

Honoring Our Ancestors



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Altars, places to honor our ancestors along with displays of that which we experience as sacred, were never part of my upbringing. I didn't start having an altar until well into my adulthood. A central part of my home altar is my connection to the ancestors. My ancestors include family and friends who died and some becoming ancestors too soon on their life path.

Our connection to those who lived before us can be deep and profound if we invite their memories into our lives. Not only their memories, but what they worked for and how they lived.

Those of us who hold identities that have been the target of oppression know that our ancestors faced hardships we may never fully understand intellectually, but we carry the memory in our bodies.

As a woman born in Egypt and raised a strict Muslim in the United States, I have had to face challenges that include anti-immigrant sentiments when I was a child from those here in the United States, and in Egypt I was faced with misogyny and strict rules of conduct because of my family's interpretation of the faith. I often felt stifled as a child and

teenager, rules imposed on me did not apply to my male cousins of the same age. I was angry at the unfairness of it and I finally left the faith in my early twenties.

I connect most closely with my female ancestors, especially my two grandmothers. I knew my maternal grandmother, Labiba (her first name) and I adored her. She was feisty, gregarious and honest to a fault. I am grateful that I remember my maternal grandparents. My grandfather Abdelgawed (his first name), was more of a quiet introvert, who was kind and generous. I have a picture of both my grandparents on my altar.

My paternal grandmother is my namesake, Aisha. By all accounts she was the life of the party, a vivacious, generous and welcoming soul. She died when I was young and I don't have any memories of her. I was born in Egypt and spent my first year of life living with her in Alexandria.

There is a picture of me as an infant on her lap and it is the only picture I know of with the two of us together.

I will never know what my grandmothers had to endure as Muslim females who were mandated into behaving a certain way in order not to be ostracized. They made the best of their circumstances, that I do

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Quest

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*"The songs of
our ancestors
are also the
songs of our
children."*

PHILIP CARR-GOMM

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Aisha Hauser

ANCESTORS

Multiple authors

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Gary

"THERE ONCE WAS A CHILD"

Sarai Rose

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ANCESTORS

What is your relationship with your ancestors like? What shapes that relationship for you?

SHAWN

CLF member, incarcerated in PA

My relationship with my ancestors is very, very important. I have relationships with them just like you would with your living relations. Because, as I see it, they are just as alive as our relations, they are just on another plane of existence, yet here with us. They are around you all the time. You just may not be able to see them. Some of us can.

Ancestor worship is important to Wiccans, Druids and Native Americans. The Japanese also have ancestor worship. You can learn from them because they lived in another time and/or place. You can talk to them and worship them. Revere them. They still shape our lives as they did in the past. They flow through our veins. So it is very important to have a relationship with them. I learn from them as I would with my living relations. We have remnants of them in our Megalithic structures. ■

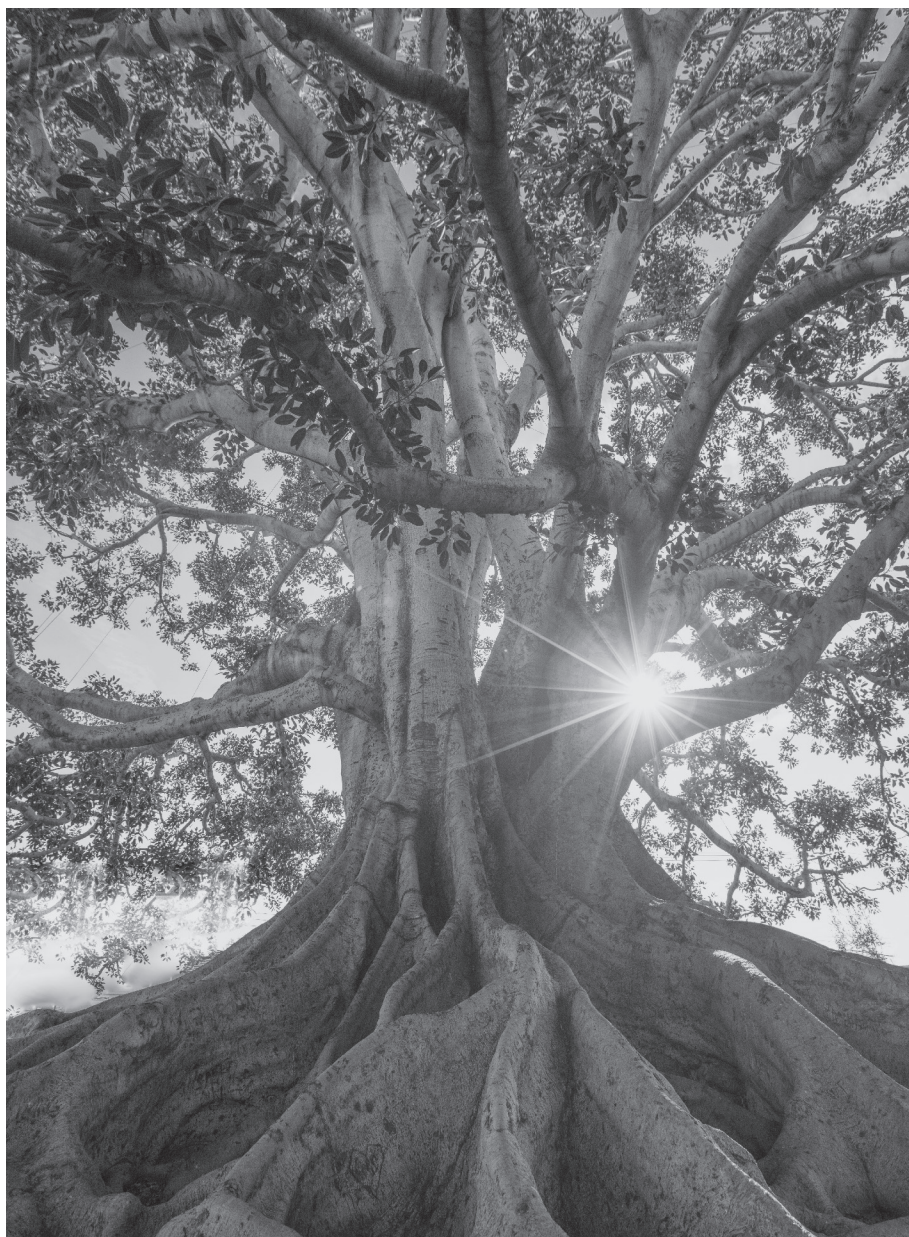


PHOTO BY JEREMY BISHOP ON UNSPLASH

GARY

CLF member, incarcerated in NC

Growing up in the South during the 1960s was tumultuous but also a time of tremendous change. Coming from Quaker ancestry, my forebears were active in the Underground Railroad at what is now Guilford College, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Heritage means many things. Just as each individual is unique but also complex, so too is one's ancestry. ■

JACOB

CLF member incarcerated in AR

My relationship with my ancestors is definitely not what I want it to be. I have barely explored it and feel like I am ignoring parts of their sacrifices and wisdom. I know some of my father's side but have not been in the situation where I have been able to explore my Cherokee ancestry. My great grandmother Easter Sunrise dropped off the Trail of Tears in Missouri. I do not know much of anything about my mother's side of things. Who are her ancestors? Due to all of this I have decided to start trying to learn more of both sides. I truly want to know where I came from, where my ancestors' beliefs came from and what shaped them. ■

Kudzu

GARY

CLF member, incarcerated in NC

I am from persimmons,
from Karo syrup, and grits.
I am from the front porch,
wide, long, cool in the Southern heat.
I am from magnolias,
whose fragrance is the quintessential South.
I am from Sunday dinners and blue eyes,
from Joseph and Kathleen.
I am from the stiff upper lip,
from seen and not heard.
I am from back row Methodism.
I am from Glenwood and Randolph,
Guilford and Shropshire,
the Queen Anne II,
Icebox fruitcake, fried chicken,
homemade cream puffs.
I am from the Christmas ornaments
made of cardboard and glitter
that Pop bought during World War II
when metal and glass went to fight Hitler,
carefully preserved, precious, rare.
I am from Grandma's tea set, fragile,
tea pouring from a dragon's mouth,
Sitting out of reach upon the sideboard,
teaching me to value heritage, tradition,
family.

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know given how generous of spirit they were and how I heard stories of their antics.

My grandmothers are the reason I am alive, they suggested to my parents that they marry each other. They were friends and loved to laugh with each other, host parties and socialize.

I think of them often with the knowledge that I am living the life they didn't know was possible for a female. I am independent, a faith leader and working for liberation of all. I am my ancestors' wildest dreams. ■



PHOTO BY ANNE NYGÅRD ON UNSPLASH

“There once was a child”

SARAI ROSE

CLF member, incarcerated in NC

There once was a child who found herself standin'
at the edge of time, life she thought—could be so cold and cruel;
but then there were brief moments when it could be so
sublime.

One day, standing in the midst of silence, alone, with
nothing but her own thoughts; back to her youthful and nice
dreams and wishes,
far out upon life's dark horizon she sat sifting through
yesterday's painful, cold gray ashes.

Soon she found herself quickly slipping and sliding along life's
bloody ledge, and in her worn and tattered heart, she made
a silent pledge.

No matter what she vowed; the coming moments or days
might bring, there'd be no surrender, with her all—she'd
stand and fight.

She knew deep within, that this journey and all that might
come along its long and winding roads, the sorrow and pain,
smiles and laughter, like a rose growing among the thorns,
this was her own tempering plight.

She had her moments of doubt and pain,
grueling moments, some so bleak, she thought herself on
the edge of time's continuum, only a heartbeat away from
going insane.

The days passin' ever so rapidly, so chaotic, life becoming
nothing more than a blur, darkness creeping in until she
finds herself slipping into an emotional manhole; empty
shadows black as night.

“There once was a child”, continued on page 5

"There once was a child", continued from page 4

Often she has found herself sitting in the heart of despair, cold
and numb, quite dead inside,

from the hungry ghost there is nowhere to hide, while she
realizes that in her demise, there'd be no one to truly care.

Within her bleeding and nice heart, there are many scars,
wounds left by those who sought to use and abuse without
remorse—the weak and naive, demons descended from the
fallen stars.

She knows not what tomorrow might bring, nor if she'll yet
witness another precious sunrise, and thus within her heart
she begins her silent goodbyes.

The weight of the world rests upon her shoulders; feeling
as if she were a daughter of Atlas, yet surrender she'll
never do, she finds her courage to cling to an inner and
mysterious faith.

She holds tightly to the voices of her ancestors; that should
she endure until the end, very trial and battle, that come
the 'morrow—
She'd be freed of her deep sorrow.

For the sun's wondrous and golden rays, shall pull her from
the depths of hell's dark and suffocating manhole, freeing
her from yesterday's haunting wraith.

As heaven's glorious and miraculous light filters into her heart,
washing her clean, and re-newing from the depths of her
grieving soul. She's refilled with a love so unconditional, a
love far beyond human comprehension, a love she knows
will never depart.

Through the windows of her soul has the Divine poured forth
a cup of his own pure love, and within this infant's curious
and seeking eyes— burns true hope and assurance given
from above.



PHOTO BY MARK OLSEN ON UNSPLASH

Samhain (Learning to Hold Ancestors Close)



ROSE GALLOGLY

*Publications Coordinator,
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Fellowship*

This piece was originally written and shared in October 2021 at my brick-and-mortar congregation, Theodore Parker UU Church.

In the almost seven months since my beloved mother's death, I have needed to learn the world all over again.

Every seasonal shift, every holiday and tradition lands differently now; every detail of the world exists only in relationship with my grief.

When Halloween decorations started cropping up around my neighborhood this month, I realized that I was seeing the fake skeletons, ghosts, and gravestones — all of these casual references to death — entirely differently. It's not exactly that I've minded that images of death on display around me, but more that I felt their irony in a new way. Halloween might be the closest this culture comes to having a holiday where death is on the surface, honored in some way, but even saying that is a stretch — this is a season of surface-level nods to death, with little space for holding its reality.

I don't fault Halloween itself for this, nor do I begrudge my neighbors and the plastic gravestones on their lawn. The denial of death and grief in this culture is so much bigger than any one holiday. Modern Western culture,

particularly white, mainstream Christian culture, sees life as an onwards and upward trajectory, and grief as a hard but brief, quiet, private time to get through. Even in this time of pandemic, in the mass death event we are all living through, dominant culture urges us to move ever forward, ever more quickly back to 'normal' — with little to no mention of our need to mourn the beloved people and things we have lost.

I've been feeling the irony of how we (sort of) (a little bit) reference death around Halloween particularly strongly, because the roots of this holiday offer something very different. Our modern Halloween has its roots in the cultural tradition of many of my ancestors: the ancient pre-Christian Irish/Celtic festival of Samhain (pronounced Sow-en), and its Christian equivalent of All Hallow's Eve.

I've been interested in the culture and spiritual traditions of my ancestors for a long time; I see it as part of my responsibility as a white person to try to understand who my people were before we were considered white, and how the processes of colonization and assimilation brought us here. And now, as I try to process my grief, my interest in ancestral practice feels more like a longing, a need to be connected to a deeper sense of time, lineage, and culture.

So I've been exploring what is known about the spiritual traditions of my

ancestors, including this ancient festival of Samhain, and trying to see what in those traditions might serve as antidotes for all that modern white culture lacks, particularly in relation to holding death and grief.

Samhain is known as one of the cross-quarter days in the Celtic wheel of the year, the approximate midpoint between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. It was a feast day, a festival to mark the end of the harvest season and welcome in winter's darkness. The always-fluid boundary between the worlds — meaning the world of the living and the otherworld, where ancestors and other spirits dwell — was thought to be particularly porous around Samhain and the other seasonal festivals, like spring's Beltaine; all times of great transition and liminality.

In contemporary pagan practice, Samhain is often referenced as a holiday about ancestors, a day to honor our beloved dead and perhaps feel closer to them than at other times. But much of my research suggests that seeing this as the one day to connect with beloved dead is more of a modern way of understanding the festival. Within the Celtic culture and worldview, ancestors were always present in daily life, and most major festivals honored and celebrated them in some way. Samhain has come

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to have a particular association with the dead simply because it marked the entry point into the winter, into the dark part of the year — and that whole season brought with it both a closeness to death, and more regular, ritual honoring of beloved ancestors.

I want to step back for a moment, and sit with that a bit more. Particularly if you are someone who knows and carries with you any kind of close loss — can you imagine how different it might feel to live within a culture where your beloved dead were held closely by your whole community at every holiday, and even particularly for a whole season of the year? A culture in which it was normal to

speak their names, leave offerings for them, hold feasts in their honor, regardless of how long it was from their year of death?

Ancient Irish culture is, of course, far from the only culture to have practices of ancestor veneration, and to have holidays that honor the dead. I'm sure, actually, that in every one of our lineages, as close as in this generation or thousands of years back, we could all find traditions with deeply similar themes — because, of course, death is universal, and the need to honor it and tend to our grief is perhaps the most basic human need.

This is something I keep coming back to: these ancient cultural traditions of ancestor connection and honoring all come from the same universal

human need to keep our loved ones close, especially when we are separated from them by death. Those traditions are now largely absent from our dominant culture — but the need for them has not gone away. Death is just as much of a reality in our lives now, it is simply less acknowledged; grief is just as present, it just less collectively held.

What would it look like for us now, in this tradition we are co-creating, to hold and honor our beloved dead together? Not just on this holiday, or even just this season, but all of the time? Informed by ancient practices or by simple human need, how can we begin, in whatever small way, to un-learn the death-denying norms of modern culture and embrace our ancestors once again? ■

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.

**Do these reflections on ancestors resonate with you, or do you feel differently?
Do you try to hold your ancestors close or at a distance?**

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include "You have permission to edit and publish my words" somewhere on your submission.



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