

Accessing Ancestral Embodied Knowledge

By Zainab Amadahy
Published in The Peak, 2016

“The Ancestor Effect”¹ is a term coined by psychology researchers who authored an article of the same title. The publication discusses findings of a study that showed how merely thinking about ancestors improves memory, creative abilities and problem solving capacities. Volunteers in the studies who turned their attention to ancestors also scored higher on intelligence tests than those who did not. The research team attributes the *Ancestor Effect* to the impact emotions have on the body -- a mind/body phenomenon. Thoughts of ancestors generally evoke affection, admiration, respect and pride. Often we are thankful to those who came before us for enduring hardships and surviving long enough to contribute to a better life for succeeding generations. Such feelings, whatever thoughts they engender, enhance our mental capacities and generate measurable indicators of optimum physical health and longevity.

This study affirms the belief of many cultural wisdom traditions that cultivating relationships with ancestors benefits wellbeing in measurable ways. At this point we have to wonder if science will ever validate many practices across cultures that enable us to access ancestral knowledge through cultivating those relationships. Some of the science discussed in this article comes remarkably close, with admittedly miles and miles to go.

When intuition was all we had, we trained, developed and honed it. But as The Divine Masculine tilted into patriarchy, intuition lost its value. We were encouraged to trust only the measurable, tangible and reproducible. We stopped investing in the intuitive. Our skills deteriorated. Our trust waned. Perception yielded to science. Our instincts receded in favour of ideas that separated us into disconnected individuals living in a survival-of-the-fittest competition.

This process occurred in different ways around the world. For most of us colonization imposed a Eurocentric worldview that ridiculed and discounted the notion of even valuing, much less reclaiming ancestral knowledge. Now researchers are “discovering” there are profound and verifiable truths to our wisdom traditions and that ancestral knowledge either resides in or can be accessed through our bodies. We will explore some of those findings here and I will leave you with a simple process for accessing ancestral wisdom.

Before we proceed, please consider a few questions: What is ancestral knowledge? Is it quantifiable facts and information? Wisdom needed to apply information in beneficial ways? Insights into the nature of our perceived reality? Is it all that and more? Furthermore, the term “ancestral” knowledge suggests we are accessing information from the past. But the passage of time is only a perception, a consequence of our function in a material/physical world. This begs the question of whether we can access information from what we perceive as the future; from our descendants. These are questions I don’t intend to answer for you but they have come up for me as I research what my body seems to know/remember/access. My answer to these

¹ Peter Fischer, Anne Sauer, Claudia Vogrincic and Silke Weisweiler. “The Ancestor Effect: Thinking about our genetic origin

questions has shifted over time and, in the end only assures me that what I don't know is immeasurably vast. Nevertheless, I welcome this opportunity to share what I think I know.

I've intersected with many teachings from various traditions around the idea of inherited knowledge. Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous African spiritualities, African diasporic spiritualities, First Nations, Maori, and Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) are among those I've directly encountered but there are many more. Often teachings around how to access that knowledge are encoded in metaphorical language, allegory and stories. Many wisdom traditions encourage experiential learning but, even so, beliefs colour one's experiences. The rational, logical, analytical mind (which is more valued in settler colonial culture than intuition) can't easily comprehend, quantify and categorize information that comes in the form of metaphor. Scientific method requires the reproduction of the same results under the same conditions over and over again before it will validate any experience as "real". Unique, personalized, diverse and symbolic experiences that can only be interpreted by the experiencer do not lend themselves to scientific investigation.

However, you don't have to quantify or otherwise make experiences tangible to know their value. As Malidoma Somé (Dagara, Burkina Faso) has noted in *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, "The more intense an experience, the more likely indigenous people are to leave in the language in which it came rather than to discuss and dissect it with words. It is almost as if discussing diminishes what is being discussed. Villagers feel that words conquer experience, dislodging experience from its rightful place of power. So unless powerful experiences and ideas are addressed poetically, or with proverbs, people don't want to take the risk of losing in a fog of words what they have struggled so hard to acquire." Likewise, reductionist scientific inquiries that want to measure and verify experience related to ancestors can diminish its power and significance. Hence, we must ask ourselves if the scientific story of reclaiming embodied ancestral knowledge has its limits.

Given that many spiritual and cultural paradigms have varied and beautiful ways of understanding, acquiring and applying ancestral knowledge you may decide you have no need of the science. However, you can choose to add scientific stories to your personal and cultural understandings. Your body can certainly handle both, even if your brain chooses not to. One of the reasons I enjoy exploring the scientific story is because it belongs to all of us, if we want it.

In this article, I explore two scientific stories of accessing embodied ancestral knowledge: 1) epigenetic inheritance and 2) biofield studies. Epigenetic inheritance is now a field of study accepted by establishment scientists. Many peer reviewed articles have been published in the last decade showing that the social and physical environment impacts how our genes express themselves and that the traumas and chronic stress suffered by our ancestors (up to 5 generations back, the science holds) can impact the form and function of our bodies. Essentially our body produces proteins in response to our physical and social environments. These proteins will inform how genes express themselves.

We've known about the impact of the physical environment on our genes for some time. Toxic chemicals, gamma radiation (from x-rays) and ultraviolet light provide unfortunate examples of how the external environment can adversely impact our genes. At the same time we know that healthy food, adequate exercise and time spent in nature also impact our genes in the direction of wellness and longevity.

Relatively new information in the world of epigenetics illustrates that your reaction to your social environment will also produce biochemicals that impact your genetic expression, for better or worse. Ancestors who were raised in nurturing, healthy, loving environments and lived lives of relative safety and privilege likely had many experiences that enabled their bodies to produce hormones and other biochemicals that promoted a sense of connection, wellness and longevity. Thus, they were able to pass down physical and genetic attributes that promote wellbeing in their descendants.

Ancestors who were enslaved, forced to attend residential school, grew up in war zones, suffered forms of abuse and otherwise lived for extended periods (if not their whole lives) in a state of chronic stress. Their bodies produced bucket loads of biochemistry that reflected and exacerbated their stress-filled, unsafe lives. Those molecules, in turn, shaped their organs and genes. These ancestors can easily have passed down a genetic legacy that predisposes you to physical illness, personality disorders and hypersensitivity to stressful environments.

Furthermore, at the level of DNA, recent discoveries by cell biologist Glen Rein, PhD are further illustrative. DNA is the material that is located in the cell's nucleus that makes up the chromosomes and genes. Rein found that “positive” emotions expand the DNA molecule, making it more resilient and consequently better able to contribute to healing and wellness. “Only the love-based emotions stimulate DNA to decompress so that messenger RNA can access codes for healing”. On the other hand, contractive emotional states compress the DNA helix, “severely limiting access to genetic information necessary for healing as well as evolution”.²

While the hows, whys and limitations of epigenetic inheritance are still being investigated, this new science is broadly accepted because it can be explained in terms of biochemical and molecular interactions. Nevertheless, there is still recognition of what ancient wisdom traditions have known for millennia: that our bodies contain inherited physical, emotional and mental information. On the other hand, biofield studies, which focus on the conversations between and among energy fields, is less known in mainstream circles.

According to “Biofield Science and Healing: An Emerging Frontier in Medicine”, (Global Advances in Health and Medicine, November 2015) the term *biofield* was coined in 1992 at a US National Institutes of Health conference, where it was defined as “a massless field, not necessarily electromagnetic, that surrounds and permeates living bodies and affects the body.” The term biofield is a Medical Subject Heading (MeSH term) at the US National Library of Medicine. The National Institutes of Health and several pharmaceutical companies are currently investing in research that will map the body’s energy fields with the hope of developing technologies that have clinical applications. The predominant aspiration is that introducing healthy frequencies of light, sound or other forms of electro-magnetism to the biofield, or parts of it, will catalyze a syncing up of unhealthy vibrational patterns to healthy ones, thus positively impacting body tissues and cells.

² Rein, G., “Effect of Conscious Intention on Human DNA”, Proceedings of the International Forum on New Science, Denver, Colorado, October 1996, <http://tinyurl.com/79mw5c7>

It's not really an unusual idea to apply energetic frequencies to diagnose and treat illness. Witness the standard healthcare uses of ultra sound, x-rays, EEG, ECG and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) -- not to mention the application of electric shock to patients in cardiac arrest.

When I started reading about biofield research, I couldn't help but note the parallels between the theoretical science and wellness paradigms offered by many wisdom and Indigenous knowledge traditions. According to several researchers in the above referenced journal, "Biofield concepts are rooted in indigenous schools of medicine, as evidenced by 'whole medical systems' practices such as Chinese, Tibetan, Native American, African and Ayurvedic medicine". Many of these cultural wellness practices are energy-based, meaning they focus more on manipulating, relocating and restoring vibrational frequencies of the body's various energy fields or currents to accelerate healing and maintain wellness.

Dr. Richard Gerber, MD in *Vibrational Medicine* (March 2001), defines biofield as "the energy field that surrounds and interpenetrates the physical body. The biofield is made up of magnetic and electromagnetic energies generated by living cells."

My definition of the biofield is that it's a collection of energy fields, some produced by and others interacting with the body. Biofields can be influenced by and also influence the structure and function of a living body.

The DNA molecule that resides in every living cell of your body has its own biofield that vibrates to its own signature frequency that some scientists have described as a "theme song". Since your ancestors are represented in your DNA you could say, metaphorically, that their songs weave your biofield.

There are many aspects of biofield science that I currently find relevant to recovering ancestral wisdom. Among decades of research findings that physicist Rupert Sheldrake points to, there is mounting and convincing evidence of what he calls a "morphogenic" field that organizes and stores information in the universe, including that which comprises our physical body. Knowledge stored in the field can pass from one generation to the next. This has been shown to happen in animal species such as lab rats where if you teach one generation of rats a skill, such as how to run a maze, their offspring will learn that skill faster. In fact, each generation increases the speed at which the skill is learned. Once these findings began to be repeated it was then learned that a direct genetic link to the previous generation was not needed for the rats to learn faster. What rats mastered in Germany could be passed on to the next generation of the same species in Japan, London or anywhere.

Studies controlling for social and environmental conditions impacting learning and memory for humans also began producing multi-decade-long studies suggesting the same thing: that each succeeding generation of humans has the capacity to learn at a faster rate.

Biofield and consciousness studies, admittedly controversial, have spawned a lot of theorizing about memory and knowledge being located outside of the brain; that there is a network of interacting energy fields that contain all the knowledge of the universe and that our bodies and brains can act as filters of that information in order for us to have a human experience in the physical world. One branch of theory suggests that the

physical and mental work done in many ceremonies, rituals and practices (breathing, meditation, chanting, drumming, etc.) aimed at reclaiming ancestral knowledge is about opening the body or parts of it to allow knowledge already in the morphogenic field to filter through into our conscious awareness.

From another branch of theory we can speculate that if we as human beings living in this reality are nothing more than a collection of energy fields interacting with each other, death does not destroy the information contained in those fields. In addition, we inherit some of the information in those fields, specifically 50% from each biological parent. (This percentage comes from the fact that 50% of our genetic information is inherited from each parent and genetic information at its core is an energy field). Time, as mentioned, is illusory - a perception symptomatic of our material, physical form of existence. The information that comprises any individual exists in a timeless form and maybe that is what we access through rituals, ceremonies, practices and the dreamtime. Some of it might be residing in our own biofield and some of it might be called in from fields we interact with.

This emerging science begs the questions of who we are connecting with when accessing ancestral wisdom and does it matter? Do all ancestors belong to everyone? Does a genetic connection matter? Again, I urge you to experiment and see what your body tells you.

These are a growing number of stories that science is telling us concerning our capacity to access ancestral knowledge. These align with some of the ancestral wisdoms with which I'm familiar, although, in comparison to the wealth of cultural and spiritual knowledge, the scientific story is a very tiny file in a vast collection of data.

Science aside, my own experiences testify to the human capacity to "catch" knowledge we were never given in any formal way. I carry several cultural, scientific and intuitive stories about how that happens and you are welcome to develop or learn your own stories. My purpose from here on is to share what I've learned about ways to access ancestral knowledge, whether stored, filtered by or otherwise accessed through the body.

Some of the cultural protocols around connecting with ancestors are very precise and specific. The teachers and elders I've encountered have provided various explanations as to why that is. If you prefer to use these practices and work with knowledge keepers, it certainly doesn't hurt. At the risk of disagreeing with some folks, I don't happen to believe these protocols are essential to connecting with ancestral wisdom. This is evidenced for me by the many times I've been able to do it outside of the prescribed practices of one culture or another and by the anecdotal evidence others have done the same. This happens with dreams, meditation, drug-induced and other experiences. I've even been known to catch a download or two in the middle of my swim workout.

At the same time, cultural practices that have been in use for centuries, and served communities perfectly well for millennia, can definitely help you connect. It can also provide a level of emotional safety if you harbor any anxieties about interacting with the dead. Furthermore, ceremonies and rituals practiced in community can be, in my experience, far more powerful and significant in terms of outcomes. The land on which the

ceremony takes place, the experience and skills of ceremonial leadership as well as other factors can also provide an enhanced experience. So, the choice is yours.

I am not qualified to share anyone's culturally specific protocols around accessing ancestral knowledge through body-oriented process. Nor do I feel the written word is the best way to do that. What I can share is one small practice that I use and teach.

The first step in any processes is always to set intention. Intention-setting is a three-step exercise: First, state why you are entering into the process. What is your desire, aspiration or goal? What outcome(s) are you looking for? For instance, do you need help with something? Are you interested in knowing more about something? Do you need clarity? You don't have to speak this aloud or write it down but it helps if you do because it helps you be clear on your intention.

The second step is to remain open to whatever shows up. Drop your ideas about what you think you want and be willing to accept what comes. Trust that the spirit(s) you're interacting with understand what you want but they also understand what is behind the want as well as how many steps you have to take before you get to a place where you can process what you want.

The third step: think about how you might contribute to a healthier, happier world if you had the information, skills or wisdom you seek. If you are in a crisis it can be difficult to focus on the suffering of others but doing so creates a sense of connection and compassion that will enhance your own sense of joy, gratitude and self-love. Because we're all interconnected, your joy, safety and security benefits all, the welfare of others is always ultimately encoded in what you want for yourself, even if you're unaware of it. But being aware can accelerate the arrival of what you want as well as heighten your joy at its appearance.

After setting an intention there are a variety of hyper-oxygenating breathing techniques you can employ. In *Power up Your Brain* neuroscientist Dr. David Perlmutter and medical anthropologist Alberto Villoldo (also a self-described shaman) wrote about how hyper-oxygenation can stir up memories. Perlmutter used a hyperbaric chamber in one of his experiments but there really isn't any need for expensive equipment to generate similar results. Breathing is all that is required, according to what many healers and *curanderas* have taught me. There are many breathing patterns that will increase the oxygen content in your body. The simplest, one in my experience, is to breathe deeply and continuously (no breaks between inhales and exhales) for a time. In a group exercise I'll go for 4-7 minutes but if you're on your own and have the time you can try it for much longer (20-30 minutes). Often what happens is that folks begin remembering stuff they've forgotten or haven't thought about in a while. These can be pleasant or anxiety producing. What can also happen is a sense of vague discomfort that isn't attached to any specific memory but is felt in the body. At the same time you might feel highly energized and fidgety. This is normal and desirable. Sometimes you won't have a conscious awareness of memories you stir up because it didn't happen in your lifetime but your body remembers (or accesses) the event to allow you to heal it.

Once you've excavated the memories, you can calm your body by switching to a breathing rhythm that relaxes the involuntary nervous system. There are many, but my favorite is one that aligns with a 4-4-8 rhythmic

pattern. Find the rhythm of your heartbeat, inhale for four beats, hold for four and exhale for eight. Repeat until you relax. This rhythm maintains the highly oxygenated state while calming anxieties or excess energies. When you are sufficiently calm you can revert to a comfortable breathing pattern and lay quiet for some moments, noticing what arises and falls in the body. In this state the “knowledge” can trickle in at its own pace in its own unique way.

Practice this technique regularly and it will get easier. You might find that once you’ve initiated the process, the revelations, information and wisdom can land at any time in a variety of ways. Many teachings tell us the ancestors are always trying to communicate with us. Whether you take this literally or metaphorically my hope is that you enjoy the process of connecting to the knowledge being offered.