



# *Soul Matters*

**November 2015**

*What Does It Mean To Be  
A People of Ancestry?*



## *What Does It Mean To Be A People of Ancestry?*

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, American writer**

Our faith agrees with Ellison: there is a difference between relatives and ancestors. Relatives give us our brown eyes and bowed legs; ancestors bless and burden us with a legacy. Relatives are those we tell stories about; ancestors call us to carry the story forward. Our relatives allowed us to be here; our ancestors tell us *why* we are here and why being here right now matters. The difference is huge. It is — as Ellison also points out — all about choosing to see yourself differently and live by a different set of values.

Take success. There's an old line that challenges the hubris of some people with privilege: "He was born on third base but believes that he hit a triple." People who choose to see their lives through the lens of ancestry constantly remind themselves how they really got there. Instead of talking with puffed up chests about how they hit a triple, you will hear them speak of "the shoulders on which I stand." Hubris or humility? Ancestors never let us forget the latter.

You will also hear ancestor-conscious people speak of blessings differently. People of ancestry look at their blessings and choose to see not only a gift, but also a responsibility. It's one thing to gratefully celebrate the blessings passed on to us; it's quite another to be so grateful for those blessings that we can't help but ensure they get passed on to others. Simply put, ancestors pass on obligations. To be a people of ancestry means recognizing that something of value has been entrusted to you and that there is a long line of people behind you counting on you to pass it on. Even *expecting* this of you.

And whether that expectation feels to you like a blessing or a burden, it most surely also reminds you that you are part of something larger. Ancestors don't simply tell you that you are obligated; they tell you that you are obligated *to something larger*. And not just that you are obligated to it, but that it is dependent *on you*. Whether the story continues to be told is up to you! Whether the family tradition continues to be done is up to you! Whether the native language continues to be taught to the children is up to you! Whether the family cycles of health are strengthened or the family cycles of dysfunction are stopped is up to you! Ancestors plop these incomplete and intimidating endeavors in our laps and say, "We've done our part and taken it as far as we can. The next step of the journey is in your hands."

Which of course also means that our hands are connected. They handed the precious gift to us. We are asked to hand it on to those who follow. And they will hopefully continue the sacred chain.

And in the end, maybe it all boils down to that: seeing ourselves as part of a sacred chain. We are not small. Our lives are not insignificant or independent. Our choices are not without consequence to others. We are part of a story, not just a set of random happenings. Our choices tell the next chapter. Our choices connect the next link. Our choices pass on that which is precious and remind us we are precious connected. This is what choosing to be a people of ancestry means. This is how it asks us to see our lives.

So, this month, let us all be grateful for those brown eyes, but choose to be part of the precious chain.

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## Option A: Bring it Back

Being a people of ancestry means passing on traditions. And it doesn't take much to notice that so many family traditions are in danger of extinction. The recipe that was required at every Thanksgiving but now no one bothers with. The outdated and supposedly tedious task of writing a handwritten letter. Passing on a family heirloom. Bedtime stories. Family game night. Marking the height of your kids on the kitchen doorway wall. Even sitting down at the dinner table to eat together. Slowly disappearing. Maybe even already gone.

This exercise simply asks you to bring one of them back. Here's your task, put simply: **Dust off an old, forgotten family tradition and protect it from extinction.**

For inspiration, you might want to check out one of these links:

- [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-to-the-letter-a-celebration-of-the-lost-art-of-letter-writing/2013/12/06/8f6608e0-5c71-11e3-95c2-13623eb2b0e1\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-to-the-letter-a-celebration-of-the-lost-art-of-letter-writing/2013/12/06/8f6608e0-5c71-11e3-95c2-13623eb2b0e1_story.html)
- <http://www.artofmanliness.com/2013/10/16/60-family-tradition-ideas/>

## Option B: Pass The Wisdom On

Traditions are important to pass on, but so is wisdom. And while you may not feel you possess ancestor-like wisdom, you do have useful lessons to share! You have learned a lot about life that will be useful to those who come after. And believe me, they are more open to it than you imagine. So don't be shy. Share your wisdom! It's as simple as that.

*Your assignment:*

**Find someone younger than yourself who you think has open ears and tell them something you've learned that you think might be useful to them. (And if that's too intimidating, then at least come to your group and share *what you would like the younger generations to know.*)**

*Essential Preparation:*

Watch this video as inspiration.

**How to Age Gracefully** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sycgL3Qg\\_Ak](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sycgL3Qg_Ak)

## Option C: The Ancestors Are Watching

Sometimes it's on our wall. Sometimes on the dresser or our desk. Many of them have been placed in a locket we wear around our neck. We are of course talking about pictures of ancestors, and placing them in prominent places so as not to forget that they are watching us. It's a habit that has fallen out of style. This

month bring it back. And in doing so, hear their voice, wisdom, comfort and call anew. Your instructions:

1. Find or print out a picture of a relative that was important to you or played a major role in your family's story. You might also pick a picture of your chosen ancestor (one that you've adopted by choice rather than given by blood) or a spiritual ancestor (a political or religious hero whose life inspires your own). The goal is to pick someone who you *want* to be looking down on you.
2. Place that picture in a prominent place for the entire month and take a brief moment to look at it at the beginning of each day.
3. Pay attention to how pulling their face, their story and "their stare" into your awareness alters your days.
4. Come to your group and share your experience.

### **Option D: When the Story Changed**

Being a people of ancestry sometimes means putting an end to what's been passed on. We are all working in one way or another to break family cycles of dysfunction. We also know that we are not the first to struggle with changing our ancestral storyline. This exercise invites you to honor this work that has gone before.

You can approach this from multiple angles:

- Identify a family member who you know has been central to the cycles of your family changing. Find a way to thank them and talk to them about what it was like for them.
- If you are a writer, make the time this month to journal or write a poem in honor of a family member who helped pass on a new storyline to you.
- Sit down with your child and tell them the story of the relative that gifted your family with "new ancestry."

### **Option E: Embracing All of Our Relations**

There is spiritual power in embracing the ancestors that inspire us, but there is spiritual necessity in embracing our ancestors who fell short. To fail to embrace the dark parts of our ancestral past is to set ourselves up for the inability to embrace (and move past) the dark parts of ourselves. This is sometimes called "shadow work" and this exercise asks us to do some of that work this month. Here are your instructions:

1. Set aside time to listen multiple times to the following song/meditation by the Native American women's acapella group, Ulali. Make sure you are centered and prepared to listen not only to the words but to the rhythmic beat that invites us to connect to the larger "heartbeat" of which we are a part. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBeCixbql\\_c&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBeCixbql_c&feature=youtu.be)
2. Pay particular attention to the phrases that focus on those ancestors who have fallen short, caused pain and continue to perpetuate harm.
3. Let this focus on these difficult-to-embrace ancestors bring to mind the ancestors in your own life that you would prefer to "disown."

4. From there decide what your own personal work is. Is there room for a new perspective on them and their actions? For their sake or for yours? What does “embrace them” mean to you? What might be your way of embracing them authentically?
5. Come to your group ready to share the invitation you heard in the song and how you responded to that invitation.

# Your Question

*As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what ancestry means, but to figure out what being a person of ancestry means for you today.*

1. Would your ancestors be proud?
2. How are your ancestors speaking today? Are you making the time to listen?
3. Is it time to question the ancestors' wisdom?
4. Is it time to tell the ancestors' secrets?
5. Have you passed on what the ancestors entrusted you with?
6. What wisdom of the elders did you ignore at your peril? Are you sure you can't start over and try to follow it anew?
7. It is true that you are burdened by an ancestry that you can't control or change? Are you using your ancestry as an excuse?
8. Have you found your favorite UU ancestor? Do you know whose shoulders you stand on? Have you decided whose legacy you want to help live on? For help see: <http://www.famousuus.com>; <http://www.uuca.org/sermons/historical-montage-of-unitarian-ancestors-by-uuca-lay-ministers/>
9. What happened to that tradition you so loved as a kid? Why did you let it go? Are you sure there is no way to creatively bring it back?
10. How does Thanksgiving need to change this year? What ritual or tradition needs brought back? What needs to go?
11. And while we are on Thanksgiving, *who* needs to go? Is it finally time to assert some say over who you are sitting with this year?
12. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

# Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a people of ancestry*.

## Ancestry

**Definition:** family predecessors; persons comprising a line of lineage

**Synonyms:** heritage; descendants; genealogy; origin

## Wise Words

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**

To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you had to be extremely — make that miraculously — fortunate in your personal ancestry. Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth’s mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forebearers on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life’s quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result — eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly — in you.

— **Bill Bryson**

The very air surrounding us and moving the flame is the air our Ancestors were breathing. There is no other.

— **Mi-Shell Jessen**

We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies.

— **Shirley Abbott**

We are a continuum. Just as we reach back to our ancestors for our fundamental values, so we, as guardians of that legacy, must reach ahead to our children and their children. And we do so with a sense of sacredness in that reaching.

— **Paul Tsongas**

Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes—our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking around.

— **G. K. Chesterton**

“Donna Laura”

a poem by by **Maria Mazziotti Gillan**

<http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/index.php?date=2008/01/04>

“It is that time and place” by **Qiyamah Rahman**, from *Becoming: A Spiritual Guide for Navigating Adulthood*, a UU Skinner House publication:

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/poetry/it-time-and-place>

### **They Are With Us Still**

In the -struggles we choose for ourselves,  
in the ways we move forward in our lives  
and bring our world forward with us,

It is right to remember the names of those  
who gave us strength in this choice of living.  
It is right to name the power of hard lives well-  
lived.

We share a history with those lives.  
We belong to the same motion.

They too were strengthened by what had gone  
before.  
They too were drawn on by the vision of what  
might come to be.

Those who lived before us,  
who struggled for justice and suffered injustice  
before us,  
have not melted into the dust,  
and have not disappeared.

They are with us still.  
The lives they lived hold us steady.

Their words remind us and call us back to  
ourselves.  
Their courage and love evoke our own.

We, the living, carry them with us:  
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

We take them with us,  
and with them choose the deeper path of living.

— **Kathleen McTigue**

### **Shards of Light**

Nowhere on this planet  
Where people have built  
Shrines, temples, mosques  
Or stood to pray (in groves or on mountaintops)  
Ever loses the spirit.  
Prayers do not disintegrate,  
Their power,  
To all aware,  
Is always available.

Prayers fall on us or  
Rise up through archeological debris.  
No place is free of them.  
And we in turn are free to absorb them --  
Not their tenets,  
Not their rules,  
Not the evil that may have lurked around the  
edges  
But the spirit --  
The shards of light.  
We are responsible for transmitting that light,  
Moving it through the universe,  
Giving it to each other.

— **Mim Neal, writer, poet & Soul Matters  
member**

### **Spiritual History**

Let my body remember.  
Let my hands and feet remember.  
Let my breath remember  
those who have come before me,  
those who have come before us.  
Didn't Muhammad wait quietly in his cave?  
And didn't Jesus sigh silently by the blue lake?  
And Guan Yin, didn't she sit in silence  
thinking about what to do before doing it?  
And what was Siddhartha the Buddha doing  
anyway under that tree if not just sitting quietly?  
And Susan B. Anthony, didn't she push back  
from her desk, and take a breath now and then?  
And Florence Nightingale, didn't she  
put down her nurse's hat  
and think silently about what to write  
in her essay on mysticism before she actually  
wrote it?  
And Sophia Fahs, didn't she stop telling  
stories sometimes and just sit there?  
And didn't Black Elk just notice the sunlight  
glancing off his chair sometimes?  
And Starhawk, does she only talk and write, or  
does she too keep silence?  
Let us remember them all with our bodies.  
Let us remember them with the silence  
they too knew.

— **Mark Belletini**



## Videos & Online

*Seeds of Our Ancestors, Seeds of Life* by Winona LaDuke

TED talk about “food as our ancestor and as the link to our ancestors.” A talk about ancestor relationships, sustainable development, renewable energy and food systems.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHNlel72eQc>

**“Ancestors & Angels” by spoken word poet and activist Drew Dellinger**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLUHC-m2kfs>

**How It All Began**

“TED speakers explore our origins as a species — who we are, where we come from, where we're headed — and how we're connected to everything that came before us.”

<http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/?showDate=2015-10-09>

## Articles

**“What They Dreamed Be Ours To Do”**

A reflection by the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker about the covenants we inherit as UUs

<http://www.uua.org/ga/past/1998/123808.shtml>

**A new species of human kin is discovered:**

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/fossils-found-in-african-cave-are-new-species-of-human-kin-say-scientists/2015/09/09/b9b4dbec-56f7-11e5-abe9-27d53f250b11\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/fossils-found-in-african-cave-are-new-species-of-human-kin-say-scientists/2015/09/09/b9b4dbec-56f7-11e5-abe9-27d53f250b11_story.html)

**“Who Apes Whom”**

About the way we tend to understand our relation to our evolutionary ancestors:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/15/opinion/who-apes-whom.html>

**“Our Ancestors”**

A worship service and sermon by the Rev. Keith Kron

<http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/20135.shtml>

## Movies & Television

*The Descendants*

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/reviews/view/21868/the-descendants>

Native islander Matt King (George Clooney) lives with his family in Hawaii. Their world shatters when a tragic accident leaves his wife in a coma. Not only must Matt struggle with the stipulation in his wife's will that she be allowed to die with dignity, but he also faces pressure from relatives to sell their family's enormous land trust.

*Finding Your Roots*

**PBS Series**

<http://video.pbs.org/program/finding-your-roots/>

Each episode of this series “journeys deep into the ancestry of a group of remarkable individuals ... bound together by an intimate, sometimes hidden link.” The show “treks through layers of ancestral history, uncovers secrets and surprises ... and shares life-altering discoveries.”

*Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*

<http://www.tracesofthetrade.org/>

In this documentary, filmmaker Katrina Browne “discovers that her New England ancestors were the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. She and nine cousins retrace the Triangle Trade and gain powerful new perspectives on the black/white divide.” As the film progresses, Browne and her family “come closer to the core: their love/hate relationship with their own Yankee culture and privileges; the healing and transformation needed not only ‘out there,’ but inside themselves.”

## Songs

**“Listen to the Voices”** by Holly Near with Emma’s Revolution

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAWKXIV0tvU>

“All My Relations” by Ulali  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBeCixbqlc&feature=youtu.be>

“We Will” by Ann Reed  
Commissioned by the First Universalist Church of Minneapolis for their 150th anniversary. The lyrics state that “All the souls who came before are standing here,” asking us to “hear them whisper low”; their message is “We will walk with you.”

Listen to the song here:  
<http://www.jango.com/music/Ann+Reed> (scroll down to "We Will")  
Purchase the song on Amazon:  
[http://www.amazon.com/We-Will/dp/B0039W9Z6G/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1444519596&sr=8-1&keywords=ann+reed+we+will](http://www.amazon.com/We-Will/dp/B0039W9Z6G/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1444519596&sr=8-1&keywords=ann+reed+we+will)

“Rank by Rank Again We Stand”  
#358 in Singing the Living Tradition

## Books

*Between the World and Me*  
by Ta-Nehisi Coates

*from the book review:* Americans have built an empire on the idea of “race,” a falsehood that damages us all but falls most heavily on the bodies of black women and men—bodies exploited through slavery and segregation, and, today, threatened, locked up, and murdered out of all proportion. What is it like to inhabit [*and inherit*] a black body and find a way to live within it? And how can we all honestly reckon with this fraught history?  
[https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25147754-between-the-world-and-me?utm\\_campaign=new\\_friend\\_updates\\_email&utm\\_content=agg\\_cover&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=friend\\_updates](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/25147754-between-the-world-and-me?utm_campaign=new_friend_updates_email&utm_content=agg_cover&utm_medium=email&utm_source=friend_updates)

*Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory, and Faith*

by Heidi B. Neumark  
*from the book review:* [This memoir] challenges readers to explore their own [inherited] identity, vocation, and theology. Neumark boldly calls

readers to explore the harsh places of the past, uncover the possible buried secrets,...and discover new hope for transformation that is only possible when what has been hidden is finally brought to light.

[http://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Inheritance-Family-Secrets-Memory/dp/1630881244/ref=pd\\_sim\\_14\\_30?ie=UTF8&refRID=0GWN069TPBXFQ02W8NZ2](http://www.amazon.com/Hidden-Inheritance-Family-Secrets-Memory/dp/1630881244/ref=pd_sim_14_30?ie=UTF8&refRID=0GWN069TPBXFQ02W8NZ2)

*Forever Fingerprints: An Amazing Discovery for Adopted Children*

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1849057788?colid=P4BOVKVUJLY3&coliid=I10ZKSJWYSYWG3&ref=wl\\_it\\_dp\\_v\\_S\\_ttl](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1849057788?colid=P4BOVKVUJLY3&coliid=I10ZKSJWYSYWG3&ref=wl_it_dp_v_S_ttl)

A book for adopted children that speaks to the complexities of ancestry when one doesn't know who their genetic ancestors are.

*The Spiritual Practice of Remembering*  
By Margaret Bendroth

*from the book review:* [The author] argues that remembering must become a regular spiritual practice, part of the rhythm of our daily lives as we recognize our world to be, in many ways, a gift from others who have gone before.

[http://www.amazon.com/Spiritual-Practice-Remembering-Margaret-Bendroth/dp/0802868975/ref=sr\\_1\\_sc\\_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1444524538&sr=1-1-spell&keywords=the+spiritual+practice+of+remembering](http://www.amazon.com/Spiritual-Practice-Remembering-Margaret-Bendroth/dp/0802868975/ref=sr_1_sc_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1444524538&sr=1-1-spell&keywords=the+spiritual+practice+of+remembering)

*Deep Ancestry: Inside The Genographic Project*

*The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey*  
Two books by Spencer Wells

*Older than the Stars*

by Karen C. Fox and Nancy Davis  
<http://www.amazon.com/Older-than-The-Stars-Karen/dp/1570917884>

A children's book that “tells the story of the cosmic connections that tie human beings to the beginning of the universe.”

**Past UU Common Read Books related to race, class and ancestry:**

2014-15: [Reclaiming Prophetic Witness](#)

2013-14: [Behind the Kitchen Door](#)

2012-13: [The New Jim Crow](#)

2011-12: [Acts of Faith](#)

2010-11: [The Death of Josseline](#)

**List of books for children and families:**

[https://www.amazon.com/registry/wishlist/P4B0VKVUJLY3/ref=cm\\_sw\\_r\\_ip\\_wl\\_o\\_m2Dfwb6MTAMN2](https://www.amazon.com/registry/wishlist/P4B0VKVUJLY3/ref=cm_sw_r_ip_wl_o_m2Dfwb6MTAMN2)

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