

# Where the Canyon Meets the Sky

## Ancestral land, family inheritance, and the development of a psychotherapist

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There are places whose names seem to have been chosen by someone who understood the human condition. Mt. Misery. Hells Canyon. The Seven Devils. Eden. Paradise. Then there is the Wallowa Valley, with the mountains rising above Joseph and Wallowa Lake resting beneath their enormous presence. The names suggest a division between darkness and light, but the land is more complicated. Beauty inhabits the canyon. Hardship belongs to the high country. The same light falls on both.

I recently returned to this country, to places where my mother's family and my father's ancestors had lived. I wanted to stand where they had stood, to see the ridges, rivers, homesteads, and valleys that had held their lives. I carried some of my mother's ashes back to Mt. Misery, where other members of her family had been returned to the earth. Almost everyone who could have told me these stories firsthand is gone now. I was returning to remember them, but also to understand something about what I carry from them into my life and my work.

After more than thirty years as a psychotherapist, I continue to discover that professional development has a personal geography. We acquire theories, attend trainings, learn methods, and become more experienced. Yet there are also places we must approach within our own histories: the family arrangements that taught us how to belong, the feelings we learned to conceal, the responsibilities we accepted before we knew we had a choice. These histories accompany us into the consulting room, whether or not we recognize their presence.

"The landscape has been inseparable from my history," I said as the journey unfolded. Mt. Misery, Grouse Flats, Troy, Eden Bench, Hells Canyon, the Seven Devils, Joseph, the Wallowas: the names belonged to a family story before they became symbols in an essay. As I visited these places, memories and stories emerged - alcoholism, tragedy, divorce, neglect, poverty, abuse, and the lives people made within those conditions. Returning did not provide a final explanation. It brought me into contact with what I knew, what I had been carrying, and what I might never know.

"It's my history," I said. "It's who I come from and it's where I come from." There was something plain in that statement that mattered more than any theory I could place around it. I did not need my inheritance to be reassuring before it deserved my attention.

## The Child Who Tried to Protect

Much of my childhood unfolded within a family marked by violence, alcoholism, neglect, fear, and emotional instability. People could love deeply and hurt terribly. Generosity existed alongside cruelty, endurance alongside helplessness, tenderness within lives organized around suffering. As a child, I could not step outside that world and consider its contradictions. I lived inside it.

One of the roles I took on as a child was trying to protect my mother from my stepfather. I have recognized the pull of that role in my adult life: moving toward distress, becoming responsible,

wanting to prevent further harm. Naming the continuity has helped me understand something about myself. It does not explain the whole of my life, and it does not make every act of care a disguised attempt to repair childhood.

Care can arise from love, conviction, interest, and pleasure in nurturing another person. It can also carry fear. I have had to learn to ask which is shaping my response, and whether both are present. Becoming useful can offer a valued place in the world while making it difficult to recognize when I am tired, overextended, or losing my own voice.

Over time, I began to experience something I described simply: “I gained a voice and started to use it.” I also began to say no. That development did not require abandoning concern for others. It required discovering that concern could include me. I continue to examine the difference between freely chosen responsibility and the old feeling that everything will come apart unless I take charge.

Becoming a therapist gave me language, training, and mentors for this inquiry. It also gave me a professional setting in which familiar sensitivities could become useful: noticing the emotional atmosphere, listening for what was not being said, recognizing distress, and wanting to help. The professional value of a capacity does not settle the question of how freely I can use it. My work has required learning to accompany suffering while noticing when the impulse to rescue begins to organize the encounter.

A person who learned to monitor an unpredictable home may become unusually attentive to a client’s changes in expression. That sensitivity can support good work. It can also become a compulsion to detect and manage every shift in the room. Someone who had to be useful may offer exceptional care while finding it difficult to tolerate a client’s disappointment. Someone who survived through independence may honor agency while missing an ordinary need for comfort or dependable help.

These are possibilities, not diagnoses of therapists with difficult histories. Their value lies in the questions they open. When I intervene, am I responding to this person’s need, or to my discomfort with their distress? When I emphasize autonomy, am I helping them find a position of their own, or moving away from dependence that unsettles me? Can I remain interested when their experience contradicts the story that has helped me understand my own?

We do not become more trustworthy by pretending to have no history. We become more accountable by learning how that history enters our attention, our choices, and our relationships.

## **You Can Go Home Again**

Monica McGoldrick’s *You Can Go Home Again: Reconnecting with Your Family* offers a frame for this return. Her use of genograms invites attention to relationships across generations: losses, alliances, estrangements, family stories, cultural circumstances, and the positions people occupy. The family becomes something we can investigate rather than only a story we have already settled.

What moves me in this approach is the invitation to become curious about people whose influence has felt painfully certain. What did they experience before I knew them? Who disappeared from the family story? What happened around the losses nobody discussed? Which forms of strength were valued, and what did someone have to hide to retain a place? These questions can widen understanding without making a pattern on a page proof of a cause.

The adults who frightened us had lives beyond our childhood experience of them. That fact does not diminish what happened to us. It may help us hold more than one truth: they were shaped by circumstances, and they were responsible for their conduct; they suffered, and they caused suffering; something human remains understandable without making the harm acceptable.

Returning home, in this sense, can mean returning to inquiry. It can involve photographs, letters, public records, a conversation with a willing relative, or a visit to a place. It can also happen in therapy when the people involved are dead, unavailable, or unsafe to approach. Family history remains incomplete. Remembered experience, documented information, another person's account, and our interpretations need room to remain distinct.

## **Returning Without Surrendering**

The language of going home can be difficult for someone whose home was dangerous. It may sound like another demand to forgive, reconcile, or prove maturity by becoming available to people who caused harm. That is not the return I mean. Contact is a consequential choice, not a test of psychological development.

A person can investigate their origins while maintaining distance. They can mourn what was missing without offering another opportunity for injury. They can feel compassion without resuming a relationship. They can decide that a particular conversation would cost more than it could reasonably offer. For some, returning to an ancestral place is possible precisely because it does not require returning to an unsafe family arrangement.

Bowen's concept of differentiation contributes another question: how do I maintain a thoughtful position of my own while participating in an emotionally important relationship? His tradition has used family-of-origin work as a setting for examining that capacity. The task concerns how we function under relational pressure, not simply how clearly we can describe the family. In applying this perspective, actual safety must remain visible; distance cannot automatically be interpreted as a failure to differentiate.

There may be a powerful difference between asking a family member to agree that we have changed and finding that we can act differently without securing their agreement. The old role may still be offered to us. We may still feel its pull. We can consider whether to accept it, revise our participation, or decline the encounter. Our freedom need not depend on the family becoming ready to acknowledge it.

## **The Genogram in the Land**

A genogram can organize family relationships on a page. On this journey, I encountered another kind of map: places where people had lived, worked, endured, and died. Mt. Misery overlooked the country near Grouse Flats where my mother was born. The return of her ashes connected her death with the land associated with her beginnings. Other members of the family had already been returned there. The geography gave continuity to a family whose living witnesses are becoming fewer.

"Almost all of my family are gone," I said. That was not a claim that no relatives remain. It named the loss of people who held the stories, who could have answered a question or corrected a memory. I am

less connected to my father's side, and much remains outside what I know. Returning brought the limits of the record into view as much as the history itself.

The homestead country also asked me to imagine the conditions in which earlier generations made lives. The distances were real. So were weather, work, limited resources, and dependence on family and neighbors. Those circumstances do not tell me exactly why a person became violent, withdrew, or drank. They give me a wider setting in which to ask about their choices without confusing an imagined explanation with information I possess.

This is part of what family-of-origin inquiry can offer a therapist: a movement beyond the account that has become familiar. The family diagram, a photograph, a death record, or an ancestral place may lead us toward a different question. We may find something that complicates our certainty. We may find a gap. We may have to let the gap remain.

I do not want the land to become evidence for the theory I brought with me. Its significance is that it belongs to the lives I am trying to understand. Looking more closely can deepen a question before it answers one.

## **The Café, the House, and the Country Above the Canyons**

The return also took me past my grandmother's café in Asotin and the home she had occupied with Bud, her logger husband, my mother, and my mother's brothers. These places brought the history closer to generations I had known. The café belonged to my grandmother's life and work. The house held a chapter of my mother's childhood, before she became the mother whose presence would shape my own.

Driving past, I was encountering the settings of lives I could never fully recover. I could identify the people who had lived there and still have questions about their days, their relationships, and what each had carried. A familiar person becomes less easily contained in the role through which we knew them when we consider the life they had before us. My mother had been a daughter and a sister in that house. My grandmother had a working life in the café. Bud's work belonged to the logging country around them.

That wider view does not cancel what happened later. It gives the people a setting beyond the injuries through which I have sometimes understood them. I want to know more of their lives without using what I learn to make my own experience smaller. Returning to a place can hold both intentions: to understand the people more fully and to remain honest about what it was like to be their child.

Above the canyons, the ranches on the Anatone flats offered another kind of continuity. I thought about the ranchers who had remained in the way of life handed down from their homesteader ancestors. Here, inheritance was still being lived through work on the land. The country was not only a record of people who had left or died. It held families whose lives continued in relationship with it.

The distinction mattered to my sense of the journey. At the Courtney homestead, I encountered the orchard, the road, and the cleared stones as traces of an earlier life. On the flats, ranching remained part of the present. In Asotin, the café and the house brought me back to the particular places of my grandmother's and mother's lives. Each required a different kind of attention. The family history could not be contained in a single image of abandonment, survival, or return.

Together, these places gave substance to what I meant when I said the landscape was inseparable from my history. I was returning to a country of work and family life: a café, a logger's household, cattle pastures, ranches above the canyons, and an orchard still bearing fruit. The lives that formed mine had happened somewhere. Driving through that country made the somewhere matter.

## **An Apple From the Old Homestead**

At the homestead of my great-great-grandfather and great-great-grandmother Courtney, I found apple trees I understood to be roughly 120 years old. I ate an apple from one of them. The encounter was simple and physical: a tree planted in the time of people I would never meet was still bearing fruit, and I could receive something from it. My ancestry was no longer only a collection of names, dates, and stories. It had a taste.

The old road was still visible in the land. Its worn grooves held the shape of passage long after the people who made those journeys were gone. I imagined the hooves of horses and the wheels of wagons moving along it. The road gave me something concrete to look at while considering lives I could otherwise approach only through fragments. People had traveled here, carrying what they needed, tending what they hoped would last.

I walked into the pasture land where cattle had once been kept. In my understanding of the family's homestead story, those animals were part of demonstrating to the government official assessing the claim that the family could work and sustain a life on the land. The pasture carried another dimension of the inheritance: the effort to make a home had involved labor, requirements, and the uncertainty of whether that effort would establish a lasting place.

At the edge of the property was a great pile of stones, most about the size of a grapefruit. I estimated that it occupied an area of roughly two thousand square feet and rose to the middle of my thigh. The stones were still there after more than a century. I understood them as the remains of clearing done by my great-great-grandfather and others. I imagined his children helping - my great-grandfather and his siblings - though I cannot know whose hands moved each stone.

The size of the pile made the labor visible. These were stones that had been lifted, carried, and put down. Returning to origins can sound abstract until we encounter something like that: a trace of effort that outlasts the people who made it. I could respect that effort without making a complete explanation of their lives from it. The pile told me that work had been done. It could not tell me everything about those who did it.

Walking through the thigh-high grass, I remained wary of rattlesnakes. My attention belonged both to where I was putting my feet and to the people whose lives had unfolded here. I felt the presence of my ancestors speaking to me. I mean that as a description of the experience, not a claim that I received information from them. The place brought them nearer in a way that thinking about them at a distance had not.

Looking west, toward Paradise, I saw a herd of elk. Among them was the largest bull elk I had ever seen. I felt something spiritual in that moment. The fruit trees, the worn road, the pile of stones, the grass, and the animals belonged to one encounter. Human effort remained visible, and life was continuing beyond the purposes for which my family had once arranged the land.

## A Renewal I Could Witness

The property, which I understood was now held by the State of Oregon as a game preserve, seemed to be undergoing a renewal. Land that had held cattle and the work of establishing a homestead now held elk moving through the grass. I felt I was witnessing something returning over the decades: a life of the land that exceeded the story of the settlers who had tried to make it their own.

I thought about what this country had been before my ancestors arrived, when the Nez Perce lived on and cared for these lands. What I saw did not establish that the landscape had returned to an earlier ecological condition. Nor could a herd of elk restore the people who had been displaced or undo the history of settlement. Still, the experience carried a sense of renewal for me. The land was alive in ways that did not depend on my family's continued presence.

I could hold affection for the orchard and respect for the labor represented by the stones while recognizing that this place belonged to a history larger than the Courtney name. My family had made a life here. Other people's relationship with this country preceded that life and continues beyond it. Returning asked me to attend to both.

The encounter also gave another shape to the idea of home. I had come to find what remained of my ancestors. I found those traces, and I found a living place that could not be reduced to them. The apple was still available to eat. The road could still be followed with the eye. The stones remained where they had been put. The elk belonged to the present. I could stand among these things without needing the past to become either wholly innocent or wholly unforgivable.

That is part of what I want to bring back into my development as a therapist: a greater capacity to encounter what is there before deciding what it means. The homestead did not resolve my history. It made the inheritance tangible and the questions more particular. I had eaten the fruit, seen the work, felt the presence, and witnessed life continuing. Those experiences gave me something to carry alongside the theories through which I have tried to understand myself.

## A Tradition Worth Recovering

I worry about what we lose when professional development becomes primarily the acquisition of techniques. Contemporary methods contribute valuable research, clearer practices, and forms of accountability that psychotherapy needs. Yet proficiency in a method cannot answer every question about the person applying it. We may learn what to do without sufficiently examining what makes us need to do it, or what we cannot yet bear to leave alone.

Family-of-origin work is a tradition I want us to recover where it has receded from attention. I do not mean that it has disappeared. Bowen-oriented coaching and training continue, and the Bowen Center explicitly includes work on one's own family of origin in professional learning. McGoldrick's work remains active. The person-of-the-therapist tradition also continues to take the clinician's personal development seriously. Calling this a lost modality expresses a concern about what can be neglected, not a claim that nobody practices it anymore.

Harry Aponte and Karni Kissil's *The Person of the Therapist Training Model* focuses on purposeful use of the therapist's personal and professional self in relationship, assessment, and intervention. This is related to family-of-origin inquiry without being identical to Bowen's model. Together, these

traditions remind us that the therapist is more than the delivery system for a technique. Who we are participates in what we do.

Personal work and research-informed practice belong together. Neither makes the other unnecessary. Returning to our origins may help us recognize a rescue impulse; recordings and supervision can help us see whether that impulse became repeated advice, missed consent, or difficulty accepting a client's correction. The meaning of our history and the impact of our conduct are different questions. We need access to both.

## **The Land Does Not Fit a Single Story**

Traveling through the canyon country, I thought about the endurance demanded of people who made homes there. The distances, winters, labor, and uncertainty were real. I could feel pride in their resourcefulness and still know that admiration was not the whole story. Returning to the land also meant encountering histories that my family's account could leave outside the frame.

The Wallowa Valley was not empty land awaiting settlement. It was, and remains, a homeland of the Nimíipuu, the Nez Perce people. In 1877, forced removal and military pursuit carried Nez Perce families far from that country. Their descendants continue to sustain relationships with their homelands. This history stands in its own right. Returning to the country of my ancestors also requires recognizing whose homeland it was before they arrived.

I wanted to understand both my family's history and Nez Perce history. The encounter brought feelings I described as ancestral shame, while distinguishing that experience from personal culpability. I had not committed the acts of earlier generations. Yet I could feel my identification with a history of settlement whose consequences were not contained within my family's story.

I do not know enough to assign particular acts to particular ancestors. I can acknowledge the larger history in which settlement occurred, including the possibility that my family benefited, without manufacturing details. Pride in endurance cannot be used to erase dispossession. Shame cannot substitute for learning the history, listening to people whose accounts have been marginalized, or considering responsibility in the present.

For a psychotherapist, this matters beyond autobiography. Family-of-origin work becomes too small if it treats the family as a sealed emotional system. Race, gender, class, religion, migration, land, labor, and political power shape the choices available to people. We need to ask what an adaptation protected someone from and also what advantages, exclusions, or obligations their story contains. Understanding context should enlarge responsibility rather than dissolve it.

## **What I Claim and What I Would Rather Disown**

Pride, shame, and humility could exist together as I considered that inheritance. I could respect endurance without treating endurance as innocence. I could acknowledge historical harm without making every ancestor a single kind of person. The question became whether I could remain attentive when the story ceased to flatter either my family or my account of myself.

Donald Nathanson's writing on shame offers one lens for considering the responses that can follow a painful encounter with ourselves. Shame may lead toward withdrawal, avoidance, self-attack, or attack

on others. Applying that framework to my ancestral reflections is an interpretation, not an explanation I can establish from the feeling alone. It does help me ask whether I am becoming curious and responsible, or merely trying to escape discomfort through pride or condemnation.

Jung's idea of the shadow offers a different question: what has too little room in the identity I prefer to claim? The shadow can include valued capacities as well as impulses we find troubling. For someone identified with strength, needing care may be difficult to recognize. For someone identified with goodness, resentment may remain outside the story. These are possibilities for inquiry, not a diagnosis of my ancestors.

In my own history, I have had to make room for the wish to help and the wish to stop helping, for compassion and anger, for belonging and a voice of my own. The difficult task is to recognize the experience without immediately treating it as an instruction. Anger does not require injury; compassion does not require renewed exposure to harm. Knowing more about myself should help me choose more carefully.

## **Descending With Someone Without Repeating Our Own Journey**

"I am always looking for the light in the darkness." Those are words I have used to describe both my personal work and my psychotherapy. My mentor Doug Anderson, whose mentoring was deeply rooted in family-of-origin work, Bowenian theory, and pastoral care, taught me that hope and light can be found within the painful experience we are willing to hold with our clients. We must be capable of descending with them. Calling toward the light from a safe distance can leave a person alone where they are.

My childhood does not receive credit for the work I subsequently did to heal. Abuse was not necessary for compassion, and fear did not make me qualified to practice psychotherapy. Personal work, study, mentorship, supervision, and decades of clinical encounters have all shaped what I can offer. My history is one part of that development. It is not its complete explanation.

Returning to my own landscape deepened that teaching, but it also sharpened a question. Can I accompany another person without assuming that their canyon resembles mine? Someone may need grief; someone else may need rest, practical action, protection, or a less inward form of attention. A therapist's experience of healing through depth can become a preference we impose if we stop checking what the client is experiencing.

Our history can make us sensitive, and it can make us selective. We may recognize a familiar wound too quickly, feel certain about an origin, or become disappointed when a client does not want the kind of encounter we have valued. The discipline is to bring our humanity while remaining open to being wrong. The client is not there to confirm that the path we walked is the path everyone needs.

Nor does suffering qualify us by itself. Having known fear does not establish that we can help someone with fear. Personal experience becomes clinically useful through reflection, skill, ethical judgment, supervision, and the other person's response. We must remain able to notice when identification is narrowing the room rather than helping us inhabit it.

## What the Land Allows Me to Hold

Mt. Misery carries a name that sounds like a verdict, but the view does not submit to it. Hells Canyon contains extraordinary beauty. The Seven Devils rise into open sky. Eden and Paradise, despite their names, belong to real country where people knew labor, hardship, and loss. The language invites a division that the landscape will not sustain.

That mattered because my family's history also resists a clean division. There was harm, and there were people who endured. There were things I cannot excuse, and human lives I still want to understand. I do not have to make an ancestor wholly admirable before acknowledging a strength, or wholly monstrous before recognizing an injury. Some things remain uncertain. Some things I know well enough to name.

The land cannot answer those questions for me. It does not tell me whether I have healed enough or whether my account is correct. Nor can a beautiful place supply the safety I lacked as a child. What it can offer is a setting in which the history has room: the canyon, the ridge, the homestead country, the lake, the remains of people whose lives preceded mine.

I have described myself as mostly healed from the abuse. The qualification matters. There has been substantial change, and there are consequences I continue to encounter. Returning did not require me to choose between acknowledging that work and acknowledging what remains. I could come with the life I have made and the history that still asks something of me.

## Carrying Home Differently

As I traveled toward Joseph and Wallowa Lake, I was increasingly moved by the relationship between the deep canyons and the mountains above them. I did not need to call the darkness beautiful in order to recognize beauty nearby. Some things should never happen to a child. Insight cannot make them necessary, and meaning cannot retrospectively make them acceptable.

At the lake, I felt a sense of arrival without resolution. I could remember the darkness and also see what was before me. Grief for my mother, compassion for some of the people who had hurt me, sadness for families that had come apart, and gratitude for the life I had made could exist together. None needed to cancel the others. This was a moment of experience, not proof that my history had finally been integrated.

That modesty matters. We can become eloquent about our development while still repeating familiar patterns in the next relationship. A meaningful journey asks something of how we return: whether we listen differently, notice an old pressure sooner, take responsibility more clearly, or allow another person to correct us. The story has to remain open to what our conduct reveals.

Fatherhood has also made the question of inheritance personal. When my son was born, I described love as moving from black and white to technicolor in an instant. I wanted to create family and take care of the life entrusted to me. That love was real. It need not be reduced to an effort to repair my own childhood in order for me to examine what I carried into it. A chosen legacy can include affection, responsibility, mistakes, and a willingness to keep learning.

For me, returning to origins is part of the continuing development of a psychotherapist. It brings me back to the person who learned to survive, the family whose contradictions I still carry, and the larger histories that exceed our private account. It helps me ask what belongs to me, what remains uncertain, what deserves grief, and what I can choose differently. It does not relieve me of learning new methods or examining the impact of my work.

We do not have to deny where we came from in order to find somewhere beautiful to stand. Nor do we have to return to every person who lived there. We can return to the questions, to the land, to the losses, to the capacities we want to keep and the arrangements we no longer wish to repeat. The canyon remains part of the landscape. So does the sky. What matters is how we learn to inhabit that whole terrain - and how carefully we make room for the terrain of another human life.

## Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

McGoldrick, M. (1995). *You can go home again: Reconnecting with your family*. W. W. Norton & Company. Later editions develop this work further; see the Multicultural Family Institute's book resources: <https://multiculturalfamily.org/publications/books/>

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*This personal essay draws on my account of a recent journey and reflects my clinical perspective. Its interpretation of the relationship between personal inquiry and professional development is not a claim that one approach is required for every therapist or that returning to family contact is necessary for healing.*