Pedagogy of the Ancestors

Practices for Mentoring and Teaching Future Generations

Patrick B. Reyes

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"In *Pedagogy of the Ancestors,* Patrick Reyes offers educators multiperspectival insights into humanity's boundless opportunities to receive our ancestors' sacred baton of wisdom in the intergenerational relay toward reclamation and restoration. Reyes reminds educators that we are historically situated to play key roles in evolution and that we would do well to know how to receive our ancestors' inheritances, use them, and pass the wealth of knowledge and customs along with life-giving purpose. To teach in this way will breathe life and hope into the dusty old bones of the withered expert-ignorant classroom dynamic. Get ready to live the learning life anew."

—Pamela Ayo Yetunde, author of *Casting Indra's Net: Fostering Spiritual Kinship and Community*

"This book gave me permission I didn't know I was waiting for: to let my cultural ancestry and my spiritual ancestry belong to each other. This book is a reminder that wholeness, not selective memory, is where healing begins; that we carry both protagonists and antagonists in our bones, and that this tension is not a problem to resolve but an inheritance to tend. For those of us who work at the intersection of faith and community and who care deeply about what we pass forward, *Pedagogy of the Ancestors* is both an invitation and a gift."

—Elizabeth Le'anani Coffee, Managing Director, Lake Institute on Faith & Giving

"*Pedagogy of the Ancestors: Practices for Mentoring and Teaching Future Generations* offers practical steps toward healing ties between one's ancestors and the generations to come. It is a call to communal connection that circumvents a sea of self-help individualism. This book is theoretically rich yet hands-on through and through, guiding readers toward cultivating an awareness of how past and future communities of memory converge. The work involves listening to voices recognized in the academy and in religious leadership alongside voices of wisdom from our own family trees, chosen and/or biological, that have shaped us

personally. What might the world look like if we work toward being good ancestors? Reyes offers invaluable insights toward this future."

—Jonathan Calvillo, Associate Professor of Latinx Communities, Candler School of Theology, Emory University

"This is one of the best books I've ever read on healing and ancestral relationships, and if I could, I would give it to everyone I know. *Pedagogy of the Ancestors* is not a book that feeds only our minds; the wisdom and care in these pages should be dropped into our bodies like medicine so that we carry and live it out in our precious daily lives. Read these pages as ceremony, because that's what Reyes is teaching us—how to find deep connection with ourselves, with God, with the ancestors who hold us, and with future generations preparing us to show up for them. This work is holy, and it's exactly what we are made for."

—Kaitlin B. Curtice, Potawatomi author of *Native* and Director of the Aki Institute

"Written from years of lived practice and thoughtful reflection, this book offers fresh language for the sacred vocation of teaching. Reyes reminds us that our greatest lessons are often found not simply in what we say but in how we live, what we model, and the relationships we nurture. He calls us beyond being cycle-breakers to becoming cycle-makers—people who intentionally cultivate hope, wisdom, and possibility for those who come after us. This is an essential read for educators, mentors, pastors, leaders, and anyone who believes their life has the power to shape future generations. Reyes has given us not simply a vision for teaching but a way of living in which the future is always being formed in the practices we embody today. Reyes reminds us that formation is always intergenerational, embodied, and communal—that we do not simply tell stories; we become stories that others inherit."

—Sarah F. Farmer, Associate Director, Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning

"Reyes invites his readers to play and dream with him, his ancestors, and their own. Along the way, you encounter God's abiding desire for us to live and give abundantly. Deeply felt and carefully crafted, *Pedagogy of the Ancestors* is a healing joy to read."

—Alaina B. Kleinbeck, Executive Director of Grants and Services, Forum for Congregational Life

"Reyes's *Pedagogy of the Ancestors* asks us to recalibrate our lives to ancestral time, to 'the speed of love.' As a practice of tending the cosmos and the soul, he invites us to embrace our generational and relational tethers to people and land, to teach and learn in all directions, so that all of us might one day heal and be well. Reyes nourishes the reader with personal memories and stories, and from that tending, long-buried stories of our own begin to surface and bloom. In a time when we are watching a world burn, it returns us to hope and to the work of becoming good ancestors."

—Christine J. Hong, Associate Professor of Educational Ministry, Lead Professor of the Doctor of Educational Ministry Program, Columbia Theological Seminary

Access a free digital guide for organizations wanting to incorporate the lessons of the book at www.wjkbooks.com/Ancestors.

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Introduction

The Call of the Ancestors, Firekeepers for Future Generations

> Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world.
>
> —Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Ancestors: Ancestors are those who came before and whose lives, choices, and stories form the foundation of our breath, imagination, and relationships. Ancestors embody the continuity of experience through time and remind us that our existence is part of a much-larger, ongoing story.

Healing: The spiritual process of piecing back together or mending parts of ourselves. Healing is about awakening the harmony between generations, making way for a flourishing future.

Vocation: The call to life and community from God and your ancestors and future generations. Vocation is a call to live and share life with the next generation.

Like echoes off a canyon wall, the ancestors are calling. Do you hear them? Are they speaking to you? Think about what that echo sounds like as it comes to you. Does the echo stop with you? The echoes are offerings for future generations that we can hear. But the echoes do not belong to us.

Stories are those echoes. Storytelling and story-receiving pass love from generation to generation. We receive stories and retell them. Each story is a reminder of something holy. A story of your ancestor, echoed by you, is both their story and your story.

Pedagogy of the Ancestors is about passing down those stories. It is about the formal and informal ways that we teach people to be good ancestors. It is not enough to hear the story or to speak it. Good ancestors live the stories. They are aware of the stories that they are given and make choices about what stories to repeat. Stories of violence and trauma are often passed down through generations. These narratives are preserved not only as records of what was endured but also as sources of resilience and strength for future generations, offering valuable lessons in perseverance and hope.

Many of us have stories of how we triumphed over great adversity or did something great—won an award, built an institution, wrote a book. Maybe that last one is my own hope that I will be remembered for this text. My family tells stories of joy, like elders in my family recalling my grandma being in the Rose Parade in Southern California: "Mijo, she was so beautiful. She was our queen." Sharing stories is more than just keeping these memories alive. It is a reminder that everyone who is a descendant of Grandma Reyes is beautiful.

In my Christian tradition, an example of storytelling is the story of Jesus. Matthew's Gospel is the most direct in providing us with his genealogy. We learn about three sets of fourteen generations: Abraham to David, David to the Babylonian exile, and from the exile to Jesus. Jesus is a descendant of a people who survived exile and war. As a Christian, I am a descendant of Jesus, spanning nearly six sets of fourteen generations—almost one hundred generations removed from Jesus. And yet despite all that time,

here I am sharing (with other descendants) four Gospels, the letters of Paul and others, narratives, practices, and rituals handed down through the generations. Jesus's life as recorded in the Gospels is made up of stories riddled with questions that only children seem to understand. It is not just about birth, life, death, and resurrection. It is not just the mystery of the Holy Spirit we wrestle with, but the narrative details that children seem to pick up immediately: "Did I dance in Ma's belly like John when I met my cousins?" A child asked this most profound question after hearing the story of Elizabeth and Mary meeting. "Why did Jesus only stay around for forty days before he went to heaven? If he had stayed around longer, it seems like he would have been able to tell more people," she added after hearing the story of the resurrection.

As spiritual descendants of Jesus, we are given a great story that has echoed across time and space. *Pedagogy of the Ancestors* draws on this tradition. Christianity is an ancestor religion. Your faith is a reminder that we are well practiced and well versed in both the personal, social, and spiritual ancestral stories. You belong to an ancestral culture. For those outside the Christian faith and tradition, tracing sacred lineages is a time-honored practice. From tracing generations down from the Buddha, to claiming our clans' names in North America, to ancestral veneration through family lines in many Eastern traditions, the act of remembering sacred ancestral stories is key to our collective liberation.

This book is not designed to share facts about ancestry or to document the world's ancestral practices. Instead, I will ask how your life will reverberate the love and hope you want for future generations. You most likely picked up this book wondering, "Am I a good ancestor?" "Do I know my ancestors?" "Can I become a good ancestor?" The answers to these questions can all be yes. I assume you want to be a good ancestor. This book will explore how we do that together.

Jesus is not the only person in the Bible we remember. Many of us make daily choices to be like a hard-hearted Pharaoh or a courageous Miriam who saved her brother, Moses. It is easy to side with the heroes and sheroes in our lineages. I hope most of

us would choose Miriam over Pharoah. Between Mary, mother of God, and the soldier who pierced Jesus's side, I hope we would choose to identify with Mary. However, our histories and lineages are far more complicated than just choosing our favorite ancestors. We are descendants of both protagonists and antagonists. We are descendants of those who are remembered and those whom history has erased from the record. While there are at least seven generations living on this planet now, unless we come from communities like mine that have practices and rituals to honor our ancestors, most of us cannot name more than three generations back, and certainly with the world as it is, we struggle to image knowing three generations in the future. To be good ancestors, we must first know ourselves.

Practice

Before you start down this path of healing your lineage, pull out a notebook or sheet of paper (or use these margins) and write out your lineage as best you can. Who do you know from your family tree? Whose wisdom do you draw on? Where do your people come from? Take inventory, with no shame and from memory, and name those from whom you descend.

I hope your lineage reflects both life-giving lines and those that were broken by trauma, abuse, or even shame. If it doesn't, add those lines now. Your lineage should reflect the Pharaohs, Moseses, and Miriams in your family tree. To understand ourselves as descendants of good ancestors and to become good ancestors ourselves, we need stories of healing in all our lineages. We need stories of life. We need to live stories where we save a baby Moses and mourn the trauma our ancestors experienced. For those descendants of Pharoah, we need to know those stories and lineages that require a deeper understanding of the pain we have caused and the shame that comes from it. Discerning what stories we are handing down could be the most radical act of love we pass to future generations.

We need storytellers who are cycle-breakers and healers. We need folks who see abuse and violence and seek healing from it for themselves and others. It could be the interpersonal violence of abuse and addiction that plagues so many of our family lines. To be a good ancestor is to declare that these cycles of violence and trauma will no longer be the sounds that bounce off the red rock canyon. Those sounds could be macro-reverberations: the legacies of colonization, slavery, patriarchy, and the many *isms* that plague our society. Cycle-breakers refuse to pass down abuse and interpersonal violence, finding healing instead. You, like me, may come from one of those families that has a history of abuse. As a gift to my children, I am trying to stop that echo. Being the first to break these cycles is a generational gift, a curing of generational curses. It's hard work.

Healed lineages are also about the cycle-*makers*. Jesus certainly was a cycle-maker, diving deep into his own traditions and lineages, proclaiming good news for the poor, women, children, elders, those who are targets of the state, and others left out by society. The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount serve as a daily devotion for me, demonstrating Jesus's sharing of old teachings and making them new. Good ancestors are also those who whisper or laugh or cry as they live out stories to be passed down. Good ancestors understand the challenges and offer something entirely new: a fresh vision, a new path forward, a loving way of being.

Good ancestors choose a new path and a new story, one based on healing and love. They offer future generations the opportunity to live in a healed world. These ancestors are fueled by dreams not just for their own descendants but for all descendants. The stories they offer make life possible, a new imagination for *all* people, not just my or their people. Good ancestors with this expansive vision do not come around often. They are usually the product of generations of good teaching and good storytelling. They are the recipients of loving generations. They received a different education entirely. Their formation

was centered in love; they knew they were loved by God because they were loved by the elders in their lives.

Pedagogy of the Ancestors sees us all as ancestors and descendants simultaneously. We are stardust intimately intertwined with time and space and fully who we are right now. We are the infinitely tiny and the infinitely large. It is not because of what we do or why we want to be, but because of *how* the universe works, how God created us in relation to all of God's creation. On a sub-particle level, there is no difference between our stories. The atoms that make up my echo are the same as yours. On a cosmic level, we are so small that we are not even short stories in God's cosmic timeline. We are but a single punctuation mark in the book of life, which is dense with stories. And yet the stories I carry have the perfect mixture of those tiny pieces of me that will loom large for future generations, because they are centered in love. Thank you for going on this healing journey with me. Thank you for allowing me to accompany you on your path to becoming a good ancestor. As you read these pages, may they be a helpful guide, but know that the most powerful guides in your life will be those of your own ancestors.

Notes about Ancestry

As someone with mixed ancestral lineage, I always struggled with what it meant to be an ancestor. My Mexican-Catholic upbringing and my Indigenous lineages made my connection to my ancestors very tangible. From Dia de los Muertos to practices like "keeping the fire," talking with and about ancestors was something that came as part of my inheritance. At times, though, I felt a strong sense of imposter syndrome. We welcomed and spoke the names of our ancestors into almost every conversation and prayer. We would go to rites of passage ceremonies, family reunions, and religious gatherings, and because I carried multiple lineages, I always had this feeling of being an insider and an outsider at the same time. This was only reinforced through my formal education, where I learned about the ancestors of the United States of

America, though we called them things like "forefathers." Very rarely did they include my actual ancestors. My family, Indigenous and belonging to the very lands I grew up on, were rarely mentioned. While I was initiated into a healing lineage from my grandma on my father's side, most of what was taught to me was informal. This is the case with most of us who must recover our histories from under the rubble of domination. I learned about those who colonized and committed genocide on these lands. Parts of my family were here, and we were raped, pillaged, and plundered for "God, glory, and gold." I was taught that to be a true American, one had to think that the United States started on the East Coast and moved West. Those of us who had been in Indigenous California and the Sonoran Desert prior to Spanish colonization disappeared from history, or our histories did not begin until contact.[1] And yet at home, my grandma reminded me every time I looked in the mirror, "We are still here." If I wasn't going to remember my ancestors, who would?

My European lineage is perhaps where I experience the most shame and pain. My ancestors were recent arrivals to the United States just after World War II, and my lineage connects to present-day North Macedonia (with some other southern European ancestry sprinkled in). The shame and pain come from the way race plays out in the United States. More than just the dominant Black-white racial binary, those with Indigenous ancestry consistently must navigate contact narratives that have challenged how stories are passed and told. A genocide was committed on this land. Treaties were violated. We are in exile on our own lands. On one side of my family, erasure and eradication were colonization's aim. But we survived. My white family, on the other hand, immigrated because of the oppression they experienced in their homeland, coming to the United States for better opportunities. They assimilated into the racial hierarchies of the United States in ways my other family never could. The hate, anger, and racism I felt within my own family structure overwhelmed me at times. Why did they treat their Chicano child so differently?

And yet knowing the practices and religious backgrounds of my European families gave me a different perspective on generational healing. They, too, needed healing. I needed healing within the European-descended family line. While I may have been born "a dirty Mexican" as my great uncle on my white side said to me in my teen years at a family reunion, I had to wrestle with what that meant because I was tied to this man in blood. I shared an inheritance with him. The irony is that he was an immigrant. I was not. To know where his shame came from, being expelled from his own land and history, he and I were more alike than I cared to admit or recognize.

When my grandma on that side was dying, I had not talked to her in years. My wrestling with and trying to heal from the abuse and violence I had experienced in my life unsettled that side of the family. While I had not meant for it to go so long between conversations with my grandma, I wanted to have closure. I desired healing. As we ended our first conversation after the long separation, I offered a blessing. The blessing came from both sides of my family. I offered her a blessing from her homeland, visuals and imagery I had picked up from research of where she was born, a land she left when she was only a child. But I also offered her the healing prayer of my other grandma, the one who loved me into existence. Drawing on both lineages has led to profound healing. I recognize that I do not have to love how my ancestors behaved before and during my lifetime, but because I carry those stories, I must do everything possible to heal from them and to seed a future that is healed for my children. If I cannot bridge the deep complexity I carry in my own body, then how can I ever expect to participate in the healing of a society or our broader culture?

Spiritual Ancestry

It was also odd to me that in Christian Scripture and in my Sunday school classes, the word *ancestors* was never mentioned or talked about, even though such people do show up in Scripture.

We honored saints and put up our *ofrendas*, little altars remembering our ancestors, each year, but this seemed oddly outside the scope of what we talked about in Sunday school. In my freshman year in college, my classmates and I were reading the Gospel of Matthew together. When we read the passage in which Matthew traces Jesus's lineage back to Abraham, I felt a prick of the familiar. Was he naming his clan, his family? When I asked the professor, he reminded me of who Matthew's Gospel was written for and why it was important for the writer to trace this lineage.

"Jesus is part of a culture that venerates ancestors?" I asked.

Frustrated at the question, the professor said that how we name our relatives in my family is different from what was happening in Matthew's Gospel, which was establishing a line of succession for the benefit of Matthew's audience. A few months later, we read Matthew's account of Jesus's conversation with Moses, representing the law, and Elijah, representing the prophets.

Again, I raised my hand. "Jesus is talking to the ancestors!" I said.

We will return to this biblical story later, but suffice it to say that my cultural lens taught me that my Christian faith is an ancestral religion. I had a profound awakening to the fact that the Bible was part of my lineage. It belonged to me, just as I belonged to this holy story. Whether my professor wanted to acknowledge it or not, if you call on your ancestors, speak with them directly, and share their stories down through generations, then you are part of an ancestral tradition.

I am a trained healer in my Indigenous and Chicano side. I will discuss the symbols, stories, and practices in more detail in later chapters. To put the Bible and this tradition together, is life-giving and painful. Just as I hold multiple lineages in my bones, the spiritual stories I carry are not one-dimensional. I encourage you to stay with the practices and stories and to use this text as a tool to affirm your own complex histories and traditions. Embrace the nuance. Dive into the pain. And seek healing with me.

On top of what I carry in my bones, it is important to note that my children inherit through their mother's Jewish and Indigenous lineages and cultural belonging in the Southwest. While these are not the same ties as I have, the point is not to replicate ourselves in future generations as we pass on our stories and become good ancestors. Rather, to be a good ancestor is to leave open the possibility of something entirely new emerging. My children are daily reminders of that. While I am sharing the story of my people, I am also a central part of them understanding and living into their lineages on their mother's side. I am an active participant in their Jewish lives and share space with our relatives who carry very different cultural practices and ways of being Indigenous from my family. To be a good ancestor means to know that while my story is important, I am also part of a broader community of people who carry unique stories and traditions. I must be a loving relative with them and create the space for their lives to unfold as lovingly as possible.

This book is about trying to navigate the many lineages that we have and to pass on the stories that will heal future generations. We carry within us many lineages. If we are stardust, if we are the combination of molecules that move from us to the broader universe at will, then perhaps we will begin to broaden our imagination about what stories we tell and how we tell them. If we see our lives through the infinitely small or expansively big, if we get unstuck in time and see ourselves as simply one generation between an infinite amount of ancestors and descendants, then what we share with the next generation will be more loving. That is ancestor pedagogy—what we pass on through story and how we live out those stories. I am not trying to convince you that you are an ancestor or to determine what type of ancestor you want to be remembered as. Instead, I encourage us to discern together *how* we live now in this infinite presence and how we share the stories of our people, places, and beings that surround us.

Overview

This book will provide traditions and practices for you to understand both how to become a good ancestor and how to educate a new generation of good ancestors. In the opening chapter, you are invited to ask yourself the aching question: *Am I a good ancestor?* Woven through the memory of my grandmother Carmen, her presence, her loss of words, the final trembling "Mijo," we descend into the heart of what it means to carry and receive legacy. This chapter answers the question by guiding us through the shadows and sunlight of watching a beloved elder become an ancestor, and the search for meaning not in words but in the warmth of daily gestures and the quiet acts of love that linger long after language falls away.

In the second chapter, we explore what it means to live a good life, or in this case why pedagogy of the ancestors requires us to tend to the relationships we are born into. It provides a theological and philosophical justification about how people find meaning and purpose, and it challenges current ideas about vocational discernment. It explores vocation, the call from God, by asking what it means to orient our lives not around the big *why* ("Why am I here?") but around the big *how*. It is here that we are introduced to the concepts of "ancestor time" and "ancestor vision," ideas that our lives should and could be lived with a deeper perspective and appreciation for our place in creation.

In chapter 3, we explore the pedagogy of the ancestors. What does it mean to live and teach as if the future counts? I introduce the concept of a superbloom, a seeding of a flourishing future through asking how we are caring for future generations. Our descendants need our love. They remember how you lived, not how you determined you should be remembered. A quick exercise to illustrate this point: Think back to your favorite teacher. Now that you have this person in your mind, think about what made them your favorite teacher. More than likely, it is because of how they made you feel. They challenged, affirmed, loved, and supported you, and they listened to you and cultivated your imagination.

You likely do not remember that one lesson from that one hour on that one day. Pedagogy, how we teach, is how we express and act out our love.

In chapter 4, we dive deeper into how pedagogy of the ancestors calls us into relationship by exploring the shared challenge of memory, how some names echo across generations while others fade like light at dusk. This chapter answers this question: *Who do we remember as ancestors and why?* Through the story of a lineage marked by loss and reclamation, we encounter the ruptures of colonization and slavery, and the quiet work of recovering and honoring the threads that bind us to those who came before. Here the narrative lingers on the rituals and acts of remembrance, inviting us to participate in the sacred task of reclaiming our birthright as inheritors and stewards of ancestral wisdom. Chapter 4 turns explicitly to the teachings, wisdom, knowledges, and practices of the dispossessed. *How do marginalized groups survive and pass on their wisdom from generation to generation in the face of atrocities such as genocide, colonization, and slavery?* We explore what we can learn from hummingbirds and Jesus, as both are able to move backward and forward in time and space, communing with ancestors, and inviting us to do the same.

Chapter 5 asks, *When do we become ancestors?* We journey through the transitions, the moments when living turns to legacy. It is through ritual and ceremony that we are introduced to the power of naming. I share stories of my family's rituals as examples of how the wisdom of ancestors is never far and how our actions today ripple outward, shaping the possibilities for future generations. Chapter 5 explores how the dispossessed turn that education into belonging. How do we educate a new generation to belong to a longer ancestral lineage, to a future generation that has yet to walk on this planet, and perhaps most pressingly for today, to a planet that is suffering because of the lack of imagination about the future? Global climate change, violence, and polarization are due to the choices and actions of us and our ancestors.

Chapter 6 explores how we practice ancestral wisdom with future generations so that they may thrive. Through play, conversation, and ritual, we see how the young become teachers, conduits to a wisdom that transcends spoken language, and how creating space for their voices allows ancestral knowledge to create belonging. This chapter provides practices and tools to connect and reconnect with our lineages, traditions, and practices. I introduce you to my tradition as someone who holds sacred stories and holds space for others' sacred stories and invites you into this work. This chapter is a meditation on listening, on letting the next generation lead, and on the ways in which practice can become legacy. To be remembered is to have made space for others, to have imagined a world that transcends our own horizon.

Chapter 7 is an invocation to impact: *How did you make a difference for those not yet born?* The narrative here is one of collective dreaming, a vision of ancestors as world-builders who find meaning not in the pursuit of a singular purpose but in the acts of love, hope, and community. We explore a model to remember the future. We explore futurism to guide and support imagining better possible worlds for our descendants. I provide a framework for looking backward in time: reflect, remember, and recover. I also provide a framework for looking into the different futures: probable, plausible, and possible. This chapter draws on the work of futurists, prophets, and mystics and invites us to see pedagogy of the ancestors as an invitation to build worlds.

The final chapter asks us to dream beyond ourselves: *How do good ancestors make space for broader communities to thrive?* We follow stories filled with hope and imagination, of ancestors who dared not only to dream but to believe that those after them would exceed those visions. This chapter is a celebration of the pedagogy of possibility, where good ancestors cultivate not just personal legacy but communal flourishing, sowing seeds of hope in soil enriched by care, action, and the boundless capacity for collective transformation. It is a final invitation to become a good ancestor by raising the next generation of good ancestors.

Throughout *Pedagogy of the Ancestors,* you will learn about the practices and traditions to help us heal a broken world. This is an offering from communities who have survived colonization and genocide with hope that we may restore relationships for future generations. The world needs educators, teachers, elders, aunties, and leaders who understand intergenerational imagination. For me, this starts with a five-generation imagination simply because I know I sit between five generations of Carmelitas. Five generations back there was a Carmelita. My grandma was Carmelita. My daughter is named Carmelita, and in five generations there will be a Carmelita who will inherit our stories. While many Indigenous communities think in seven generations, I offer five because that is who I name as my relations.[2] Regardless of how you count the generations, what we do today must be to honor the generations before and the generations to come. *How* we live our lives, much more than *why* we do, will determine how we honor those who precede and those who follow us. The love we pour into our lives will be the rain that waters the seeds of the future. We will be ancestors who remember the future and recover the imagination of our past.

The insights and practices in this book are a gift from my community. Some of the practices will be familiar to you, while others may be new. What I have shared is what I am permitted to by my community of healers and elders. There are practices I encourage you to adopt and adapt for your community. Healing work is never easy or clean. It is messy, hard, and at times full of conflict. Spiritual and religious leaders often report feeling lonely in their work. Leadership can be isolating. For those of us who will serve in leadership, we must have communities of accountability and support. Create your circle of elders whom you can go to with your questions, pain, joy, and visions as you engage intergenerational healing.

A note about reading through the text. Each chapter is structured with a similar rhythm. I open with key terms, then a story or prayer about connecting to ancestors that introduces ancestral thinking and teaching. We walk through traditions

and scholarship that invite us to explore that theme for the chapter a bit deeper. Think of this as my sharing with you the deeper knowledge and practices from the traditions and sources I have inherited. These middle sections are a combination of trying to appeal to two lineages that I embody: one, my training as a theologian and scholar, and the other, my training and equipping as a healer through my culture and family. I view these two worldviews as flowing out of the same lake. My lake may be small, and I am aware that you draw on other sources of wisdom. My hope is that our lives are the rivers that flow to an ocean filled with the world's ancestral teachings. You are receiving a gift from my community, and I encourage you to bring your ancestors to the reading of this text.

Each chapter ends with a practice for you to do by yourself or in community. I call these "firekeeper practices" because they are meant to invite you into the practice of holding sacred fire. Across traditions and lineages, gathering around the fire is central to how stories are shared and passed on. To care for the fire, the hearth, the *kiva*, is an act of generational memory. To be a firekeeper is to hold the community, to ground it, to ensure its survival and thriving for the next generation. The practices build on each other, and I hope that by the end of the book you will have begun healing your roots and seeding hope, compassion, and love for future generations.

The journey to becoming a good ancestor will not be complete by reading this book. There are good ancestors, bad ancestors, and those we forget altogether. May you be blessed as you explore how to be an ancestor whose love will be felt by your descendants.

I have a final invitation from a long line of educators and healers: practice. Everything teaches. The next generation is watching how you live. By practicing what you will learn throughout this book, and undoubtedly what you will add to it, you will teach a new generation how to be a good ancestor. The pedagogy of the ancestors is expressed in how you live. Live a life worthy of your ancestors' dreams and accountable to the hopes of future generations. As we practice together over these pages, my hope

is that you know that you are loved—loved by your ancestors, community, and the generations that will speak your name. You are an ancestor. Let us go practice being a good one.

Keepers of Sacred Fire Practices

The first practice is the Good Ancestor assessment. This assessment is designed to help you find your starting place and guide your reading. When it comes to ancestral education and healing work, we all come with very different starting places. For leaders working with this text in their community, part of good pedagogy is understanding and accounting for the different starting places of our community members. Each of my siblings, cousins, aunties and *tíos* all have different entry points into ancestral work. Some are deeply connected in spirit and blood, and others may feel completely cut off from our sacred stories. There are a host of reasons for these different entry points, as we will see throughout the text. This assessment is not meant to judge or explain those starting points, simply to acknowledge them. Take the assessment below and read the explanation at the end. Each "Yes" answer equals 1 point.

Naming Our Lineages

1. Can you name the specific cultures, families, or communities that make up your ancestral lineage?
2. Are you aware of any generational gifts or strengths that have been passed down through your family?
3. Do you recognize any generational trauma or challenges inherited from your ancestors?
4. Can you list the names or stories of your ancestors going back more than five generations?
5. Have you ever intentionally learned about your ancestry through conversation, research, or tradition?

Total score: ___

Understanding Ourselves as Descendants in Community

1. Does your sense of self or identity draw upon your lineage or ancestral history?
2. Are there cultural markers, rituals, or practices you follow that connect you to your lineage?
3. Do you feel a sense of belonging in a community that shares or honors your ancestral background?
4. Is your lineage a source of guidance in how you approach challenges or decisions?
5. Do you see yourself as a link in a chain of descendants rather than an isolated individual?

Total score: ___

Descendants (Imagining FIVE Generations Ahead)

1. Do you ever imagine the impact your decisions might have on people five generations from now?
2. Do you make choices today with the well-being of future generations in mind?
3. Do you include young people and/or children in your decision-making?
4. Are you engaged in any practices or rituals that acknowledge the existence of future descendants?
5. Do you believe your actions can contribute to healing or strengthening your lineage for generations to come?

Total score: ___

Teaching (Educating for Future Generations)

1. Do you see yourself as a teacher or guide for younger people in your community or family?
2. Are you consciously passing down traditions, values, or stories to the next generation?

3. Do you encourage others to think about their impact on the future?
4. Have you ever adapted your teaching or mentoring to include lessons about ancestry or legacy?
5. Do you view education as a method for shaping the world for future generations?

Total score: _____

Daily Life (Conscious Choices and Justice)

1. Do you make daily decisions with future generations in mind?
2. Have you committed to communities or relationships beyond your family of origin or culture?
3. Are you actively working to help transform unjust systems or create more just systems?
4. Do you challenge yourself to make choices that contribute to greater justice and equity?
5. Do you seek to live in a way that would prompt others looking back to call you a "good ancestor"?

Total score: _____

Total overall score: _____

21–25

If you scored in this range, your connection to community and your ancestors is strong. You understand your role as a leader, elder, ancestor in waiting in the community. As you read the book, I encourage you to be intentional about the practices and traditions you bring from your community. Use the book as a guide to map how you see yourself as a living ancestor and rewrite this text for your community. Pay attention to the practices. More importantly, welcome, fellow firekeeper.

16–20

For those connecting or reconnecting to lost, erased, or eradicated histories and traditions, this range represents a host of social and spiritual conditions that may or may not be in your control. You may have deep connections to your roots and are still trying to figure out how to manifest that into sharing with the next generation. You may have been cut off from your own histories and traditions, so you are reconnecting with them. As you read this book, I invite you to consider this as an invitation to dive even deeper into your commitments to being a good ancestor.

11–15

For those who are just beginning this journey or who may see themselves as an elder or teacher but perhaps not be thinking about their life and work in an intergenerational way, this score represents an opportunity to go from single-generation thinking to intergenerational thinking. If you scored in this range, I invite you to read this text as an invitation to think of everything you do rippling on for generations to come. From what you buy goods, to where you live, to whom you spend your time with, I want you to reflect on a singular question: How is my life impacting future generations right now?

6–10

I am glad you are here. If you scored here, I want you to pay attention to the work on belonging. If you are in this range, you are seeking a connection to both your community and your past. As you read through the book, I hope that you take inventory of your family histories and of all the ways you are tied to those around you and that you really begin to explore what gift you want to give to future generations. You are beloved. We will document together how you not only belong as a descendant to honored ancestors but how you live a life as a good ancestor.

5 or less

If you scored here, the work of becoming a good ancestor starts today. Throughout the text, see the words and practices as invitations into spiritual inheritance. There may be a disconnection from your ancestors, from teaching or mentoring the next generation, and curiosity about what all this means for you and your life. I hope that by sticking with this process and this text, you will be a fellow firekeeper for your people. We will find your ancestors together.

This book was written for all those who care about future generations: teachers, elders, parents, caregivers, neighborhood saints and sinners alike. It is for those who have children and those who never will. The book is written for those whose family trees live in their bones, for those who print it off from online ancestry tools, and for those who are just learning about their families or whose family histories have been erased due to colonization, slavery, and the many sins committed on this land. Regardless of your starting point, the end of the journey is the same. We are all future ancestors. What kind of ancestors do we want to be?

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