

Gretel Peltó:

A Life in Nutrition

“We are the tribe of nutritionists”

Gretel Peltó’s long and distinguished career in nutrition has been powerfully informed by her love of the arts and her early career in anthropology. She discusses the development of her unique perspective on nutrition – and shares a favorite recipe with our readers.

Sight and Life (SAL): *Gretel, your first degree was in Dance and Literature, which is scarcely what one would expect of a nutritionist. What attracted you to these subjects, and why did you move on from them to sociology, anthropology and ultimately nutrition?*

Gretel Peltó (GP): The attraction lay in my belief in the very close interrelation of the arts and the sciences. Many people construct a false dichotomy between them, but I think that no such dichotomy exists – at least, not at the level that matters for my work. The arts and the sciences are similar in many ways, including the attributes that are required for successful practice. They’re identical in terms of requiring knowledge, technical skills, precision, imagination and persistence. These are fundamental attributes that are needed as much by artists as by scientists. So, my focus may have changed over the years, but this does not represent any shift in my values or in the way I manage my life. The transition was intellectually painless, in fact. In emotional terms, it was traumatic, because when I made the shift from art to science, I had to accept that I was abandoning the lodestar I had followed for so long. But the transition was brief; I got over it quickly.

SAL: *How did it happen?*

GP: I went to Bennington College in Vermont because it had a very good Dance curriculum. They also had a strong English Literature department, which included the highly influential analytical critics Stanley Edgar Hyman and Kenneth Burke. In many

ways, they were bringing newer, broader directions to literary criticism, and their thinking opened up exciting new perspectives for me. Also important was the fact that I am the daughter of an artist and a scientist. My mother was an artist photographer, and my father was an applied sociologist – one of the co-founders, in fact, of a field that in those days went by the name Social Work Research. He ran a research unit in Saint Paul, Minnesota, that focused on improving social work programs. Doesn’t that sound like my whole life ...? I was unbelievably fortunate to be born to these two people, who also had very strongly developed social values and a powerful commitment to equity and fairness. I grew up with a deep drive to make a difference – not for myself, but for society at large. To this day, incidentally, my family continues to have more artists in its ranks than scientists.

SAL: *Do your early studies of Dance and Literature still influence your thinking?*

GP: Not in a literal way, but rather at a much deeper level in the sense of allowing me to be mindful of the creative process in my work. In science, the emphasis on being logical and precise is so great that we sometimes need to give ourselves the space to think imaginatively as well – which is something the great scientists have always maintained, of course!

SAL: *The word “sociology” rarely appears in the discourse of nutrition, the word “anthropology”, even less frequently. In what ways have your studies in the fields of sociology and anthropology influenced your thinking as a nutritionist – and why are you such a rare animal in this regard?*

GP: To answer that question, I must first explain that anthropology – unlike sociology – has always been interested in nutrition, in what people eat and how they produce and consume it. From the beginning of the twentieth century, anthropology had a sub-

A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with short, wavy white hair. She is wearing a dark red, ribbed sweater and gold hoop earrings. Her hands are clasped together, resting under her chin. She has a gentle, thoughtful expression and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

“I grew up with a deep drive to make a difference – not for myself, but for society at large”

Gretel Pelto



Invited to join a powwow, Cass Lake, Minnesota

stantial literature on food and nutrition – and let’s not forget that the great cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead headed up the US National Research Council’s Committee on Food Habits during the Second World War, which was one of the first critical attempts to bring nutrition and anthropology together in the arena of social policy. A lot of anthropology is based on a biocultural perspective, and in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers became interested in what was known as cultural ecology, which ties foods systems and human health to the ways in which societies operate. So it’s no surprise to me that anthropology has always been so concerned with nutrition.

My own interest in nutrition arose at an early stage in my graduate training in anthropology. My first fieldwork was on an Ojibway reservation in northern Minnesota. Community members were kind and generous in helping me to understand their community. They shared meals with me; they even invited me to join an important powwow as a participant, and to help in the wild rice harvest. This is the first time that I saw, first hand, the effects of food insecurity on nutrition, and it was another turning-point because I decided to devote my work to the interface of nutrition and anthropology.

“I value especially the Kellogg Award, because it says that my work as a nutritionist is valued by the wider world”

What is stunningly surprising, to me, is that nutrition has been so little concerned with anthropology. It’s still a struggle to get the critical importance of anthropology recognized by the wider nutrition community. I’m a very strong advocate of ethnographic methods, which are sometimes – falsely – conflated with other approaches to qualitative research. I still sometimes get introduced as “the anthropologist,” although I see myself first and foremost as a nutritionist – that’s my professional identity. Of the awards I have been fortunate to receive, the 2015 American Society for Nutrition Kellogg Prize in International Nutrition is the one I treasure the most. Being appointed a Fellow of the American Society for Nutrition in 2005 was also very important to me, as was the receipt of the Bronislaw Malinowski Award given me by the Society for Applied Anthropology in 2007. But the Kellogg Award is the one that really says that my core work as a nutritionist is valued by the wider world.

SAL: *Much of your work has focused on maternal and child nutrition. Why has this topic played such a prominent role in your research?*

GP: Good maternal nutrition, and good nutrition during the first 1,000 days of a child’s life, set the stage for everything that happens after that. Poor nutrition of women, especially during pregnancy, and malnutrition during infancy and early childhood have major effects throughout one’s lifetime. I think we must focus as much of our energy as possible on this critical window of opportunity. My belief in equity and social justice, which I’ve held since childhood, makes me feel that everyone in the world



Celebrating my birthday in Changsha



Receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Helsinki

should have an equal chance of good nutrition, especially during their first 1,000 days. If we want everyone's life to have a positive trajectory, we absolutely have to address this. Of course, in focusing on the first 1,000 days, I'm not saying that women should be viewed primarily as child-bearing vessels. That's not my view at all. I've always been a feminist, and the inequitable power differential between men and women still makes me angry. I myself was born into a cultural context in which women have been given much more power and influence than in the past, but on a global scale, the power differential is still very much in women's disfavor.

SAL: *The Lancet 2008 series on maternal and child nutrition was a landmark publication that gave rise to the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement and the First 1,000 Days Movement. How would you assess the success of these initiatives to date, and what more needs to be done to improve maternal and child nutrition globally?*

GP: I'm astounded by the speed with which these initiatives have gained momentum. I'm thrilled about these developments. Significant social developments usually take time. Of course, there are circumstances in which these are accelerated, but generally speaking, it takes a long time to bring about major transformations in society. The changes we are seeing on a global scale are proceeding at a terrific rate in relative terms, but it's much too early to make any judgment as to their success. That's not to say that we shouldn't be reflecting on what is happening: we need the views of people both inside and outside this move-

ment. But it's much too early to make a balanced assessment or to complain that progress is too slow. Let's wait and see.

SAL: *You have worked extensively in academia, with professorial positions at the University of Connecticut and Cornell University, and also in the international agency environment, heading behavioral research in the Division of Child Health at the World Health Organization from 1992 to 1999. How did this career path come about?*

GP: I'm one of a relatively small number of people who have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to move from academia into action and back into academia. My move to WHO in Geneva was initially intended to be temporary. I was brought in to apply my social science skills to address some difficult issues in improving health care delivery for infectious disease in children. I obtained a two-year leave of absence from the University of Connecticut, and I certainly intended to go back to my job there. At the end of the second year, however, I realized that I hadn't accomplished all I had wanted to, and so I asked my university for an extension for another two years. Extending beyond that second term was not possible from the university's perspective, but when the time came, I already knew that I wanted to stay in the world of research for action.

Then there were also important changes in my personal life. My marriage broke up, and eventually I remarried. My second husband is Jean-Pierre Habicht – who happens to be Swiss and even from Geneva itself, although he was in the Division of Nutrition at Cornell University at the time. He was willing to return



Reviewing focused ethnographic study data with a research team in China

to his hometown, but Cornell was reluctant to see him go. They offered me a position in nutrition at a time when I felt I wanted to apply what I had learned about implementation research to training the next generation. I left WHO and moved back into an academic environment.

SAL: *What are the respective challenges and opportunities of working in academia and working in the action environment for a nutritionist, in your view? And what can the two worlds learn from one another?*

GP: That's difficult to answer. What I loved about working at WHO was that it gave me the feeling that I was a worker in the arena of social justice, month by month and day by day. I was working in the field of child health, particularly the management of diarrhea and acute respiratory infections, and I spent 30 to 40 percent of my time travelling. I worked very closely with pediatricians around the world and I found them extremely inspiring, but I must confess that I struggled with the bureaucratic environment of WHO itself. Universities have their own bureaucracies, of course, but if you can steer clear of them, you can work with greater freedom in that context. On balance, I much prefer working in academia, but I see myself very much as an actively engaged academic, working at the interface between research and action. I'm committed to improving the quality of research in programs, and so at this later stage of my career it was a logical choice to return to academia.

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**“I see myself as working
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SAL: *In issue 2/2014 of this magazine, you and your husband Jean-Pierre made the case for a society dedicated to implementation science. The Society for Implementation Science in Nutrition (SISN) is now a reality. What has SISN achieved so far, what have you learned from the experience, and what are your hopes for its future?*

GP: SISN is the creation of a number of highly dedicated individuals – not least Klaus Kraemer of *Sight and Life*, who is a true visionary in this field. The concept of implementation science is not new, and there are scientists in other disciplines who have been working in this field for quite some time now. The nutrition community, however, has been late to see the value of this approach and fully embrace it. We're working very hard to catch up – trying to learn as much as we can from other disciplines, including health services research, that are already active in this area. At the same time, we need to create approaches that meet the specific challenges we face in nutrition. We are established now; we've made a lot of progress in a short time, and we are starting to form some promising

Ari's Sephardic Lamb Tajine

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Lamb, cut into small chunks**Onion, chopped****Powdered ginger****Cinnamon****Saffron****Salt****Pepper****Mixed olives****Raisins****Honey****Lemon**

Brown the lamb well, in batches, and remove from pan. Brown the chopped onion. Add ginger and cinnamon. Add back the lamb, the saffron dissolved in water, and salt and pepper to taste. Then add water, about two-thirds up the sides of the lamb. Taste and add more cinnamon and ginger as needed, as it cooks.

Cover and cook on low simmer, for about one and a half hours (depending on cut of lamb).

Next add generous amount of mixed, chopped olives, raisins, honey, lemon juice and lemon zest.

Bake uncovered in hot oven, about 30 minutes.

Top with combination of toasted almond slivers and toasted sesame seeds (toasted separately).

Serve with vegetable dishes, such as carrots with caraway, braised celery, and potatoes.

alliances with colleagues in other disciplines and in sectors of action, such as the SUN Movement.

SAL: *It is not always the case that academics are married to someone working in the same field as themselves. In what ways has your personal relationship with your husband Jean-Pierre Habicht influenced your own thinking as a scientist?*

GP: What's particularly interesting in our case is that we work in the same area but we bring different disciplines to bear on

the subject. That's the secret of our joint success. He brings an epidemiological perspective and I bring an anthropological perspective, and we look at things from very different perspectives but in ways that are ultimately complementary. We've been married for 20 years now, and we've influenced one another considerably over the course of that time, and in ways that we'd like to think are productive.

SAL: *Are there other thinkers, scientists or artists who have influenced you?*

GP: There are two ways I'd like to answer that question. First I must speak of Margaret Mead, to whom I referred earlier. I didn't study with Margaret Mead, but she was one of the earliest pioneers of bringing anthropology and nutrition together, and was hugely influential on the decisions that I've taken in my career. She was an extraordinary personality, and a very important role model for me. I wasn't close to her, but I knew her through her role on the editorial board of the journal that my first husband and I set up, *Reviews in Anthropology*. Sadly, she died relatively young, of pancreatic cancer. When I heard that she was unwell, I took the opportunity of a long flight to write a letter to her telling her what a beacon she had been for me in my life. My handwriting isn't very legible, I'm afraid, and on completing the letter in longhand, I planned to type it up and send it to her. I didn't manage to do that before she died, and the fact that I didn't has been a sadness I will carry with me for the rest of my life. But she was a vital inspiration to me.

The other answer to your question – and here I sound like most of my fellow-nutritionists speaking at their own award ceremonies – is that my most important influences have been my parents, my teachers, my colleagues and my students. You could ask your question of many nutritionists and receive exactly the same response.

“Margaret Mead was a beacon for me”

SAL: *That's a very interesting observation. Going back to your roots in anthropology, do you think that there is such a thing as a tribe of nutritionists?*

GP: Exactly! That's exactly it. We are a tribe, and we behave like one. We have elders and families, and we pool our collective experience in pursuit of common goals.

SAL: *You are known to have a great love of cooking, and to possess an extensive collection of cookery books. The subject of cooking is mentioned relatively infrequently by nutritionists, however. What does cooking mean to you personally, and do you*

think that it could be more actively incorporated into the way we look at nutrition?

GP: I grew up in a household in which food was very important. My mother was a great cook, and was deeply interested in the nutritional value of food. She was way ahead of her time in that regard. But that doesn't satisfactorily explain my own passion for cooking. I think the main reason is that early in my career as a professional woman, I learned the value of taking time out from the stresses and strains of working life and relaxing by preparing food. In a psychological sense, I became bonded with cooking because it offered me such profound rewards and helped me manage my life better.

I'm glad to say that the value of cooking is receiving more attention in the field in which I work, with community nutritionists in developing countries increasingly helping local communities through demonstrations of food preparation and cooking. So there are some movements in that direction, and I see them as extremely positive, although I haven't personally been involved in them. I'm convinced that many more people in the world could experience the joy that can be derived from cooking, but this requires secure conditions and an enabling environment, which are lacking in many parts of the world today.

SAL: *Would you nevertheless share a favorite recipe with us, Gretel?*

GP: My favorite recipe is actually almost always changing, and I very rarely cook the same thing twice because I love the fun of cooking new things, or of cooking familiar things in new ways. And that also justifies my addiction to adding yet more cookbooks to my already very extensive collection! Here is a recipe that was developed by my opera conductor son, who loves to cook as much as I do.

SAL: *Many thanks, Gretel. I hope that many of our readers try it out!*

GP: Thank you.

SAL: *Thank you too, and the best of luck with your future projects.*

Gretel Pelto was interviewed by Jonathan Steffen

Gretel Pelto: Career highlights

Gretel Pelto was born and raised in Minneapolis, MN, USA. Her undergraduate education was at Bennington College, where she majored in Dance and Literature; she completed a BA in Sociology (1963) at the University of Minnesota, followed by an MA (1967) and PhD (1970) in Anthropology from the University of Minnesota. In 1996, she was also awarded an honorary doctorate in Nutrition from the University of Helsinki, in recognition of her work in furthering the development of nutritional anthropology in Finland. She was awarded Fellow status in the American Society for Nutrition in 2005. Her primary academic appointments have been in Nutrition departments (University of Connecticut: 1976–1992; Cornell University: 1999–present), where her teaching has focused on maternal and child nutrition, community nutrition, and most recently, program planning and policy.

From 1992 to 1999, Gretel oversaw behavioral research in the Division of Child Health at the World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland. Her field research has centered mainly on Mexico, and she has also been additionally associated with studies in Latin America, Asia and Africa.

The focus of her research is on infant and young child feeding and household management of illness in infants and children. Her theoretical and social focus is on the interface between programs and families and communities. Throughout her career, Gretel has taken an active role in fostering applied nutritional and medical anthropology through editing specialist journals, serving on national and international research and policy committees, and participating in organizations dedicated to nutrition and anthropology.