Understanding Ancestral Trauma

"The family story is **our** story. Like it or not, it resides within us." – Mark Wolynn

What is ancestral trauma?

Emotional traumas that are left unresolved do not dissolve. Rather, they are buried within us and express themselves, often unconsciously, in our habits and patterns. Throughout families, these habits and patterns and unresolved traumas repeat themselves, often without the person even realizing it. This information is mirrored in our genetics. Recent studies have shown that trauma changes our genetics. And a parent who experiences a trauma could later have a child who shows traumatic symptoms, or anxiety and depression even though that child never experienced a traumatic event themselves. Research suggests trauma can be passed down three generations so it is important to go back three generations in your family's history if possible.

How to identify it in your own family history?

AWARENESS BUILDING

Cultivating awareness means turning towards your family and asking the big questions. Every family has a history of big, unspeakable events that sometimes are buried. Approach the elders in your family with compassion and patience. If you have living relatives you can speak with, ask them about births, deaths, miscarriages, bankruptcies, loss of housing, job security/insecurity, etc... These are sensitive topics, so be patient with your family. It may be very painful for them to talk about their history. **What is the story your ancestors want you to hear?**

CONSTRUCTING YOUR FAMILY NARRATIVE

There is incredible power in giving voice to the unresolved traumas of our families. These stories are living parts of your family's shared history. Speaking their truth, giving light to their presence releases the emotional burden of all those who come after you; your children, your grandchildren, and your great-grand-children.

IDENTIFYING THEMES

After you write, listen or read the story of your ancestors, however far back you can access, notice the themes that are present.

- Grief/loss/death
- Displacement/loss of safety + basic needs
- Immigration/Loss of ancestral lands.
- Power/control
- Helplessness/ inadequacy/inferiority
- Income disparities/debt/bankruptcy
- Illegal activity/Jail time

You've gathered all the information... what now?

Whatever your pursuits reveal, whatever you learn about yourself, remember that you did not create this. It is bigger than you. Many of the struggles you live with today are representative of what your family has passed down to you. Some of their unresolved, unheard, unhealed traumas live within you. There is a tendency in our culture to individuate and thus believe that we are on our own and are the cause of all our suffering, as well as our own saviors. When we explore our lives through the lens of ancestral trauma we begin to understand the interconnectedness of us all. There are invisible golden threads that weave us together. And our shared family trauma, like any trauma, can only be healed in the context of others, our community. Maybe that community is your therapist, or your nuclear family, or your cultural or religious community. Healing can take place in many different ways. I encourage you to do this healing work with someone else, and not alone. Contact a therapist and have someone support and guide you through this work.