I am a descendant of the Lynx moving along the edge of forests. I am a descendant of Buffalo hunters on the Northern Plains. I am a descendant of wild rice and sweet lakes. I am a descendant of cranberry gatherers in the Turtle Mountains. I am a descendant of earth divers and round dancers. I am a granddaughter of Mary Sauvage, Mary Cree, and Mary Caribou, my indigenous foremothers, who were given Christian first names and kept tribal markers as surnames. Boozhoo Nokomis!

I am a descendant of French Voyageurs seeking soft beaver skins for money. I am a descendant of women who married bears and made moccasins. I am a descendant of traders and merchants carrying canoes loaded with animal pelts across portages in the prairie. I am a descendant of fiddle players and jiggers. Bonjour Grand-meres Poitra, Malaterre, Amyotte.

I am a descendant of boarding-school survivors and Michif-language speakers, “half-breeds” and passers. I am a descendant of winter starvation survivors and rabbit trappers. I am a descendant of relocated urban Indians raised by Catholic nuns and frozen Juneberries. Tansi Nokom! I am a descendant of the Sixth Fire.

I am a descendant of Scandinavian women who made mead and went to battle with metal shields. I am the descendant of Norwegian farmers growing barley in North Dakota throughout the twentieth century. I am the descendant of Protestant preachers and elementary school teachers. I am the granddaughter of the Nelsons, Evansteds, and Semlings. Hei Bestomor!

In greeting my ancestors, I recognize that I am touched with all of the stories that they carried as human beings on the Earth: their seeds, waters, traumas, legacies, worries, pains, victories, and love. I am tied to them physically and metaphysically as my ancestral roots. As the late great poet John Trudell would say, we need to recognize our true DNA, our Descendants-N-Ancestors. In the Anishinaabe language, the word for ancestor is aanikoobishigan, which is based on a root word meaning “string or tie it together.” To be an ancestor is to be tied together throughout the generations. But what is it that ties us—genes, behaviors, blood, languages, identities, breath?

As my Tongan elder friend Emile Wolfram often asks me, “Are your actions worthy of the conspiracy of your ancestors?” What did they have in mind for me and the future of our kin? Ancestors give us life, so that is first and foremost. We wouldn’t be here without them. They provide identity and history. Through their stories of struggle and survival, they also give strength, perseverance, and courage. My ancestors have also given me the ability to embrace a diversity of perspectives, representing both the colonizer and the colonized and the messy, mixed spectrum between. In this reflection, they help me think about what kind of legacy I can leave for future generations and what kind of ancestor I want to be. I wonder what is it that gets transmitted and why. Is this a deliberate act, like planting a domestic seed in well-prepared ground, or is it a wild process, like big leaf maple seeds spinning through the sky after a big gust of wind? Trickster consciousness tells me, of course, that it is both and neither.
I want to be an ancestor who “remembered to remember” and who worked to restore the fragments of Turtle Island knowing and being out of the wreckage of colonial collisions and monocultural assimilation. This is what it means to be a descendant of the Sixth Fire. There was dislocation and ethnocide, cultural rupture from boarding school, stolen and poisoned lands, and enforced poverty and dis-ease due to oppression and racism. The prophecy of the Fifth and Sixth Fires said there would be much pain from so many relatives pushed off the Red Road and forced into the Split-Head Society. Too many dying from the “soul wound” of colonialism or disappearing in a bottle of oblivion to self-medicate from the intergenerational grief passed down. These are some of the legacies of colonialism that I inherit. These mark my body, mind, and psyche in subtle and overt ways: genetics and epigenetics and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and endocrine disrupters. All real and measurable on the geography of native presence.

These traumas I inherit along with profound resilience, a faith in compassionate kinship, and a reliance on trickster play and humor. We are the survivors of relocations, dispossessions, and warfare. We are the first people of this land, and my ancestors remind me to remember the regenerative powers of life. “Just like the Thunderers and underwater beings, there are many things beneath and around us to teach us to climb well, to deal with opposition and conflict.”

As Seventh Fire descendants, we seek out our original names and clans from elders and teachers and relearn our languages and practices, even if it is sometimes from internet classes, academic books, and state museums. If we are lucky, elders and knowledge holders are available to talk with. In piecing together the ancestral patchwork of the Sixth Fire, I come to understand that even though it is crucial to revitalize cultural knowledge and practices and heal from colonial fragmentation, the liberated, uncolonized spirit of the Earth is always available as an ally. In the diversity and beauty of Mother Earth and Father Sky I can find inspiration for my decolonized spirit. Regardless of outer circumstances and projections, my learning spirits can be nourished by the indestructible life force that surrounds us and is within us. As one of my great teachers, the late physicist and philosopher David Bohm, used to say, “There is a reality independent of human thought.” Even though we inherit encyclopedias of human thought and collective experience (while much of this is a blessing, a lot of it is limiting baggage) the doorway of the present moment and our interwoven connection to non-human life reminds me of a liberated co-existence. “In fact, the waters and rocks can be the very lessons themselves. In an Anishinabek view of the world, the laws of life are all around us.” And these natural laws are inherently based on a fabric of mutuality and reciprocity that is ultimately stronger than colonial disruptions.

Given this inheritance and diverse basket of learnings, I want to be an ancestor who nourished legacies of health without forgetting the pain. I want to be remembered as someone who helped create space to nurture a sense of belonging, belonging to that fundamental fabric of wholeness that ultimately created us and will absorb us once again. I want to serve as a pallbearer for the burial of colonial, fragmented worldviews and practices that support separation and to act as a midwife for a new/old consciousness of justice and harmony, what we Anishinaabeg call the Eighth Fire.

There are times when we should permit death to come as comfortably and beautifully as possible, embracing the mystery of death as a sacred doorway. There is much in our given society that needs to die: racism, sexism, colonialism, predatory capitalism, greed, or what Leanne Simpson calls “extractivism”—the mining of land, waters, and human life for individual profit
and greed. Some have called this the “commodification of the sacred.” So much of this results from a lack of compassion and empathy and a predatorial, solipsistic existence. Capitalistic societies hellbent on Eurocentric notions of “empire,” “consumerism,” and “progress” are obsessed with and addicted to the power of domination and destruction. Much needs to die and be composted to transform into something truly fertile and nourishing again to all life, not just for select groups of humans, the 1 percent. We also need to end ongoing cycles of violence and trauma that perpetuate neglect, abuse, and violence. These are related to the structural inequities maintained by the neocolonialism of capitalism, often simply called economic globalization. Ohlone/Esselen writer Deborah Miranda refers to this as the “genealogy of violence.”

I decided to end some of these cycles by not having my own biological children. It was perhaps an extreme decision, but I felt that I needed to heal myself and make time to understand my inheritance before I could reproduce a healthy human being. I know that children are also very healing and can aid in this process, but for me, it was a matter of focus. Due to my parents’ traumas, I had to grow up quickly and often served as a parent for adults, so from a young age I felt that I would choose to be childless. I chose this not only to review my inheritance without perpetuating unconscious patterns onto innocent lives, but to lessen the pressure on the finite resources of the Earth—the very “resources,” or more accurately, relatives, that held me together as a child. I also knew that there are many parentless children in the world that need care. If I wanted to care for a child, I could always adopt. I also wanted to acknowledge and honor all of the women who worked hard to win women the right to not have children and stand in silent solidarity with all of the women who had children even though it was maybe not their choice or path. On a metaphysical level, I am committed to not being a host for hungry ghosts or a perpetrator of traumas onto new life. I left my children in the unborn spirit realm. This has been an austere sacrifice, but it feels like an
authentic part of my life path. It is certainly not for others who enjoy and benefit from the sacred gift of childbirth and biologically producing the next generation, which is a profound and beautiful process. Yet for me, not having my own biological children was a way I could try to end something unhealthy and unconscious and to open space for other, non-biological explorations and creations.

This came, of course, with some grieving. Hospice work is often about embracing the grieving process. It includes peering into one’s shadow stories and hidden fears. Grieving work involves opening up painful spaces of immense sadness and loss through individual, family, and cultural lines. It can also reveal unconscious shame, guilt, and trauma that can precipitate opportunities for healing and transformation. These opportunities are available in extraordinary and ordinary moments, whenever someone holds a safe space for difficult conversations or for divergent worldviews to collide and coalesce. I want to be an ancestor who facilitated space for these types of inquiries and explorations, to be present and authentic in the face of inevitable pain or conflict. As poet Robinson Jeffers put it, “The calm to look for is the calm at the whirlwind’s heart.” I do this as a teacher and youth mentor, and most significantly as a lover, partner, daughter, friend, and sister. As the saying goes, when you have no children of your own, all children are yours, and we can serve as nourishing mothers or ancestors at any time as needed or requested.

To balance the grieving work, I also want to be an ancestor who served as a midwife and witness to a new/old consciousness, to the Eighth Fire, the new generation of young people who are strong, beautiful, and united despite pressures to stay isolated and divided. This is the generation of proud Métis, Mestizo, Hapa, Creole, queer, fluid, passionate young people who are healing the relationship between the Indigenous and the settler, the colonizer and colonized, the feminine and the masculine, and are consciously choosing to walk the Green Path, the Pollen Path, the Red Road, and the Beauty Way to a peaceful co-existence on this precious Earth. This generation is rejecting colonial divisions and is rising up and out of the drowning anguish of our times with hip-hop music, Round dance, Earth poetry, and new collective structures (i.e., permaculture coops, artist collectives, and urban farms) dedicated to harmony and justice. They are the Guardians of the Waters, they are Earth Guardians, they are countless young people speaking out about climate disruption and gun violence. Earth Guardians co-founder Xiuhtezcatl Roske-Martinez, who helped file a lawsuit against the U.S. federal government and fossil fuel industry, shares:

When those in power stand alongside the very industries that threaten the future of my generation instead of standing with the people, it is a reminder that they are not our leaders. The real leaders are the twenty youth standing with me in court to demand justice for my generation and justice for all youth.

Young, strong, and growing, these are the people of the Eighth Fire. You met some of them at the beginning of this section. I have been honored to serve with them as midwife, witness, teacher, mentor, friend, student, and ally.

Together in the San Francisco Bay area we have been planting seeds, the Three Sisters—Iroquois white corn, with numerous varieties of squash and beans—and other sacred foods given to us by Creator and our web of kin: strawberry, tobacco, sunflower, and others. Through the Cultural Conservancy, we grow these beautiful plants at an organic farm to nourish ourselves and others and practice food sovereignty. We feast on them and learn and teach the whole process from seed germination to various harvesting and cooking methods. Hungry youth
come to us seeking to relearn ways to connect to and celebrate healthy, local foods. They come hungry for their ancestral seeds to nourish their bodies and indigeneity. Some also come with handfuls of seeds and their own knowledge of farming and planting, lessons from their families and communities, to share with us. In addition to the delicious, cultivated food plants we grow we also learn about elderberry, tule, Oregon grape, manzanita, willow, and other Native perennial plants that grow in Northern California. For the first peoples of this land, these plants serve as the basis for food, medicine, and craft, from cough syrup to canoes.

Robin Kimmerer has shared that “to give a gift is to be as a berry in our Anishinaabeg language.” I have received many gifts of berries throughout my life: salmon berry, thimbleberry, huckleberry, blueberry, and blackberry from my homelands in Northern California and Juneberry, chokecherry, cranberry, raspberry, and saskatoon berry from my homelands in the Turtle Mountains of North Dakota, to name a few. These berries are my ancestors. Late summers they are usually dark and juicy, sweet and tangy, delectable and intoxicating. Sometimes, though, they are bitter and mealy, dry and acrid. But always they are vivacious in some tangible way. To receive these gifts, to ingest and absorb them into our bodies and beings, is a vital act of nourishment. I have also received such numerous gifts from my ancestors, the sweet and bitter, tasty and sour, all nourishing my body, mind, heart, and spirit in potent and mysterious ways. These berries bind my generations together. So the ancestor I want to be is as a berry—to nourish, nurture, inspire, and vitalize. I can be this as a specific seed planted as a teacher in a classroom with eager youth, and I can also be that seemingly random maple or cattail seed released by the strong north wind to wander and flow wherever it needs to go.

Photo credits: Melissa K. Nelson

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay appears in the Center for Humans and Nature’s book *What Kind of Ancestor Do You Want to Be?*, eds. John Hausdoerffer, Brooke Parry Hecht, Katherine Kassouf Cummings, and Melissa K. Nelson (University of Chicago Press).

Melissa K. Nelson is a professor of Indigenous Sustainability in the School of Sustainability at Arizona State University and president of the Cultural Conservancy. She is a co-editor of and contributor to *Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Learning from Indigenous Practices for Environmental Sustainability* (2018). Melissa is a proud member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.