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Local News for a Global Village

Nuclear Age Peace Foundation welcomes Matthew Spellberg as new President

By Kerry Methner/ *VOICE*

A DYNAMIC NEW VOICE WILL JOIN THE SANTA BARBARA COMMUNITY in October when Matthew Spellberg steps up as the Nuclea Age Peace Foundation's president. While he will be relocating from the East Coast, he grew up in the San Francisco Bay area and looks forward to this "homecoming."

Spellberg, 34, received his BA and MA from Harvard and his PhD from Princeton. It was during his undergraduate years at Harvard, as Elaine Scarry's Research Assistant (author of *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing Between Democracy and Doom* and an NAPF Advisor), that his attention to the dangers posed by nuclear weapons began.

Subsequently, he taught Law, Journalism, Literature, and Composition for six years in the New Jersey prison system, at the same time helping to build a fledgling volunteer organization at Princeton into a major prison teaching institution.

His scholarly research focuses on the Indigenous cultures and languages of North America, and on the history of dreaming across different societies. Elected to the Harvard Society of Fellows in 2017, he co-founded Harvard's Seminar on the Native Cultures of the Americas the following year.

"The highest good is a world in which the human imagination can flourish in all of its forms—from an individual's most private thoughts to the grand systems of a culture—and be exercised by all with agency, continuity and care. We live in an era where technological and structural forces threaten such a vision of the good from all sides. Nuclear weapons are the most extreme form of this threat, promising the destruction of everything we have ever known. But the historical structures that made nuclear weapons possible are the same that have created a planet paralyzed by inequality, racism, continuous surveillance, exploitation of the land, and the inexhaustible demands of an industrialized economic system." He continued, "As President of NAPF I plan to continue and expand the Foundation's legacy in these two directions: fighting to change the human relationship to technology, and exploring alternatives for how we best organize our cultures and live as citizens of this planet. I am honored to be NAPF's new Presedent."

Spellberg took time out to answer several questions via emal for *VOICE readers*. They follow in a version edited for length.

VOICE: What was your family's focus?

Spellberg: My father is a lawyer, and my mother is a doctor – neither is a professional activist, but both are in their way deeply generous people. Both give freely of their skills and expertise to the

people around them, especially those who wouldn't normally be able to afford such help–they are very modest about this, but I learned a great deal from their example.

The most formative aspet of my childhood, though, was growing up in a bilingual household. My mother's family is Polish, and my granparents emigrated after the Second World War. My grandmother espeially wanted me to learn Polish, and so I grew up surrounded by older speakers of the language. This meant that I was steeped in a rich heritage of stories, songs, and memories. My grandparents also passed through some of the rawest moments of the 20th century. My grandfather enlisted in the Polish army in 1939, and was taken prisoner by the Russians a few months later. He spent two years in a Siberian POW camp, and was then later returned to active duty in an all-Polish unit of the British Army, fighting in North Africa and Italy. My grandmother worked as a nurse in the underground in occupied Poland before fleeing the Russian advance in 1945. They met as refugees in Italy, where they studied medicine together. These experiences figured largely in my mind as a child, and still do now. My grandparents witnessed immense suffering, and that weighed on them. But they also saw survival as a cause for joy, and this made them vital and humane people. That I was able to learn about all this from them in Polish, their first language, made their history all the more vivid. It gave me a deep appreciation for languages, and for the inheritance of the past.

VOICE: What was your relationship to the earth and human impact on it as a young person?

Spellberg: If my mother gave me the gifts of language and culture, then my father gave me the gift of nature. He grew up in California, and has always loved the California landscape. Every summer he took me and my brother backpacking in the Sierra Nevadas, and to visit a sky-blue lake in the Yosemite high country that is his favorite place in the whole world. My father taught me to love the land wordlessly and unquestioningly, like a child. And he taught me to see communion with the land as a means to affirm your love for other people. We talked only rarely about the damage humans had done. It was enough for him to show me the beauty of the world; from there I was able to infer what was at stake in the way the land was being abused.

VOICE: How did you become focused on indigenous culture and language? Dreaming across cultures?

Spellberg: I am a persistent person, and also a restless person. When I become interested in an idea, I hold onto it for years and years, and my approach is to let it lead me as far as it will go, across disciplines, histories and cultures. I first became interested in dreaming in college, when I read a book by a 19th-century Frenchman, who wrote about his experiments with what we would now call "lucid dreaming," that is, learning to control your dreams. What astonished me was the vividness of his descriptions, how he conjured such a beautiful and fantastical world in his sleep. It seemed to me the outer limit of the imagination, and it seemed to me the most democratic form of imagining: not everyone can write a novel, but almost everyone can dream, and can, given the right state of mind, dream spectacularly. Many people around me at the time dismissed dreams as a little silly or boring. I was amazed to discover that there was a long line of philosophers, artists, and even whole cultures who took dreams seriously as tools for thinking, making, and even *acting* in the world.

As for Indigenous languages and cultures, I came relatively late to them: it wasn't until I was 24 or so, and already studying for a PhD in literature. The short version of the story is that I read a book about Indigenous oral traditions and it blew my mind. It made me realize I needed to start my education all over again, from scratch. In the context of my research on dreaming, I realized Indigenous thinkers had much more sophisticated accounts of

what happens in your dreams than most European philosophers or neuroscientists.

The longer version of the story goes back to these two great forces in my childhood, Polish culture and California nature. I loved them both; they both shaped me deeply; but I couldn't quite understand how they coexisted in the world. I remember reading European novels that described birch forests and thinking to myself, what does a birch forest look like? I had never seen one in California. On the flipside, I had never read a story about a Redwood forest. When I started reading Native American texts I realized that the North American continent had evolved alongside a literary and cultural tradition of incredible power, one anchored to the flora and fauna of this landscape. It made me understand how much I had always been a stranger to the land on which I had lived, and it opened my eyes to the painful history of colonialism. It sent me travelling to Native communities, and started me working with Native American language scholars and teachers. And it has set me on a course to understand and celebrate these traditions. They are the real heart of the Americas.

VOICE: How did you make the journey from indigenous languages and culture to the NAPF?

Spellberg: It has been a very sudden shift in my life—the invitation to apply to NAPF came just a few months ago. I had been planning a more conventional life in academia. But in my interviews with the NAPF board I was amazed by their passionate convictions as well as their adventurousness, and it seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to try something radical and audacious. Working with Indigenous communities had taught me a lot about the intertwined crises our country faces, and also how much can be learned by venturing outside the university. Both of these gave me the courage to make this big leap.

One other major part of my life deserves mention here: for many years I was involved in prison education in New Jersey. There I learned a lot about how to negotiate with many different actors, like local goverments, different educational institutions, and nonprofits. It was hard work, but I loved it. I felt it was deeply continuous with my more solitary intellectual pursuits, and I'm excited to work in that vein again.

VOICE: Did you have mentors that encouraged you?

Spellberg: I have been fortunate to have wonderful mentors all through my life. Let me mention three. The most important teacher in my life is Elaine Scarry, a professor of mine from college. It's through her that I came to know of NAPF and take this job. I learned so many lessons from her, perhaps the most important of which is that if you love the beauty of the world, you must fight to protect it from injustice. My second great mentor in recent years has been Robert Bringhurst, a polymath poet and scholar whose writings introduced me to Native American languages. He has modeled for me a life of total immersion in both nature and culture. My third mentor is not one person, but a group of people. I study the Tlingit language of Southeast Alaska over Zoom with a small band of linguists, school teachers, and language-lovers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We call ourselves "the Tlingit Nerds." They have taught me everything I know about community.

VOICE: What's the role of human imagination in addressing critical challenges today?

Spellberg: I think that nowadays many people have a strong sense that they are "against X" – whether that X is nuclear weapons, militarism, climate change, inequality, racism, gun laws. But we have become very impoverished in the sense of being "for Y". The writer Mark Fisher was fond of saying "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism." He meant that we have a superabundance of films and novels that depict some kind of apocalypse, but very few documents that show us any viable alternative to the system we live in. You can extend that statement to many issues: it is easier to imagine the end of the

world than a world without cars, easier to imagine the end of the world than a world without prisons, easier to imagine the end of the world than a world without nuclear weapons (this last one is distressingly literal: everyone can picture a mushroom cloud, but if you talk about disarmament, people look at you as if you're crazy). We can see the problems, but we do not have solutions that are worth fighting for in of themselves.

I believe that people will never fight as hard *against X* as they will *for Y*. And rightly so. If all you do is dismantle a system, who knows what will rise up to fill the gap? The imagination is needed to propose genuine alternatives, and it is only in the pursuit of these alternatives that we will acquire the will and courage to dismantle present-day injustices. One person who knew this very well was Gandhi. He always said that non-violent resistance to the British Raj could not be a goal in of itself. The goal had to be a new India, one that did not merely preserve the injustices of British rule under a new government. He called this part of his vision the "constructive program" – for him it meant imagining a radically new modernity with a changed relationship to technology and values. He was famous for skipping out on meetings with important politicians in order to help build a latrine. For him, this was how the fight would be won, with the constructive imagination. In fact, for him this was the *only* fight worth fighting.

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VOICE: Please say more on continuing NAPF's work.

Spellberg: To pick up from the last question, I want NAPF to become an incubator of the Y that we fight for: I want it to be developing new models for governance and culture, models which will inspire us to break our interlinked chains of technological and social violence. More concretely, I'd like NAPF to become a think-tank for audacious proposals at the intersection of philosophy and policy. In 1689, John Locke published The Second Treatise of Government. The ideas he put forth seemed completely impossible at the time, but 85 years later the American Declaration of Independence made them a reality almost word for word. I think we need more Second Treatises floating around right now. And we need specifically ideas about two issues, which I think of as the two prongs of NAPF: first, our relationship to technology, and second, our way of organizing society. For instance, to deal with nuclear weapons, I think we need to think deeply and creatively about our whole relationship to civil defense. What would it mean to create a model of civil defense much more directly connected to the whole nation, rather than run by a professional army that is increasingly alienated from the majority of the citizenry?

Similarly, I think we need to re-think our whole relationship to land use if we are ever to emerge from the shadow of destructive technologies, nuclear and otherwise. What would it mean to foreground Indigenous land practices and sovereignty in our laws and customs? These are not questions that can be answered and put into use in a single generation. But we are in desperate need of ambitious thinking on these topics, thinking that can take the form of policy papers, presentations, documentary films—all kinds of collaborations between scholars and activists.

I realize this sounds ambitious, but that's the point: we need to have teams of people thinking on a speculative canvas, so that down the line, when a window for change opens up, we can have proposals and models ready to go. I want NAPF to be the umbrella

under which such teams gather.

VOICE: Is it possible to inspire cultures to dream of a healthy, safe, interconnected society?

Spellberg: It is absolutely possible, but we should not underestimate the difficulties involved. Ideas often need years to incubate and grow and reach maturity. They must be carefully cultivated, preserved when fashions change, and revised when unintended consequences crop up. But once an idea genuinely takes root in a people or a place, it becomes unstoppable.

VOICE: What are you most looking forward to as president of NAPF?

Spellberg: I am looking forward to bridging the gap between past and present. NAPF has an inspiring history because, from its inception, it was oriented not only toward dismantling the nuclear system, but also toward proposing a new, utopian vision of the future. That's what has drawn visionaries like Jacques Cousteau and Desmond Tutu to the foundation over the years. NAPF is like a secret reservoir that still retains some of the audacious energy of the mid-20th century: the sense of possibility that motivated the Civil Rights Movement, the Peace Movement, and all of the intellectual ferment that characterized the 1960s. Over the last few decades, that energy has been largely sapped in the public sphere by a cancerous cynicism. But there are signs that in 2021, society is finally beginning to shake off this attitude. NAPF is in a position to bridge this earlier tradition of utopian thinking with a new sense of political possibility.

VOICE: Any additional comments?

Spellberg: I am so excited to get to know Santa Barbara and its people. I know that NAPF has been deeply a part of this community, and I want it to remain that way for years to come.

Matthew Spellberg on a recent trip to Alaska