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# Finding Soul on the Path of Orisa

A WEST AFRICAN  
SPIRITUAL TRADITION



## Healing and Honoring Your Spiritual Legacy

We all belong to such a far-reaching line of spirits that most of us can't even fathom what that really means. If we're lucky, we may have some sense of those who have preceded us by fifty, a hundred, or even two hundred years. But our lineage stretches back much farther than that, forming a thick chain of ancestral goodness and strength as well as pain and suffering. Imagine, if you can, ancestors whose feet touched the earth, not just a generation or two ago, but centuries ago. Imagine them with you now, their sorrows reflected in yours and their energy cleansing the road in front of you, assisting you in your struggles and whispering ancient wisdom in your ear.

In the West we like to think of ourselves as self-created or as products of our parental upbringing. In reality, we arrive

on Earth laden with a combination of blessings and baggage bequeathed to us by all the members of our bloodline, by all our dead relatives, known and unknown. Some of this ancestral knowledge comes to us through our parents and caretakers; some comes from a more distant link.

For example, I learned to love books largely because my mother does; an affection she learned from her mother, a writer and poet, who learned from her father, and so on. I imagine somewhere way back in that part of my lineage, there is a bookmaker or scribe whose life was dedicated to the written word. I have also inherited from my mother a fear of using my gifts to open doors of opportunity, which for years has kept me miserable and barely making ends meet in my work life. This too my mother learned from her mother, who was college-educated but spent her entire adult life living in poverty. My grandmother, in turn, took this in from her Irish mother, who grew up dirt poor and then married into money, but never gave herself permission to enjoy it. Though the money could have allowed them to live more comfortably, she insisted that her little girls wear the same kind of rough woolen stockings she'd grown up wearing.

Sometimes, lineage works on us in subtle but riveting ways. I know my mother cries when she hears Native American chanting because her Indian blood remembers those songs, their purpose and meaning. The first time my hands ripped leaves for an initiation ceremony, they seemed to move of their own accord, as if they already knew the motions, as if one of my ancestors who used leaves for medicine had stepped into my skin. Lineage works from deep within us and makes us who we are and in many ways shapes how we choose to live out our lives.

## Clearing Rocky Ground

How do we deal with the rocky ground we sometimes encounter in the ancestral garden? In working with the *egun*, one of our first tasks is to dig down and test the condition of the soil. Is it moist and loamy, or hard and dry? Is it rich with nutrients or lacking in vitality? Has it been depleted or eroded? Does it need to be built up or refortified?

When I first got down to my people's soil all I did was cry, because all I could see were generations of intense family pain and separation. The list of grievances was harsh and long: poverty, loss, ruptured families, incest, disowned and abandoned children, emotional and psychological abuse, shame, addiction, betrayal, and lies. My family story was laden with pain, and it was all I'd ever known. I had no memories of grandmothers or older aunts or other family members who loved and protected me, whom I could count on. My ability to accept the principle that ancestors exist in our world didn't preclude the fact that I could not point to a single one who was a positive presence in my daily life.

The only forebear I'd ever known personally was my maternal grandmother, who was manipulative and narcissistic. During my childhood, our visits to her were sporadic and obligatory, and she and my mother would go through periods of estrangement that sometimes lasted years. I never felt that she liked me, and I didn't like her either. The two or three other ancestors I knew about were people I'd either never known, knew very little about, or associated only with my family's legacy of toxic relationships





and severed ties.

I deeply wanted a relationship with my ancestors. I needed to heal the spiritual rift of my lineage and to feel connected to something besides the big empty hole that the ancestors had always meant for me. I knew my involvement with the Orisa tradition could give me this connection with my spirits. I hoped the tradition's rituals for calling, remembering, honoring, and loving the ancestors could transform my life. Yet, I also knew that if I wanted true healing, I could not ignore my feelings of emptiness and loss.

Orisa teaches that your mother's mother is one of your most important ancestors and that she should be given a primary place of reverence on your shrine. So once I'd put my grandmother's picture on the table and started calling her name during my morning prayers, technically I was doing the right thing. I guess I could have left it at that. But it didn't feel like enough, and it seemed like a cover for other unnamed feelings. I decided I wanted to do more than go through the motions and that I couldn't blindly take on a belief system without doing the work needed to internalize the teachings. I began to understand that tending an *egun*

shrine, learning to love and feel loved by my spirits, would require looking back into a family story full of wounded spirits. Feeling my ancestors in my daily life would mean feeling the pain of that story.

When I put my hands into the dirt and started pulling things out, trying to find some healthy soil to grow in, I kept coming up with slimy, worm-eaten, smelly old things, twisted pieces of rusted metal, and shards of broken glass left behind by my people before me. I was searching for a clean, soft soil that would make me feel loved and part of something good, capable of nurturing life. But I kept finding generation after generation of unfinished business. It was heavy and painful work—researching my bloodline, asking my mother difficult questions, and learning painful truths about my people. I often had to leave it for a while, to take a break and do something else to replenish my strength so that I could continue my *egun* work. Over the years, I kept digging, using my bare hands, a shovel, or a stick—anything to excavate the junk that interfered with my garden's ability to sustain a robust set of roots.

This cycle of working and digging, finding old pain and



grieving, went on for some time. Then one day I realized something inside me had shifted, quietly and from a place deep within. After laboring for a long time in seemingly infertile ground, I discovered not too far below the decimated topsoil an abundance of beautiful black, rich, healthy earth. By pulling out the debris and pain-ridden histories that had choked off my ancestors' beauty, I had unearthed a bountiful mound of sparkling jewels that began to tangibly enrich my life.

Let me say that this excavation is ongoing. Although it can be particularly consuming during the early stages of ancestral gardening, the digging and searching never really stops; the frequency and intensity just lessens. Our family stories are ongoing and too complicated and profound, too full of mysteries and unanswered questions, for most of us to ever finish our ancestral gardening completely. There is always something else to look at, another hard truth to find and free up, so we can keep on healing and developing spiritually. We should not see this as a burden. Instead, we should accept that we may need to dig around in our ancestral grounds from time to time and trust that the old pains we find there

will continue to bring healing and beauty.

## Accepting the Whole Truth

We may sometimes want to step around the painful aspects of family history by romanticizing or simplifying our view of certain ancestors. For example, as an African-American woman, I cannot remember my black ancestors without looking squarely at the atrocity of slavery. What I would like to remember about my people and slavery is that they survived such tremendous brutality with their spirits intact and that most of my spiritual endowments come straight from them. I would prefer to focus on this side of the truth, to pay witness to the positive aspects of their lineage that have survived, while quietly keeping the other, unpleasant side of that truth buried.

In a sense, it is less painful to see things that way. It is easier to remember my black *egun* in a solely positive light than it is to also look at the injustices they themselves may





have committed. I would rather disregard the ways in which my people took the wounds of slavery and turned them upon themselves and each other. I would rather not look at how this caused another kind of damage, one less broad in scope than the institution of slavery, but still damage that continues to reach far beyond the span of their lifetimes into the lives of their descendants today.

Part of me would like to simplify my notion of the white people in my family, with whom I've never had any positive connection. On one hand, I can look at the white side of my lineage and clearly see the painful ways their racism and class privilege have worked like a poison running through a body, devastating our family. But the full and complicated truth is, even if their goodness was not obvious when they were alive, some of my white *egun* do bring me many blessings now that they are dead. I was able to write this book in part because the spirit of my nonconformist Pennsylvania-Dutch-British-Irish grandmother, the one I never had a good word for when she was living, sat down beside me day after day, urging me to stay focused and helping me to be brave enough to say all I needed to say.

The whole story about most families is that they are unavoidably complex and multifaceted. Usually these complexities are caused by painful or unpleasant circumstances in their lives. When we start digging in our gardens and looking back at those lives, we will not be spared the ugly, frightening, and hurtful parts. When we invite the ancestors into our lives, we see the whole truth of their lives and inevitably find the sweet and the sour laced together. The dance of polarities that governs the universe—hot and cold, light and dark, opposing sides forever and intimately bound with one another—takes place in families too. Each family has a sustaining and affirming side as well as a jagged and cutting side. If we look closely, most of us will see at least a few thorny stems growing among the flowers in our ancestral gardens.

How then do we work with the complexities of our personal lineages? What do we do about the weeds that can grow so fast and move so quickly to take over our plots of earth? How do we keep the tangled vines from choking the tender shoots? Well, if we want our gardens to thrive, we must vigilantly remove and control the weeds to prevent



them from diverting water and nutrients from the life-sustaining vegetation. This process of approaching the painful areas in our lineage requires time, effort, patience, and a great deal of tenderness for ourselves and eventually for the spirits. It can be back-breaking, hand-blistering, and frustratingly tedious work. But then, we don't do it because it is easy, fun, or painless. We do it because we know we may need to unearth some nastiness in order to free up the joy, peace, and goodness that also grow in our *egun* gardens.

## Difficult Feelings

In addition to the unresolved issues the ancestors may leave behind for us to deal with, we also bring seeds of our own weeds to our *egun* gardens. Many of us have resentment and pain connected with certain spirits that weigh us down, impeding our ability to nurture our spirituality.

For some of us, growing a lush ancestral garden is impossible until we figure out what to do with the dead father

who drank too much, the violent mother who beat us, or the mean-spirited uncle who neglected and abused us. Just glancing at the web of secrets and lies surrounding certain ancestors can leave us depressed and worn out. Depleted, we may simply parrot our devotions or bypass ancestral work altogether.

Some people try to navigate these hard spaces by saying, "Let it go. It's over. What's in the past should stay in the past." I think that is an incomplete response, because our lives today are inevitably affected by what happened to our families in the past. How we live today impacts how we and those who come after us will live tomorrow. There is no separation between past, present, and future; it is all connected.

Another problem with the what's-done-is-done response to family history is that it encourages the masking of feelings and thus short-circuits our healing. Denying pain just buries pain. When we turn our backs on pain, under the mistaken notion that avoidance will make pain magically disappear, it just shows up someplace else, attached to an even greater crisis, having grown larger, more persistent, and more





damaging from our having ignored it.

It might seem easier to operate under the illusion that if we ignore pain, it will go away. But no matter how far or how long we keep painful truths out of sight, we're really just adding them to the mountain of unfinished business that many of us live crouching in the shadow of. In working with my own ancestral garden, I found that in order to have the deep-rooted relationship with my spirits that I so dearly wanted, I needed to tend to the unfinished business they'd left behind and to the unfinished business I had with them.

Before I talk about how to use the *egun* altar to aid in the process of resolving issues with people who are no longer in a body, let me be clear that keeping an *egun* shrine is no substitute for therapy. Working with ritual, prayer, altars, and spirits should not take the place of the kind of in-depth work that requires the support of a skilled and compassionate therapist. When our wounds run so deep that we don't feel up to making the journey alone, we need to find someone who can walk with us at least for a while. In that case, ancestral worship can often help in the therapeutic process. However, whether or not your inner work involves

therapy, your altar and the spirits who congregate there can provide a powerful healing force.

In my experience, most spirits elevate to some degree—or at least want to—after leaving their physical bodies. People who have passed over to the invisible realm can often see their relationships with greater insight and compassion than when they were living. Most spirits who visited damage and devastation upon us during their lifetimes want to heal the injuries they've left behind. Even ancestors who committed horribly evil acts in life are capable of healing and elevation in the spirit realm.

When we are in the midst of struggling to heal the traumas inflicted by members of our families who have died, we may feel like casting them out of our ancestral gardens—and we may need to do just that for a while. We may have to temporarily deny them access to the space we make for ancestors both in our homes and in our hearts. Eventually, though, we must at least acknowledge their presence. My elders taught me that we can never disown our *egun*. Our ancestors are our ancestors, period—acts of violation, abuse, and dysfunctional family dynamics notwithstanding. Our





irrefutable connection with them cannot be undone. It has been encoded into our blood, whether we like it or not, no matter how deeply they have hurt us or others. That does not necessarily mean we must include them on our altars; it simply means that we must understand and accept the fact that who they were is part of who we are.

I have learned through many years of working with the weeds in my own garden that I hurt as much when I don't call my grandmother's name at the altar as when I do. When I focus on healing the wounds of the painful legacy left to me, I feel more healthy and whole, more me, than when I turn away from the ancestors who have wounded me.

Opening our daily lives to a more resonant and reciprocal ancestral presence requires working to repair and fortify our spiritual legacy. Each of us forms a link in a long ancestral chain, which, for most of us, has been ruptured or somehow damaged. Looking up that chain to find out who is there and how we are connected helps us to recover a cellular soul memory that lives within each of us. When we exclude certain of our spirits from our ancestral work—even when our resistance to them is wholly justified—the memory chain

starts to split apart and the connectedness with our lineage weakens. I am not saying that we should always include these ancestors in our prayers or at our shrines. However, our resistance to these unwelcome spirits should serve as a reminder of where we still need to work on healing our injuries. We should continue to work with the intent and hope of one day mending ourselves enough so that we are able and willing to include those spirits on our altars. With that gesture we begin to release them, which in turn releases us from the pain they have caused. That process may take months, years, or decades. The key is not to ride roughshod over your feelings. Real healing comes from carefully investigating and tending to our wounds.

## Be Honest

I am well aware that this wound-tending and peacemaking is frequently easier said than done. It took more than ten years of diligent work for me to include one of my great-



grandfathers on my ancestral table. He was an upstanding white man who disowned my mother, his only grandchild, because she was, as he said, a “nigger.” Even though I knew all along that excluding him from my *mojuba* is not what I should have done, I needed to be true to my process. I could not put him on my shrine until my heart told me to, until I had worked out some of my anger toward him, and until I’d given his spirit ritual elevation. Only then was it safe for me to attempt to get closer to him.

Now that he is on my altar, he has shown me his sorrow and his desire for reconciliation. Even so, I continue to wade through my complicated and difficult feelings. Putting him on the altar does not mean that there is no more work to be done, that I have fully forgiven him, or that the gash his rejection caused our family has healed over. It merely says that together we can now take the next small steps toward mending this broken part of the family story we share.

In my work with the *egun*, they continue to teach me that often the same ancestors who hurt us during their lives are now in the spiritual realm, seeking atonement for having caused that pain. These spirits need to heal from their

transgressions as much as we need to heal from what they’ve done to us. Supporting our healing gives them a way to move toward their own redemption. We have to be willing to involve them in the healing process.

To take on this joint effort, we must first tell the truth about how we feel. That often means opening ourselves to wrenching emotions over messy family dynamics, relationships, and histories. I have seen many people shy away from the deeper layers of *egun* work because they have too many painful and unresolved feelings around deceased family members who have hurt them. They avoid the pain, either because they don’t want to get past it or don’t feel they can. The point is not to get over it, but to embrace those feelings and use them as a way to move into a more meaningful relationship with the ancestors. The key is to tell the truth, take your time, and not skip any steps. Be true to your experience, be gentle with yourself, and be willing to accept whatever your relationship with your *egun* brings.

