Transcript of *Ancestors: Honoring Them; Becoming Them*

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When my mom's mother was about 16, she was awarded a full-ride scholarship to Cornell University. She didn't go; She wanted to go, but her step-mother, who came from a blue-collar German immigrant family, said, "If she goes to college, I get a maid!" That was it; end of discussion. My brilliant grandmother went to work as a secretary.

There are plenty of other uncomfortable stories about my recent ancestors and their backwards worldviews. I've shared a few of them here in the past.

Two generations after Grandma got shut down, I went to Cornell, but left again in my junior year. I was disillusioned with the world that recent generations had bestowed on me, especially the looming threat of 50,000 nuclear weapons on hair trigger.

So I left Cornell to walk from Los Angeles to Washington DC on the Great Peace March for Global Nuclear Disarmament, a move which my father's father disagreed with.

As a young adult, I was pretty disinterested in the preferences and stories of ancestors like him. Even now, I'm much more interested in how we could make things better. I've had a world-view of constant progress, where each generation strives to make the world better for the next. More security, more access to tools and wealth, more rights and inclusion, infinite economic growth. Onward and upward!

For much of my adulthood I dismissed my ancestors as not worth much time or effort, because to me they represented the ignorant past. Ironically, I have some amazingly progressive ancestors.

People ask me what JD stands for. My birth name was John Dewey, and yes, I am related to the great educator and democracy advocate John Dewey. It's ironic because less than a decade after changing my last name, I became an educator myself, and got enamored with democratic education in particular.

Well, this is a time of year when many cultures honor ancestors, and the last few Fall seasons I've been revisiting how I think about these relationships. Halloween is a shallow and commercialized shadow of its own ancestor, the Pagan holiday of Samhain.

Yeah, whoever chose the letters we use to represent Celtic phonetics deserves a Darwin award for linguistic obfuscation. I just don't see how those letters could possibly spell Samhain. One of my favorite Celtic vocalists is (moyra) Maire Brennan, spelled like this.

Anyhow, Samhain was how my pre-Christian European ancestors honored their own ancestors. Samhain literally means "summer's end," but it was also New Year's eve on their calendar.

Incidentally, unlike our New Year, which has no relation to anything astronomical, Samhain is exactly halfway between the fall equinox and the winter solstice. It's part of what modern Pagans call the "Wheel of the Year." That wheel includes some other holidays Christians co-opted, like Christmas. I say more about the wheel in my Seasons of Love service. So, Samhain was New Year's eve, the night between the years.

Pre-Christian European Pagan worldviews share some similarities with indigenous worldviews from all over the planet—close integration with seasonal and astronomical cycles, kinship with all life, and honoring of ancestors. I've started to think of such cultures as steady-state cultures, because their worldview centered kinship, connection, and cycles, rather than a one-way focus on progress.

My modern American culture says, "have what you want," always extracting and consuming Earth's resources to meet our drive for more-more-more.

Steady-state worldviews emphasize "want what you have"; what we have is enough; life is good.

I didn't learn about Samhain until I was an adult, but Halloween was big in my childhood. My family went all-out. My dad had an army-surplus parachute that he would string up like a huge spiderweb, and we would open up our garage with orange lights, hot spiced cider, jack-o-lanterns, an endless tape loop of spooky sound effects, and games, like bobbing for

apples, stuff like that. Costumes, of course.

This is me, age 9, sweating far more than expected while encased in aluminum foil. I'm supposed to be a robot. When the neighbors came to our house, we would fry them a fresh doughnut, right in our garage, and they could roll it, still hot, in a pan of confectioner's sugar or cinnamon sugar. You can see the raw donuts and pans of sugar behind me. I wish I had more pictures from those Halloweens.

I think some of this was my parents compensating for NOT giving out candy. My parents were into health food, vitamins, homemade whole wheat bread, whole-grain donuts, if you can imagine. So candy didn't really fit with the lifestyle. Still, our house was the go-to place for neighborhood kids and their parents on Halloween. It was fun.

We did go trick-or-treating ourselves—you can see my candy bag in the photo, but consuming our treasures was pretty carefully regulated, with my Halloween candy often lasting until Easter, and not because of my own self-control.

Because Samhain marks the night between one year and the next, Pagans believe that the veil between this world and the world of the dead is thinner during that night, so messages and well-wishes more easily pass through.

That aspect remains the core of Dia de los Muertos celebrations in Mexico and the U.S.
If you've seen the Disney movie Coco, you have a sense of the basics. I understand Disney did a good job there.

In this Mexican tradition, the souls of the deceased remain nearby on the other side, but only as long as someone here on Earth remembers them. Dia de los Muertos is the one day each year when we remember them in earnest, ensuring another year of their existence just on the other side of the veil.

But rather than either frightening or solemn, Dia de los Muertos is a laughter-filled celebration. I think this reflects a deep cultural difference around how we think of death.

Someone said to me, “Americans are the only people on Earth who think they won’t die.” I think there’s truth in that; most of us avoid even talking about death if we can: “Oh, man, stop being so morbid!”

In turn, I think that reflects a deep cultural disconnection from the natural world. Death is normal and natural. Rev. Barbara Whittaker-Johns reminds us that the opposite of death isn’t life. The opposite of death is birth. Life includes both birth and death. Life couldn’t exist without both.

If you want to conquer death—if you want to be saved from death—understand that in this world, that would mean doing away with birth, too, and life would cease to exist. Every birth preordains that this precious new child will surely die, but we never say birth is morbid!

Modern genetics offers a whole new lens for remembering and celebrating our ancestors. Even without genetics, you can see that you have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on, doubling as you go back through each generation of your genetic ancestors.

It doesn’t take many generations to exceed the entire population of the earth. We could represent that graphically like this, what I call your “cone of ancestry.” We don’t have to go very far back to realize that your cone of ancestry and mine have to overlap, as in, we must have a common ancestor, a great-great-grandparent we both descend from. That makes us cousins. And every ancestor in that big overlapping triangle in the middle is an ancestor to both of us.

This statistical approach suggests that almost all humans alive today probably have a common ancestor only a few thousand years back at most. A 2004 paper in the journal Nature showed that statistically, even taking into account the geographic and sociological barriers to random mating, the cones of ancestry for everyone on earth overlap as recently as about 2,000 years ago. Your ancestors and mine are the same people, just a few tens of generations back. We are closer cousins than we thought.

Genetic analyses give similar results, but because they’re based on single sequences rather than the whole genome, genetic estimates of common ancestors are always much further back in time than statistical models.

For example, so-called Y-chromosomal Adam is the Most Recent Common Ancestor of all the people with Y-chromosomes. Y-Adam lived around 200,000 years ago, much further back than 2,000 years. But that number disregards half of your ancestors, because only half of us even have a Y chromosome. We have many ancestors whose presence only shows up in part of our DNA, if at all.

The cool thing about common ancestors is that the reasoning doesn't stop at the most recent common ancestor. Y-chromosomal Adam's parents are also common ancestors to all of us. As we go further and further back in the chain of ancestry, at some point we find that our ancestors are homo but not yet sapiens. But it doesn't stop there, either; the cone of ancestry continues, all the way back to the first rodent-like mammals.

This is a most amazing fossil, just discovered in July, 2023. It's hard to tell from the photograph, but the three-dimensional arrangement of these bones makes it clear that one of our mammal ancestors actually picked a fight with a dinosaur at least five times its size.

Until this fossil, we assumed mammals in the Cretaceous just scurried from hiding place to hiding place while dinosaurs reigned supreme. No longer. We have some seriously scrappy ancestors in our family tree.

But of course those mammals' chromosomes didn't come out of nowhere. They got them from their parents, same as us, so we can continue tracing our ancestry all the way back through reptiles, fish, arthropods, and single cells to a single microscopic bacterial cell. That cell is known as LUCA, the Last Universal Common Ancestor.

There are lots of different ways of graphically showing our family tree, but our knowledge of the relationships comes from the same technology that allows criminologists to solve crimes by looking at DNA from distant cousins.

I'm told that in the Sufi worldview, and maybe other middle-Eastern cultures, ancestors are not behind us in the past, but in front of us in the past, stretching out into the distance, because they literally went before us. We follow in their footsteps, which of course are in front of us, their lives stretching out before us, so we're seeing the backs of our parents, and

beyond them our grandparents, details blurring as the generations recede into the distance, our lives not so different from theirs. To me, this is a really foreign way of thinking about it. I have to work hard to even visualize it.

I enjoy trying because I was acculturated in a paradigm of progress, where we don't WANT to follow in our ancestors' footsteps; we want to be better and do better than they did; we want to leave them behind.

The Sufi way seems to me to express a more steady-state worldview. It intrinsically honors the fact that we are not that different from our ancestors. We have similar challenges; we go through similar life stages; we have the same loves and fears and griefs that they did. Following their footsteps.

Today, when "sustainability" is the word of the decade, a more humble, more steady-state worldview may be in order. What would it look like, and feel like, to be content living as our ancestors did, wanting what we have? To follow in our ancient ancestors' footsteps, and being content with that?

That math we did earlier calls into question the definition of an ancestor, because some of those who went before us didn't have any genetic descendants. They were born and died without having children, so they are in no-one's cone of ancestry. That group includes many gay people, infertile people, and people who died in childhood, or who never found a mate.

But they participated in their times, so their memes, their ideas and contributions to history are also part of our makeup, especially our cultures and technologies. They are our ancestors, too, in that, while their genetics don't live on in our cells, their cultural and molecular contributions do. Why did I say "Molecular contributions?"

By the time you're 40 years old, about 125,000 pounds of matter have passed through your body and back out into Earth's cycles. If you include all the air that's been inside your lungs and right back out again, it's more like half a million pounds. Our bodies are made of the recycled parts of other bodies. That's a kind of ancestry, too, a molecular ancestry.

I'm still of two minds when it comes to the notion of progress. I'm not ready to let go of the dream of beloved community, where minorities of all kinds are welcomed and loved for the beautiful rainbow diversity they enrich all of

us with.

But “progress” has also traditionally meant ever-cushier comforts, and more-complex technologies, and all the environmental suicides that attend an extractive “have what you want” economy.

Our current global worldview wants us to believe “you’re either growing or you’re dying,” which is patently false; our bodies go from age 20 to around 60 in a steady-state period of high health and productivity, neither growing nor dying, for decades.

It is only after seeing my own children as adults that I see the threads of deep connection with my grandparents. They are so much like me! Even the things I wish I hadn’t passed on—that I know my children struggle with—there they are. James Baldwin wrote: “Children have never been very good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them.”

Noticing this invites me to wonder about the ways I am like my parents and grandparents, and how that plays out in my cousins, the ones I know and more-distant ones, like you, and ones I’ve never met. I have come to appreciate family ties for what they can tell me about myself.

Most of my ancestors are dead. There’s a persistent urban legend that gets reincarnated every so often that says there are more people alive now than have ever died. Nope. Even with humanity’s obscene over-growth in population, it’s 8 billion to about 108 billion. The dead outnumber us 13 to 1.

Of course, that number depends on which of our deep ancestors we count as “people.” But whether you start at 50,000 years ago or 200,000, the number of dead homo sapiens sapiens is still many times the living.

If you add in our non-human animal ancestors, the fungi and plants, single-celled critters and so on, almost all of my ancestors are dead. Dying appears to be a popular activity.

Why are we so paranoid about becoming ancestors ourselves? And why is our culture so focused on our own comforts and achievements rather than setting our descendants up for success, or even survival?

In the words of my friend Victor, an indigenous-rights activist and medical doctor from the Yaqui nation, “How will future generations know that you loved them?”

I think our fear of death, and our unwillingness to face the reality of it, drives our worldview of separation and exploitation that threatens our descendants.

I don’t want them to follow in the footsteps of a have-what-you-want worldview. There isn’t enough planet for that.

We are the generation that will decide how many of our descendants succumb to hurricanes, floods, wildfires, heatwaves, droughts, famines, wars caused by dwindling resources, and mass migration out of regions made uninhabitable by our generation’s waste of fossil fuels. If we hit four degrees C above pre-industrial levels, all the yellow places on this map will likely be uninhabitable.

What does it mean to be a good ancestor in such times? Is a worldview of progress inherently problematic? Can we separate cultural progress from economic growth, and create a worldview that’s steady state in our relations with Earth, but progressive in relation to other people?

I’m not sure, but I’m increasingly suspicious that my dismissiveness of my ancestors as a young adult was a missed opportunity.

My grandmother never did go to college. She was promoted fairly quickly from secretary to office manager, which is what she was doing when she met my grandfather. I suppose if she had gone to Cornell, I would not exist. I did fulfill Grandma’s dream when I finally earned my Cornell degree, eleven years after I left for the Peace March, but she didn’t live to see it.

This Halloween season, Samhain, dia de los Muertos, let’s remember our ancestors and honor their lives, because they were so like our own in so many ways. Let us revere the flow of matter that gives us life, and makes us intimates with all our ancestors, contemporaries, and descendants. Let us remember that we will die, following a long line of ancestors to do that successfully, if not always gracefully.

Let us examine carefully the legacy we leave as ancestors, humbly accepting our very temporary ripple in the long river of time. May we have the courage of introspection necessary to ensure that future generations will know we love them. And let us grapple with our own worldviews, finding the sweet both/and balance between a sustainable acceptance of what we have, and constant progress towards the beloved community. May it be so.