

**Making Peace With Our Ancestors**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss**  
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Making peace with our ancestors is a challenge that people have faced down through the centuries. According to the book of Exodus, when Moses received the second set of tablets of the ten commandments, “the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord, the Lord, a god merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.’” (Exodus 34: vs. 6-7)

As a youth, I remember feeling conflicted about that passage. I mean how fair is that? It’s one thing to have to answer for my own mistakes, but to have the iniquity of my father’s father’s father visited upon me? Really! It’s small wonder that the Mormons have come up with the inspired idea of surrogate baptisms for their ancestors. Who wouldn’t want one’s ancestors to enter into a state of grace under such circumstances?

And yet, as I have grown older, I think I have a better understanding of the dynamic to which this passage is referring. To some extent, it’s just telling it like it is.

If we clear-cut the forests, and the topsoil washes away into the streams and rivers, killing generations of salmon, it will take generations to recover from our greed. New forests grow slowly if at all when there is no topsoil, and once a breeding population of a species is sufficiently diminished, it takes many generations for it to recover - if it can recover at all.

If we use toxic chemicals in our mining operations to make a quick profit, you can bet our children’s children’s children will still be paying the price for our lack of thought. Or if we just push unsustainable consumption because it’s good for our current economy, or promote deficit spending with no thought for the long-range consequences of our actions, you can rest assured that our iniquities will be visited on several generations to come.

Is it fair? No! But whether we speak of this reality using the analogy of a God who is angry that we have not paid attention to ecologically sound scriptural prescriptions, or in terms of the grief of an Earth Mother who washes away evolutionary mistakes with her tears, or whether we reject all God/Goddess analogies, the pattern still holds some truth in it that we had best not ignore.

Or lets look at a more personal example. If a person is alcoholic, or for some other reason has inadequate parenting skills but has children anyway, the children may well resolve not to do to their

children what was done to them, but unless they are fortunate enough to enter a therapeutic process in which positive parenting skills are learned, you can safely predict that their children, and yes, their children's children, will all suffer from this lack.

OK, so even if we accept that it's true that we can suffer from our ancestor's iniquities, what are we to do about it? Well, one obvious thing to do is to try and be the type of ancestors to our children that future generations won't have to suffer for our inequities. (While this is a noble idea, I'm afraid we have a long way to go before we have accomplished it – particularly in the area of sustainable consumption, but since this is not a sermon on ecology I won't pursue that here.)

Still, there are a number of writers who suggest that it is healthy for us to do more, that in fact it is important for us to forgive, make peace with, and even move into a process of spiritually healing those whose energy patterns still affect our lives even though they may have long since departed this earth.

Now before you go jumping to the conclusion that I've really gone around the bend this time, let me explain. It's a well-established understanding in therapeutic circles that there are major advantages to forgiving our parents for whatever transgressions, real or imagined, from which we experience ourselves as suffering. While they may benefit to some degree from this process, I know from personal experience that I was the major beneficiary of being able to use the gestalt technique of visualizing my parents as sitting in an empty chair and having those conversations with them that let me conclude the unfinished business that was impeding my life, long after it would have made any sense to have that conversation with the people they had become in their latter years.

The truth is that if we can't forgive, and give others credit for doing the best they could, given the dynamics of their lives, we can't get beyond our resentments. And if we can't get beyond our resentments, it is very difficult to move on unimpeded in our own lives. Resentments can be kept around for years and, if carefully bagged and sorted, can be trotted out on almost any occasion to justify what is wrong with a person or relationship, or to explain why we have difficulties in other relationships. What resentments never seem to do is aid in our lives working the way we want them to. Given this fact one of the most useful therapeutic exercises of which I know in any form of relationship work is one designed to facilitate the releasing of resentments.

Still, there is a whole other level of work that can be done in terms of making peace with our ancestors. In a chapter on Ancestral lineage healing in the book *Spirit Medicine*, Hank Wesselman writes:

“The energy body is a composite field derived from three sources – the energy of the mother, that of the father, and the energetic infusion from our personal over-soul. These three

fields are links of connection, in turn, with our ancestral past, and since energy never dies, we can't disconnect from those who've given life to us.

These fields record imprints of everything that happened within the lives of our ancestors. Lifetimes dominated by positive focus and good intentions produce lineages oriented toward positive action, personal growth, and accomplishment. In the same manner, negative goals or unsavory actions across many generations may result in imprints of abuse, illness, and misfortune. In the Eastern traditions, the creation of such patterns is called karma."

Wesselman continues: " Those ancestors who have crossed over most recently are the ones with whom we have the closest links, both biologically and spiritually. If a serious illness or severe life trauma was endured by one or more of these individuals, it's recorded within their energy system. And since they're only removed from us by a generation or two, those conditions may affect us, producing distortions in our own fields that can manifest as illness."

Hank goes on to describe a chronic soar throat he developed during his early fifties, at a time when his grandfather, with whom he had been quite close, had developed throat cancer. After months of seeking treatment through traditional western medicine, taking allergy pills, etc. all with no resolution to the symptoms, it occurred to him that his soar throat might be related to the disturbance in his energy field caused by his grandfather's cancer. When he pursued this avenue of healing through shamanic work using a technique developed for spiritual healing, he not only experienced relief from his own symptoms, he experienced "releasing" his grandfather's spirit from it's energy pattern as well.

Now there is no way I can cover the intricacies of this type of shamanic work in a sermon, and yet I think it is important to mention it because it helps expand our sense of what it may mean to "make peace with our ancestors."

Hank claims that: "Many indigenous groups, including the Taoists in northern China and Korea, know that the energy body can maintain its integration as a personal pattern long after death. They say that it takes approximately four generations, or up to a hundred years, for an ancestor's energy to completely detach from this world. It's also known that ancestors often feel a particular concern for their descendants, and they may remain in connection with them, serving as guides, protectors, and teachers."

If we accept that these perceptions are even possibly true, it gives us another powerful methodology for working with the patterns in our lives that otherwise may seem quite illusive.

Now I'll have to admit that a part of me reacts to this type of theory as being dangerously close to being in conflict with a major source of inspiration we claim as UUs "Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit."

Still, when I think about it, there is nothing illogical or unscientific about such ways of understanding the world. True, any type of spiritual healing is very difficult to prove scientifically, since duplicating the effects of the movement of spirit in a double blind experiment is virtually impossible. Nevertheless, the older I get, the more inclined I am to be open to the possibility that there are lots of things about which I just don't know.

One thing, however, I know for sure. In my own life, I have observed that I have needed to deal with certain energy patterns that I have definitely 'inherited' from my ancestors. Whether I conceive of these patterns as being the result of spirit energy, or as psychological scripts, or the influence of Jungian archetypes makes little difference.

However I conceive of this energy, making peace with my ancestral inheritance is vital, for it is only in the context of accepting – without blame or resentment – all of where I am today, that I am freed to be truly creative with my tomorrows.