

**DEFINITION:**

family predecessors; persons comprising a line of lineage

**SYNONYMS:** heritage; descendants; genealogy; origin

## Taking It Home:

**Activity: Changing the Cycle**

Being a people of ancestry sometimes means putting an end to what's been passed on. We are all working in one way or another to break family cycles of dysfunction. We also know that we are not the first to struggle with changing our ancestral storyline.

**Your assignment:** Identify a family member who you know has been central to the cycles of your family changing. Find a way to thank them and talk to them about what it was like for them.

**Books:**

Between the World and Me: Ta-Nehisi Coates

**Article:**

“What They Dreamed Be Ours To Do”

A reflection by the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker about the covenants we inherit as UUs

<http://www.uua.org/ga/past/1998/123808.shtml>

**Video:**

**Finding Your Roots**

**PBS Series**

<http://video.pbs.org/program/finding-your-roots/>

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These materials are part of the small group ministry program at Jefferson Unitarian Church. For more information on using them, or to set up your small group, please contact Rev. Eric Banner.

[ericbanner@jeffersonunitarian.org](mailto:ericbanner@jeffersonunitarian.org)

(303)279-5282 ext. 28

<http://www.jeffersonunitarian.org/SmallGroups>



# Jefferson Unitarian Church November 2015 Small Group Session: Ancestry 1.0

**Opening/  
Chalice  
Lighting:** As we come together,  
I go into myself.  
I dig into myself for a deep answer.  
I have patience with everything that remains  
unsolved in my heart, and I live the question.  
What is required of us is that we love the difficult  
and learn to deal with it.  
In the difficult are the friendly forces, the hands  
that work on us.  
It is clear that we must embrace the struggle.  
Right in the difficult we must have our joys, our  
happiness, our dreams.  
We create this space to go into ourselves and see  
how deep the place is from which our  
lives flow. **(RM Rilke, adapted by Scott Rudolf)**

**Check In:** Up to 2 minutes per person to share what they  
bring with them since the last time the group met

**Reading:** We are a continuum. Just as we reach back to our  
ancestors for our fundamental values, so we, as  
guardians of that legacy, must reach ahead to our  
children and their children. And we do so with a  
sense of sacredness in that reaching.  
— Paul Tsongas

**Resting in  
the  
Silence:** Take 2 minutes to just sit. If your group is up to it,  
go longer, as long as you let people know how  
long the silence will be.

**Questions  
and  
Quotes  
From The  
Common  
Bowl:** Share the quotes and questions for today's  
session in the way that is customary in your small  
group. You can pass the sheet, you can select  
them randomly from a bowl after having cut them  
into individual pieces. Or whatever works well for  
your small group.

**Sharing/  
Deep  
Listening:** Allow each person up to five minutes to share  
what has come up for them about today's topic. If  
someone does not use the full five minutes, make  
sure you count to ten full breaths before moving  
on to the next person, in case the speaker is not  
truly finished.

**A Second  
Share:** If time allows, you may have a brief second share  
from those who have found they have more to  
say, keeping in mind your commitment to going  
no longer than ninety minutes.

**Closing  
Reading:** The very air surrounding us and moving the flame  
is the air our Ancestors were breathing. There is  
no other.  
— Mi-Shell Jessen

**Extinguish  
the  
Chalice:** Join hands and say the following together:  
"As we go into the week ahead, may we be  
ancestors worth having."  
And then, extinguish your chalice until you meet  
again.

## *A People of Ancestry?*

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.

— **Ralph Ellison, American writer**

Our faith agrees with Ellison: there is a difference between relatives and ancestors. Relatives give us our brown eyes and bowed legs; ancestors bless and burden us with a legacy. Relatives are those we tell stories about; ancestors call us to carry the story forward. Our relatives allowed us to be here; our ancestors tell us *why* we are here and why being here right now matters. The difference is huge. It is — as Ellison also points out — all about choosing to see yourself differently and live by a different set of values.

Take success. There's an old line that challenges the hubris of some people with privilege: "He was born on third base but believes that he hit a triple." People who choose to see their lives through the lens of ancestry constantly remind themselves how they really got there. Instead of talking with puffed up chests about how they hit a triple, you will hear them speak of "the shoulders on which I stand." Hubris or humility? Ancestors never let us forget the latter.

You will also hear ancestor-conscious people speak of blessings differently. People of ancestry look at their blessings and choose to see not only a gift, but also a responsibility. It's one thing to gratefully celebrate the blessings passed on to us; it's quite another to be so grateful for those blessings that we can't help but ensure they get passed on to others. Simply put, ancestors pass on obligations. To be a people of ancestry means recognizing that something of value has been entrusted to you and that there is a long line of people behind you counting on you to pass it on. Even *expecting* this of you.

And whether that expectation feels to you like a blessing or a burden, it most surely also reminds you that you are part of something larger. Ancestors don't simply tell you that you are obligated; they tell you that you are obligated *to something larger*. And not just that you are obligated to it, but that it is dependent *on you*. Whether the story continues to be told is up to you! Whether the family tradition continues to be done is up to you! Whether the native language continues to be taught to the children is up to you! Whether the family cycles of health are strengthened or the family cycles of dysfunction are stopped is up to you! Ancestors plop these incomplete and intimidating

endeavors in our laps and say, “We’ve done our part and taken it as far as we can. The next step of the journey is in your hands.”

Which of course also means that our hands are connected. They handed the precious gift to us. We are asked to hand it on to those who follow. And they will hopefully continue the sacred chain.

And in the end, maybe it all boils down to that: seeing ourselves as part of a sacred chain. We are not small. Our lives are not insignificant or independent. Our choices are not without consequence to others. We are part of a story, not just a set of random happenings. Our choices tell the next chapter. Our choices connect the next link. Our choices pass on that which is precious and remind us we are preciously connected. This is what choosing to be a people of ancestry means. This is how it asks us to see our lives.

So, this month, let us all be grateful for those brown eyes, but choose to be part of the precious chain.

The very air surrounding us and moving the flame is the air our Ancestors were breathing. There is no other. — Mi-Shell Jessen

Would your ancestors be proud?

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values. — Ralph Ellison

How are your ancestors speaking today? Are you making the time to listen?

We are a continuum. Just as we reach back to our ancestors for our fundamental values, so we, as guardians of that legacy, must reach ahead to our children and their children. And we do so with a sense of sacredness in that reaching. — Paul Tsongas

What wisdom of the elders did you ignore at your peril? Are you sure you can't start over and try to follow it anew?

To be here now, alive in the twenty-first century and smart enough to know it, you had to be extremely — make that miraculously — fortunate in your personal ancestry. Consider the fact that for 3.8 billion years, a period of time older than the Earth's mountains and rivers and oceans, every one of your forebearers on both sides has been attractive enough to find a mate, healthy enough to reproduce, and sufficiently blessed by fate and circumstances to do so. Not one of your pertinent ancestors was squashed, devoured, drowned, starved, stranded, stuck fast, untimely wounded, or otherwise deflected from its life's quest of delivering a tiny charge of genetic material to the right partner at the right moment in order to perpetuate the only possible sequence of hereditary combinations that could result — eventually, astoundingly, and all too briefly — in you. — Bill Bryson

How does Thanksgiving need to change this year? What ritual or tradition needs brought back? What needs to go?

Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests, and mines, and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors. — Ralph Waldo Emerson

“If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment. Each is present in your body. You are the continuation of each of these people.” — Thích Nhất Hạnh

What would it mean to be an ancestor future generations can be proud of? How would you need to live now?