**INSPIRATIONBASE**

*A collection of ethical leadership speeches*

Cecile

Pineda



Cecile Pineda was born in Harlem as the daughter of a Mexican father and a French-Swiss mother. She worked as theatre producer and director before turning to writing fiction. Her fiction has been critically acclaimed and has won numerous awards. Her first novel, *Face*, won the *Commonwealth Club of California Gold Medal*, the *Sue Kaufman Prize*, and the *American Book Award Nomination for First Fiction*. As a peace activist, she has written non-fiction about our planet’s sustainability. In 2012, as a response to the nuclear industry, she published *Devil’s Tango: How I Learned the Fukushima Step by Step.* In 2015, *Apology to a Whale: Words to Mend a World* followed, in which she talks about our interconnectedness on Earth, about ecological collapse, and about economic injustice.

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| **CP 1*.*** *Cecile Pineda, “I'm in love with this planet 1”* | | | |  |
| Whorf had this idea that language is the vehicle for a world view. So, for example, if you speak Hopi, okay, the clouds are living creatures; they are alive. And how do you know that? Well, because the language, the Hopi language, reflects in its syntax the way it talks about clouds. It gives them the identity of living things, okay? It ascribes that identity to them. In our language, a cloud is a dead thing; it’s not alive, okay? You know, I go walking, and I look at the sky, and I say, “Well, why not?”  […] And the question is: what is it about the western mind that has killed everything on this planet? That is the burning issue more than any other. It’s called “global warming.” Okay? It’s what’s happening to this planet and to a lot of life on it. And what technological civilization has done to create that catastrophe. Alright? And, you know, I’m passionately angry about this development. But, so, I have faith. And my faith is that if we understood where we come from, we could stop it. There might be some hope. And so, you know, I read extensively the work of Marija Gimbutas, the Lithuanian anthropologist. She’s dead now. But Marija Gimbutas published, oh, my gosh, almost fifty books I think. Very many. And many, many of them are painstaking renditions, drawings of the grave offering she found in the excavation she did in Eastern Europe. Mostly. And these were the people who she identifies as “Old Europe.” That is to say that we could say they were the original inhabitants of Europe. Well, they probably were not the original ones, but at that epoch of prehistory - and we’re talking about 8000 B.C. to about 3000 B.C. - they were. They were hunters and gatherers, and they lived in small, small settlements. We wouldn’t even call them villages perhaps. They were hunters and gatherers. They had begun very, very elemental agriculture. And they were egalitarian, non-hierarchical, peaceful people. There is no weaponry to be found in any of those graves. Women and men were buried equally. Homosexual people were equally respected and part of the culture. They worship the Mother Goddess, okay? And you can see, well, the Venus of Heidelberg. This is an emblem of the Mother Goddess. As well there are other forms of the emblem of the Mother Goddess. And you see it was palm-sized. You know, people could hold their devotion, the way they hold their cell phones today. But they were peaceful people, they were non-hierarchical, and non-patriarchal. They were egalitarian. The sexes were equal. And very importantly, they spoke the proto-language of that culture, which is the culture that Gimbutas identifies as “Old Europe.” And most of all, their cycle of existence consisted of birth, life, death, and rebirth. In 3000 B.C., more or less, the Yamnaya from the Russian Steppe, what is now Russia - it’s an area between the Caspian and the Black Sea - swept into Europe. They were herders, okay? They were herders of animals, stockmen. And they came with their beasts; they came with their weaponry; with their warfare; with their patriarchy; with their hierarchy; with their language; they came with their view of existence which ended in death. Okay, that’s where we come from. Death, okay? This is what I’m apologizing for. This is what I’m apologizing for [in my book *Apology to a Whale: Words to Mend a World*]. They came. Their worldview ended in death, okay? And they killed everything in their path. Within a thousand years they had swept across Europe; they had massacred people throughout Europe.  […] [T]hey massacred people as they went, and they stopped when they got to the Atlantic Coast because you could not cross the sea then; they didn’t have the technology. Until 1492, when this same massacring invasion was extended into the New World, and, as you know, massacred millions if Indigenous people in this continent. | | | | |
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| **CP 2*.*** *Cecile Pineda, “I'm in love with this planet 2”* | | | |  |
| You see, I saw black people from the beginning of my life, and by the age of six, I knew I liked black people. And I liked them because they were the sweetest, most courteous, and gentlest people that I knew. And I was born in a section of Harlem called “Sugar Hill” by black people, and that was the place where, when “you made it as a black family,” that’s where you wound up, Sugar Hill. […] So that’s where I come from. And it was perfectly natural for me to advocate for black people because I identify, you know, with black people because I was into that, you know. And I’ve had very lovely, very lovely experiences with black people. So, it’s perfectly natural that I would advocate for them.  […] [I] have to ask myself: So what was the formative? What was the formative force in your life, more than other, that shaped who you are? Come on. I don’t speak Spanish. I speak French. I, well, I stutter in Spanish, I stammer. But it’s not my language. You see, I can speak French, I can write in French. How did this happen? How does it happen that I went to, you know, a western university, and I was educated in New York? How is it that…? Because this is who I am, you know. I’m Mexican. How did this happen? Well, my father wanted me to assimilate. He wanted me to pass. Because he understood on a deep level how racist this country was. He, of course, was racist as well. So, enough of that. But he wanted me to pass. So when I began to publish, when I published *Face*, which was my first novel, they asked me, “Where are you from?” And I understood that question to mean, “Well, if you are a writer, how come we haven’t heard from you until you’re now in your fifties?” “Oh, well, I had a theatre company.” That was the answer. I didn’t say, “Well, I came from Juchitán.” Because I didn’t know. I didn’t know. I had been deprived of all of that. So, the first question is, “What was it about my birth?” Well, it’s because my father was an immigrant, you see. And this became very integral to my story. […] It’s because this also is my story on some level. My family didn’t cross the border now with the border patrol as it’s so constituted. But from its inception in 1780, I think, United States immigration policy has been extremely prejudicial to immigrants from Northern Europe who are blonde and blue-eyed. The myth of the blonde, right? The blonde is having fun. The blonde is a sexual object. Okay? Not the dark-haired woman, you see. And so, this is true for Eastern Europe. They were Jewish, they were Catholic, they’re Southern Europe Catholics, okay? We don’t want them. […] So although my father was very advantaged when he crossed the border at Brownsville at the age of sixteen, he didn’t have to go through immigrant detention jails, you know, he didn’t have to be deprived of water for eight days or food for eight days. He was not an infant that had to have another incarcerated person change his diapers because nobody else would. That’s what’s going on now. He didn’t die at the border. There are children that are dying at the border. We need to remember that. We need to remember who their names are, okay? We need to remember the little Maya girl who got her first pair of shoes to make the 2000-mile trip to the border. And she died because she was refused water for eight days. But she celebrated her first pair of shoes. You have to remember that.  […] [T]he issue in one word is life. And life from a personal perspective - because I’m eighty-eight; I never thought, it was ridiculous to think I would have survived that long, barely. But life of this planet. I think this planet is an exquisite garden. Every day, you know, I walk. I walk, and I found - even though I’m in a city - I found the most exquisite places , natural places that are wild. I saw a skunk three days ago. So, you know, I love this planet. I’m in love with this planet. And to think that we’re abusing it in the way that we have because we don’t understand where we live. This is the central issue. This is the central issue.  […] And my whole obsession now at my age is life. And that’s it. I can’t reduce it to anything more fundamental than that. On a personal level and on a planetary level. | | | | |
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Collected by Daniela Ribitsch