

Your Therapist Isn't Your Tribe

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Over almost 20 years as a psychotherapist, I have often noticed clients' unexpressed pain stemming from isolation and disconnection from family and community. I often sensed an internal voice remind me, "You're not a tribe. What they are missing is bigger than what therapy offers." The reminder guided me as to what I could and couldn't offer, helping to define the parameter of therapy. I continued my practice, allowing this invisible knowingness to ebb and flow over the years.

Over 10 years ago I began working as a Systemic Family Constellations practitioner. Through my experiences with this body-based, experiential method and reconnecting with my own ancestral roots, my intuitions led to an expanded awareness of the need for healing in American culture. I could increasingly see that the difficulties people described in my office were not only individual problems; they mirrored the collectively unacknowledged experiences of our ancestors. I began to see a connection between our American quest for psychological health and the unacknowledged traumatic truths of our country's history. Emphasis on the individual experience of shame, guilt, perfectionism, communication, and abuse are in resonance with America's earliest immigrant, colonial history.

Therapists are trained to diagnose, analyze, treat, manage, medicate, hospitalize, pathologize, label, and help others cope with life. Where were, I wondered, healing resources in American culture for the tragedies and traumas experienced as a group, such as Indigenous American genocide, enslavement of African Americans, wars, health epidemics, the Great Depression?

Without intending to do so, psychotherapy has been asked to become one of our culture's replacements for ancestors, elders, shamans, medicine people... for the grandparents, the interconnectedness of the generations...for the web of connection lost when our ancestors emigrated from the home countries. Psychotherapy has in some ways become like a pacifier, a replacement for the real breast milk: family and tribal connection.

From dysfunctional family to honoring our roots

Many schools of psychological thought focus on the effects of wounding in family life. Modern language used to describe family experience in American culture is often rooted in pathology and judgment. The label “dysfunctional family” blinds us from seeing how the human experience takes place within the context of a larger ancestral web. Can we imagine our immigrant ancestors describing their elders as dysfunctional?

We have confused psychological health with the human condition, missing the most important fact: life got through. If you are reading this article, there is a fundamental way in which your family was functional: you’re alive. If this awareness is followed by a “yes, but...,” consider for a moment the impact on your sense of self, your identity, in your soul, on your cells and in your physical body, your relationships, your ancestors and your descendants, to live from the conviction, “My family is dysfunctional.” Does this belief have a strengthening or weakening effect on your being?

Over the last 100 years, many Americans have moved away from multi-generational, extended family networks. Many people seek therapy while living in a context of this isolation from grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. Connection with a therapist provides solace, comfort, and a place to learn that one’s feelings and experience are “normal.” What’s also true is that all of us, including therapists, are all entangled in one way or another with aspects of our family history that are waiting to be acknowledged. Each of us is a part of the larger, human family, and we need each other to wake up those aspects of our own ancestry that are ready to be seen, honored, and integrated.

Remembering our roots

It has become commonplace for Americans to link their identity to their jobs. Doing so while disconnected from ancestry exacerbates imbalance around work and family life. Whether your work life is flourishing or you are unemployed, you are more than your job. Imagine how American culture would be affected if each of us still practiced remembering our relationships as descendants with our ancestry:

My name is:

I am the daughter/son of:

I am the the granddaughter or grandson of:

I am the the great-granddaughter or grandson of:

My ancestors came from (name as many immigrant countries as you know or tribe if Indigenous American):

What effect does it have on you to consider introducing yourself in this way?

Are there blanks where you are unable to fill in the information?

What do you know about these circumstances?

Are there places where you sense a need for healing from one generation to the next?

What do you notice physically, emotionally, and spiritually as you consider these questions?

We are simply not as original as our egos or the American story would like us to believe. How we are living our lives is deeply influenced by the ones who came before us. As my practice has developed into teaching individuals and groups about ancestral resonance and reconnection, I consistently witness transformative strength that comes from seeing one's life experience in connection with earlier generations. Families can develop a trancelike way of existence in response to suffering. Understanding how the family trance is often passed on from one generation to the next and reconnecting with our ancestral roots often promotes compassion and a renewed respect for the human experience.

Lisa Iversen, MSW, LCSW, has been a Systemic Family Constellations practitioner since 1999 and a psychotherapist since 1993. She is the author of Ancestral Blueprints: Revealing Invisible Truths in America's Soul (Family Constellations West, 2009). Her areas of expertise and interest include transgenerational trauma, mental illness in families, effects of war in family and American culture, relationship between individual-collective healing, post-colonial healing, integration of indigenous and western healing approaches, visibility of feminine rooted wisdom, and ancestral resonance in daily living. Lisa lives in Bellingham, Washington with her husband and daughter. To learn more, visit www.ancestralblueprints.com.