

# *Dreaming with the Ancestors*

Karen Jaenke

*The question is, "Who are you?" This is the first step in entering the indigenous holistic mind. No elder or ceremony can continue until one is able to answer this question. Knowledge is considered to be a living entity. We ask permission to enter Her and we must be able to specify our name, nation, clan, and have a clear question or reason for wanting to enter!*

**F**or many traditional people, an ongoing, vital relationship to their ancestors, extending as generations, forms a central anchor for personal identity. This sense

of family and self extends well beyond the modern nuclear family into a multi-generational awareness of connections, patterns, and stories woven into their relationship with land and cosmos. This sense of multigenerational influence and

awareness is captured in various indigenous traditions. The continuing influence of people's ancestors is negatively conveyed in the Hebrew scriptures, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth gener-

ation.”<sup>2</sup> The interdependence between generations is also conveyed in the familiar teaching among many Native Americans that, in significant matters of decision making, the present generation give consideration to seven generations past and seven generations forward. Ideally, familial or clan awareness reaches across these directions, encompassing a total of fifteen generations and bestowing a wide sense of a person’s place and obligations through time. This cache of familial stories also offers resources for meeting the challenges of the present, providing sources of healing, insight, guidance, and wisdom.

Knowing these multigenerational stories allows one to see their life patterns in an expanded context. These ancestral stories offer a perspective that helps one to recognize both positive resources as well as dysfunctional patterns bequeathed from the past that otherwise operate unconsciously. Bringing formative events of striking intensity from the family’s past into conscious awareness introduces layers of meaning into the deeper origins of present patterns, which is the first step toward a healing resolution.

### ***Sacred intention and sacred action toward the ancestors***

Through my work with dreams and contact with native elders, I learned that familial stories could be recovered from the mists. The process of ancestral remembrance occurs through sacred intention and action. Sacred intentions can be expressed in both waking and dreaming states. People manifest their intentions to remember and honor ancestors through revered actions, which may include collecting family stories from the living and undertaking genealogical research of the deceased by gathering

familial and public records. Inviting one’s elders to tell stories handed down from his or her ancestors can create a rich oral family history. Formative stories comprise a family mythology, preserving salient memories of significant events that reverberate through generations. Similarly, genealogical research uncovers factual information such as the names of forgotten ancestors, places, and dates that outline major movements in the family, forming a basic framework on which to attach stories passed down through oral tradition. This factual base acquired through genealogical research and oral family history provides a context and framework for grasping the more numinous and direct encounters with the ancestors that appear in dreams.

Remembering the ancestors through dreaming is fortified by these waking intentions and actions, expressed both as an act of surrender and an expression of longing. Surrender entails entering the emptiness of not knowing one’s ancestors, whereas longing emerges from the alienation and hollowness of an individualistic existence disconnected from one’s heritage. An honest and humbling reckoning with one’s loss of connection with his or her ancestors and the accompanying alienation creates an opening. A sacrifice of false independence and hubris is a necessary prelude to the ancestor’s appearance.

Malidoma Some raises the question about what intention the ancestors hold toward their living descendents: “When we set our intentions and make appropriate gestures and sacrifices to remember the ancestors, especially the significant events and stories of their lives, what intention might we imagine the ancestors are holding toward us, the living?”<sup>3</sup> He describes the intentions of the ancestors toward the living as,

When people die . . . their spirits, living on in the Other World, remember clearly the experience of walking on the earth. They remember the moments when they contributed to greater good and helped to make the world better. But they also remember with great remorse the failed adventures and the gestures that harmed others and made the world a less dignifying place. The more they see this the more they ache and . . . [are eager] to turn their attention to helping those still in this world. To be active in this world, however, spirits need to enlist our cooperation and help.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The gifts of ancestral dreams***

Ancestral dreams remember and honor ancestors in multiple ways. (1) They help reestablish familial relationships severed by death, transcending the veil between the worlds and mending and extending our connection with the past. Such dreams serve primarily as a bridge, linking this world with the other world. (2) Ancestral dreams may heal specific “places of break” within multi-generational family systems. They address tragedies and traumas suffered by our ancestors that continue to play out in subsequent generations. (3) These dreams can revitalize and illuminate the dreamer, connecting him or her more consciously to the current of energy from which they descended—a current that is potent, continuous, and alive. (4) Dreams of living relatives can prepare one to accompany their elders through major life events, particularly the transition through death to the other world.

Examples of each of these four types of ancestral dreams follow. By sharing my own dreams, I show how opening to and honoring ancestral dreams heals wounds within the family and the dreamer and develops a living, embodied connection to one’s ancestors and the expansive realm that the ancestors inhabit.

### ***A bridge to the other side***

Contact with ancestors on the other side shifts both perceptions and fears of the finality of death and the isolation of individual existence. Dreams of ancestors revitalize their presence and memory, reminding their descendents of the wider stream of existence from which their lives arise. Such dreams bestow a metaperspective on time, serving as a reset button that resituates people’s lives within a wider time-space continuum that extends beyond their birth and death. They awaken one to an invisible realm populated by those who have died, allowing glimpses into a vast invisible web extending through time in which one’s life participates.

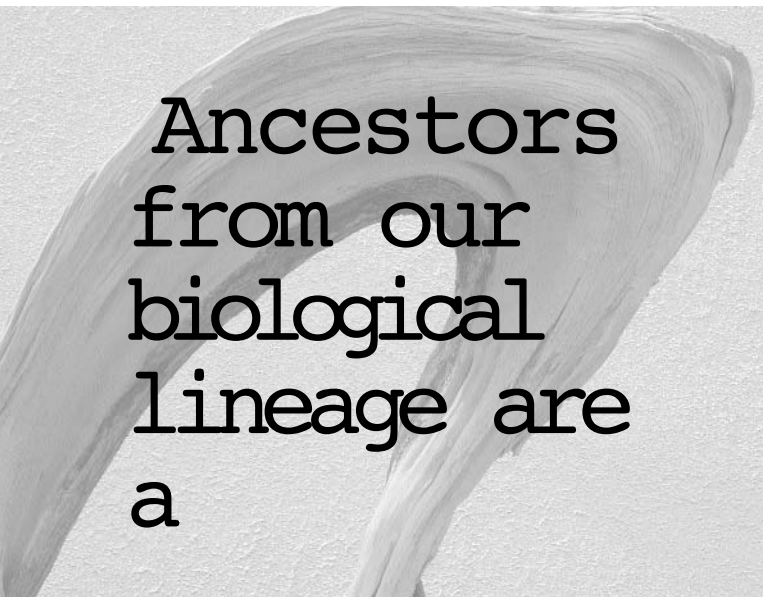
In the expanded field of ancestral dreams, time becomes malleable; one enters a time-space continuum that is fluid and vast, travels with lightning speed, experiences moments from the

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past or future, and fusion of the past and present or present and future, when new, creative possibilities arise and unfold. In this fluid continuum, old patterns transform in healing directions, setting new templates in the psyche that can then be ritualized and enacted in the everyday, visible world. Such present time enactments release wounds and limitations embedded in our ancestral lineage.



# Ancestors from our biological lineage are a

## ***Bridging the two worlds: My paternal grandmother***

According to Apela Colorado, ancestors from our biological lineage are a primary bridge to the other world. The following dream of my paternal grandmother illuminates both the bridging and healing aspects of ancestral dreams. At the time of the dream, my paternal grandmother was the only ancestor I knew who had crossed to the other side.

My paternal grandmother was born on the first day of spring in 1898 and appropriately named “Flora.” She grew up in a German-American family where the memory of the motherland was still relatively fresh and German was spoken in the household. During my childhood, a German word would occasionally spill from her lips; in those intriguing moments I heard an echo of a past that simultaneously eluded me.

My grandmother died in a degenerated condition, after a progressive mental decline lasting fifteen years in

which she lost all memory and use of language. Toward the end of her life she babbled in mysterious syllables like a child just learning to speak, and then she lost her capacity for speech entirely. Bereft of any faculty or impulse to communicate, she slipped deeper inside the dark, isolated dungeon of her body, remaining in this state for several years before her death.

These formidable, impressionable memories unsettled my adolescent world. Witnessing her aging process was excruciating because people so often commented on my physical likeness to her, which I feared would foreshadow a similar future. There was something terrible and inexplicable in her slow, almost cruel, deterioration. I did not receive much help from my family in making sense of it. It was anguishing to see

my father witnessing his mother’s loss of critical faculties, which seemed to mock her humanity. Her decline became a nearly unspeakable topic in our house. She died December 2, 1986.

On December 1, 1996, my Grandma Jaenke visited me in a vivid dream, healing years of painful memories and heartache. She came to me not only alive but with all her vital faculties restored. In her prime, poised at full maturity, and vitally alive, the dream is an apparition of her revitalized presence.

This simple dream spoke strongly to me. Although I encountered her in several dreams since her death, the emphasis was never so unequivocally on the restoration of her faculties and vitality. It urged me to envision her on the other side as a lively and whole being in the prime of life, not in her final deteriorated condition. In a single instant, the dream healed not only the travesty of her final years but also my memory of them. It showed that movement toward wholeness could continue on the other side. Reassuring me of her well-being

after death, it indicated the presence of some mysterious regenerative source.

The day following this dream, I found myself sharing it with an acquaintance. As I started to recount the background around my grandmother’s death, I recalled that she had died on December 2, 1986, and my dream was precisely on the eve of the tenth anniversary of her death. As that stunning realization passed through me, I suddenly entered an expansive timelessness, subsumed by the greater mystery of the dream. Recognizing the dream’s synchronistic appearance on the tenth anniversary of her death, I could not disavow a distinct impression of intentionality behind the dream, an intelligent source responsible for orchestrating its precise and meaningful timing. The dream then transfigured into a visitation.

In some old cultures, including Jewish and Native American traditions, the anniversary of the death of our ancestors is an auspicious time. Each year, on the anniversary of their passing, our ancestors on the other side come closer to this world. The veil between the two worlds becomes more permeable and their presence more accessible. The dream manifested the veracity of this ancient understanding.

Several weeks later, I shared the dream with my father, mother, and maternal grandmother. Hearing the story and its exact timing on the tenth anniversary made an impression on my family, especially my father, and drew my grandmother’s presence into the room, inviting other memories and stories of her life. My father disclosed that my grandmother had an abiding interest in psychic matters and frequently spoke of her dreams. My father and grandfather, favoring the rational mind, often teased and chided her for taking her dreams seriously.

For the first time I clearly saw the lines of psychic inheritance to which I was attached. I was awed and overjoyed to learn of my grandmother’s interest in her dreams, understanding in a new way that, across generations, her affinity and fascination with dreams had been passed to me, along with physical resemblance. Psychic and spiritual matters irresistibly captivated both my Grandma Jaenke and me.

From my maternal grandmother, I learned that my Grandma Jaenke had a special affinity for me, "I'm not surprised Grandma Jaenke came in your dream. You were her favorite." These words confirmed that my paternal grandmother and I shared a similar imprint across generations, appearing at our successive places in the stream of the family line.

With my curiosity piqued, I urged my dad to tell me more about my grandmother's dreams. He recalled two. In one, she dreamed of Katherine Trost, my great-grandmother. Similar to mine, it was a simple dream of her presence; her face or bust appeared in a vivid flash in the middle of the night. The next morning my grandmother learned that my great-grandmother had died at 2 A.M.

By talking about ancestral dreams with family members, further connections with dream material, as well as intergenerational links between dreamers in a lineage, are revealed. At the anniversary of her death, I dreamt of my paternal grandmother, who before me dreamt of my paternal great-grandmother on the advent of her death. This discovery wove me into a lineage of women dreamers. In this way, dreams bridge generations. Connecting this world and the next, they serve as an umbilical cord to the ancestors.

### ***Healing breaks and places of generational stress***

By realizing that relatives live on in death and that it is possible to bridge to the other side, one can receive an ancestral presence and healing influence. Family members have bonds that transcend death. The living and dead are connected and continue to influence one another through an invisible world.

Family members are related at the level of the soul. Energy from the past that is blocked or unexpressed within a family system affects people in the present. Discovering where breaks occurred in their family and attending to them, people mend the past while stepping into greater wholeness in the present. Additionally, completing the unfinished work of prior generations is a primary means of expressing love for the ancestors, helping them complete the work that was not possible in their lifetimes. People's lives become whole

when they complete unfinished threads from past generations.

Ancestral dreams help us increase the flow of love and energy in family systems at stressful points of difficulty and tragedy.<sup>5</sup> These difficulties can include a family's inability to accept all its members, as well as sudden, traumatic, or violent breaks that disrupt the flow of life.

From the perspective of the ancestral soul, everyone in a family has a right to belong. Every person has a place and purpose within the family and culture. Within the ancestral soul each person born into that family—whole or maimed, conforming or not—has the birthright of belonging. When a family excludes one member, it suffers a soul loss and a fragmentation of its vitality, wholeness, and relatedness, which continues into subsequent generations.

Places of generational stress affect the soul of a family. Disorder or disruptions of the flow of love need to be acknowledged and restored. Ancestral dreams may address various unresolved questions: Who is missing from the family? Who has been disowned, imprisoned, institutionalized, died, or never spoken of again? Where is the story of the family broken? What accidents, misfortunes, and unacknowledged losses form breaches in the family system? Where has the voice of the family gone silent? When did something too painful or horrifying to speak of occur? What needs to be remembered?

Ancestral dreams tap into an energetic knowing field—the wisdom of the ancestral soul—from which deep memory and healing resolutions emerge. Through dreams, relatives speak for themselves and fill in gaps of family memory. Ancestral dreams are channels through which healing and rebalancing energies from the other side are poured into our lives.

Various means exist to draw on this invisible world. Family interventions, ceremonies, and dreams can shift familial energy patterns, changing events among the living for the better. Cultivating an authentic connection to the ancestors can support finding and living in accord with one's deeper life purpose and fulfilling one's destiny.

### ***Finding the matrilineal line: My great-great-grandmother***

In October 1998 I visited the family history center, searching for information about my paternal ancestors' passage from Europe to Turtle Island. Later that month, my father and I had a phone conversation that left me distraught. Retiring to bed that night, still plagued by our unpleasant encounter, I wondered about the source of this pattern in my family that I find so oppressive. Because no family stories adequately account for it, I found myself looking for the origins of this malaise within my ancestry.

The next morning, I awoke to a stunning dream that catapulted me from sleep into stark reality and answered my pre-occupations.<sup>6</sup> My ancestors came to me.

I am transported back in time, across several generations, to the early or mid-nineteenth century. I observe, without being observed, the interior of a large wooden house, a simple structure with high ceilings and bare wooden walls and lacking modern trappings such as electricity. Modest furnishings set in dim lighting line the periphery of this main room. A huge chandelier, reminiscent of earlier times, hangs from the ceiling—a prominent centerpiece. There, a scene unfolds, which I am privy to witness. Four middle-aged women and men stand in the center of the room; some are being released from household servitude by their master. They are my ancestors. It seems that they have been indentured servants, and the moment that I am witnessing is the moment of their release. Suddenly, after years of servitude, they are free to go.

Instead of an expected response of jubilation, they are constrained by paralysis. They stand still, as if frozen by their years of servitude. Their minds appear to be numb to the message of freedom; their bodies are too paralyzed to respond. They stand in the center of the bare room frozen, almost lifeless, no longer capable of acting in service to themselves and shorn of the ability to envision freedom or even make the first gesture toward it.

Their minds, so long in the habit of deferring to the needs and wishes of others, seem to short-circuit the message of liberation. The natural impulse toward freedom and self-definition no longer transmits, seemingly jumbled inside their neurological pathways. They have thoroughly internalized servitude.

The gravity of their presence is palpable in the room and spills into my bedroom as I awaken. The short-circuiting

dizzies my mind. The dream lingers with unwavering intensity and chilling vividness that does not dispel on awakening. Undeniably, my ancestors reveal their fate to me. My attention locks in place, unswerving from their presence and revelation. I am sobered, saddened, and stunned all at once, as I take into myself their tragic plight. An atmosphere of austerity settles over me, like dust on relics in an attic of the past.

The dream stays with me in the succeeding months, but I have no place or family story on which to hang its stark revelation. It is crisp, clear, and undeniable, yet I cannot discern where it fits in the stream of family history. I hold it as an encapsulated memory—vivid, compelling, and real—and an unacknowledged, unremembered piece of the family shadow.

Four months later I am traveling with my maternal grandmother, on our way to visit my father in the hospital. During our two-hour drive she begins to indulge me with family stories and tales of my grandfather, then reaching back generations to her mother, and her mother's mother. I hear the words fall from her mouth and hang suspended in the air, "My mother's mother was an indentured servant." Stunned, I say nothing, though instantly the scene of the dream resurrects before me; time momentarily stands still and then opens into a vast expanse. Simultaneously, I am in the dream scene of the past, the car in the present, and the time-continuum between the two. Five generations fill the air as my grandmother and I travel down the highway. Time becomes liquid as I enter the stream that flows from my ancestors.

When present time coalesces around me again, I ask my grandmother for more details. She tells me her grandmother, Magdalena Beiter Verlin, came from Alsace-Lorraine, and settled in Kansas as an indentured servant in the household of a rich newspaper publisher. After release from servitude, she married and raised a large family of her own, with six daughters and a few sons.

I learn more of Magdalena's story from my mother. She worked for William White, editor of the *Emporia Gazette*, who, according to my mother, was quite well-known and still highly regarded by journalists today. A White

family photo was taken of Magdalena with White's two children, suggesting that her role in the household was as a domestic and a nanny.

My mother's genealogical research indicates that there were numerous people from Alsace-Lorraine who settled in Kansas in the 1860s. The New York Emigration Society sent many settlers there to vote for a free state during the Civil War era. They were given a Bible, a rifle, and a small amount of money and settled Kansas. Many left after voting, because it was a rough area known as "bloody Kansas."

I pondered why the courageous story of my great-great-grandmother—leaving behind an entire world, crossing the ocean, beginning afresh in a new land, learning a new language, working for her passage into freedom, and establishing a family in a new place—had not been told to me. My mother insists her story was not a secret. Yet until I received direct information about Magdalena through the dream, I did not have even a mental image of my great-great-grandmother, much less her story. Her story was told stripped of its deeper emotional and psycho-spiritual impact. Only through the dream do I contact the broken spirit that attended her years of indentured servitude and beyond.

With the knowledge gained from the dream, the presence of her broken spirit can be gleaned from one family story, passed down by my great-uncle Clarence and recounted by my grandmother:

She loved liquor, but no one ever saw her drunk. There is an old family expression that came into being because of Grandmother Verlin: When the grocery order was being made, Grandmother, blind and bedridden, would call out "and a gallon of whiskey." Years later, after she had died, when others were going grocery shopping, the expression was added in her memory, "and a gallon of whiskey."

According to my mother, the whiskey came in a large bottle, and Grandmother Verlin filled a small flask from it. She made all her own clothes and sewed deep pockets into them in which to carry her flask.<sup>7</sup>

One final story, recounted independently by both my great-aunt Peggy and my grandmother, hints of how her life came to a close. At the end of her life, her only possession was a little black suit-



case, which she carried around with her for ten years. In the black suitcase was a black shroud, a burial dress of black poplin that she made, with a corsage or flower. This black shroud was one of the few things she owned. According to my grandmother, she felt it was her responsibility to provide her own burial dress. She died, in the words of my grandmother, "poor as a church mouse."

Taking in her life story, I grieve the long silence that shrouded it as the black dress shrouded her body in death. I grieve the stripping of her story of its essential emotional and spiritual resonance. I grieve what her passage to "freedom" cost her self-determining spirit. Finally, I



grieve the passing down of a matrilineal heritage of internalized servitude through the generations of women in my family—as I now seek to redeem the shadow of this heritage in the context of my own life. I celebrate her coming to me, inspiring me to learn and share her story.

Magdalena was the first female ancestor from our matrilineal line to set foot on U.S. soil. I celebrate knowing Magdalena Beiter Verlin and the sense of fullness it brings to recover the origins of the matrilineal line on this land.

Yet other questions arise in this mixture of grieving and celebrating. What narrowing of the prospects for her life in Alsace-Lorraine in mid-nineteenth

century motivated her to leave behind her homeland and everything familiar to start afresh somewhere unknown across the seas? What is the unacknowledged impact of her decision to join in the European colonization of the American continent, settle in a new land, and participate in the displacement of native people (the Osage tribe) from their ancestral homelands? Whose blood was shed in bloody Kansas? These questions gnaw at me as I examine the edges of her life and story.

### *Connecting to the current of the ancestors*

Dreams may offer intimations and images that help descendants formulate pictures of and understand the nature of the ancestors' presence. While gathering and piecing together the stories of my grandmothers, another dream came on July 19, 2000, which affirmed the vitality of the ancestral connection, while shedding light on its meaning.

I dream of an antique lamp belonging to my ancestors that has just come into my possession. It sits in front of me, with a bronze base and ornamental glass crystals suspended from the upper rim. It has been converted into an electric lamp, but the wiring is old and broken. As I reach out to touch the lamp, its electrical current flows into me. The current is so strong, I cannot pull my hand away. The current continues to flow into me, until I know I must free my hand. Trying several more times with great effort, finally I release my hand from the lamp's current. Awakening, the full surge of current passes through my entire body.

The lamp and light of my ancestors has come to me. The vital current of their light flows into me, as electricity that surges through body and being. The energy of this ancestral current is strong, not easily released once grasped, even dangerous if not grounded. I am electrified and vitalized by its presence, desiring to ground the light force of the ancestors to allow its current to flow safely through me.

### *Accompanying ancestors' transition to the other side*

Ancestral dreams can prepare family members for the coming death of living relatives, empowering them to share the deep mystery of the transitioning process. By accompanying our ances-

tors in their passage through death to the other side, we become their beneficiaries of standing in this potent place between the two worlds. One such dream occurred on February 2, 2001.

I am standing with my Grandma Schmidt and my dog, Pas de Loup, by the side of the road, protecting my dog from the dangers of the street and cars. I receive a flash of information—intuitively or over a circuit involving special knowing capacities, like ESP. Just as I put together several bits of information to realize what is about to occur, it occurs. A red Jeep with bells hanging from the sides comes speeding toward the three of us and hits us. Instantly we are flung to the other side of the road. I am disoriented, tumbling in space. The three of us become scattered, and I lose contact with my dog and grandmother. Everything slows down, and reality itself seems to tumble. I seek to discern what to do next. First, I notice the impact of the collision on my head—constriction in my forehead—but then notice that I am in the presence of vortex of energy that, like a cone, is narrow and constricted in one direction but opens spaciouly in the other. I realize that I am to go in the direction of the spatial opening. Going toward the opening, I drift further into an expansive space where all constriction, limitation, and heaviness evaporate. Floating through space, I travel a long, long, long distance, partaking of pure expansiveness and freedom from all tension. I am carried as if a solitary particle to the far edge of the universe, to the very frontier of the cosmos, where new space is being created. I travel as a light body across unfathomable expanses where matter exists in its least dense form—where single particles journey at vast distances apart. Participation in this unfurling of new space, this act of spatiating, bestows ineffable lightness, freedom, and bliss.

When I awoke from this dream, I passed through successive layers of reality arranged from the most subtle to the more dense, descending through stages of contraction, until finally arriving and landing in the state of density that accompanies my normal self-awareness.

For several weeks following this dream, I felt that death was coming and inescapable. I had gone to such an otherworldly place of freedom, expansion, and bliss, and it did not seem possible that life could continue. The dream must be a premonition of, even preparation for, death. I called my grandmother to check on her and found her contently

and safely watching television in her apartment. After several weeks, when death did not come for either of us, it dawned on me that I had instead been given the task of remaining in life and bringing the awareness of freedom and joy bestowed by the dream into this world, embodying this ultimate spaciousness within the confines of my physical existence.

Although the dream brought profound healing and transcendence for me personally, it was not clear why my grandmother and I would undertake this sudden journey to the other world together. My dog's presence was clearer—in myths dogs are often guardians to the underworld. My grandmother and I shared many years of easy connection and intimacy during difficult periods in my life; our relationship was like a hand to a glove. From our closeness, it was not entirely surprising that we would journey together across to the other side, yet the full meaning and mystery of the dream was still to unfold.

A second dream involving the transitional space between life and death with my maternal grandmother came almost three years later, on January 28, 2004.

I am visiting Grandma Schmidt at her apartment, a somewhat barren and poorly lit space composed of three rooms: a central living room with a sitting area, a bedroom to the right, and a kitchen to the left opening onto the living room. We are sitting and talking in the sitting area of the living room. With some trepidation, I ask for her permission to die in the same bed in which she died. My question transcended the linear time frame of the present moment of the dream, referring to our deaths both present and future, seemed confusing to her. So I qualify the reference to my death, adding, "I know it will be a long time from now." There is a sense of awkwardness in bringing up her death that fills the space between us but also a sacred stillness, invoking the common ground of our deaths.

My grandmother seems to respond affirmatively if obliquely to my request, so I open the door to her bedroom, where there are three twin beds—two to the left under the windows and one to the right, near the closet. I look toward the bed of our deaths—the one on the right by itself—which has a plain brown cotton bedspread with ribbing. Then I smell the room to see if it still has the odor of death. It does not, yet as I tap into my future bodily fragility and final breath in con-

templating the approach of death, tears fill my eyes pondering this moment.

When I return from the bedroom, my grandmother has moved to the kitchen and is packing up her things in boxes, as if preparing to leave this place. I ask to assist her.

Asking to share my grandmother's deathbed brought to mind a practice of the Miwok Indians, the indigenous inhabitants of the land where I reside. A finger-like peninsula juts north, dividing two bodies of water—the Pacific Ocean and Tomales Bay. The Miwok believed that the tip of this peninsula, Tomales Point, was the jumping off place for deceased persons on their journey from this world to the next. Picturing myself leaving this world from the same bed as my grandmother offered a comforting and grounding image of sharing a common place of departure with my ancestors when leaving this world.

The dream radically alters my consciousness, infusing energy into the base of my spine, a flowing stream offering embodied connection to the life force of the universe. The intersubjective connection between my grandmother's spirit and mine unfurls around me. The veil between the worlds opens, with an infusion of spiritual energy and fluid possibilities. This vortex is akin to the doors in an emergency or operating room, which swing in both directions, allowing energies to pass. The open channel between my grandmother's spirit and mine enables me to enter the space into which she was flowing. Our spirits comingle in this fluid, open, and interconnected place. I discover that the threshold between the worlds is a potent vortex infused with spiritual energies and characterized by fluid and permeable boundaries, where multiple possibilities exist in *potentia*; objects lose their solid, dense, and fixed form, becoming malleable to transmutation. One who accompanies another through the veil receives an influx of spiritual energy from the other side. Knowing the power of this threshold viscerally, I feel empowered to help my grandmother transition.

Turning my attention toward the most captivating moment of the dream—gazing on the shared bed of our deaths—I enter this moment of utmost fragility at the approach of death, where all one's energy becomes

channeled into breathing—the thin thread that tethers one to life. Until the dream, I was terrified to explore this edge, but the dream overshadowed my former resistance, taking me toward the precipice of the final breath. My fear and resistance were connected to an energetic memory in my body of a trauma from age two when I nearly choked to death—my constricted breath becoming a weak link to life. Contacting this receding breath, I discover, on the other side of this constriction and fear, a fullness of breath infusing spirit into me.

Exploring the edge of the final breath, the story of the Eskimo shaman's initiation came to mind. The shaman apprentice goes out alone in the cold for weeks or months without food to meditate on each bone of his skeleton, patiently rubbing stones until reaching enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> Only when he has completed this meditation, is reduced to his skeleton, learns the ritual name for each bone, and comes to know his "life soul" may he return to the tribe. Tibetan Buddhism offers similar practices of meditating on one's own death and decay.

These two dreams prepared me for my grandmother's death, which came five and a half and two and a half years later. During the week I was invited to submit this article, I learned that my ninety-seven-year-old grandmother was dying. I was able to be with her in her final twenty-eight hours. On the eve of her final night, the nurse described the body's natural dying process to me, which is a sequential shutdown beginning with the extremities of the body, followed by the lower abdominal organs, and finally the lungs, heart, and brain. I spent her last night in a chair-bed alongside her hospital bed with these two dreams offering themselves as meditative guides. The time to embody and enact the dreams on the physical plane had come.

I held her hand and breathed with her through the night, the sound of her labored breath filling the room. I laid awake most of the night, attuning my breath to the rhythm of hers, which, according to the monitors, remained steady at eleven to fifteen breaths per minute through the night. During this meditation that lasted nine hours, I entered a state of deep com-

munion with my grandmother, who passed into a coma.

As the light of dawn filled her room, I realized something else was needed to assist her transition. I suggested to the nurse, doctor, and my parents that the oxygen mask was perpetuating and slowing her dying process. The others agreed and preparations were made to remove it. Within the first minute, the oxygen saturation level in her blood dropped dramatically and continued to do so in the succeeding minutes until it reached a plateau. Her breathing became more belabored and shallow, and her heart rate dropped. I stroked her face tenderly with the back of my right hand, holding her left hand in my left hand, while my mother tended to her on her right side. After about twenty minutes, she breathed her last breath. Her heart kept beating for five minutes more—at first full beats and then, for several minutes more, quivering. During the quivering, my parents' minister, leaned into

hand and face. My father added a drop of oil to her forehead. The minister then offered a beautiful, encompassing prayer.

The others left, and my mother and I were alone in the room with my grandmother. Words were exchanged between my mother and me that healed old barriers. My mother saw the depths of my soul, and she expressed her desire to spend her final years and days in my presence.

### *Ongoing perception of the ancestors presence*

Through sacred intention, sacred action, and ancestral dreams, it becomes possible to recover and inhabit a multi-generational perspective that includes one's ancestors. This remembrance creates a monumental shift in awareness. By opening to the ancestors, one contacts an expansive realm that includes both visible and invisible worlds and the interactions between the two. While one cannot access this dimension in the same manner as the

everyday world of sense perception, we do possess faculties that, when cultivated, allow us to perceive it. The world of the ancestors becomes particularly illuminated and accessible in dreams, altered states of consciousness, rituals invoking and honoring ancestors, and other moments of heightened perceptual awareness.

This capacity to perceive the presence of the ancestors is akin to an experience of walking in the woods

in which filtered sunlight appears as scattered beams that traverse the forest's vegetation. Shafts of sunlight illuminate selective bands in the forest, revealing rich niches of activity and lushness not normally perceived. Deep in the forest, a shaft of light illuminates a spiderweb, showing thin filaments of carefully woven luminous threads, revealing the intricacies of a radial pattern. The center extends outward by curtains of threads, elegantly attached in concentric rings, forming a mandala and offering an

image of the cosmos in microcosm. A gentle breeze caresses the luminescent web, shaking its concentric layers, and vibrating the delicate filaments in soft undulating waves of motion.

In the encounter between forest, sunlight, spiderweb, breeze, and attuned human, a metaphor for the ancestors' presence may be gleaned. The web of life, though always present in the forested background, is not necessarily always apparent. Walking deep into the forest and into the hidden recesses of the soul, the greater light illuminates the path, lighting up an intricate web of relationships and allowing the oft-hidden presence of ancestors to become visible and aglow. When the spirit of one's ancestors infuses life with its breath, allowing hidden webs of connection to reverberate in awareness with shimmering energy, one knows that the presence of the ancestors as a vital, vibrant presence; seeing the web of relationships from which the threads of one's life is spun.

### NOTES

1. P. A. Colorado, "Indigenous Science and Western Science: A Healing Convergence," paper presented at the World Science Dialog I, New York, April 1994.

2. See 20:5 Exod. and 5:9 Deut.

3. M. Some, *Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual and Community* (New York: Tarcher, 1998), 54.

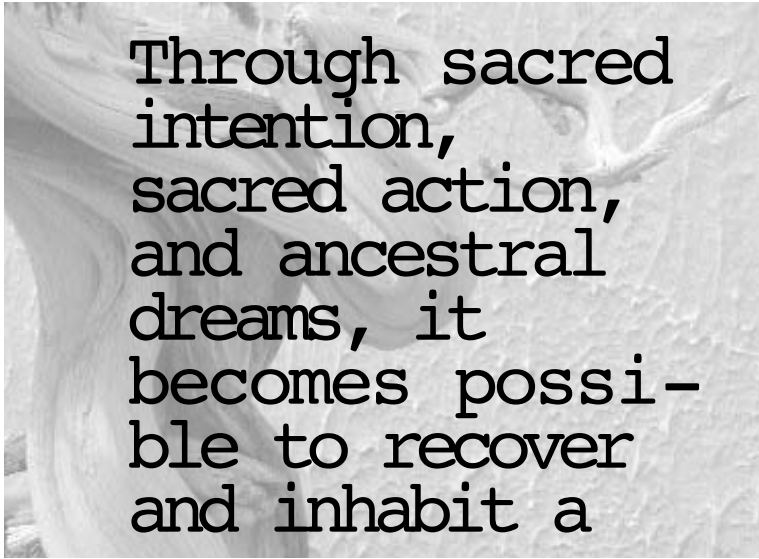
4. Ibid.

5. I am indebted to Francesca Mason Boring and her work with Family Constellations for this understanding about the ancestral soul and the importance of healing places of break and silence within family systems. The Family Constellation, developed by Bert Hellinger, is a technique for revealing the hidden dynamics in a family so they can be worked with and healed. For more information on Family Constellations, see <http://www.familyconstellations-usa.com/about.html>.

6. In Plains Indian dream ethnography, dreams of empowerment that come unsought are frequently associated with stress or crisis. This can include a "variety of emotional conflicts engendered by problematic kinship relationships . . . This is particularly true for female visionaries." L. Irwin, *The Dream Seekers: Native American Visionary Traditions of the Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 85.

7. This portion of the story was added by my mother, Claire Louise Jaenke.

8. F. O'Kane, *Sacred Chaos: God's Shadow and the Dark Self* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1994), 9.



Through sacred intention, sacred action, and ancestral dreams, it becomes possible to recover and inhabit a

me, "She might need you to tell her what to do." "Grandma," I said, "You have been a blessing to all of us, but now you are free to go. Go toward the light or toward the opening—the place that opens into a vast space." Shortly thereafter her heart stopped beating.

I asked those in the room—my mother, father, and their minister—for their permission to anoint my grandmother with lavender oil, touching her face and left hand, and giving the oil to my mother who anointed my grandmother's right