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When Grandma Comes to Visit: Exploring How Communion with Our Ancestors & Nature Deepens Our Capacity for Healing, Restoration, Resilience, and Resistance

Phyllis Jeffers-Coly

Diasporic Soul

I am not quite sure what they are officially called—these itty bitty brown seeds that show up in white wispy whirls in my home. I see them as special and sacred because they give me a way to feel tangibly connected with my ancestors, specifically my maternal grandmother. The magic, the delight, the awe, the sense of wonder that I associate with these seeds that show up in white wispy whirls is what I hope to share when I integrate invocation, which is typically familiar for our visitors, and yoga, which might be less familiar, into the Heritage and Healing experiences my husband and I offer to Black Americans in Senegal.

This piece, using the recent reflections of some of our guests, addresses the ways that their first trip home, their pilgrimage to West Africa, specifically Senegal, as contemplative practice fosters a sense of well-being for Black folks in part because it offers us a chance to be more aware of our union and in deeper communion with Spirit, specifically in terms of communion with our ancestors and nature, including the magic, perhaps, of white wispy whirly seeds. I am interested in how they have and continue to deepen their relationship with their ancestors and nature in ways that have allowed them to stay grounded, rooted, and centered, and to tap into a sense of expansiveness and possibility even in the face of adversity. I have witnessed how these Spiritual connections allow them to deepen their capacity for healing, restoration, resilience, and resistance.

I am not quite sure what the itty bitty brown seeds that show up unexpectedly, dancing in white wispy whirls around my home, are called officially. They are special and sacred because they give me a way to feel tangibly connected with my ancestors, specifically my maternal grandmother. And, be clear, I am not a botanist, horticulturalist or green-thumb guru¹ like my husband Eddy, but I absolutely know for sure that these itty bitty brown seeds in white, wispy, whirls excite me, sometimes to tears when they appear unexpectedly, randomly and magically at moments that I understand are my grandmother speaking to, affirming and reassuring me. There are other ways my ancestors engage me, but these itty bitty brown seeds dancing in white, wispy, whirls feel the most sweet and delightful. They also add to my sense safety, security and belonging because I am connected to and supported by our ancestors.

The magic, the delight, the awe, the wonder, and the sense that Spirit supports us is what I hope to inspire in the sisters and brothers who make their pilgrimage to Senegal with my husband and me. A pilgrimage that, in 2015, my husband Eddy and I made when we took a vacation to Senegal that proved to be healing and transformative for us as a couple as well as a turning point in our lives, professionally and personally. In fact, our 2015 trip to Senegal opened the door for us to consider moving there for a completely fresh start. As a result, Eddy and I opened our outdoor plant-filled terrace café—Tangor Café—outside of Dakar and founded Diasporic Soul in 2016. Diasporic Soul offers heritage and healing experiences that integrate both culture (SOUL) and

¹ I am simply engaging in word play by using guru here rhetorically—using alliteration and assonance with the “g.” I am in no way going down the road of calling my husband a guru as far as his green-thumb goes (see, there I go again). However, his impact as a “teacher” is reflected by the fact that he was nicknamed Professor Onion Sauce by our two of our early visitors who fell in love with our onion sauce and were moved by my husband’s knowledge of and disposition toward nature and plants. He conveys a deep respect for nature, which includes his appreciation of the beauty he continues to create for himself and others—a refuge, really—in our home, on our farm, and in our outdoor café. In fact, he is a key part of the way in which our visitors begin to see their relationship with nature and their spirituality in a far more expansive way.

contemplative practices, including many that are included on the *Tree of Contemplative Practices* and addressed in Barbezat and Bush's *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education*. Further, our work is informed by our understanding that white supremacy, anti-Black racism, epistemic violence and race-based stress and trauma disrupt our sense of safety, security and belonging. As well as our sense of our innate dignity and worth. Thus, by healing we mean, evoking Alice Walker, putting the energy, heart, and courage back into our bodies with our own culture (SOUL) so that we can continue to transform and dismantle the institutions and relationships that have been causing us harm, injury, misery, and trauma. Put another way, it means remembering and reveling in the fact that we are most certainly Black. Dope. And All Good. And, as singer Seinabo Sey² reminds us in her song "Breathe," we are Beautiful, Magical, and Valuable. Diasporic Soul Heritage & Healing Experiences offer Black people the opportunity to engage in cultural and contemplative practices that allow us to remember that we are in fact all of these things. Our experiences include retreats and heritage travel opportunities for individuals, families, and/or groups of friends. We also offer healing-centered leadership development experiences for Black collegians and professionals. And, while we offer retreats and workshops in the United States, we know very clearly that making a pilgrimage to Senegal is life-changing, impactful, and transformative in many ways.

In fact, while here, in Africa, our guests certainly deepen their capacity to feel a sense of belonging, safety, security, and innate dignity

2 Sey, S. (7 September 2018). Breathe [song] on *I'm a Dream*. Universal Music. <https://www.okayafrica.com/seinabo-sey-breathe-video-gambia/>. Seinabo Sey, who is a Swedish-Gambian singer, wrote "Breathe," which is an orchestral string-backed song about self-love and self-acceptance, while on her first visit to Dakar, Senegal. Sey explains that "she felt at ease in Senegal, but couldn't quite pinpoint why until she realized that she loved it in Senegal because she didn't have to explain herself to people. She realized that as Black women, so much of our time is spent explaining obvious things about our culture or ourselves, when we would rather just be" (quoted in Tambini, 26 April 2018). In other words, in "Breathe," Seinabo Sey speaks of Senegal being a place where she can do just that, breathe; a place where she can express herself authentically as a Black woman.

and worth. This is due in part because they experience a culture here in Senegal that recognizes that we are supported by Spirit, both in nature and by our ancestors. Yet, in order to experience the sense of wonder and delight that the itty bitty brown seeds in white wispy whirls bring me, they must be willing and able to “surrender to the realm of the unseen, the unknown so that it can reveal itself” (Parker, 2020, p. 158) and “relinquish [their] need be in control” (Holmes, 2017, p. 165). However, surrendering in a way that allows us to be open to Spirit can be challenging because many of us have spent some portion of our lives contracting in self-protection and bracing ourselves against “ongoing, recurrent, and cumulative” race-based stress and trauma (Parker, 2020, p. 62) that we experience in a culture where we often do not feel a sense of belonging, where we do not feel safe and where we do not feel secure. And, where we do not feel supported. And, surrendering and opening up to Spirit is also challenging when we stay in our heads because we have existed in a society where “the thinking mind” comes first before the wisdom of body and Spirit. As Malidoma Somé notes in his groundbreaking book, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa* (1998), “the modern world is denaturalized” and “Western orthodoxies, often binary in nature, negate the body and see the earth as inferior to heaven. And, patriarchal religions mask the ancient cosmologies that recognize the mind-body-Spirit connection and the connection of our bodies to the earth. As well nature’s role in our healing.” Thus, some of us have a hard time surrendering, letting go and delighting in dancing itty bitty brown seeds in white wispy whirls floating about the house, which means that seeing them as anything more than some sort of dirty mess that must be cleaned up and discarded is out of the question. Yet, if we intend to experience the delight and sense of wonder and awe that nature and Spirit offer us, if we want to experience healing and restoration, then we must surrender.

So, no matter how much I love alliteration, assonance, and my grandmother, in lieu of beginning with magical, mythical tales of rainbows, red birds or dancing white wispy, whirly things, we begin our heritage and healing experiences with invocation and developing the breath and body awareness that we might typically associate with the

opening of a yoga practice. Here, in the context of prayer and invocation, I can explain yoga as union, with one's authentic and true self as well as with all that is Spirit and living. I can more readily explain that yoga, and that connection to Spirit and that which is divine requires us to surrender. Even though I do not necessarily use the term Ishvara Pranidhana (Sutra 2.45). Combining the prayer and invocation that most of my guests are familiar with and what may be fairly new to them in terms of yoga allows me to connect the concept of the breath as life force energy and the idea that yoga is an embodied way that we can deepen our awareness of, communion with or restore our connection to and with Spirit. Put another way, I use this approach to establish that we are embodied Spirits who are connected to the sacred, God, the Divine, which is fundamentally part of everything and everyday life, (Holmes, 2017, p. 27), including nature. A foregone conclusion in traditional Senegalese culture. Thus, we can be open to the possibility of recognizing how our ancestors and nature offer us support as we experience healing and restoration. Recognizing that our connection to Spirit, to the divine energy in nature and our ancestors can contribute to our capacity to heal. And, by healing, as Alice Walker tells us in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved*, we mean putting the heart, courage and energy back in our bodies with our own culture. Connecting to Spirit is the energy that Walker refers to. The heart and courage that she refers to are learning to love and stand up for ourselves and one another in ways that are not always easy in a world where white supremacy and anti-Black racism continue to cause us misery, pain, harm and injury—individually and collectively.

Hands down, the same delight, awe, joy, wonder, and sense that I am supported that is elicited by the itty bitty brown seeds that show up in white, wispy whirly seeds for me is evoked by Senegal's beloved baobab tree for others. These trees are in fact tangible and concrete ways for us to connect with nature's divinity, her Spirit. As a visitor to Senegal, it is easy to never fully understand or make a direct connection with the baobab tree. For many, seeing these sacred trees often only consists of whizzing past them on the way to from one destination to another. Or hearing a tour guide mention the row of them on Goree

Island as they crest the hillside to get to the island's top perch or at an overpriced nature refuge in a jeep with a tour guide who negates their cultural and spiritual significance. In fact, meeting the baobab goes well beyond noting that they are part of the observable landscape or the country's terrain.

The sense of the tree's divinity begins with delight, wonder, and awe when we walk through our town, *Sebikotane*, which is an enclave outside Dakar that is home to nature-honoring Serere people, Senegal's third largest ethnic group. The sacred nature of the baobab for the Serere includes that fact that it is one of first trees of the Earth according to Serere beliefs about the origins of humankind. Thus, baobabs are typically not cut down even though their fruit, leaves, and bark are essential to the culture. If they are to be cut down a prayer that includes naming the individual doing the cutting must be said; permission of the tree must be granted. The baobab can also be an altar and in certain circumstances, a sacred burial place for griots as well as a communal gathering place.

For our guests, the trees' sheer size and magnitude is part of what evokes a sense of awe, wonder, and delight in the same way that folks are struck by the size and mass of the African Renaissance Monument. But, unlike the massive man-made monument, the baobab trees, like the one that protects our town and the one near Eddy's ancestral homestead, connect us to something sacred, to Spirit. As we open up and surrender to our curiosity we are able to step closer and feel into how massive these beloved trees are, and how small we are beneath them and in the larger expanse of nature. Willing to get out of their heads and let down their guard, our guests sense the life-force energy of the trees they connect to during their time here. Energy that can be a bit intimidating and uncomfortable at first because it is so immense and at the same time unfamiliar. But her majesty is seductive and all that she is and provides opens us up to her gifts and the way she feels like she supports us just with her mere presence. Supporting us with the gifts of protection and communion as she holds her prominent place in villages and family compounds, particularly those of the Serere. As the dwelling place of Spirit.

The awareness of this connection with the baobab and her Spirit in is reflected in the experience of one brother who has been visiting us since 2018. During his first visit, his connection with the Spirit and energy of the baobab tree was made. One that he explains by stating that there is a “difference between knowing and believing,” which for some might “seem like semantics.” He explains that “knowing God and believing in God takes you on two different trajectories” to contextualize how he describes the way that his pilgrimage to Senegal altered him, how he went from knowing to believing in his divine connection to nature, trees specifically:

So, when I think about the baobab tree and trees in general before going to Senegal. I believed trees had power, I read about it; heard talks about it. This green lady, I read about these things. But after going to Senegal [for me believing] moved into the knowing.

This brother’s shift from believing to knowing took place in part because of an experience he had one afternoon early in his visit while Eddy and I were visiting a seer with two other folks who were with this brother on the visit:

I had a vision of these trees surrounding me in a circle. ... [T]hey (the trees) were all dancing around me. And, Baba Eddy told me that, the seer had spoken about me. I told him that I had had this vision of these trees surrounding me . . . and he said the seer had seen the same thing. That the Spirits had welcomed me to Senegal. And they had surrounded me; the trees and the Spirits had surrounded me. So, we were having parallel or perhaps simultaneous visions, me and the seer, of trees surrounding me.

So, from then on (during that visit and afterwards) seeing the baobab tree would shake me, would give me chills. I could see that Spirit in that tree and that Spirit could see me. And we would have some kind of com-

munion or dialogue. And when I pass by particularly if there was a group of them or if was an independent tree.

And, thus coming back here (to California) I don't really have such trees but I still view all and see and know all the trees are different. And that they have a Spirit. That we have some kind of kinship with them. That they lived as human beings at some point, as ancestors. They certainly bear witness to us and if we are in tune enough we can bear witness to them as well. That experience [in Senegal] in terms of nature and the trees has changed me forever.

The way that this brother's experience with baobab impacted his awareness and connection to nature and Spirit is similar to a young sister who came to us in May 2018. She too, on what became ultimately her pilgrimage for her in spite of the Fulbright program directors' intentions, spent time walking in and connecting to nature with us in Sebikotane:

I would say that my time with you opened my eyes to asking my ancestors and Mother Nature for help. I grew up very spiritual. My mother would always tell me "leave it to God" and that always helped me throughout my life. But after my time with you, that awareness was heightened. I knew I really was no longer alone. I [have] the sun! Oh my god I [have] the sun, Mami Wata, the ocean, the grand, powerful ocean. I [have] the trees—so steady, so stable. You, Eddy, and Yaay³ taught me that I have the force, the grace, and the love of nature always with me. And that is when I truly began to feel the love of God that Christians usually talk about. Through God's creation I found God. You all taught me to talk and commune with nature in a way that was already in me but needed to be unlocked.

3 Yaay is mom in Wolof and in this case refers to Eddy's mom who lives between our home in Senegal and Marseille, France.

That same sense of awareness that this young lady has that she is supported and connected to nature is reflected in the experiences of others who have had Diasporic Soul Heritage and Healing Experiences with Eddy and I. For example, one brother who came first as a student in 2018 and then as a staff member with Xavier University in 2019 speaks to how since the beginning of the pandemic he returned to many of the contemplative practices that he was taught during his Diasporic Soul Experience, including communing with nature:

Right before everything was officially shut down, my girlfriend and I got a puppy. He (the puppy, Oscar) was good for us in many ways; he forced us to go outside. Walking and hiking have become regular parts of our lives now thanks to Oscar. We are required to take a breath, go outside, move our bodies, and ultimately take in everything around us. Whether it is first thing in the morning or in the middle of the day, communing with nature has been a grounding force for us in an unstable time. I find that I am yearning to engage even more with nature.

The way that this young brother has used nature to ground him as he begins adulthood during a global pandemic made worse by the fact that “racism is as pernicious as ever,” is reflected in the experience of a young sister who brought him along with two cohorts of students for a two-week Diasporic Soul Heritage and Healing Experience under the auspices of Xavier University’s Stained Glass Initiative⁴. Like her former student and mentee, she has come to a place where she is more profoundly connected and sensitive to nature as a living being. For example, she explains that after practicing restorative yoga under the moon

⁴ Xavier University’s Stained Glass Initiative, housed in the institution’s Center for Diversity and Inclusion under the leadership of Dr. Kyra Shahid, offered Black students the opportunity to participate in a Diasporic Soul Heritage and Healing experience at no cost to the students as a part of their work around the institution’s ties to enslavement. The experience included pre and post weekend retreats in Cincinnati and their two-weeks in Senegal. Students completed Shahid’s Anti-Black Racism and Epistemic Violence course as a pre-requisite and earned a Global Competency Certification upon completion of the experience and submission of required artifacts.

on the roof during her 2019 visit, she is far more conscious and attentive to the moon. Specifically, she states that she can sense how the moon impacts her physically, including her menstrual cycle. She recalls that before our rooftop yoga practices she would see the moon but not really be fully aware of her, but now her practice includes sitting with her.

Much like her elder mentor from California who has moved from knowing to believing in his connection to nature, to trees, she has become much more attentive to the energy of the trees that she meets, in part because of the way in which the baobab occupied such an integral part of her pilgrimage and the pilgrimages she makes with students. She describes that now she not only sees the trees, as is the case with the moon, she senses them, their energy, their Spirit. She described, for example, how the trees on the campus of Tougaloo College⁵, though comparable in size to the baobab tree, did not feel as majestic and powerful to her. Instead, they felt heavy, sad and grief-filled. One might wonder if the energy she sensed is somehow the impact of these trees being rooted in the soil that certainly holds the blood, sweat, and tears of Black Americans subjected to enslavement and who experienced the brutalities of living in the Jim Crow South. What have these trees been privy to, what have they witnessed, what have they absorbed? She has, as she states, typically been able to sense the energy of other people; now she senses the energy of other Spirit entities in nature.

This young woman's deepened awareness and connection with nature is reflected in the experience of another sister who attended our Calm and the Chaos Healing Retreat for Black Women in January 2019 and who was our first Diasporic Soul in Residence from January to October 2020. Like the young brother who has used nature as a resource during the pandemic and his first very stressful year as a Ph.D. student, she has found herself supported by and more connected to nature:

Going within and figuring out why I feel the way that I feel is something that I always used to do, but definitely after Senegal I pay much more attention to the signs of what's going on within me. But, now I also try to un-

5 Tougaloo College is an HBCU that like Xavier University is part of the Universities Studying Slavery consortium. Both institutions have hosted the USS conference in recent years.

derstand too and see the signs that are outside of me as well. Like paying attention to nature. Being in nature is something that I definitely have done more since I've been back from Senegal. Paying attention to the trees and leaves, the birds, everything that's around me and looking for signs in those things or signs presenting themselves to me as well is something that I have definitely been more cognizant of since I've been back, especially the birds. There's a lot of red birds around here.

The red birds she mentions reflect a shared understanding that she and I have. One that is much like what I know to be true about the itty bitty brown seeds that show up as white wispy whirls from my grandmother. They, the red birds, are one way that our ancestors show up for us. For my dear friend in Cincinnati and for my younger sister in North Carolina, it is the cardinal or cardinals in the window. For my friend and artist Angela Franklin⁶, they are the red birds that offer solace and reassurance to the grieving female subject in *When Feeling Blue, She Reaches for the Red Bird*, one of the mixed media pieces in Franklin's *My Soul to Keep* series that explores the relationship between self-care and grief. The red birds, here in Senegal and in the United States, are one way that the Spirit of nature connects us to the Spirits of our ancestors. When we feel safe and secure enough to surrender and let down our guard so that we might be open to Spirit speaking to us via red birds or itty bitty brown seeds in white wispy whirls. And, allowing ourselves to connect

6 Angela Franklin, a native of Cincinnati, Ohio, and owner of Chez Alpha Books in Dakar, is a well-regarded multimedia artist who served as the 2019–2020 Artist-in-Residence with Xavier University's Stained Glass Initiative. Her works evoke and capture our history and our culture, including our capacity for resilience and resistance in spite of oppression and life's hardships. While her commissioned works for Xavier tell a visually compelling and rich story about the institution's disturbing and unresolved relationship with slavery and white supremacy, her 2018 series *My Soul to Keep* is a riveting and striking collection of multimedia art textiles that she created to express and process her grief after losing her sister. The series consists of multiple pieces, all of which deeply resonate with me, including *When Feeling Blue, She Reaches for the Redbird* and *Pour First from a Full Cup and a Full Heart*.

to the ways in which we might communicate with them and that they might be communicating with, protecting, guiding, and supporting us.

For instance, the young man who has found solace in nature along with his pet dog Oscar during the pandemic, has also found himself reaching out to his ancestors more often:

I rely on them (my ancestors) to get me through teaching classes (of predominately white affluent students at a private liberal arts PWI). I just have this yearning to know more about these people who helped us get to where we are today. I think about the relationship that I have with my grandmothers and how I yearn for that same connection with my deceased grandfathers. I think about my cousin Donte who passed in 2017 and ultimately led me down this personal path of exploration. I think about my Aunt Red who lovingly nicknamed me “The Professor” before either of us knew that would be my career path. And I think about my Uncle Phil who is the first sibling on both sides of the family to pass and how it made all the survivors that much more human.

With so much death around us⁷, I find it all that more important to give honor where honor is due and acknowledge the sacrifices made for us to get to this point. Every time I pray and write, I ask for the ancestors who mean me well, paved the way, loved on me, and have experience doing this work to join me and enjoy the fellowship that happens in the spaces I occupy. I even recently started collecting pictures with the goal of starting our ancestral [altar] in our home.

Much like this young graduate student, one of the sisters who attended our March 2019 Calm in the Chaos Healing Retreat has found a

7 The death toll referenced here specifically refers to those resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

connection with the Spirit of her ancestors. Prior to coming to Senegal, “[she] had a lot of questions about [her] ancestors” and held the belief that “[her] ancestors were always out of reach.” However, “with guidance from the *marabout* (seer) and encouragement from Uncle Eddy”—she gained a better understanding by the end of the retreat that allowed her to begin connecting with her ancestors:

I discovered that even if I do not know my ancestors by name, they know me and are guiding and protecting me regardless. With that knowledge, whenever faced with adversity since—I am rooted in the knowing that those who went before me laid the groundwork for [me].

I had concerns about not being able to have a stationary altar due to my nomadic lifestyle and was taught that an altar does not have to be immobile. I learned that connecting with and giving offerings to my ancestors can be as simple or intricate as I feel led. A year later, upon getting my first apartment, I built my altar, which is where I give offering and speak to my ancestors.

My spirituality is now rooted with the awareness of the limitless influence of my ancestors. The knowledge of my ancestors’ resilience and ability to withstand adversity has been an anchor for me in ways I never imagined. [Their] ability to withstand adversity is rooted deep in my flesh, and because of that—I think one of the best ways to honor those ancestors is by being at peace and not having to work so damn hard for what they already overcame. They did, so I do not have to—at least not in the same way. I believe that every time I experience joy, or overcome a disparaging thought, or fight through some really heavy shit—I am honoring their fight.

Similarly, the sister who led the students from Xavier here has too, particularly after her second visit, begun to develop a greater awareness of or connection to her ancestors’ Spirits. Most recently, as she

prepared to bury her Aunt Vivian, she heard her singing “How Great Thy Art” while working on the funeral program along with her cousin. A song that had actually not been selected for her aunt’s homecoming celebration, yet, upon hearing her aunt’s voice, she understood that her aunt wanted it sung at her funeral. And, so it was. She also, prior to this most recent loss, recalls hearing three of her other aunties speaking to her at different times since her second visit to Senegal in 2018. For her, as she describes it, she feels that she is more open to and aware of the presence of her ancestors. And, she, like the young brother and sisters navigating challenges of starting their adult lives, particularly during the two pandemics, recognizes her ancestors as an important resource that deepens her capacity to stay grounded, rooted, and centered. Where she is supported in a way that allows her to deepen her resilience and engage in resistance and seek justice with confidence, courage, and a deep sense of agency and personal power. Where she is able to experience the healing that Walker and Somé speak of.

A healing that takes place when we feel safe and secure enough to surrender and let go and open to Spirit. Healing that includes restoring our connection to nature as sacred and the Spirits of our ancestors. Healing that recognizes that both nature and our ancestors as Spirit can support us as we deepen our capacity for both resilience and resistance. Healing that allows us to put energy, heart, and courage back into our bodies with our own culture. Healing that allows us to understand that we are indeed Black, Dope, and All Good. Healing that allows us to revel in the fact that we are so truly magical, valuable, and beautiful. Healing in ways that foster deep curiosity, delight, awe, wonder, joy, and the sense that we are supported by the seen and the unseen.

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