

Breathing New Life into Old Pictures

By Lisa Iversen, MSW, LCSW



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Editor's Note: The first part of the article is taken directly from Lisa's book and therefore the American spellings have been retained.

Part I: Book Extract

I wrote the book Ancestral Blueprints: Revealing Invisible Truths in America's Soul with the hope that it would contribute to healing in American culture. The following book excerpt is an imperfect glimpse into how race, culture, and history intersect with one another in the United States:

While working in the Systemic Family Constellation field and connecting more deeply 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 therapy office were not only individual problems; they mirrored aspects of the collective American experience. I began to see a connection between our American quest for psychological health and the unacknowledged traumatic truths of our country's history. Popular self-help books about shame, guilt, perfectionism, and balance resonate with the shadow side of our nation, including its earliest roots: colonial genocide of Indigenous Americans and enslavement of African Americans.

The facts are clear: our country was established out of disconnection from earlier generations and ancestors' indigenous soil. Yet while immigrant ancestors left their home countries, part of their souls remained in the homelands. More than our minds can realize, this resonance deeply influences today's choices about family, work, politics, and life in the United States.

The American emphasis on self-reliance reinforces an impulse to disconnect from one's ancestry and, therefore, from oneself – an image that needing others or help is somehow unpatriotic. Over the last hundred 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.

Contemporary therapeutic language such as individuation, emancipation, codependence, and enmeshment are undoubtedly useful in one respect, but they are also in resonance with promoting images of the self-reliant American. Many schools of psychological thought also 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 immigrant ancestors describing their elders as dysfunctional?

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, and sometimes families 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 promotes compassion and a renewed respect for the human experience. In the Systemic Family Constellation field, I consistently witness transformative strength that comes from seeing one's life experience in connection with earlier generations.

Part II: President Barack Obama

Barack Obama's election embodies the importance of knowing from whom and where we come, of honouring our roots, and integrating our ancestry. He is showing us a picture of what it looks like to live out the richness of one's heritage, to acknowledge the home countries of one's ancestors, and to resist claiming one part of a lineage while denying the existence of another. Our human family is in resonance with the Obama family as America and the global community continues to adjust to his presidency. For the millions of Americans with white skin who have unseen ancestors with black or brown skin, for those with black or brown skin who have unacknowledged white ancestors, for those with ancestors from more than one country, the message is clear: no one is to be excluded. We tap into irreplaceable strength from acknowledging what we receive from both our mothers and our fathers and from all of our ancestors and their homelands. Obama's election breathes new life into old pictures, reminding us that our ancestors matter. Our heritage, our blood lineage...Cherokee, Scottish, Irish, Chinese, German, Choctaw, Mexican, Sioux, Jewish, Nigerian, Kenyan, the unnamed, the unknown...they all matter.

As we acknowledge our ancestry, we must also respectfully acknowledge the secrets that have been closely guarded by our families. Wherever we were born and raised, our bodies and some part of our being knows the truth about what has happened on that land in the generations before us. This is true whether or not we know the history in our minds. We are born into the silence that is passed from one generation to the next, but the truth asks to be seen, heard, and respected. President Obama reminded us of the power of this silence during his campaign speech in Philadelphia in 2008:

“Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. The comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeksⁱⁱ reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.”

Resisting the impulse to walk away from one another rests on our ability to resist walking away from ourselves and the parts of history that we would rather not claim. This movement of acceptance begins with each person's experience as a son or daughter. Acceptance requires developing compassionate self-awareness, both as individuals and as a country, where we are able to recognise our relationship with history just as it is today – whether it is claimed, denied, frozen, or integrated – in whatever condition it may be. When an individual or community has experienced division, trauma, or violence, coping muscles become habitually flexed. Often the coping patterns are passed on from one generation to the next and continue to be practised even when survival is no longer threatened.

The survival mode is necessary in times of crisis. However, when there is enough safety to express relief and joy, there is also permission to feel previously frozen grief and fear – feelings that remind people of their vulnerability and humanity. There was just such a collective exhalation of breath as President Barack Obama took the oath of office. His election symbolises unprecedented changes in the American landscape, cracking the ice in those places where America's soul has been in survival mode. We are asked to examine the costs of our history and show each other what is truly our greatest strength: that no matter where each person comes from, whatever his or her history has been, we are indeed all a part of the same human family.

When Americans gather together – in small towns, reservations, cities, suburbs and farming communities; in coffee houses, schools, diners, libraries and malls– history is with us in each moment and in every place. We are invited to see ourselves in each other's reflections as daughters and sons, women and men, parents and children. We are descendants of immigrant and indigenous, coloniser and colonised, enslaved and enslaver, with a steady opportunity to recognise our common bonds. In these ordinary gathering places, we are called to see how we have protected ourselves from history, where we have lost connection with our origins, and if we have judged each other for what we do or don't have, or what our ancestors did or didn't do. We are invited to acknowledge how we make ourselves more important than another, or make others more important than ourselves.

Tears of joy at Barack Obama's inauguration will become historical artifacts, and will eventually cloud our vision if we are unable to acknowledge both his and our own human imperfections and fallibility as American citizens. This is also true for those whose eyes were dry, who would have preferred a different outcome to this historic election or who are struggling to accept an African American man as their president. Inheritance belongs to all of us, and we are all entangled in one way or another with the unseen images of America's history. As we embrace our collective American ancestry, we create a solid foundation for democracy in its highest form.

Indigenous Americans: Unseen Mentors for American Democracy

According to Native American elder Oren Lyons (2007): *"In 1492, Haudenosaunee - which is better known as the Iroquois by the French, and Six Nations by the English - already had several hundred years of democracy, organised democracy. We had a constitution here based on peace, based on equity and justice, based on unity and health. This was ongoing."*

Richard Williams of the American Indian College Fund (2003) continues: *"The political structure of the great Iroquois Confederacy served as a model for democracy among the founding fathers, who wrote the Constitution based on 'we the people,' something unheard of in the aristocratic, feudal societies of Europe. In fact, there is no word for 'I' in any American Indian language, which was a profound concept to the framers who closely studied the tribes' customs, government and culture."*

American Indian democracy existed within the web of ancestral connection. Indigenous principles of law and order made a profound impression on the European founding fathers; this Indigenous influence is generally ignored in the retelling of American history. *"As far as I know, all the other Indian nations functioned more or less the same way. Their leadership was chosen by the people. Leaders were fundamentally servants to the people,"* says Lyons (2007). However, those influential principles of law could not be lived out in the same way for this new country. Indian democracy was grounded in ancestry. In contrast, American democracy was created in a context of immigration, colonial genocide, and institutional slavery.

American Historian Bruce Johansen (1990) explains: *"John Adams observed that Benjamin Franklin...and other great philosophers and politicians of the age were attempting to set up governments of...modern Indians."* Adams saw American Indian governments as a window to the pre-monarchical past of Europeans. The founders looked to American Indian ideas about government because they believed that American Indian societies possessed a democratic heritage that European society had largely lost. This truth remains largely invisible in mainstream American culture: American Indians were mentors for democracy to America's European forebears.

Nature's Laws vs. Courtroom Laws

Since before the inception of the United States, laws were created in courtrooms to justify taking what there was no permission to take. *"The ideas of land tenure and ownership were brought here. We didn't think that you could buy and sell land. In fact, the ideas of buying and selling were concepts we didn't have...And we said: 'Well, how can you buy land? You might just as well buy air, or buy water.' That is precisely what has happened...They said: 'Let's make us a law here; we'll call it the law of discovery.' The first Christian nation that discovers this land will be able to secure it and the other Christian nations will respect that,"* reflects Lyons (2007).

Rules written on paper by attorneys cannot replace internalised, inherited laws of human life that exist within the web of all relations. One of the consequences of European Americans' disconnection with ancestry has been the delegation of family issues regarding balance, justice, and belonging to courts. This larger context of American history has allowed property laws to become the basis for family law. The same legal system that was created to justify the founding of our country became the foundation for

today's courts that are overwhelmed with family law issues such as custody and divorce suits, child and adult protective services, domestic violence restraining orders, and foster care management.

"The law has had such a profound impact on the way Americans have understood and experienced family life...family law, past and present, is too important to be left to the lawyers, or even the legal historians," reflects Michael Grossberg, American Historical Review (2001).

Today the USA has seventy percent of all the lawyers on earth, one for every 200 adults in America. Former President Jimmy Carterⁱⁱⁱ once commented:

"We have more litigation, but I am not sure that we have more justice. No resources of talent and training in our own society... (are) more wastefully or unfairly distributed than legal skills. Ninety percent of our lawyers serve ten percent of our people. We are over-lawyered and under-represented."

Lyons (2007) continues:

"In most Indian nations, because they had inhabited one place for so long and were a people for so long, the rules and laws were embedded in the genes of the people more or less, in the minds of the people certainly, but not written. Plenty of law, almost on everything, but unspoken. Unspoken unless transgressed. There was always reaction to transgression."

Today we all pay the price with a litigious climate, excess of lawyers, and difficulty saying: "I'm sorry," in the face of injustice.

Who Invented White People?

In honour of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday in 1998, Dr. Gregory Jay from the University of Wisconsin gave the provocative talk: "Who Invented White People?" Jay reflects:

"From the days of the founding fathers until the Civil Rights movement, 'white' was a common term in the law as well as society. Federal, state, and local officials regularly passed laws containing the word 'white' defining everything from slavery and citizenship to where people could sit on a bus....Over and over we hear people say: 'Race shouldn't matter', that we should, or even do, have a 'colour blind society'. What has happened, I think, is that we have instead created a blindness to whiteness, or been blinded by whiteness itself."^{iv}

The contemporary meaning of whiteness developed in the context of colonialism. Colonising European ancestors needed a defining trait to distinguish themselves from American Indian and African American populations whom they were colonising and enslaving. At first, religious distinction (specifically Christianity) was a way to establish superiority and justify both colonisation and slavery. The practice of saving souls went hand in hand with taking land or exploiting labour. Eventually skin colour, an unchangeable trait (versus religious or spiritual identification), became the way European forebears could rationalise colonial practices.

Jay continues:

“No longer a European, the American represents a new race made from the stock of various European nations...America was that place where the downtrodden classes of Europe could throw off the oppression of aristocrats and attain not only fraternal equality among themselves, but superiority over those who were not of the new white race. When the Constitution of the United States was written, it thus specifically enshrined slavery into law and denied citizenship to enslaved Africans. When the Naturalization Act of 1789 was made law, it stipulated that only 'whites' were eligible for naturalisation as citizens (a clause persistently contested by people of Chinese and Japanese ancestry for the next 150 years).”

According to Dr. Joy DeGruy-Leary (2005):

“Of greatest import, the American slavery experience was exclusively based on the notion of racial inferiority...Africans were considered to be ‘presumed’ or ‘natural’ slaves based on their skin colour. They were also referred to as ‘thinking property’ and inherently ‘rightless persons’. In few societies, if any, were so large a group of people considered to be less than human.”

Her experiences with constellation work have helped a Nigerian immigrant named ‘Dee’ understand the racial tension she experiences living in the southern USA:

“I came to the USA from West Africa where the slave trade was the biggest. I remember when I first came to America eleven years ago—all the faces I saw were so familiar. They looked alike: like cousin this, brother that, their whole behaviour and body language – everything. I used to talk about it with my friends. They would also be looking, confirming what I was thinking. As I became more entrained in American culture, I wanted to understand why the Indigenous African and African Americans were not friendly. It was really troubling for me. Ninety-nine percent of my friends in the USA are European American.”

“What is the issue? It all goes back to slavery. Over many generations, there is the gap between the ancestors who sold and the ancestors who were sold that lives on in the descendants. In the middle of it all are the Europeans. They have more affinity to the Indigenous Africans. It’s easier to befriend them instead of African Americans. I couldn’t understand it until seeing the bond – every which way there is the bond.”

Most scientists and academics agree that race is a socially constructed idea. Without this idea, belief systems such as white supremacy would have no foundation. Ancestry, however, is not only about skin colour. It is about generational connection, home countries, languages, faith traditions and other aspects of lineage. Identifying as ‘white’ helps avoid the complexity of European American heritage: what is known and unknown; questions unasked and unanswered.

For today’s conversations about race to be constructive or healing, white Americans must become more grounded in the truth of their own European ancestries and mixed heritages. Knowing where one belongs as a descendant within the ancestral web is key to this groundedness. Our minds can best serve our

human family during this historical time by re-acquainting ourselves with our ancestral roots. Doing so provides the necessary strength required to more fully face these difficult parts of the history of the USA.

Dee concludes:

“There was an African American woman who came to the constellation workshop and felt: ‘Haven’t the whites done enough? Here she (Lisa) is coming here (to Atlanta, Georgia) when it’s white people who have caused the problems’....By the time the constellation was over, the other woman could’ve been white and Lisa, black. The woman saw that she had not been able to relieve the pain of her ancestors in slavery. She had become her own slave owner. She walked like a slave and had no money. The constellation allowed her to relieve this pain, to know that she is not a slave, and to see that the ancestors can carry the burden of slavery. They want their descendants to feel joy, freedom, happiness, love.”

“For each African American person, this comes up: handing these things back to the ancestors. Our ancestors have done a wonderful job. We don’t need to do it – to suffer for them. We need to remember that it is disrespectful to think that they need our help. They don’t need you to do this; they have already done it. That came out so clearly. This woman called later and said: ‘Thank you. This is an avenue that I know that constellations can help with so much in this country’.”

Notes:

ⁱ “A More Perfect Union” speech given during United States presidential campaign, Constitution Center, Philadelphia, PA, USA. March 18, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Obama’s frank speech was prompted by allegations that he shared his pastor’s controversial opinions on race relations.

ⁱⁱⁱ Remarks made at 100th Anniversary Luncheon of the Los Angeles County Bar Association, Los Angeles, CA, USA in 1978.

^{iv} Speech entitled: “Who Invented White People?” speech, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, WI, USA.

^v Direct quote from conversation between Rev. Adedumola (‘Dee’) Carter, Nelda Danz, and Lisa Iversen in 2008.

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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.