists, peace campaigners, educators and politicians, preachers and ministers – for 200 years from the mid–18th century. As Unitarians, they dissented from the orthodox religious doctrines of their time; as women, they dissented from the restricted cultural roles prescribed for them by society.

An awareness of our ancestors gives us a sense of being part of a larger story. It is a way of constituting our individual and collective selfhood.

Richard J. Mouw

WITH CHILDREN

Be a Good Ancestor by Leona and Gabrielle Prince

A picture book rooted in Indigenous teachings that invites readers to examine how they connect to the world around them and think deeply about their actions' consequences. Be a Good Ancestor highlights environmental issues, animal welfare, self-esteem and community building.

Alma and How She Got Her Name by Juana Martinez-Neal A young girl of Hispanic heritage learns about her ancestors in a beautifully illustrated story that touches on the arts, spirituality and social justice in the context of family history.

ONLINE

Did you know that the online <u>Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist</u> <u>Biography</u> has many Canadian entries? Type "Canada" or "Canadian" into the search engine to discover Dr. Joseph Workman, the founder of Canadian psychiatry, or Lucia Fidelia Woolley Gillette, probably the first ordained woman to preach in Canada.

In a <u>Yes Magazine</u> article, adrienne maree brown considers how to be accountable to her ancestors while acknowledging the differences and challenges many of them represent to her own identity and choices.

Human beings are all more closely related than we commonly think. In <u>this article</u>, Scott Hershberger of Scientific American explains the concept of the most recent common ancestor and other indicators of shared ancestry.

Ritual affirms the common patterns, the values, the shared joys, risks, sorrows, and changes that bind a community together. Ritual links together our ancestors and descendants, those who went before with those will come after us.

Starhawk

Discussion Guide

Welcome

Greet everyone. If this is a drop-in group or if there are newer folks present, do a go round of names. Give a brief overview of the session, including time expectations.

Today's theme is the practice of learning from our ancestors' experiences. Many of our ancestors lived through times of great upheaval. What can they offer us right now?

Chalice Lighting

Our chalice lighting words were written by UU minister Marta J. Valentin.

We come together today to honour the universal community of seekers to which we all belong.

We gather together today to share from our deepest place of safe that we might nurture ourselves by celebrating one another.

We call into our presence this hour our ancestors whose love, labour, and commitment made it possible for us to be here now.

Let us call one another to the table of abundance that we may feed on those fruits that sustain us and ever ask us to grow.

Let us open to this moment with hearts that have no borders.

Check In

Offer a choice of these questions or one of your own:

- How goes it with your spirit?
- What's in your mind and heart today?

Continued . . .

Covenant

If you created a covenant at the last session, make time to review your new covenant, to see if anyone has any questions or additions to suggest.

Sample covenant:

- Speak as personally and deeply as we wish--or not. It is always okay to pass.
- Speak kindly about ourselves and others.
- Speak from our own experiences.
- Hold confidentiality. Share your experience of the conversation, not other people's stories.
- Listen respectfully. Avoid giving advice or asking probing questions about others' lives.
- Be aware of power differentials. Consider our own and others' identities and how these identities shape the impact of our contributions.
- (Include any agreements added by your group)

Conversation

This month we are reflecting on the theme of "Learning From Ancestors," mindful that our ancestors include not only our biological or genetic ancestors, and our cultural heritage, but also our spiritual ancestors who inspire us in our lives as Unitarians and as people seeking love and justice in our world.

People can offer their responses to the service, the reflection questions, their experience with one of the practices, or any of the theme packet content. You may choose to begin with a go-round or simply let the conversation flow, making sure everyone has a chance to share. If there is a lull, let the silence sit for a time, then offer up a question to continue the conversation.

Optional Starting Questions

- How does your understanding of ancestry influence your life's journey?
- Who do you consider your cultural and spiritual ancestors, and what are you learning from them?

Sharing Silence

Before closing the session, offer a minute of silence to give people a moment to process all that has been said and to share a time of quiet.

Leaving

From this conversation about learning from ancestors, what is staying with you, in your heart, mind or spirit?

Closing Words

Adapted from words of late Rev. Dr. Orlanda Brugnola, UU minister.

Flame, friend of our most ancient ancestors,
Wwe have kindled you to make you visible in this time.
Yet, in truth, you burn always,
in the unique worth of each person,
in the imagination,
in the turning of the heart to sorrow or joy,
in the call to hope
and in the call to justice.
As you have burned bright before us,
continue to burn bright within us.

Extinguish the chalice





EVERY BREATH IS A SACRAMENT,
AN AFFIRMATION OF OUR CONNECTION
WITH ALL OTHER LIVING THINGS,
A RENEWAL OF OUR LINK
WITH OUR ANCESTORS
AND A CONTRIBUTION
TO GENERATIONS
YET TO COME.
DAVID SUZUKI

Meaning Making Packets
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