

Pat McCabe is a Voice for Peace by Helena Norberg-Hodge

Pat McCabe (Weyakpa Najin Win, meaning “Woman Stands Shining”) is an ambassador between two worlds. A Navajo mother, grandmother, artist and ceremonial leader, she has been deeply immersed in land-based, indigenous ways of living and being. Having grown up in a multicultural neighbourhood next to Stanford University in California, she is also accustomed to the realities of the modern, industrialised world. It makes her an invaluable bridge-builder and cross-cultural communicator, and a powerful voice for the deep and broad transformation needed in the modern world to deal with its ecological and social crises.

Pat works with communities across Turtle Island/North America, helping to heal uprooted identities, broken relationships, and all the insecurity, confusion and anger that they engender. She promotes healing by reconciling the masculine and the feminine, by remembering and recreating the sacred, and, at a fundamental level, by regenerating community connections. Pat is also a voice for global peace, and has worked with the International Centre for Cultural Studies in India, the Global Ecovillage Network and the Sarvodaya Network in Sri Lanka. She reframes questions of sustainability, power and decolonisation with brave inquisitiveness, and stands up to the pain of the modern world with robust optimism.

Pat is also an active participant in Indigenous Peoples gatherings worldwide, and it was at one of these gatherings—Defend the Sacred in Portugal—that I first met her. I immediately felt the integrity and strength of her presence, and warmed to her open heart and wicked sense of humour. I am privileged to be in conversation and collaboration with such a unique and powerful individual.

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First of all I’d love to ask you about your childhood and what were some of the experiences that have been significant in shaping who you are.

Well so I always say that my greatest gift to the world is being able to describe a transition, and maybe a transformation too, of living on earth in the modern world paradigm and then being introduced, quite far on into life, to another paradigm that human beings also live in. All human beings are living in the same place, same element, same sky, same earth, same sea, [laughs], same everything and yet the way that some people approach living here, how they choose to have relationships with this place, is so radically different. So I’ve been running back and forth recording each paradigm: the earth-based, which is at the centre of indigenous life, my heritage, and the modern. So my childhood, well I grew up here in Albuquerque, which is the largest city in New Mexico,

and we always call ourselves a tri-cultural community. Which means European descent, in our case Spanish descent, like literally from Spain, and indigenous. My father was able to attend university and received a Ford Foundation fellowship to go to any school that he could get into. In the end he was choosing between Stanford and Harvard, and my mum told him no, we've got to go to California, and I'm really grateful she made that call [laughs]. So our family went to live at the Stanford University campus when my father was getting his PhD. And I really feel like that's where I had a very deep schooling. It didn't have anything to do with an institution, it had to do with the community that was there. Because it was a very international community. I was growing up having on one side a neighbour from Japan, and on the other, from Israel. I was really taught to respect other cultures and to value them and pay attention—to notice how they think. Not only how they dress and what kinds of foods they eat, but how they were thinking too.

It's interesting to hear your background because I now see why you are so perfectly suited to carry indigenous wisdom into the modern world. In my experience, it's often people like you, who have actually experienced modern industrial life and also had a taste of more earth-based, more indigenous ways, who can provide really strong leadership.

Yeah. And the languages that each paradigm uses are so radically different. Methodologies for who speaks, when, how, all these different things that they require a translator to really move between. I always wish that, you know, in an interview like this, we had the possibility of talking to what I would say are the really true elders, elders who are sitting at home on the land and who stay there. But they might not be interested in having this conversation! There's a reason why they're staying there. So I bow and respect those people who hold that space. And I have huge respect for the indigenous peoples worldwide who are pointing out the injustices, the difficulties, and expressing their anger over history. I'm glad that they're holding that space because I don't know what the world would be if they weren't voicing those things. At the same time I also feel like the place I hold, of not necessarily being the one to voice those things, but to keep looking for ways to translate to each other, which could be understood as peacemaking, that's also important. I mean, I was raised in the modern paradigm mostly, was heading for high academics and fame and fortune. But it was hurting my soul so deeply that I was looking for a way out. That's the thing about that modern world paradigm, it's never proposed that there could be another way. It's like, this is it, this is reality. Wait, no, this is a choice that some human beings are making about who we are and how it is. So yeah, I notice that it's people like me who can be in this translation seat and there are limitations to it. But I think it absolutely is necessary! [Laughs].

Absolutely. What was it that you were hurting over that sent you really looking for something else? How old were you by that time?

Well I mean I was experiencing quite a bit of pain and confusion for a while because I look like I look. I look like I'm full blooded indigenous, which I am. And the history of my family was that my grandparents were taken into residential missionary boarding schools where they weren't with their family, they were raised by missionaries. That's where my grandparents met. And then they sent their children there, and that's where my parents met also. By the time I came along, people in my immediate family were not practicing our culture, our spiritual ways or speaking our language. So there was a great deal of confusion for me in looking the way I looked and yet not having the goods! [Laughs]. Not having the knowledge. People would always come up to me and say, "Gosh, what do your people say about this?" And I had nothing to give them. But I'd say where the really big fork in the road came, one, I got sent to an east coast boarding school here in the United States called Phillips Exeter Academy which is sort of the epitome of the young person,

aged 14 to 18, to be indoctrinated into Ivy League colleges et cetera. I was going to school with diplomats' children. Presidential candidates used to speak at our school. So on the one hand my parents were elated and felt like I was in the cream of the crop of the United States, and yet for myself I just felt a lot of emptiness and devastation for just not understanding my place. When I was 29 I hit a point where I could no longer keep running away from myself and this life. I had two children and I had watched people wrestling with this cultural interruption piece in my family for generations. I had watched people try to destroy themselves from that pain. And I could feel myself headed that way. I knew the pain of being a young child watching the adults not coping and using addiction and other things to try to make it through life. And I realised, wow, I am getting ready to do the exact same thing and putting these two little kids that I have through that same mess. So I sent a cry out to the world. At that point I had left the church I was raised in. I stopped going when I went to boarding school, which was really frightening. I didn't know what was going to happen to my soul or me or anything! But I just felt like no, I cannot keep doing this. So at 29 years old when I sent this cry out, I really had no idea what would come back. And what came back was an invitation to my first Native American ceremony ever. Some people invited me to a Lakota sweat lodge. And the rest, as they say, is history. That's been my spiritual path ever since, a little over 25 years now.

My take on it is that the western, competitive, hyper-individualistic whole package creates that pain you talked about in virtually everyone. Which is why most teenagers, even in the heart of Western culture, go through this deep suffering, and feeling the meaninglessness of life.

Absolutely. I mean it's the preparation period that's given to quote unquote "succeed" in what I call the power-over paradigm. And the power-over paradigm is an inherently violent paradigm. What it says is in order to have what you need, you have to beat somebody else out for what they need. And the goal is to do your very best not to be at the very bottom of the pyramid. Because the people at the bottom were expendable. Which we're seeing on the earth right now with this pandemic, how people make decisions because they've been so convinced that this is the only paradigm and they've been trained to succeed in it, which means a very brutal way of being with each other. And I know as a young person for me I was looking for something else. I know now it was community, and it was multigenerational community.

I want to explore that further in the context of localising, but before we do, I've heard you say that you would describe indigenous as being "people of place." Can you elaborate on that?

Right. To me, literally, that's what the word means. "To be of place." And I know there are many people I would call indigenous who baulk at that word. But I think it's a good word for a time. Because I really feel that, as a species, too many of us have not accepted or considered deeply—much less really gone into the science of it—that we're indigenous to earth. We surround ourselves with giant structures and with things that came out of the human mind. And we begin to believe these are the structures we were born to live in. I'm sure there are children who have grown up in these urban places and never left. So we don't really understand what it means to be indigenous to earth. When I look at myself and my people culturally, I see we are of a certain place. Have been of that place for over millennia. When you have a ceremonial life, you have a broad spectrum of ways of relationship with place such that it becomes very a conversational. Over seasons, over longer weather patterns, over unusual events. All that builds, just like with any relationship when you've really weathered some storms with a person, a way of knowing at a glance what the other one is thinking and what is needed. I guess that's what I'm

saying about indigenous meaning “being of place.” And some of us have been in place longer than others. Or more recently maybe we could say.

Often the way that I talk and terms that I use aren't readily received in modern world paradigm, in very intellectual paradigm. It's very hard for those who have not built a broad spectrum of ways of knowing to be able to receive what I have to say. So often I start with something that comes from the wonderful Dr Greg Cajete. When anthropologists were first meeting and writing about us, he was the one who noticed that they would refer to us, and he is also Native American, as “primitive” and “childlike.” And I'd just love him because he didn't go right away to, you know, what a bunch of racist such-and-suches. Instead, he said, “There's a system of thought going on over there that every time these people see us, these are the words that come to mind. And I wonder what that system of thought is.” I think that's a very useful way of approaching many, many things in our world right now! [Laughs]. So he said, “All right, well let me examine. Maybe if I knew more about who these guys are that are writing about us and what their culture is like, I could understand why they're saying this.” And looking over the fence through his lenses, 'cause we all have our lenses, what he thought he saw was that most of the early writers who wrote about indigenous people in what we now call the United States were English aristocratic men. What he saw was that these guys up until the age of five in their culture were allowed to sing, dance, play, pretend, et cetera. But at the age of five it was time to get down to the serious business of being an educated man. At that point, all these other activities could be hobbies, but the primary activity became the honing of the intellect. And that's how it pretty much remained for them until their death. So here come these guys to see us in what we now call the United States and what were we doing, the indigenous peoples there? We were singing. We were dancing. We were having conversations with things that they didn't think you could talk to. We were receiving visions. Even our grown men were involved in these activities, right? So their only conclusion was these are primitive and childlike people. When I read that, everything changed for me. When you think about it, children all over the world do that. Every every one of our species starts out with that really deep way of seeing and hearing. When we look at children playing we say that they're pretending to have conversations. I think they are having conversations with things around them—animals and plants et cetera. So anyway we all start out that way. But indigenous people keep all of that open all the way from birth until death. And in fact we begin to cultivate ways to do these activities together in community such that we begin to have shared knowledge. And we not only have shared knowledge but we generate knowledge collectively. Which is not something that the modern world knows much about. Everybody's trying to have the best idea first and get full credit by themselves for it. So we maintain a broad spectrum of ways of knowing. We don't limit ourselves only to intellect. I think that this is also the reason why we have been able to have long-term sustainable practices, like, for millennia. You can't really have that relationship with place with intellect alone. That's a hard case to make in modern world but I'm working on it.

Well I am right with you. There is a vital difference between left brain intellectual knowledge and embodied experiential knowledge, which allows us to appreciate the complexity of the living world much more fully. This is why I'm so intent on shortening the distance between us and the living world, in order to ensure that we comprehend our impact. Unless we are closer to the people and the environments we're having an impact on in meeting our economic needs, we inevitably - structurally - become irresponsible. In the living world nothing remains static, everything is in flux, and each and every moment is unique. The feedback from the plants, the animals, the soil and water that indigenous people depended on, made them more responsive, more humble. And as you said, they built collective knowledge over millennia. “That plant we can use when it's been dried and

we can feed it to animals but humans can't eat it raw, it's poisonous." "This one you can only eat in the spring or this can be used in this way." So that deep intimate knowledge is what for me localisation is all about. It's not a guarantee for wise and ethical behaviour, but a prerequisite.

Right. And I think another thing to maybe bring into that conversation about local is that for many indigenous peoples they have something they might call original instructions, right? So this is understanding the lay of the land. Now I believe that we live in a free will construct. What that means is that we can pretty much do whatever we come up with, right? That's what's been going on on the planet everywhere. Everybody's been doing whatever they can dream up to do. And that's really fuelled by what we were just talking about, how you getting the best idea all by yourself and trying it out first is the way. There's no intergenerational counsel, there's no intercultural counsel, there's no global counsel, people just come up with an idea and they can see one use for it and they go for it. So that's doable, that's possible. However there's a caveat to that, apparently. And that caveat is that you might be able to do anything you can dream up but you might not be able to have life on this mother earth if you do everything you can dream up. It begs this idea that maybe you can't just do anything. So what's the criteria for what you might not be able to do? Indigenous cultures have been very meticulous about passing down their understanding of what makes sense to do here and what doesn't. One of those things is the idea that every being has sovereignty. Not just humans but every single being is a sovereign being with a role to play. I want to bring up this concept of the sacred hoop. So there's this sacred hoop of life, like a circle. And every life form gets to have a seat on this sacred hoop. And every life form has to uphold their part of the sacred hoop. If any life form doesn't uphold their part then the integrity of the hoop begins to fail. Their neighbours start struggling to uphold their part. Things begin to deteriorate. So each being has a very particular thing that they offer this hoop. I don't believe we have the right to interfere with any one of the beings' perfect design for thriving life and their ability to uphold their part of the hoop. We must not interfere with that. When we don't understand that every being has sovereignty we interfere with all of these different roles. We interfere with all of these different beings being able to uphold their part. I mean we truly are an inter-being. When we would go out to collect sage medicine for ceremony, my clan grandfather would say, "You need to have a conversation with these beings. You need to ask if it's okay for you to take them. Maybe there's something going on with them right now that they'd say now's not a good time. Why don't you try those guys way over there?" [Laughs]. And people say, "Well how do you know if they're saying yes or no?" Well that takes time and practice. If you keep going out and you keep going out, it will begin to register in your own body. You will begin to have this conversation. That's why we make offerings before we take anything. It's part of creating a consensual relationship that is honouring of the sovereignty of all the beings involved. So that's one thing that I'm seeing with this localisation versus globalisation, you cannot begin to see who is impacted from across the world when you get on Amazon and order whatever you're ordering. Not to mention the Amazon workers apparently aren't having it so good right now with this pandemic and and the financial structure that they're in. So there's no way to really honour that sovereignty when you are reaching so far beyond your own locale.

And these sovereign beings also exist in relationships that are sacred. When we go in cutting forests and taking animals and putting them in cages, we're also disrupting the sovereignty of viruses and of the individual communities of cells that have coexisted for millennia. Long distance economics creates a system that couldn't be more arrogant and in many ways couldn't be more evil in how it cuts apart the fabric of life—in this blind way. Because it's blind I also don't think of the individuals as evil. I think of the system and the acts as a type of evil. But it's mainly ignorance, would you agree?

I would. I was going to say I actually have some compassion, maybe to a fault [laughs], for modern world “paradigm-ers.” Because I understand what people are up against to really think outside of that space. It’s a really daunting prospect to be in a paradigm where you really believe this is the only way, and that you have to get on top of that heap or you will not be able to provide for children or whatever. Unfortunately the mindset means that even after you’ve made your first billion dollars you still have that sense. I mean it’s a crazy-making way of being that is self-perpetuating to such outlandish degrees. But it’s multi-generational, and reinforced. You were born into it, your parents, your grandparents. To make matters worse it might have appeared to be working for your great grandfather at one time. I really feel for the men of today in modern world paradigm because they’re like, well, my great grandfather did this for his family and my father was able to do this. Why can’t I make it work? It’s because it’s literally a pyramid scheme. So it only worked for so long to benefit some people but eventually someone gets left holding the bag. That’s why I have a huge amount of compassion for people who really believe that that’s the only way. I am privileged in that I happen to know there are other ways of being here that don’t necessarily lead to that.

And don’t lead to that loneliness, that frustration, that sense of deep, deep alienation. To come back to those English aristocrats, I’ve actually known that culture quite intimately. Some of it even in my family. And the thing that we also need to recognise is that this way of being trained into left brain intellectualism and suppressing your own needs, your own heart, your own body was a perfect way of raising young men to conquer the world without any feeling. So it’s wonderful that we now have more and more recognition of that. There is this micro-trend towards truly embodied therapy where we’re actually being helped to come back into our senses and feelings, and we have many examples now of reconnection as the healing paradigm. For me that’s also fundamentally what localisation is about—deep reconnection to others, and to life itself. And that experience of oneness is for me what lies behind virtually every spiritual tradition and religion. And the deep joy and ecstasy from being able to be a part of that enormous family of life.

Yeah. You know I often have the opportunity to work with college students and sometimes even high school students. [Laughs]. I feel like I’m a little radical maybe for them. But you know what I end up saying to them is, you’ve got to want your life. You’ve got to want your life. Whatever it is that makes you want your life, do it. Do that. I also tell them, your joy matters. Your joy matters. Every time I say that, there’s stunned silence. I always have to say it like at least one more time so that these young people can even let it in. I tell them, “Nobody ever said that to me. Nobody ever said that my joy mattered.” And I usually check with all the adults in the room and say, “Did anybody ever say that to you?” “No.” We don’t talk about joy. Not even with our beloved young people. I mean that’s a crazy marker as a human being that you would not say to a young person, your joy matters. And the reason we don’t say that is because we know you’re going to enter into this system where you probably won’t get to think much about joy. Or experience much joy. So it’s kind of better that we just don’t bring it up. So I’m trying to tell these young people, your joy is your compass. Your joy is telling you about why you came here. Because you came here for something. [Laughs]. You don’t end up here by accident. For me, I can say that I’ve finally come into my life’s purpose. And there’s a lot of joy in it. There’s sustained joy in knowing that I’m in my purpose. And the paradox is that what you came here for is going to flow out of you pretty naturally. It’s not something that has to be cultivated and rehearsed. There may be certain events that have to happen to bring you to that realisation, but once you hit it, it just rises and flows out. So it’s pretty antithetical to this whole system that our young people are being placed in.

I think also we have to be careful with a lot of voices in the mainstream encouraging people to “follow your passion and you too can be truly successful” when it’s still within this paradigm of fame and fortune. That message is part of the whole package of this modern economy which is what’s been pushing children away from the universal need to feel loved, connected and purposeful. I think the most evil aspect of this colonial, patriarchal system has been to rob children of that genuine sense of love and connection that they’re all looking for. And replacing it with a message. You’ve got to have the latest iPad, you’ve got to be doing well at school, you’ve got to be a success to be accepted, respected and loved.

You really raised an important point, something that I’ve tried to keep on my radar and comes up a lot with indigenous people sharing wisdom and knowledge. That if you’re sharing wisdom and knowledge from the earth paradigm, from thriving life paradigm, the way it gets received and translated by modern world paradigm can have disastrous results [laughs]. And this is why indigenous people are more often than not saying, “We can’t share these things.” Sometimes it’s definitely out of anger and a sense of evening the score, and that’s a very human thing. I understand it. But there’s also, even for the people who don’t necessarily go that direction, there’s this concern that the way this is going to be received from a modern world paradigm where it’s all about “me” won’t have the intended effect. Because the goals for each paradigm are radically different. Personal achievement, personal fame and fortune versus not only collective success for your community but really success with earth community.

One thing that’s true, and I’m sure you’re seeing it too is this huge shift towards a deeper listening and then deeper appreciation for what’s essential. And my sense is now with this virus that again there’s this huge opportunity that people are beginning to really question the dominant system. And coming back to a real appreciation of community.

Yeah. I mean so much is being illuminated if you care to look at all. You’re going to see many, many things going on which break down any notion that people in leadership roles are really looking out for the people. They’re quite upset right now that their own wealth is going to be interrupted. To the point that here in the United States we’re saying elders won’t mind being sacrificed by the disease to keep our economy going! Which is the exact reversal of how indigenous people hold our elders. So it’s a pretty amazing thing to look at. One of my elders said viruses come when we are unprepared to host our futures. I’ve been thinking about this. How am I unprepared to host my future? Again, it depends on which paradigm you’re looking at. I’m sure there are people who are trying to figure out how they’re going to come back financially in their business as soon as this is all over. I’m not sure it’s going to work that way. And if not this cataclysmic event then some other ones that are very close behind it are definitely going to knock us out of that possibility. So it’s making me consider what is this future that I’m looking to host? In my prayers I talk about how do I participate fully in the very highest possibility for life and light and love? I don’t think I know what that is. So there’s a placeholder for me in terms of preparing for this future. It’s a very deep listening and a deep questioning for myself. And I have to imagine that many people of course are going through that. They’re having to reckon with the unhappiness that you’re describing, the loneliness, the continuous competitiveness. If you could sacrifice your rest you might actually end up ahead of somebody else who had to rest. So you’ll never rest. Those kinds of outlooks. So it’s going to be really interesting to see what emerges for all kinds of people.

I feel so blessed because having been involved for 40 years now promoting this localising path, I’m getting so much news from the grassroots, where community building particularly around local food and so on is happening. That’s where I see this amazing

testimony to the perseverance of human beings to reconnect again. People are listening to their bodies, to their hearts and forging a clear path towards a deep reconnection with life. There's been a cultural transformation going on with more and more appreciation for indigenous culture, for the feminine, for animal rights. And yet, from my point, this cultural value change hasn't been transformed into a new economic trajectory. Our government and business leaders are still continuing to run fearfully in a direction of so-called growth, to keep the economy alive over everything else. But as I said, there is ample evidence that they are not representing the voice of the majority. In Local Futures, we get more and more information every day about inspiring initiatives in which people are strengthening community and the local economy with a central focus on food.

One of my favourite authors is Joseph Chilton Pierce, and he wrote *The Biology of Transcendence*, which is really amazing. One of the things I always remember from that book is, he was talking about the fall of Poland, and I have to say I'm not a huge Polish history buff or anything, but I get the idea from what he's saying that Poland has fallen many times, but in one of these times that it fell, there was a group of farmers who were really in deep cooperation and collaboration all throughout the country. So when everything else fell, because they had a community, they had cohesion, everything else began to be rebuild around them. He said, maybe the goal isn't so much to steer the entire global ship in a particular direction all at once, maybe it's to be building lifeboats of cohesion. That's what I feel like I'm witnessing on a local level. And also by internet, local cohesive lifeboats connecting with other ones, but nevertheless, reaching out, seeing what other people are doing, and then going back locally and figuring out how to make that stronger and stronger. That's been one of the great pleasures of this time for me, is an all-new appreciation even for my global communities where we come together on Zoom and just check in. We've been checking in a couple times a week now, and it's just so beautiful, the care that is shown. I find that very, very hopeful and helpful, that we can each be building some kind of lifeboat of cohesion and coherence. I feel the need to also assert that people have been saying humans are the virus and that the corona is the medicine for us. And there's usually this comment that says, "We're expendable, we don't really have to be here, we're just nothing but trouble." Something I feel very grateful to have from my culture—and it's in my gut too—is the belief we're here for a purpose, we've been given a seat on this sacred hoop of life, and there is a way in which all life will thrive, greater and greater, by our being here. That's the big question for me: what is that way? What is that way for us to be here, such that that happens, such that we really fulfil the destiny of the five-fingered presence on that sacred hoop?