

Honoring Your Roots *find healing at your family altar*

By Karen Carnabucci, MSS, LCSW,TEP

An altar that honors your predecessors can make your life more meaningful & your heart more full. You may also discover relief from chronic distress, overwhelming grief, unexplained misfortunes and longing for what has no name.

Honoring ancestors with altars, prayers and rituals is not new. For thousands of years, indigenous people throughout the globe have designated special spaces to express sacred connections to their roots. While it's common to have groupings of photographs or mementos, an altar gives conscious intention to welcome the ancestors' presence, support and guidance in everyday life.

This unconventional healing process, developed in Germany about 30 years ago, is known as Systemic Constellation work and its use is rapidly spreading throughout the world. In constellation sessions, a person identifies a personal issue and selects group members to represent certain family members (or others) in the group space. The positioning reveals the dynamics – both hidden and evident – within the family system.

The facilitator repositions the members to restore respect, dignity and love, with attention to those who've been excluded or forgotten. As reconciliation is achieved, the genuine love in a family begins to flow. Each person who attends a session experiences effects of this change, which they find is often deeper compared to traditional talk psychotherapy.

As part of my sessions with systemic constellation work, I often recommend clients construct altars to deepen connections with their roots. This assignment may take

place either before or after the person begins constellation sessions to affirm the connection with the old ones of the family. Here are instructions:

Identify a place in your home where the ancestors can remind you of their presence.

- Cleanse the space and place items, such as photographs and mementos that remind you of your forebears. Be creative with stones, marbles, shells or other objects if you don't have photos.
- In some traditions, fruit, candy or flowers are added for the deceased to enjoy along with items that may have been relished in life, such as cigars or special foods.

Through the years, I've collected many stories of peace and healing resulting from the use of this process. Although the actions may seem simple, they can make very big differences in people's worlds; consider Leonard's story...

Leonard sought relief from episodes of night sweats and repetitious dreams. Sober for nearly 20 years, thanks to involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous, he continued to suffer depression despite being involved with talk therapy. His family had a history of loss and hardship. His great-grandfather escaped the pogroms of Russia at the turn of the 20th century to emigrate to the United States. His son supported the extended family during the Great Depression. Some Jewish relatives died in the Holocaust, and two uncles died in service to the United States during World War II.

He arranged family photos on a book shelf with a wooden carving of a weeping man. I suggested he say these words in meditation:

"I honor your suffering. Please accept the suffering as your fate. You lived it, and I don't have to relive it. Please give me your blessing so that I can live well."

As months passed, he noticed that the night sweats greatly diminished, he slept more easily and became more comfortable with feelings of loss. For years, he avoided memorial prayers at his synagogue because he could not sit calmly. He attended an observance after our sessions and sobbed for a long time. "It felt healing," he reported. "It was genuine grief – not self pity, not victimization, but grief. It felt good to mourn."

It is important to honor the whole family system, which may include miscarried, aborted and stillborn children and others who have been estranged or forgotten. Sharon, for example, gave her daughter up for adoption 40 years ago. She found a photo of her adult daughter online and framed it. After displaying the picture, she has felt a "calming" within.

People often question honoring forebears who have been abusive or controlling. Yet when we carry unresolved issues from our ancestors, we may unconsciously carry their same pain until we find ways to connect with them. In these cases, honoring is more akin to recognizing both the pain and the forebear's gift -- that of life -- which is passed to the next generation.

Julia struggled with mixed feelings for years after her father died. He ruled the family "like a tyrant". After constellation work, she collected a basket of pine cones for a trip to the cemetery. There, she presented them as gifts for her ancestors and improvised a prayer that honored her father, then bowed deeply. Afterward, much of the grief and anger was lifted.

These and numerous others have benefited from Systemic Constellation Therapy. When we allow ourselves to feel the pain of the past, we are taking the first step toward true healing. ❁

Karen Carnabucci, is a non-traditional psychotherapist, coach and trainer specializing in mind-body therapies and has co-written a book "Integrating Psychodrama and Systemic Constellation Work: New Directions in Action Methods, Mind-Body Therapies and Energy Healing." Find her at (262) 633-2645 or www.lakehousecenter.com.

