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Calling Our Ancestors: Healing Our Family Trees  
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## The Family Tree

“We all carry inside of us, people who came before us,” says Liam Callanan in his book *The Cloud Atlas* (159). Our ancestral lineage lies rooted in our trees, our family trees. So what happens to us as individuals if the roots of our family trees are wounded or damaged? Does a piece of us also die if a part of the tree is wounded or damaged? I cannot say for sure, but I decided to bring this question into my own spiritual direction journey. I knew that spiritual direction would provide a safe and loving place in which sacred listening would allow for the possibility for my ancestors to communicate with me.

We are composed of our past and our present. This can affect the choices we make or create for our future. The walk I have taken with my ancestral family may assist others through their journeys as well. If our ancestors live within us and they call, will we choose to answer back, to answer the call, to restore balance and harmony within our families?

As I began my journey, I sat in silence, waiting. The first image that bubbled to the surface of my mind was a picture of myself, my mom, my aunt and my grandma. We are all standing together inside a life-size sculpture of a family holding hands. The sculpture stands in front of a line of pine trees in a park located in Victoria B.C. In that moment of remembering, I understood that if I am born the daughter of my mother and father, who in turn were birthed of mothers and fathers, and their generations before them; then, I, too, will carry the wounds they carried within them. I may not be conscious of it unless I take the time to reflect on the stories and lives of those who bore me. I can become whole again, the whole tree, within myself, and touch the grove of trees that make up my family, touching one another’s lives.

Spiritual direction provided the perfect place for me to bring these wounds, these past stories that color our lives, to be heard, to be tended, to be listened to and sung. As I tended these roots, cared for this tree, that is my family, a profound love was brought back into relationships which once strained can now flourish because they are no longer root-bound.

Over a period of ten years, I have tended the layers and layers of soil in which my family’s tree grows. At first the story haunted me but now it bears fruit through the sun that has shone on us. I will share the journey I took exploring my family tree, how I brought it into spiritual direction and the process that helped me honor who I am and who my family is. I name the wound, call in my ancestor, tend the wound, grieve and

find forgiveness, sing a new song, heal through the act of creating art and re-imagine a healed tree through guided meditation. In this way I consciously tended the family tree that I inherited.

### **Naming the Wound: Uncovering Family Roots**

Uncovering family wounds can be tricky business. When I brought my own family story into spiritual direction to explore, I had already been sitting with the knowledge for years wondering what to do with it, wondering how it might be affecting me emotionally and spiritually. Wounds of a family are delicate, fragile and yet deeply rooted if not explored. I wanted to look at myself and my family to repair what I saw as dark places inside my own heart. In companioning the soul, we promise to not only listen to but to bear witness to the places that are not so beautiful. Spiritual companionship allows for us to struggle, wrestle with these wounded places, while knowing that another is holding space for us and that ultimately God or Spirit is tending this sacred space as well.

In spiritual direction I was asked the question, "What is the first step that appears before you on this path?" I began to listen with my heart. As I listened, I heard, "Name the wound." I was then asked, "What wound would like to be named in this moment?" My family wound: my grandpa abused my mom and my aunt when they were children. I did not know this until I was in my 20's. It stayed hidden because my mom and aunt could not bear to speak of the trauma that they saw growing up. When I look back, I remember my grandfather always smelling of stale cigarette smoke and warm beer. When I was a child, he would hug me when we went to visit my grandma. I always hoped that we would leave quickly. The smell was overwhelming to me.

As I shared this in spiritual direction, the next question I was asked, "How does naming the wound of your family feel important to you, to your spirit?" What I uncovered through the exploration of this question was that Spirit wanted me to explore this wound so that I could discover why I was experiencing anxiety inside of my body. My nervous system was constantly on high alert, ready to run. It had been too difficult for my mom or my aunt to look directly at the original wounding. Because I was separated from it by a generation, I could safely look and go into the dark places of our family roots and be held by the light that God could breathe into myself and my family. By bringing light to the dark places, it held less power over me. God would share with me that by facing it, I could heal, that my family could heal and that we could re-write a new story. Naming the wound of my family tree brought light into a place that in the past tried to remain hidden. When stories are kept in the dark, thoughts can grow bigger than they had when it first started and shame can follow. To name the wound is not to pass blame onto someone else but to speak and give voice in the silence as to own the wounds so they can begin to heal. Sharing my family's story also allowed me the ability to open up a dialogue with my mom to better understand

what she had suffered, how she hurt and hold space for the places inside of herself that she lost as a child. When I began to discuss these events with my mom, my grandpa had already passed. I was fifteen years old when he died. It would take another fifteen years before I sat in holy space to name this wound that our family tree bore.

### **Calling Our Ancestors**

I practice an interfaith style of spirituality. I draw wisdom from many traditions – Christian, Buddhist, Celtic Pagan, Native American and Hindu. I call on God to move through me and bring forth the teachings that serve as an instrument for my healing in the present moment.

Through my spiritual companionship, the next question that arose was, “Now that your wound has been named, in what way can you honor these wounds?” I took this question into my heart. It was many months later before I saw the answer. I sometimes see answers like images projected on a screen in front of me. The first image that bubbled to the surface was a scene from one of the *Harry Potter* books by J.K. Rowling. In the story Harry and his friends have learned that the person they are battling with, Voldemort, receives his power through his name. Because they do not want to contribute to restoring his power, they instead consistently refer to Voldemort as “He who must not be named.” After seeing this scene pop up in my head, it disappeared and another second scene appeared. I grew up in Yuma, Arizona on the border of Mexico. San Luis sits just 20 minutes south of where I grew up. Our town has a large cultural heritage of Hispanic families, and I have spent much time with different families hearing, practicing and honoring their traditions. One of the ways I learned to honor families through the Hispanic culture was through what is called “La Ofrenda,” the offering table. It is a form of prayer altar. The names and pictures of ancestors are placed on an altar heavily decorated with flowers and colors and food as a way to honor those who have departed. With these two images in my head the Un-naming and the Naming, I was able to discern through my spiritual direction practice the power held within a name. If the wound has a name, do I then not need to also name the person who did the wounding?

I took this understanding that arose inside of me and went home. I found a photo of my grandpa, wrote his name “Ralph” on the back and placed his photo on my prayer altar. I lit a candle for remembrance and called his name. I called him back into our circle, our family tree. I understood that if he remained outside of us, apart, none of our family would truly heal our past hurts. He didn’t have to be physically present for me to do this. He is already a part of me, my biology, my roots, my family. I called him back into our circle, naming him again.

## Tending the Wound

When there is a wound or an injury, tending a spiritual wound can be very similar to that of a physical one. To let a physical wound cover over before it is healed can lead to illness and infection. This can be a mirror for spiritual wounds as well. In order to tend to a spiritual wound, it is important to address, compassionately, what lies beneath the surface - not hurried or pushed - but with tender care. The interesting thing that occurred through the process of writing this article is the appearance to the reader that these steps happened quickly. As a spiritual director, myself, I know that the Divine has Her own timing in matters. Between "calling in my grandfather" and "tending the wound," a period of four years passed with a quietness that was only quiet on the outside ... much was bubbling beneath the surface, stirring our roots. The next big step on this journey would take place after my grandma, my last remaining grandparent, passed away in August of 2006. My Grandma Paula was the wife of my Grandpa Ralph.

My grandma's passing opened the door into the discovery my mom and I, unknowingly, had been waiting for to be able to go deeper into understanding my grandpa. As my mom and I went through my grandma's belongings, we uncovered a folder with my grandpa's military records. As we read through them, we discovered that through his service, my grandpa had increasingly become more belligerent and was in trouble repeatedly. The reports spoke of paranoid behavior, feelings of being watched and anti-authoritarian behavior. As we sat with this new information and I began looking at old photographs of my mom's family growing up, I could see the house they grew up in change over time. The block wall in the backyard grew taller as my grandpa added layers. He also covered the windows to block out what he did not want in. It is most likely there was mental illness that went undiagnosed. This may have been part of the reason he chose alcohol to quiet the noise. Seeing the pain that he had been in, sparked my mom to begin a search on an ancestry site online to learn about her dad and any clues to what had happened to him when he was a child. We both began to view my grandpa not as just a father and grandfather but as a person with a history before either myself or my mom had been born.

I brought this information into my spiritual direction sessions. Could I begin to hold my grandpa, grandma and mom in this sacred space with the Divine knowing that I would not be able to fix them or change them but could sit with all of them in my heart? Through discernment, I began to hear the words, "As above, so below." What I uncovered was that if God could hold my family and all its wounds and not turn away from us, then I could do the same. There are no guarantees how healing takes place or what outcomes there will be. It was enough to be in that difficult space knowing that we were not alone. When a tree is injured or sick, often times we may prune it in the right places and add nutrients to assist its health. If we did not, the tree might not survive or thrive. Spiritual direction allowed the space to tend to the wounds my

family had sustained. In his book *True Love*, Thich Nhat Hahn says, “We should open our door so that our suffering can come out. We are afraid of doing that, but Buddhism teaches us that we should not be afraid, because we have available to us an energy that should help us to care for our pain—the energy of mindfulness. If we practice cultivating this energy of mindfulness, we will have enough of it to take care of our pain” (40).

### **Grieving, Finding Forgiveness and Honoring Our Ancestors**

Over the next two years, my mom took the information about my grandpa, her father, and began to research his lineage. What she uncovered in Ralph’s story was revealing for both of us and for the whole family tree.

My grandpa was Italian. His mother and father immigrated to the United States from Italy as so many families did at that time. They ended up in New York, and his father and mother worked and had a large family. Then, tragically, there was a fire. The fire took the life of my great – grandmother, Ralph’s mother. My grandpa was only two years old at the time. His father, having no way to care for the younger children, had them placed in an orphanage. My Grandpa Ralph, one older sister and one older brother were placed in the orphanage and remained there through their childhood years.

With this new information about my grandpa, as a child, as a person and as someone who had suffered greatly, we began to see through his hurting eyes beyond the pain that he passed onto his family as an adult through abuse. Historically, there would have been no social programs to help him communicate these hurts. These things were not spoken of. Silence was kept. My mom and I could both place Ralph outside of ourselves and see his personal experience had been deeply scarred and shaped him. Forgiveness does not ask that you forgive the person the deeds inflicted upon you, forgiveness only asks for understanding and to remove the heavy stones from our hearts that we carry around from the past. This was one heavy stone my mom and I could remove from the roots around our family tree.

Uncovering these parts of our roots to understand our family’s wounds helped me to bring this into listening compassionately in spiritual direction. My question to God was never, “Why?” My question was always, “What, Creator, can I do to honor my grandpa, my mom, myself, our family?” Through sacred listening, I heard in what way I could both grieve for our family and also honor it at the same time.

As I have shared earlier, I have a personal faith that is open to practicing different faith styles and spiritual traditions. In Tucson, we have the beautiful opportunity each year to honor the dead in the All Souls Procession. It is scheduled to correspond with the Hispanic tradition of Dia de Los Muertos. In this procession hundreds of thousands

of people both gather to watch or to walk in this parade honoring those who have passed. We imagine getting to walk with our ancestors. And this is what I did. I called my Grandpa Ralph into the parade, bringing his photo and his name and asking him to walk with me, to be once again part of our family tree. As I walked, I knew that without him, I would not be here either.

### **Singing a New Song - Finding Joy in a Place of Sorrow**

In his song "Yirawala," American roots singer Trevor Hall sings these lyrics:

Know your song and the sands it sang from,  
Know your song and pass it down,  
If you cut that tree, we're never going to be free

It took another year before the next step on my journey would reveal itself. As I sat in discernment in spiritual direction and with God, I heard that through song, through the power of singing, through using my voice in joy that I and my family could continue the journey of healing. I took this understanding and began to sing.

I sang with the local Global Chant community that I am a part of. I sang mantras and songs from many traditions that uplifted my soul. I sang with my church choir and joined my song with the songs of those around me and lifted these prayers up to God. I sang while I drove in my car, I sang in the shower, I sang while I waited in line at the grocery store. I sang the heart sutra "Gate Gate Para Gate Parasam Gate Bodhi Svaha," a Buddhist mantra of compassion. I sang "Bind us together Lord, Bind us together, with cords that cannot be broken," a Christian song of love and forgiveness. I sang "Ho'oponopono," a Hawaiian prayer song of forgiving ourselves and forgiving another. I sang "Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu," a Hindu mantra of peace. With each song and each time, I asked that those around me, both living and passed, receive the light from these songs.

When I next met in spiritual direction, I had this dream to share and to bring into deeper listening. In the dream, I sat at the kitchen table of my family home where I grew up. I looked out the front window and saw Grandpa Ralph walking down the sidewalk. He turned up the walkway coming towards the house. Then there came a knock at the door. My mom, who was closest to the door, opened it. My grandpa walked directly over to me and stood in front of me. He was wearing the very same clothes I used to see him in when he was alive - white V-neck t-shirt, brown pants, black shoes and a plain brown baseball cap. However, there was something different about him. He was clean shaven, his clothes were bright and clean, and his once olive green eyes were now a brilliant light blue. His eyes shone brightly, sparkling and clear. He said to me, "That singing is good. Keep up the good work, kid." Then he smiled and walked back out the door. That's when I woke up.

Through my spiritual direction process, we held this dream in prayer and thanked the Divine for allowing my grandpa and myself to connect in this new way that was different from what the past had been. Singing had brought a new song into my life for my family tree. Through a deeper relationship with God, with my family tree and with awareness for our past, I could feel a deeper love and gratitude.

### **Healing through Creating Collage Art**

As my mom and I continued to sit with all of the new knowledge and understanding of her father, my grandpa, the pain of the history, although not lessened, became one more of understanding and acceptance of the sometimes painful trials of being human. I wanted to continue to create an honoring environment for myself and for my family.

My spiritual director asked me this question, "In what way can you continue to heal your family tree?" God, through a period of silence and reflection, began to plant a new seed in my heart to explore the family tree through the act of creating art. I was asked to create a family collage. Doing a collage was not only an opportunity to create a piece of art with my hands but also the chance to create using images. It was an opportunity to bring family photos together along with iconic elements that represented my family and the embodiment of what it meant to grow from this living tree. I could see that our tree was still very much alive and growing despite the wounded limbs.

Working with my hands, I brought together elements of my grandma and grandpa and a photo of them together, images of the statue of liberty as both my grandma and grandpa made their way to America through her gates. I included images of the hummingbird representing freedom of spirit and a butterfly to signify regeneration, growth and flight into new directions. The collage represented the ability to take the broken pieces fallen from the tree and bring them together into a new and beautiful way. The Japanese have a spiritual practice, known as Kintsugi. In Kintsugi, if a piece of pottery breaks, it is mended with gold to bind the pieces back together. When light shines through the cracks, the beauty can shine through even the darkest of places making the history of its story even more beautiful.

Upon finishing my family collage, I brought the finished piece into spiritual direction. I wanted to honor the work, the beauty and the grace with which our family tree has continued to mend, cracks and all. The next question I was asked was, "How do you feel and in what way is God present in this moment?" My response was, "I feel as if I can breathe more deeply having lifted the weight of shame off my grandfather's shoulders."

## **Guided Meditation: Our Tree of Hope, Strength & Courage**

The year after I created my collage artwork, I began to re-imagine the relationship that I had with my grandpa. I wanted to take what it had been while he was alive and shift it to what it could be in my heart since he had passed.

Through discernment and deep listening, I saw an image appear. I, myself, am a bodywork practitioner and use guided meditation and imagery work to help my clients. I saw that I could use this same practice with my own family tree. I journaled to discover what was hiding. Images appeared through my writing. I saw that the wounds that were rooted in the ground and in the soil, in which our family tree was growing, needed to be tended.

As I meditated, the tree that appeared to represent my family was the oak tree. The oak is a symbol of strength, wisdom, nobility, family, loyalty and honor. These were all the qualities I was looking for to restore to our family, to restore our tree. I sat in meditation and imagined sitting with my back against this oak tree. One-by-one my relatives joined me to sit under the shade of its branches being grateful to be part of this history together.

What had once been a wounded, shameful, anxiety-filled ancestry of family wounding now shifted into a beautiful oak tree - strong, healed and courageous. Now it could bear the new seeds of future change. I began to imagine that God had entered our midst not through the "third chair" but as the "third tree" right there in the center, the Oak, present for us the whole time.

### **Planting Roots: Starting Where We Are**

"You know why trees smell the way they do?" Murphy asked.

"Sap?" Logan guessed. "Chlorophyll?"

"Stars. Trees breathe in starlight year after year, and it goes deep into their bones. So when you cut a tree open, you smell a hundred years worth of light. Ancient starlight that took millions of years to reach Earth. That's why trees smell so beautiful and old."

Frances O'Roarke Dowell, *Where I'd Like to Be* (77)

If starlight, where our ancient ancestors dwell, touches the earth then it also touches our trees. As it touches our trees, we, ourselves, breathe it in. Then one day we become an ancestor in this cycle. If this is true, then maybe, just maybe, by doing the work around the wounds of our family trees, it can assist the evolution of other

families. It can help transform the dynamics in familial relationships, which then creates a ripple of wondrous change. Starlight can create a glow even in the darkest of places.

As I brought all of these pieces of discernment, family knowledge, understanding, forgiveness and blessing into spiritual direction, I was asked this last question, "Does your family tree feel healthier?" I prayed about this question, what it meant for myself, my mom, my grandma and grandpa, my relatives. Does our family tree feel healthier? Yes. We no longer need to be afraid of the dark or what is buried in the roots of the family tree. Is the process completed? No. It is a process of ever-evolving spiritual growth. Then I read this quote by Thich Nhat Hahn from his book *How to Love*, "Resilient trees can weather a violent storm because their roots are deep and firm. The roots of a lasting relationship are mindfulness, deep listening and loving speech, and a strong community to support you" (36).

My family tree has weathered a storm of violence and yet remained in communication, in community and present to one another through love, compassion and deep listening. We have been able to grow a resilient family tree. Calling in our ancestors took courage, faith and trust that no matter the wound, starlight could find its way into our family tree and help us to heal.

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My Family Ancestor Collage by Shannon Sullivan