

YOUR MAGICAL INHERITANCE

Creating your first Ancestor Altar



By Jim TwoSnakes

Printing this book.

This book is formatted as a letter half format. This means it can be printed as individual pages, or on many printers the PDF can be printed as a booklet, meaning that once printed the pages can be folded in half to form a book

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To forget one's ancestors is to be a brook without a source, a tree without a root.

— Chinese proverb

It is often very difficult to know where to begin your spiritual path. Truth be told it can even be challenging for those of us who have been doing it for a while. There are just so many options, and social media is full of seemingly endless possibilities. You might see videos about working with angels, devils, animal guides, deities and many more. Spell jars, spell candles, sigils, circles, crystals and moon water. So much information!

There are some common reasons why people are wanting to explore spirituality. Feeling connected, a part of something bigger, overcoming challenges, personal growth, wealth, love, protection. And there is one way most people can find solutions to many of these issues. So it seems appropriate that just after Midnight on Samhain, or Halloween, that I am sitting down to help you discover the answer.

The Answer Is Your Ancestors

No entity will have as much a reason to connect with you and push you to grow like your Ancestors do. Your Ancestors want to see you succeed and they will help you if you ask them to. And the best way to reach them for guidance and support is with an Ancestor Altar. An Ancestor Altar will help you build

deep meaningful connections with your Ancestors so that you take your spiritual practice to the next level. Your Ancestors will guide you through the toughest challenges in life because they want you to succeed.

In this booklet I will outline a very basic method for starting and maintaining an Ancestor Altar. The methods I am using are a more universal version but your specific path, tradition, or even culture might have a method already with a lot of rich detail. I urge you to explore these as well!

I will also address some of the most common problems encountered like a toxic (or worse) family background, estrangement or adoption, or being of a different faith than your Ancestors. I will also be covering in what ways Ancestors can support you, and how even Ancestors you have not met are available and looking to help you. We will even talk about how you can help your Ancestors!

What Is An Altar?

Something I should address now is that for all practical reasons I will be using the words altar and shrine interchangeably, but they are technically different. An altar is a place where offerings like incense or recited words are given and “work” is done, meaning petitions, spells, energy work etc. It’s a focal point for your Spiritual work. A shrine is a place where people come to worship. But a secondary

definition, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is “a special place in which you remember and praise someone who has died.” Well then, how do we do those things? They are usually expressed as...giving offerings like incense or recited words.

I think you might be able to see why I use the words interchangeably, at least for this specific practice. We are creating spaces to remember, to admire, and focus ourselves to commune, so aspects of both words are incorporated. However this leads me to another interesting thought we should explore.

Worship or Veneration?

I think many of us are attracted to Ancestor work because we feel connected to them. Even in a secular context look at the absolute boom in genealogy as a hobby. We want to know where we come from, and who we are connected to. But where many get uncomfortable is this whole “worship” thing. It could be a holdover from religion or perhaps it feels blasphemous to worship anything not “God”. Maybe just the word worship itself pushes your mind into a connection you no longer feel comfortable with. I think for these reasons many of you might feel more comfortable with the word veneration.

Veneration is to have a deep respect for something or someone. Webster's Dictionary defines it as “*respect or awe inspired by the dignity, wisdom, dedication, or talent of a person*” which I think is a perfect way of thinking about the work we are about to begin on. You are asking your Ancestors for help because you admire traits they had. They are not God or Gods, they were people just like you, but who now are one step closer to the Divine.

“Your Grandmother is watching over you” could be a phrase used by people of innumerable religious or spiritual paths. Even Roman Catholic Bishops working in Vietnam stated *“We acknowledge the long tradition of ancestor veneration in this land has been sown by the Holy Spirit.”*

Ancestor worship or veneration is not replacing any religion or deity, it is acknowledging that your Ancestors had skills and talents. That they may be able to help you directly, or at the very least be in a better position to petition the Divine (by whatever name you call it) to help you.

What Is Working With Your Ancestors Like?

I think it is safe to say that it is likely a little different for everyone. For some it will feel like a very direct connection, for others it might just be something you see in your life like opportunities or a different more mindful mindset.

One thing that I think I need to make clear at the outset, and this is something that is a valuable conversation for many aspects of spirituality, is the use of terms like heard or sensed. As in “I heard my grandmother say...” or “I sensed my Ancestors want...” While there may be for a few people the surprisingly rare phenomenon of hearing in an auditory sense, most of the time these words are used to express something “heard” in the mind or heart. You might be able to imagine or visualize your grandmother saying something, and this is most often what people mean. It might be a deep gut level intuition.

Sight and instinct are not even the only senses. For example your grandfather, like mine, might have worn the original scent of Old Spice aftershave, and you get a faint smell of that. Maybe you associate your aunt with a dish of peppermint candies, and you smell them or think you faintly taste them. I have even experienced craving for things that I don't like. There was a time when I really felt like I wanted tart cherry juice, and I don't like the tart flavor. I left a glass of it on my Ancestor Altar and the craving vanished! For others, it might be much more separated from physical or emotional sensations and more results orientated. Perhaps upon completing the Ancestor Altar you have been praying to them for help with finding a new vehicle, and suddenly you are offered an amazing deal on a used car. Hey it's

even a Chevy, your fathers favorite brand. It will take time, and some practice to get the hang of it. You can look for other pointers in my Spiritual Accounting Handbook (more on that later). In short there is no universal experience, but no matter what happens you will feel more connected, loved and grounded in your practice.

What Can My Ancestors Help Me With?

I think that the best way I can present this is answering *why* your Ancestors can be such a help. It's because they were once human just like you, so they get it. While your distant Ancestors might not recognize a computer, they understand having enough money, or having a career, or trying to feed a family. They might not have ever seen a car, but they understand the value of tools, or of having even a horse and wagon to transport things. They understand health issues, feeling safe, wanting to find love, being more spiritual and so much more. So what can your Ancestors help you with? Almost anything. And in my experience, they can be quicker to help precisely because they remember being human. They know how urgent some of these needs are.

Now does that mean that you will have instant results? That for a candle and a few days work a new car will suddenly appear in your driveway? Of course not, but having already used a car a few times as an

example, let's stick with it. Appealing to your Ancestors, especially a grandfather or aunt who was a mechanic, might help you find a good reputable mechanic. You might decide to tackle a repair yourself and have it go well. A friend might suddenly have a car for sale, or a person might be more willing to come down to your price range on a car you like. The gut feeling that you should take a side trip down a street you don't usually travel might find just the right car, or maybe there is a coworker that out of the blue says they have been thinking of carpooling more.

You can see how these results might also apply to situations like finding work, getting more customers etc. Maybe it's finding the right doctor or therapist. Maybe it's keeping your home safe from natural or spiritual intruders, which if successful you might never see the results from because you never see any intruders!

The key I think is not getting too focused on a particular outcome. This is something that often trips up both the spiritual practitioner and the layperson alike. You might be so focused on the red car you want, not knowing that the blue one is a better option for you and your life. But your Ancestors may know!

What If My Ancestors Were A Different Faith Than Me?

It's not surprising when this happens, and there may be some faith traditions where it is taboo to venerate the dead. Always do what is best for you within your cultural context. However I will say that with Ancestor veneration so common to so many cultures, this may not be as big an issue as it seems. Let's look again at the Catholic guidance for Vietnamese Bishops.

“Catholic daughters-in-law, sons-in-law and their children should partake in ancestor rituals, present offerings on ancestor altars, and offer incense in front of ancestors’ pictures as a way to have good relationships with their non-Catholic relatives.”

The same works in reverse as well. I have Ancestors who were Catholic, Lutheran, Muslim and a variety of others before we stretch back in time far enough where they were Pagan. But even then the Pagan practices and culture they had likely looked fundamentally different from my practices today. And for some faiths the differing religions and traditions have merged into something altogether unique.

I have small Christian offerings that I leave on my Ancestor Altar, and I have never felt them as being disapproving. A dear friend has a rosary and a small

Bible he leaves on his. The fact that I acknowledge their faith while following my own seems to be a bridge. If they absolutely refuse to work with you, that is their prerogative, you literally have thousands of other Ancestors. This is about relationships not conversions.

What If I Don't Know My Ancestors?

Divorces, adoptions, being disowned, immigrants, lost records; there are many reasons why someone might not know who their Ancestors were. Maybe the records get obscured just a few generations back, or maybe you never had access to them because you were adopted. Believe it or not, this does not prevent you from having an Ancestor practice.

Let's start with the easier of the two, the lost records or disconnect. For this I would say use the information you have, and count on the fact that THEY know they are your Ancestors. As you get deeper into your practice just having a long list of names will not make those Ancestors come forward but dedicated practice will. The technique we will be using is one of building trust on trust, and verifying to the best of our ability. The proper Ancestors will make themselves known.

But what if I was adopted? What I write next will apply to many people, both adopted and not, so I need you to take it with all seriousness.

Family is more than genetics.

This is something DNA tests and family trees cannot tell. Family is the people who love and care for you, and you them. If you were adopted, if you have a step family, then they are your Ancestors as well. For some people this might even go so far as to include the family of a spouse, a dear friend, a devoted teacher or a mentor. These are your family too, ones of love and choice not just chance. Very powerful connections!

And even then, if they so choose, your genetic Ancestors can still be available. Once in a reading for a client who was adopted, I saw quite clearly that he was to work with his adopted family, but at some point he was going to see a photo in a book or a magazine of a Hispanic man in a white hat, and that photo would resonate with him. It was not that the photo was necessarily an Ancestor, but that photo was to represent one of his biological Ancestors, because the person on the photo and the actual Ancestor had some resemblance. Using that photo he could work with a genetic Ancestor in addition to his amazing adopted family. Family is such a large and powerful concept, the diversity, resilience, and adaptability of Ancestor veneration is just as large and powerful. It might just take a bit more time and care to get there.

What If My Ancestors Were Toxic?

I need to just state this up front with total clarity.

You owe nothing to toxic Ancestors; No veneration, no acknowledgement, no forgiveness.

Some people might have just been too toxic, and have done unforgivable things. You owe them nothing, don't let anything I say next be taken otherwise. The things I write next never override what I stated above.

People are flawed. People make horrible mistakes, and people are controlled by things like addictions or chemical imbalances. This is not an excuse, this is just fact. But one thing I have noticed is that once people are freed of physical limitations, sometimes they are able to see just how toxic they were and want to apologize or make amends. I just wanted to state this because it has happened with my Ancestor veneration, and it offered me opportunities to heal. I thought the information needed to be included in this book, But YOU are under no obligations.

Further, we might actually know how evil an Ancestor was. History is full of horrible people who committed atrocious acts, and they were all no doubt related to someone. We might rightly want to avoid or even shun those Ancestors and this is a very healthy option to take.

That doesn't mean ALL the Ancestors before or after are closed to you. Somewhere is at least one that doesn't have the toxic traits, and who wants to work with you. You will need to bypass the toxic and horrible people and as with people who didn't know who their Ancestors were, it might just take a bit more time and care to get there.

Is it possible that working with an Ancestor Altar might give you opportunities to help things like generational trauma, or even the suffering of those who have already passed? The short answer is yes, but I urge you to become very comfortable and familiar with working with your more gentle and enlightened Ancestors first before seeking advice on how to undertake that task. Helping your Ancestors to become more enlightened, healed and elevated is possible but is not where one should begin.

The Three Components

With some of these basics explained, let's move on to the very basic three component beginning of your Ancestor Altar.

I assure you these will not be hard to acquire, as a matter of fact, you might even have them already.

1. **A White Cloth.** I prefer a natural fabric like cotton, but use what appeals to you. But it doesn't have to be elaborate. A nice new handkerchief, a linen napkin, a table cloth, or if you are inclined to sewing or crafting you might make your own, with some nice hems on fabric from the craft store. It doesn't need to be large. Adjust the size for the location you will be using. I think pure white is best, but there are times when exceptions feel right as well. Maybe you want to make a square of cloth with material from a relative's flannel shirt that was red, white and black. Trust your intuition.
2. **A Cup.** Once again, there are a lot of options, but I tend to think clear glass or natural materials work best. So a water goblet, a tea cup, a wooden drinking cup, or a ceramic cup are all viable. As with the cloth I tend to recommend white if there is an option. The cup can be as simple or as complex as you like, everything from the jelly jar cups like your grandmother had, to dollar store glass teacup, to a \$200 water goblet from a custom glass shop. What matters is that it feels right. As to what to put in the cup? All we need there is some cool clean water.
3. **A White Candle.** As with the other items, use what feels right, what you can afford, and perhaps you will be able to get better later. A nice jar candle, taper candles, tea light

candles. If you use a candle other than a jar candle, you might also want to add to your list a candle holder of some sort. A glass plate can be really useful as well for dripping wax. In a few cases there are people that cannot use a candle. A very clever substitute for this is an inexpensive plug in salt lamp, which also provides light, warmth and has a very Earthy energy.

Why these three items? Because they provide the most basic needs for you and your Ancestors. The cloth serves multiple purposes. It creates a space that they know is for them. Anything you put in that space they know is for them. And any time you sit or meditate in front of that space, they know you are open to receiving information from them. Likewise the water, gives them welcome, and lets them know you care for them. You are seeking to quench their thirst after long travels, and soothe their throat so they may speak. Water is the most basic offering one can give, and if you think about it many times you have offered a drink to someone visiting your house. It is kindness and courtesy. There may be other offerings you might want to give them, and I will write about that some more below, but water is a basic of life. The candle offers both a light to guide them, and warmth that they might not otherwise have. The flame breathes and so they can breathe. And like the cloth itself, when you light it it is both an acknowledgement you are thinking of them, plus

a reminder to you that you are spending this time focusing on them. Plus the dancing flame is useful for getting us into trance states where we might be more receptive to the messages they give.

Getting Ready

Of course you will need a space. As with so many other places in this book, there are a lot of options and versatility that can be had. My recommendation would be a place in the home which is easy to access but not in a bedroom. This could be a shelf in the kitchen, a bookcase, a small table, a spot inside a china cabinet. It can be as large or as small as you need. I have known people that use a chest or a box, and the items are put away when not in use. I even knew one person who used the box their mother's ashes were contained in! If your glass and candle are small it could be portable for privacy or in a dorm room. If you have a side room that is not used it could be an entire hutch or table. As always I tend to recommend natural materials if possible, but I have to tell you an inherited piece of furniture is great, and in truth if that means it's a card table it will do just fine.

You are going to want to cleanse both the area, the furniture, the cup and the candle. Start with a physical cleaning, wiping them down or washing them as appropriate (after all, you can't exactly get a salt lamp wet for example). Then a spiritual cleanse,

for which you might opt for a smoke cleanse with rosemary or even some of the bay leaves in your spice cabinet. Maybe just a pinch of rosemary or a sliver of lavender soap in the washing machine for the cloth. Let the cloth and the cup air dry in the sunlight. Maybe you like essential oils so for cleaning the furniture a drop of lemon oil in with a little Murphy's Oil Soap is great for physical and spiritual cleaning. And of course there are options like orange blossom water or florida water which are available online or maybe a local shop along with mugwort which is a very popular herb for smoke cleansing. There are a ton of options for cleansing, but this is the key. Prayer. You are going to ask whatever powers that you pray to to help you to cleanse the space and the objects. To ensure that the best, most enlightened and helpful Ancestors come through. I have seen very powerful cleansings done with sincere prayer, water and a few flower petals and nothing more. And you can do that as well.

When everything is "cleaned and cleansed" , place the cloth down. I tend to put the cup with the water in the center, and the candle directly behind. You are now ready to begin.

Enhancing Your Altar

While we have covered the very basic altar setup, this is just where the fun begins! Altar spaces can be incredible experiences and a place of both

inspiration and creativity as well as memory. We love to decorate ours for the holidays. We also place items that belonged to or have a special connection to our Ancestors. Photos, pocket watches, coins, candy dishes, so many things. One of my favorite additions was a digital photo frame loaded with photos of my deceased relatives, their homes, scans of documents, whatever seemed appropriate. These photos rotate through the frame all day every day ensuring their memories are always in the light. In fact it has become a bit of a divination in a sense, when I feel the urge to look towards the Altar space, I can see whose photo is showing, and know that is who is reaching out for a proverbial peck on the cheek. Now I must note that in some traditions it is taboo to place the photo of a living person on your altar, as it is seen as asking them to join the Ancestors. But in our household when our children were young they wanted to put a photo of my father, their grandfather, on the altar. A photo that also included myself and my wife. I can state that we are both still here and doing well. If in doubt, use your best judgement or defer to your own cultural or path traditions. Another favorite enhancement is stones at the corners. These stones can be from where you live, or from places they lived, or perhaps even near where they are buried. Anything which makes you feel closer and more connected is a welcome item if it feels right to you. Which leads me to the next section.

Offerings

Hopefully the term “offering” doesn’t scare you too much. Offerings is a term that can be used with some rather negative connotations in stories. The water you leave in your cup is an offering, as is the candle. An offering is just that, something we are giving to a friend or a loved one, a guest, or in this case an Ancestor. It is not a payment, it is a gift.

In the case of Ancestors and Ancestor altars, there are many types of offerings that might be appropriate like food and drinks, candies, money, or flowers, incense and other gifts.

One of my favorite offerings is tea, just a simple cup, made when I make my own morning tea. Our family also likes to leave a meal when we eat, especially on holidays or other special occasions. If we have a birthday celebration, of course the Ancestors get a slice of cake!

Other times, my gift is a sacrifice, yet another charged word. No silly, not THAT kind of sacrifice, you have been watching too much television. A sacrifice is something you offer that you lose or give up, especially something you might want. I might really want that last home baked chocolate chip cookie, you know the perfect crispy edge with the gooey center? If I give that as an offering, I am

sacrificing my ability to eat it myself. I am giving something precious because I am denying myself.

Now I'm not advising you that you must give these types of offerings or sacrifices, but I am saying it is a thing that is commonly done. But we must be balanced with it. If we were to be so hungry consistently that we could not sleep, and thus not work, it would defeat the purpose of asking the Ancestors to help us with prosperity.

How long should offerings be on the altar? That is going to vary because of circumstance and personal preference. For example the tea I offer will remain at least until it is cold. The water should be emptied and refilled each day. The flowers might last a week. If I am offering fresh bread, or a plate of a dinner I am also eating, I might remove the offering when I am done eating from my own plate, with the logic that they have eaten the essence of the meal in the same time I have eaten mine. Alcohol might be left until it is gone. (Spirits? Evaporation? Who can say!)

Tea and water, along with other liquids I will use as a libation outside. Food offerings, if safe, I will leave at a special tree in my yard for consumption by wildlife. If unsure I will compost or dispose of as proper. In some traditions the food is eaten by people, as it would be wasteful to do otherwise. The Ancestors will have time to consume the essence, and then the people consume the physical. As I have stated

elsewhere, if your culture or tradition has specific guidance, follow it!

But perhaps the biggest offering we can give is our love and our time. Time spent saying hello, time spent singing a song, time spent quietly contemplating. This is a sacrifice of our time, and something we will never get back, so it is by default quite limited and precious. And this time is something our Ancestors greatly value.

Why do we give offerings? To build connections and relationships, but also in a very practical sense so that our Ancestors have the energy they need to help us. We give to them to strengthen and nourish them, not only because they are helping us, but from love and respect.

How Do We Begin?

The reason I wrote above about issues like not knowing Ancestors and how to adjust accordingly is because of the place I like to begin this process, and that is with someone we knew while they were alive. Why? Because quite simply it is easier to trust and verify that we are interacting with who we think we are. It makes the connections easier to establish and maintain.

Picking a time of day, dedicate at least five to ten minutes each day to your practice. I will tell you that

five minutes consistently often yields better results than hours infrequently.

Turn off your phone, and minimize disruptions. I always think it is best to approach the Ancestors, or any Spirits really, clean. So especially the first time, take the time to shower or bathe, and put on fresh clothes if possible. Light the candle, and put on some soft music if you desire.

To begin, start with a memory of an Ancestor you knew when they were alive. Say a prayer, and then sit and remember them with fine detail until it feels like they are present with you. Breathe deeply, and be calm. ***Remember that this altar is your special space to communicate with them.*** When you stand or sit in front of it, it is like picking up the phone and dialing their number.

When you begin to sense them or have a sharp detailed memory of them, tell them what your intent is with the altar. Tell them it is a place for them to come and visit and talk. Ask them if there is anything they want to tell you. Ask them if there is anything they need. Tell them you care.

When you begin, you might be tempted to say it is all your imagination. Parts of it could be, but you will get better at telling the difference. Have a conversation with them, tell them about your life, ask them for advice or for help. Visualize how they

would act and what they would say if they were still alive with you today. This process can get very emotional and intense, especially at first. I also find it is helpful to say things to them out loud, not just with your mind. Our voices vibrate the world around us, and our breath is sacred. Saying their name out loud is often helpful in helping to start this time with them.

After your minutes are up, thank them, extinguish the candle if desired, and say a prayer of thanks. Then we come to the next vital step, journaling. Even if it is a few quick notes, how did it go, what did they say? If they didn't speak do you think the message was received? What is your intuition saying? What are your emotions like? Why is this such an important step? Because you have some **Spiritual Accounting** to do.

What is Spiritual Accounting?

I'm going to link you to another [booklet I wrote](#), but in short Spiritual Accounting is a methodology for learning to trust and verify your messages from Spirit. Why is this important? In short, because we as humans make mistakes in hearing the messages, and sometimes the messages are just wrong or not from who we think they are. It might be a case where it was just our imagination, a phenomenon called "sock puppeting" in some communities. It might be that we have a Spirit pretending to be someone else.

Or we might only be hearing the parts we want to hear. This is another reason we are ideally starting with an Ancestor we knew when they were alive.

If you knew your grandfather in life, there are more clues to work from, like the aforementioned scent of Old Spice. You can also get gut feelings about love and trust, and even pick out things that just don't fit right. If grandpa was a very refined man, him telling you to sell your good shoes to go play the lottery would be very out of character, and a message I would not be inclined to trust. Whether you heard him wrong, or it's not really your grandfather will be easy to sort out. Once that trust is established then he can help introduce you to more and more Ancestors, and help assure trustworthy communication.

And here is something I am going to tell you that I am sure will be quite controversial and perhaps even make some people angry. We have at our home allowed the addition of one very special and aged cat, who was alive for the majority of my childrens lives, to have a representation on the Ancestor altar. In the exceedingly rare occasion where you have such a damaged family relationship with your immediate family, one where there are severe trust issues, I have suggested that a beloved family pet might be easier to begin with, as your loyal dog, cat or even a horse who has passed may be better at sensing good spirits and intents than you are, especially though

the filter of a traumatized mind. From that animal you may be able to sort out what spirits of people you can trust. Please do not use this as your first option, it is very unlikely this applies to the vast majority of people, but should you think it applies to you, please get a reading from a competent divination specialist before beginning.

I've Started, Now What?

Now my friend, the trick is to keep going. To refine your techniques, to better your listening skills, to figure out what areas your Ancestors can best help you, and to meet new Ancestors along the way. This practice can be very rich and rewarding with many opportunities for growth and enlightenment. Your Ancestor practice can open the doors to so many other advancements in other areas like mindfulness or spell work. Having a team, a family of Spirits you can count on makes every task easier, and will sharpen your intuition and confidence. Keep learning about your family tree, keep learning about what parts of the practice work for you, and what ones need to change. Test things, read about how your culture and others practice Ancestor veneration.

You have started on a path not just to learn about your Ancestors, but how to become a good Ancestor yourself.

A hat tip to renowned author, chaos magician and, Initiated Asogwe Haitian Vodou Priest Andrieh Vitimus for teaching me the basics of this technique.

Resources

Jim's Website <https://jimtwosnakes.net>

Around Grandfather Fire podcast
<https://anchor.fm/around-grandfather-fire>

