

## **Listening for the Ancestors by Lindy Gifford**

**Sunday, April 14, 2019**

### **Time for All Ages**

Adapted from "Tell Me a Story" by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson

Long ago, on the wild Scottish coast, a fisherman rowed to shore and beached his boat after a long day of fishing. As he walked across the pebbly shore toward his cottage, he heard the astonishing sound of singing voices. He turned and saw, as few people have seen, several Selkie people (seal people) playing onshore. When the Selkie people saw him, they slipped into the sea and disappeared beneath the dark waves.

The fisherman could not believe his eyes. He knew few people ever saw Selkies. These seal folk cast aside their skins now and then to come onto shore in human form.

Then he caught sight of a sealskin lying on a nearby rock. He picked up the skin and slung it over his shoulder. "No one will believe me unless I show them this," he said. He also thought he might earn a penny or two by selling this amazing find.

As he followed the path to his cottage, he heard someone wailing behind him. When he turned, he saw a beautiful young woman sobbing uncontrollably.

"Kind sir," the lady said through her tears, "you have my sealskin. Please give it back, for I belong to the Selkie people, and I cannot live in the water without my skin."

The fisherman had fallen in love at first sight with the woman, and would not return her sealskin. "Come with me and be my wife," he said. "I love you, and without your sealskin you'll have to live on land."

The young woman knew she could do nothing, for the fisherman was determined, and he refused to return her sealskin. And so, crying and sighing, she followed him home to his cottage. The fisherman stuffed the sealskin inside a crevice in the chimney where he knew she would never find it.

Soon afterward they married, and for many years they lived together, and the Selkie woman learned to love her husband, for he had a kind and generous heart. She gave birth to seven children, and he was a good father.

Sometimes, though, the children would find their mother sitting on the beach and gazing wistfully out at the sea.

One day the fisherman and the three eldest children went to sea in their boat. The next three went to the village to buy some provisions. The mother and her youngest child were left at home alone.

The woman looked out the window of the cottage and saw the waves crashing onshore. Far away she could see, on the slick, black rocks, the seals playing and barking and singing. She sighed deeply, and her youngest child said, "Mother, you look so sad whenever you look at the sea."

Without thinking, the woman said, "That's because I was born in the sea, and that is the home to which I can never return because your father hid my sealskin."

Now the child, like all children in Scotland, had heard tales of the Selkie folk, and she knew right away what her mother was. At once she ran to the chimney and pulled the sealskin from its hiding place.

"When I was here alone with father once, he took this from its place and stared at it. I knew it must be something special, and now I know what it is."

The woman embraced the sealskin, and then her child. "My darling child, I'll always love you," she said, and then, clasping the sealskin to her heart, she ran toward the sea. There, slipping into her skin, she dived into the sea.

As soon as the woman leapt into the water, the other seals dived from their slippery rocks and swam toward her, and the child could hear their joyous cries. She knew that she had done the right thing.

She was never seen again on land, but sometimes when the children played on the shore, they would see a single seal watching them from the water. Though the fisherman missed his wife and the children missed their mother, they knew she was happy in the world where she belonged, and her happiness gave them a measure of joy.

### **Opening Words**

from *Sacred Instructions* by Sherri Mitchell

*In our bodies, we carry the blood of our ancestors and the seeds of the future generations. We are the living conduit of all life. When we contemplate the vastness of the interwoven network that we are tied to, our individual threads of life seem far less fragile. We are strengthened by who we come from and inspired by those who will follow.*

Before I begin, I want to just acknowledge that we stand on Wabanaki sacred land and take a moment to let that knowledge be in us.

## Reflection

Good morning. I want to open my remarks with some perspective. I was raised Unitarian Universalist. I stopped attending any church for my teenage and young adult years. During that time nature was my church, and it still is. When I had young children I joined this Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. I am very grateful for this faith, Unitarian Universalism, and this community. In addition to the natural world, it and you have been my solid ground. I am ever grateful for a faith that makes room for a wide range of understandings of life and Divinity. My grounding in it enables me to explore widely and actively pursue an interfaith path, while still participating as fully as I can in my birth tradition. To be clear, “interfaith” does not mean that I want to take on other people’s traditions as my own, but I also believe deeply that other traditions—and Indigenous traditions in particular—have always had important lessons to teach us, and especially right now.

Listen now to more words from Sherri Mitchell, Weh’na Ha’mu’ Kwasset, “She who brings the light.”

*All of our prophecies speak of this time: the time when the people of the world would begin waking up and unifying for the protection of life. As indigenous people, we have been guided to carry the sacred teachings that allowed us to maintain our connected way of life, so that when this time came, we would be able to help guide humanity back to a more balanced way of being.*

Last November I was blessed to find myself in Toronto Canada, attending and offering a workshop at the seventh Parliament of World Religions. (The first Parliament was held in 1893 at the Chicago Worlds Fair.) The First Nations people of Canada welcomed us all to their land the first day, for the Indigenous Assembly, followed on the second day by the Women’s assembly. I have never been to another event that made the loving, inclusive world we all dream of so palpably real. And always, I was inexorably drawn to listen to the Indigenous peoples and particularly, native women. Their vision and prophetic voice are calling us toward a better future.

While in Toronto, I was staying in an Air BnB with my two sisters and my cousin, who flew over for the Parliament from Great Britain. It turns out that all my mother’s other living relatives, beyond the four of us in the air BnB, live within striking distance of Toronto. So, of course, one evening we had an uproarious reunion at the Old Spagetti Factory. There were lots of first cousins I hadn’t seen in twenty years and second and third cousins once and twice removed that I had never met.

My maternal ancestral line was all from Montreal originally. Well, technically from Westmount, the English-speaking streetcar suburb of the city. Like so many English inhabitants of the Province of Quebec, they fled Montreal when the separatist movement was on the rise. Ironically, in their search for a more “English” city, they landed in Toronto, just designated the most multi-cultural city in the world. The contrast between the city and the Parliament of World Religions on the one hand and my Canadian family gathering on the other, could not have been more stark.

At the Parliament, especially at the Indigenous Assembly, there was a fair amount of talk about the ancestors, and here I was gathering with my own extended family, being reminded of my

own white colonial ancestors, whom I often seem to try not to think about too much. Clearly it was time to think about those ancestors, too. I have not done much genealogical research. Others in my family have, and I want to get that information from them, but that's actually not what I want to talk about today. Today I am talking about ancestor reverence.

I studied anthropology and archeology at school, so I knew that ancestor reverence is central to many traditions the world over, particularly Indigenous cultures, but it was certainly not a part of my Anglo upbringing. I longed for the wisdom of my own ancestors, but my restless city dwelling ancestors for generations back lacked the direct connection to the earth that people who have lived for thousands of years in the same place have. At the same time, I know that we all were indigenous to somewhere once, if we go back far enough. How could I access the wisdom of my more ancient ancestors?

When I heard Sherri Mitchell speak, first here at the Fellowship and then at the Lincoln Theater, her words were like an echo of things I had always known, but somehow forgotten. But it was at the annual Healing the Wounds of Turtle Island gatherings that the Native understanding of the ancestors began to really sink in. Sherri convenes Indigenous elders from all over the world on the shores of the Penobscot River in July every year and invites all of us to join them for four intense days of healing ceremony and teaching. I have been to the first two of the 21 year planned cycle. I will never forget the moment the first year when Sherry made the calm and ordinary-seeming announcement into the microphone: "The ancestors are here. They're at the edge of the woods, watching us. They want to know what we are going to do."

During the ceremonies, we were given the rare opportunity to be in the presence of the sacred wampum belts. The women who are the keepers of the belts told us of how many of the belts had been lost to them. This was a huge loss to the people. Much of the wisdom and knowledge of the ancestors is coded into those wampum belts. Slowly, over-time, and more and more recently, many of the belts have come back to them or been replicated. But the women told us they could no longer read or understand them. So, they prayed with the belts for many days and nights and waited and listened, and slowly, they heard and learned again what they used to know. The ancestors told them.

The ancestors first began to show up in my life around the time of my mother's death. I didn't see them or hear voices, but to my own surprise, I began to hear myself say to people that I felt their presence. My mother had Alzheimers' disease, so much of what she said appeared to make no sense. It would have been easy to discount the times she asked if we didn't want to go get those folks in the basement or the cellar and welcome them and find them beds. Or when she was restless and I was trying to calm her and she asked me if I wouldn't like to go in to town and get some herbs and potions. Or my favorite, the time she sat with me in front of the window on a beautiful spring day and exclaimed, "What a lovely celebration." It was not so hard for me to believe that the ancestors were circling round to ease her passage and welcome her with celebration.

Recently, I have begun to think that it might actually be the ancestors that are showing up in my life all the time, and have been for quite a while. For several years, I have been recording my dreams and also taking seriously and recording synchronicities when they occur. Carl Jung

pioneered the concept of synchronicities, which he described as "meaningful coincidences." I say that I don't know what they mean, but I know they are meaning-ful. They have so much in common with dreams, that I believe they spring from the same source, whether that is the collective unconscious, Divinity, or, just perhaps, the ancestors.

Both dreams and synchronicities for me, are largely "peopled" with animals. All my most meaningful epiphanies and experiences of the sacred occur in nature and often, the message is delivered by our feathered, scaled, and furred relations. The Wabanaki people tell us that we were the last creature to evolve on earth, so as Sherri Mitchell says, every creature is our ancestor. If we trace our ancestral lines back far enough, they do in fact converge. Every person alive today can trace their ancestry back to a single woman living in Africa. And every creature and plant (including us) can trace back further to a single celled organism living in the ocean.

But this is not an intellectual exercise or a self-reflective indulgence. I believe that understanding and healing my own ancestral line is essential to the wider healing and reconciliation work needed right now, especially with native peoples. I have been engaging the work of learning and acknowledging our shared history with my Wabanaki REACH group. We worked our way through the excellent curriculum that REACH provides and have since moved on to other efforts. It was our small group that arranged for Sherri Mitchell to speak at the Lincoln Theater. Recently a member of our group suggested that we ask the ancestors for guidance, and that's what we decided to do for our next ongoing effort.

I cannot say what form engaging the ancestors will take for us as a group, or for me as an individual in future. But in closing, I would like to offer a small glimpse of the form it has taken in my life so far. Think of it as a modern sequel to the Selkie myth, a myth from my own ancestors.

The day after my mother's death my sisters and I went down to the cottage and took a favorite walk through the woods to a bench right at the mouth of the river. A single seal was on the rocks just offshore, where we had not seen one before. Watching us. We've seen a single seal on those rocks on several occasions, since. Lately, I've been seeing seals further up the Damariscotta River more than I ever used to, even in the Great Salt Bay. Twice last summer, seals swam surprisingly close to me and my family where we were swimming in the river, their heads popping above the surface, gazing at us. The day we spread some of my mother's ashes on the tide below the same bench, we were surprised that the seal was not there. When we looked up from our ceremony, we found she had joined us and was watching closely from her rock.

Recently I dreamed of seals. Seals that crawled out of the ocean and headed inland, walking with the gate of salamanders. There was one mother and daughter pair. They walked together. I tried to turn them back toward the sea, but they kept going away from the ocean. They seemed to know what they were doing. Perhaps they were evolving. I had been thinking of the seals as bringing messages from the ancestors. But what if these seals are speaking for the descendants. What if they are telling us we need to evolve? I don't know what it all means. But I know I need to listen. To notice. To accept what is coming through and go where ever I am led—even when I don't know where I'm going.

## **Benediction**

Adapted from the poem, *For Calling the Spirit Back from Wandering the Earth in Its Human Feet* by Joy Harjo, award-winning poet and member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.

Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.

Open the door, then close it behind you....

Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time. They sit before the fire that has been there without time.

Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters.

Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you.  
Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought down upon them.

Don't worry.

The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises, interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and those who will despise you because they despise themselves.

The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few years, a hundred, a thousand or even more....

Let go the pain you are holding in your mind, your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet.  
Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way for those who are heading in our direction.

Ask for forgiveness.

Call upon the help of those who love you. These helpers take many forms: animal, element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.

Call your spirit back. It may be caught in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse....

Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It may return in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together. They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.

Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.

Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go....

Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.