

# Ancestral Wisdom in Difficult Times Using Focusing Oriented Therapy

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## INTRODUCTION

Living in the digital age, we are increasingly isolated, alone, and afraid, left to navigate a seemingly polarized world with no support. While many communities continue age old spiritual traditions of honoring and revering their ancestors, many of us do not think of our family members, and “chosen family” members as spiritual benefactors that can help us cope with difficult times and difficult emotions.

Having passed into the spiritual realm, our ancestors possess an equanimity, egolessness and affective distance that we wouldn't be able to access on our own, especially when we're flooded with difficult thoughts and emotions. They have a wider perspective that comes from lived experience and watching human history evolve over time.

This presentation will look at a sampling of cultures where ancestor reverence is integral to the spirituality and ontology of the people. It will discuss the health benefits of gratitude and how we can expand this practice to include our ancestors. I will then provide a suggested script to help find and work with an ancestor one have positive regard for. This same ancestor will then be approached with a difficult experience or question. Finally, I will share how my ancestors have impacted my life, how my healing journey with them unfolded, and how they guide me forward through the difficult times we find ourselves in today.

So just what do I mean when I talk about ancestors? In the broadest sense, they're all the beings who lived on Earth before us. More specifically, “our ancestors are the human dead, the collective wisdom and suffering of *homo sapiens sapiens* over the past 200,000 or so years” (Foor, 2017). The ancestors are not limited to our blood and family lineages; indeed, one can feel close connection to an ancestor from another culture. However, in my experience biological ancestors tend to be very influential, particularly in regard to personal and family healing.

As a teenager, I began to look into my family history, deeply moved by the tragic and harrowing stories my grandmother told me about her family during the Holocaust. I felt deep respect and awe for my ancestors and became interested in exploring how other cultures honor their beloved dead. I studied the spiritual practices of ancestor reverence in Africa, Asia, Haiti, Mexico and in the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and the US. Central to the belief systems of all these traditions, I learned, was that if we care for the well-being of those who have passed, they will be more likely to intervene when we are in trouble.

## A SAMPLING OF REVERENTIAL PRACTICES

Our human species started in Africa, the source of our most ancient forebears. The first forms of worship were focused on honoring and worshipping those who came before us as well as the natural world. African ancestor belief is still the predominant belief system in sub-Saharan Africa. Ancestors are thought to have the power to influence future events, and are thought to be invested in seeing their progeny and future generations thrive. This predominant pre-colonial belief system, is focused on the veneration of deceased family members, rather than mourning or remembering them.

Aboriginal people in the Americas honor the ancestors by first establishing presence. They call in the four directions, and the elements of earth, air, fire and water. The body is honored as the Creator's house which has to be cleaned and purified to show honor for the gift of life. Smudging the body with the fragrant smoke of sweetgrass and sage, signals to the ancestors in the spirit world that their descendants are living with reverence and gratitude for their contributions. Similarly, in ceremony, tobacco is lit and smoked as an offering to remind the ancestors and the Creator to watch over and protect them. It is also a way that the living directly communicate prayers to their beloved dead.

While there is a legacy of trauma among Aboriginal people, given the brutal history of colonization in the Americas, their resilience seems fortified by their connection to their ancestors and the natural world. The Creator, the ancestors, the weather, the land, the water and all of "the relatives with wings, fins, roots and paws" are all honored as one (Turcotte and Schaffer, 2014). Shirley Turcotte speaks of this in her article on Aboriginal Focusing Oriented Therapy (AFOT): "All my relations acknowledges our relationship to our ancestors, to the ancestral lands of our people, the places in which we have lived and where we have traveled, to the plants and animals we have consumed and/or commodified, and to the people to whom we are connected, sometimes without ever meeting. Most broadly, this Indigenous world view includes the universe and all of its interconnectedness. It is this implicit and ancestral memory knowledge, through the generations, that teaches us when to trust, how to trust and where to move ourselves forward for all concerned" (Turcotte and Schiffer, 2014). As part of Aboriginal Focusing Oriented Therapy, grief, trauma, anger, and baggage can be stored in the land and the waters, can be released to fire and air, or into the arms of the intergenerational family. To help heal the devastating effects of colonialism, tobacco can be smoked or laid in an open fire to call in the ancestors, and everything else in the web of life, to be a part of the healing process. "The ancestors, our current and future children, and all of life and land will see us through these difficult times" (Turcotte and Schiffer, 2014). It is believed that what an individual heals now, can heal past and future generations, creating connection across time through ceremony. As

Turcotte states: “If Time is all here right now, the work I do will benefit my ancestors. Healing the present I heal the past” (Personal notes from Turcotte, 2012).

Vodou is a Haitian spiritual tradition that draws from West African pantheons and belief systems. Within this spiritual cosmocentric world view, the individual exists as part of a larger universe composed of lwa-s, ancestors, social relationships, and the larger natural world.

“Vodou is based on a vision of life in which individuals are given identity, strength and safety in a dangerous world through the thick fabric linking them together with other human beings, as well as spirits and ancestors” (Brown,1989; 1991)

In Haiti, the African gods or deities are called lwa-s and represent the spirit of African ancestors, deceased family members and biblical figures. They are thought of as “guardians that can protect the devotee against the curse of an enemy and can be called upon for help in times of distress to provide guidance or to transform a situation” (Desrosiers & Fleurose, 2002).

Disturbances in health or luck are a sign that harmonious relationships with lwas have been disrupted and may need to be mended. Vodou rituals heal individuals and groups “by exercising, strengthening, and mending relationships among the living, the dead, and the spirits” (Brown 1991: 346). According to this world view, the only way to control health and luck is through “the care and feeding of family, in the largest sense of that term” (Brown 1991: 346). For this reason, in Vodou ritual, a lot of attention is paid to the care and feeding of the ancestors.

Like Focusing, Vodou is a body-centered practice. Devotional practices are embodied and include drumming, dancing, singing, possession and drawing *vévés*: artistic representations or designs personal to each lwa. The devotee spreads cornmeal on the earth and draws the *vévé* of their preferred lwa in the cornmeal using a stick. When a devotee is in distress, s/he can beseech the help of an ancestor by drawing the *vévé* of the lwa whose qualities or powers might be helpful in assisting or healing them. The *vévé* serves as an earthly portal for the ancestor to come through from the Invisible to the Visible world. The lwa is then welcomed and received through dance, drumming, singing and possession.

Extending back before 1000 BCE in Asia, ancestor worship has been central to the culture.

Prayers and offerings of food, candles and incense are set out on altars to demonstrate filial piety, both at home and in temples. Elaborate burial rituals are also practiced, and graves are tended to and visited with deep respect. Special care is given to avoiding trespassing on or despoiling the graves. These practices are centered on the continuity of the family and reverence for the elders. In Mexico every year, the ancestors are honored in a three day tradition called the day of the dead, or El Dia de Los Muertos. It is a holiday especially set aside for the feeding and caring of the ancestors. At the grave site, which has been meticulously cleaned and festively decorated, a basin of water and a towel are provided for the dead to wash up after their long journey from the other side. Family members lay out picnics with special foods and beverages thought to be

enjoyed by the dead, and share funny anecdotes about the loved one, sing songs that they liked, even write poems for them.

By proactively engaging in simple actions to honor our ancestors, they can become a tremendous source of healing, empowerment, and nourishment in our everyday lives. (Daniel Foor, PhD).

We all have loving ancestors who want to see us fulfill our destinies as happy and well-adjusted people.

In your life, you may want to incorporate some of these ancient practices to enhance your relationships with your beloved dead and build loving bonds with them. You may feel moved to establish an altar, sing to them, light a candle, talk to them or simply place a photo of your ancestor in view. But ultimately, all that is needed is love in your heart and a sincere intent and willingness to connect with them.

### THE POWER OF GRATITUDE

Central to the practices mentioned in this presentation is the idea that positive and nurturing relationships with ancestors can be fostered by showing appreciation for the gifts they have given. According to the research conclusions of Barbara Fredrickson, a positive psychology researcher, gratitude is a pro-social behavior, enhancing quality, supportive relationships, as well as trust, and bonding (2004).

Emotionally stable relationships is one of the most reliably powerful predictors of happiness according to three decades of research on subjective wellbeing by psychologist and professor emeritus Ed Diener. We can thereby assume that gratitude practice for our ancestors will enhance our own emotional well being.

So what do we mean when we talk about gratitude? According to Robert Emmons, a psychology professor at UC Davis known for his research on gratitude, the emotion of gratitude is felt when a person acknowledges that something good has happened, which has been brought about by the efforts or presence of something or someone outside of them. Gratitude can also be experienced when we acknowledge that we were spared a negative event or state of being(2004). Gratitude enhances positive affect as well our ability to take in and enjoy the good in our lives. As G.K. Chesterton puts it: "All goods look better when they look like gifts".

Gratitude may improve mood by priming our focus on the good things and good states already present in our lives. It draws our attention away from the things we don't have, thereby bypassing the unpleasant emotional states associated with social comparison, resentment and jealousy (McCullough et al., 2002). Also, when we focus on the positive consequence of a difficult experience, we tend to be more accepting of stressful life events and can more easily employ healthy coping interventions. According to a study by Kashtan, Uswatte, and Julian (2006), grateful people have less posttraumatic symptoms after a trauma than less grateful

people. The unpleasantness of negative memories often fade faster for grateful people(Watkins, Grimm, Holben & Kolts, 2008), thus lowering the intrusiveness of these memories and their unpleasant effects. Grateful people seem to reflect more positively on their past and more readily retrieve positive memories.

Another study that demonstrates the power of this practice comes from the father of Positive Psychology himself, Martin Seligman. He asked people who considered themselves to be severely depressed to write down three good things that happened to them each day for 15 days. At the end of this experiment 94% of these subjects had a decrease in depression and 92% said their happiness level had increased.

Finally, in his book "Authentic Happiness" Seligman states that of all the exercises he's developed over the years to enhance feelings of happiness, the most effective is writing a gratitude letter to someone who has enriched our lives. You may want to try writing a one-page gratitude letter to a beloved ancestor and see if it helps you feel happier and closer to them. Seligman has found in multiple studies that the action of expressing your gratitude has a major impact on your wellbeing.

By practicing gratitude for what our forebears have given us by their sacrifices, we open the door to receiving help and guidance from them.

We will now move into opening that door through the practice of Focusing.

### Experiential Exercise #1

*The natural world can be a grounding focus of connection because it has been here longer than we have and will continue to be here long after we have gone.*

*Take some time now to feel the support of the earth underneath you. The earth is your oldest ancestor and you are a part of this earth. Your bones are made up of the minerals of the earth. In your blood flows the salt water of the oceans, the rain clouds and streams. You are a beloved child of this earth and you carry its life force inside your body. Feel how the earth is supporting you, how it is holding up the chair you're sitting on, how it is holding up the floor, and the building.*

*Now let your attention melt down inside your body and connect to the aliveness there. Feel your feet on the floor and the aliveness inside your feet...perhaps a tingling, pulsing feeling.*

*Sense into the sit bones against the cushion, the sensations in the hands, the heart beating within, the lungs filling with air and releasing. Feel yourself, grounded and stable in your sitting posture.*

*As we begin, set an intention to hold yourself and your chosen ancestor with friendliness and compassion throughout the exercise, pausing whenever you like to connect back to the sensations in your body in the present moment.*

*Imagine you are entering into a space where you can sense your ancestors and benefactors appearing. Notice who appears. You may sense family members from previous generations you don't know very well. Or perhaps some ancestors with whom you have a more complicated relationship are appearing. If they do, for now, just set them aside at a comfortable distance. Now ask your body to choose someone you miss or admire, who has positively affected your life, either through your direct knowledge of them or through stories you've heard about them. Who has taught you the value of living with integrity or inspired you through their courage, their generosity or their wise counsel?*

*If you can't settle on a member of your family, choose a teacher or benefactor or a public figure who has touched and inspired you.*

*You might notice if you're facing them or close to them or how you are in relation to them. Reflect on how their values, their decisions and hard work, their simple demonstrations of kindness, their mistakes, their sacrifices, perhaps how they've fought for freedom from oppression; even their immigration or military service, and how you carry their legacy into your life today.*

*If any loss or grief or guilt or joy comes as a result of being in their presence, keep it company with kindness, or if it feels better, you can try and place those feelings to the side for now.*

*Ask your body what, through the generations, this ancestor or benefactor has passed onto you. Is it a perspective on the world? A belief system? Is it a feeling or drive inside you? A sense of spiritual strength? Is there an image that comes to mind, a metaphor or symbol?*

*How have the gifts they've given you changed the way you move in the world? How have they helped awaken you?*

*Consider how their efforts have resulted in the safety and well being you've been given in this life. You may feel moved to share with them now how they've inspired you and made you who you are today, or if it feels more appropriate, you may express sorrow and empathy for what they've endured.*

*Send some thoughts of thanks and gratitude for the gifts you've received... Thank you for what you've contributed to my life and wherever you are, may you be well and at ease. May you feel my appreciation and gratitude, may you feel my love.*

*How does it feel in your body, in your mind, in your heart, as you connect with this gratitude. Or perhaps there is another feeling is showing up. Whatever you are feeling notice the sensations you have in your body, and any images that come to mind.*

## Experiential exercise #2

Knowing that our ancestors have endured profound challenges in their lives can give us perspective when faced with personal or collective challenges.

*Take a moment now to ask your body what is difficult for you at this time. It may be personal like relationship difficulties or an illness. It may be something about your professional life or perhaps the changes that have been happening in this country.*

*Notice what comes in your body and see if you can get a handle for it.*

*Now go back to your ancestor and see what they might have to say to you about this difficulty.*

*Notice what comes in your body ...is there is a sense of purpose or comfort or relief?*

*See if there is something you would like to say to them.*

*Take whatever has come and put it in a safe place for you to access later. Are there questions or areas you want to explore in the future?*

*Thank your body for all the came. Thank your family member or members for making themselves known to you today. If you like, let them know you'd like to speak to them again soon.*

## MY STORY

My interest in my ancestors started when I asked my paternal grandmother Sarah why I had met my great grandmothers on my mothers side but not hers. She told me it was because her parents, brother and two of her four sisters were killed during WWII. My great grandparents saw the rise of anti-semitism in Europe and make intricate arrangements to get their other 3 oldest daughters out of Poland. They arranged passage for two of my great-aunts to escape to Israel and for my grandmother Sarah to immigrate to Canada. Shortly after my grandmother had established herself in Montreal, she received word that her father had been killed by a train in what was thought was an assassination by anti-Semitic Poles, emboldened by the rise of the Third Reich. After this tragedy, my grandmother Sarah felt a responsibility to get her remaining family members out of Poland. She married my grandfather, Moishe Ross, a chicken salesman who made a decent living, hoping that with their combined income they would be able to get Sarah's mother Beilah, her brother Avram, and her youngest sisters, Razeleh and Dvorah, out of Poland. My grandparents tried their best, saving their money over several years to try and pay their passage to Canada, but by the time they had enough to send them, the war had broken out, and the borders had closed, making it impossible to get the money to them. As Poland succumbed to Nazi Germany, my great-grandmother Beilah saw that their only hope for survival was to pay a Polish family to hide them. After several years in hiding, Beilah ran out of money, and the family who harbored them forced them out into the street, where they were found by Nazi soldiers and shot to death.

I was 17 years old when my grandmother Sarah entrusted me with this story. We had a close relationship, and she was nurturing and loving with me in a way she wasn't able to be with her own children. It felt like an incredible honor and privilege to receive her confidence in such an intimate way.

In his book Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust, Dan Bar-On shares his findings that it is often members of the third generation who are entrusted with such stories, and with the preservation of the family legacy (Bar-On, 1995). They hold the 'memorial candle' for those who were lost, and tend to the flame of memory. Perhaps it was the closeness of our relationship that enabled my grandmother to share her pain with me. However, there was also a cost to the emotional intimacy we shared. My love and empathy for her, also brought about an identification with and unconscious absorption of her sadness, worthlessness, and devastation, as well as her belief that she was not entitled to happiness in her life. This well known phenomenon, I learned, was known as Inter-Generational Trauma.

For me, it manifested as workaholism. I found myself taking on an unnecessary amount of responsibility for my clients' problems. I worked long hours, yet it seemed that no matter how hard I worked, how drained and exhausted I was, I always felt like I wasn't doing enough. I felt burnt out, depressed, and unworthy of the rest that would restore me to balance. Over many FOT sessions of dialoguing with my ancestors, I came to understand that my perceptions had been colored by the guilt and feelings of helplessness I had absorbed from my grandmother. The feeling I had always had of having to strive and help others in order to have a right to exist, were my grandmother's, not my own.

In one of my first FOT sessions, I told Beilah how sorry I was that she and her children had suffered so much and died such violent deaths. I told her how much she inspired me with her resilience and strength to endure in hiding for so many years under such challenging circumstances. Beilah responded with gratitude, moved by the depth of my feelings for her and her family. She went on to say, that my efforts to restrict my experience of happiness had no impact on the suffering they went through. To see me suffer did not help her, she told me, it only brought her back to her own traumatic memories. It would give more meaning to her death, and the deaths of her children, if I lived with more joy. Hearing her words reminded me of something Buddhist meditation teacher Jack Kornfield said: "To deny your happiness is to lessen the importance of the deprivation of others. It doesn't help for you not to feel the happiness that's given to you. They won't be saved out of your guilt. Find that joy, so instead you can let your love and admiration for them inspire you to do what you can to make the world a better place."



In the FOT sessions that followed this conversation, the Focusing attitude created a sacred space where my great grandmother's, grandmother's and my own inter-generational wounds were honored and attended to. Within this safety, we communicated in a kind and compassionate way with each other. I experienced a felt shift in how I related to and carried my great-grandmother Beilah and grandma Sarah. I was able to identify my unconscious drives towards self-sacrifice and productivity and begin to release them by clearing space between my emotions and the emotions of my family members. My great-grandmother was healed by hearing Sarah and I's gratitude for her love and sacrifice, and Sarah was healed of her shame, guilt and unworthiness by her mother's benevolence and comforting words.

Shirley Turcotte says about Aboriginal Focusing Oriented Therapy: "Just because someone is no longer with us does not mean the relationship can't be improved or made better" (Turcotte, 2008). Indeed, relationships with family members once fraught with trauma can heal and these same ancestors can serve as inner guides and supports with daily living. For example, when I'm too depleted to give to my clients, I often call on my ancestors by name and picture them sitting around me, helping me work with a client, doing for me what I cannot do for myself.

### INSPIRING ACTIVISM

My journey of connection with my ancestors has been accelerated by the difficult times we are living in. I have gone to my ancestors to help me cope with the constant barrage of injustice in this country and elsewhere. The ongoing relentless killing of unarmed black and brown men, women and children by police has been devastating; their unjust acquittal of their killers adding insult to injury for the victims and their families. My ancestors have helped me hold my shock, anger, and grief over these state-sanctioned crimes. In these times of outrage, I remember the spirits of those who survived and thrived despite the horrors of slavery, I remember the fortitude of all the aboriginal people whose people and traditions have survived in spite of genocide, I remember the courage and loving resolve of the freedom fighters of the civil rights movement, and by remembering them I am inspired to continue to fight racial killings and injustice. These ancestors give me a wider perspective of history and faith that the spirit of the people can prevail.

When I think of my own ancestors, I think of the love that guided my great grandparents actions to try and save their children from harm. I think of my great grandmother Beilah and her younger children, who hid from the Nazi Occupation for several years in a Polish family's basement. I think of my grandmother Sarah who had fled to Canada as a teenager shortly before the war. How she found a way to move through the traumatic grief that came when she learned her parents, sisters and brother had been found and killed. I think of my other great-grandparents who fled pogroms. By reflecting on all their experiences in a Focusing way, I can access their wisdom and learn to tolerate anxiety, fear, uncertainty, feelings of helplessness and rage.

When I woke up shocked and terrified to what felt like a nightmare reality on November 9, 2016, I thought of my grandparents Charlotte and Manny, who resisted their way through the McCarthy and Nixon administrations. I knew I could draw on their experience to help me find a way through the Trump era.

### MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

The best way we can repay our great debt of gratitude for what our ancestors went through, is by living well and doing good deeds. Since last summer, I have been turning to my ancestors more often to advise me regarding social activism. Focusing experientially on my ancestors' suffering and having a felt experience of their pain and trauma, has helped me feel more deeply and identify with the pain of people that are being oppressed in this country. I can feel my interconnectedness with others and move towards transcending the separateness white privilege fosters. These experiences have motivated me to examine the system of white power that, on multiple levels, gives me unearned advantages daily, simply because I am white. I am doing what I can now to reorient myself from the influence of whiteness and do what is within my power to dismantle it. I know to the deepest level of my being that none of us are free until we are all free. Fighting for the liberation of people of color and other marginalized people, is fighting for my own liberation. I have been motivated by love as an activist for racial and economic justice by my ancestors and feel grateful to be carrying their legacy of resistance forward into my current activism. Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) is a tool for all of us to keep this river of goodness flowing from one heart to another.

Moving forward, I know that I need never feel alone with my difficulties again; my ancestors and I are living life together as a shared experience. When I am tired or discouraged along the way, my ancestors tell me: "We are the ground you walk upon. We are always holding you up, holding you tenderly. We will be with you one step at a time, one day at a time. Keep walking forward."

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