

Traveling with the Mystics

An Interview with Hannah Maximova by Michelle White

December 2005

Michelle: Okay, so, Hannah, where were you born? Give me some background here.

Hannah: I was born in Iowa City, Iowa, but I don't know much about it because we moved to Tucson when I was four. I lived in Tucson until I finished college and then moved to Chicago for nine years before moving here three years ago. I'm 33.

I have two older brothers, and we were raised Jewish—we all had our Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, four years of Hebrew school, extended overnight camp, the whole thing.

Michelle: You're sure you're not English and going to boarding school or something?

Hannah: Maybe it sounds strange, but my brothers and I went to away to camp for a month or two at a time. We each spent several summers there when we were pretty young kids. It was Camp Charles Pearlstein in Prescott, Arizona, and it was incredible. We had the best Rabbi, the woods were amazing...it was an incredibly powerful experience for me.

So I was raised pretty decisively Jewish. But my father isn't Jewish (he isn't Christian either—he was raised without religion), and my brothers and I went to a Catholic school for three years when we were young. That was really more of a hippie school. The kids were free to learn or not learn anything. There were no classes and we did whatever we liked. It was great.

When we transitioned back to public school, we were well above our grade levels once we'd adjusted to the public school experience. So I don't think we were hampered by spending years at hippie school. It's one of the best gifts I've ever been given. I didn't have to sit still or experience boredom until fourth grade. I ran free and did whatever appealed to me.

Years later I asked my brother why all of our teachers there had names like "Sister Mary," "Sister Judy," and "Sister Ann," and he said, "They were nuns!" Nuns! I had no idea. (laughs) So I guess it was technically a Catholic hippie school, but there were plenty of Jews around. I did more art there than I've ever done since.

Afterward, we settled into public school. Then when I was twelve, my parents divorced. My mother moved into our vacation cabin on the nearby Mount Lemmon, and my brothers and I stayed with our father. He was at work most of the time, so it was pretty chaotic in our house for a couple of years. The kids were in charge, and for us that wasn't a good thing. I feel like we were yelling and fighting almost all of the time.

Michelle: What was your Mom doing on the mountain?

Hannah: Well, she had a small computer business, and she was a volunteer firefighter for a while. We saw her pretty often when either she visited us or we visited her. I threw up just about every time I made that trip up the mountain though. It was a very difficult expanse for me to cross. I've always had motion sickness on very curvy roads.

Eventually, my mother moved back to Tucson, and I moved into the apartment she rented. I lived alone in her place for a while though, because she took a job that put her on the road almost all of the time. Both of my parents have since apologized for making decisions that were hard on us when we were young teenagers.

Michelle: Did you get into trouble?

Hannah: No, I really didn't. It seems like people from more intact families have very different kinds of things to rebel against as teenagers—they have normalcy to rebel against. When your family busts up, you get chaos to react to instead, sometimes through being very normal. I was a cheerleader all through high school.

Michelle: So was I!

Hannah: All right! That's so great! Yeah, my parents hated it, they were mortified.

Michelle: Yeah! (laughing) It mortifies ME that I was a cheerleader!

Hannah: Oh, I'm proud of it! When I tell people they usually can't believe it. When I told my Dad I was joining the squad, he got very serious and said, "Okay, you can do cheerleading, but you also have to be on the basketball team" (laughs). I said, "Right." I hate basketball and completely suck at it.

For me cheering was terrific. It was so normal and structured. I got to be the captain twice and got to learn to be in charge of things...I got to feel like a regular kid again like I hadn't for years.

When you ask if I got into trouble, I don't think I did, but I guess some people would call it trouble that I drank a lot and got stoned a fair amount of times and went to many parties. I never did it during school weeks or while driving, so I don't think it was so bad. A lot of people complain about high school, but I loved it...had a great time.

Michelle: And how were your grades?

Hannah: Great. I always got A's and B's. Honestly, I feel like you're not supposed to say it, but partying the way I did was good for me. I was a pretty shy kid, and then I wasn't shy as a teenager and haven't been shy since. It helped me through some of my problems by helping me

feel less self-conscious. I was also lucky to have a close group of friends I spent nearly all of my time with. Most of us had screwball families, so we understood each other.

Michelle: So what next? How did you apply to college and do all those things you need parents for?

Hannah: I stayed in Tucson and went to the University of Arizona and arranged all of that with my friends. We did the applications, visited the school, chose dorms and all that together. We were hyper-responsible kids, having been responsible for ourselves from a young age.

I should mention that by the time I finished my second year of college, I had stopped drinking and smoking and haven't been drunk or stoned since. I haven't had more than a half a glass of wine or a few sips of beer since I was 19. I guess I just finished with it and didn't want it anymore. Lost interest.

In my college dorm, I was friends with most of my wing but was especially close to a young woman named Lauren Canter who I'd known as a little girl. She and I had been in the same cabin at Camp Charles Pearlstein, and we had pictures of us together as little kids. Lauren and I really bonded in college because we both had problems with insomnia (I don't anymore). We'd sit in the dorm's kitchen all night talking when we couldn't sleep.

She had a lot of stories to tell because she was a survivor of childhood cancer and wasn't expected to live very long. She had been to terminal camp, the camp you can't qualify for unless you're dying. Most of what I remember talking about late at night was terminal camp and all the dead people she knew. She had dark brown eyes but her eyes kind of washed black when she talked about it. For an 18-year-old, she had a very powerful relationship with death. Then she died a year later when we were sophomores and she became the first person I knew who'd passed away.

After she was gone, school got a lot less engaging. Her dying made my living feel different, like I couldn't understand why I got to live and she didn't. I felt like life was something I had to earn, that it wasn't just there to squander and be bored with. I'd always wanted to go to Europe, but that seemed impossible until a friend told me about the student travel office on campus. It turned out that there were programs that made it easy to work there. So I saved up a bunch of money, got my visas together and bought a one-way ticket to London.

Michelle: Were you studying there?

Hannah: No, I showed up with no place to live or work and not knowing anyone. I remember having dinner with my Dad one night before then and going on about how tired I was from all the jobs, and he asked why I was working so much. "Oh," I said, "I'm leaving for Europe in a couple of weeks. Didn't I mention that?" I guess I hadn't. Oops. I'd been saving for months or maybe a year at that point.

Michelle: Were you putting yourself through school?

Hannah: No, my Dad paid for my schooling. I was lucky. My Mom contributed too. I always worked, but that was for spending money. I didn't have to worry about tuition, books, rent or food. That was part of the reason I stayed in my state for college. That way it could be cheap and I could get a lot of help.

So I took a semester off from college and spent six months abroad, and came back a different person. I'd never been anywhere by myself before then. I was absolutely terrified to go. I had my visas, the money I'd saved, my new passport, and I'd given most of my things away, stored others...The night before I left was nuts, I was so scared to go.

Michelle: And you didn't go with anyone else?

Hannah: Nope, I went alone. My friend Lauren dying just changed my priorities and opened up the possibility for me to live that way. I've heard that translated into survivor's guilt but it was a great gift at 19 to feel that life was a choice, an option and a privilege. And not to honor that gift with the coolest life you're capable of making was to show great disrespect to the people who didn't get to live it.

So I went and stayed in London for two weeks, met some great people, and decided I didn't want to stay in London. That led me to a ticket booth in a train station where I asked the ticket guy if he knew of a university town that might be a good place to live in. "I'm from Swansea," he said. So I got a ticket to Swansea in southern Wales and found a room to rent and a job. Well, two jobs: I bartended and worked in a backpack store.

Eventually, I traveled all over the continent with all sorts of people. It was the greatest thing I'd ever done. It was amazing, it changed me permanently. So many fellow backpackers I met had had a close friend or relative their age die, that was a normal experience there. The student backpacking community is a group with very little money, no plans, no appointments, nothing to do but adventure around and get to know each other.

Michelle: Were these primarily Americans?

Hannah: No, not at all. Most hostels had maybe 5 to 15 percent Americans. Most of the people you meet there are from other countries. It's immensely social to travel alone if you're friendly. You meet a million people. And if people you like are going in a direction you're intrigued by, you go with them. If not, you don't.

Michelle: How were you different when you came back?

Hannah: I wasn't afraid of anything. Or if I was, I didn't worry about it much. I'd been alone in the middle of the night a couple of times in some very creepy places and had some strange scrapes. But each time it worked out in such great ways. I was helped or rescued in amazing

ways. I felt like I found out that the universe wants to love you and wants you to fulfill your destiny. And you can tell what that is because it reverberates in the core of your being and makes your whole consciousness quake. That's what you're supposed to be doing, and the universal consciousness wants you to do it, wants to help you do it, and it gives you a million little guides to learn how. There's an Einstein quote: "The most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe."

So I came back from my trip feeling slightly bananas and newly born. I felt like I'd found my hands there, my capabilities. So I got back and registered to go back to school and had the clear feeling that school only matters when you care about it.

There were classes I didn't care about, and on my trip I didn't remember one thing about them—they hadn't even happened in my experience. There were other ones that affected me so deeply, that sort of wrote the story of me in a big way. There weren't many of those, but they were the only ones that mattered. Once I was back, I didn't take classes that didn't resonate with me.

Michelle: Were they the kinds of things that led to a degree, or were you just hanging out?

Hannah: Yeah, they were, and I did. I got my degree in fine art photography.

So in that time I was also in a performance comedy group which was pretty popular on campus. I'd watched it for years before I joined and had always loved it. Hundreds of people came to see it every week, and most of us rearranged our schedules every semester to be sure that our Fridays at noon were free. I don't know where I got the idea that I could join, but I tried out, got in, and did that for a couple of years.

That's where I met my husband Mike. He was in the group for a few years before I joined. We were 20 and 22 at the time, and we've been together ever since.

Every week our comedy group would write an hour's worth of original sketches, have a writers' meeting and two rehearsals, and then put on the show on Fridays. It took a lot of time to be in this group, way more than a regular class. I got in as a writer and then eventually progressed to being a performer too. It was so fun to perform for such an appreciative audience. It was great to write something and see it performed that week, to find out that quickly what would affect people and what wouldn't.

After graduating we moved to Chicago and lived there for nine years. But in the middle of that I went back to Europe on another one-way ticket by myself and stayed for another six months. Mike stayed in the U.S. but came over to visit for three weeks in the middle of it. At that time, I thought I'd take a six-month trip every six years but have since learned that that gets harder the older you get (laughs). It's a lot easier at 19 and 25.

On that second trip I lived and worked in London and again wandered around the continent a lot. I could earn enough money in London in one day to spend a week in Greece. I did graphic design and art direction that time, the same work I do now.

One day on that trip I was at the top of a hill in Oban, a city in northern Scotland. had learned about this crazy family that lived there in the last century, the McCaigs. The family had four sons and four daughters, all of them attractive, intelligent, socially-engaged people. None of them married, none had children, and I believe they lived together all their lives. Weird. They just didn't have to procreate or marry for their lives to be fulfilled.

Many of them worked, so they had plenty of money. One of the brothers decided that he wanted to use the money to give the town's stonecutters something to do. He commissioned a huge stone circle on the hill above the city. It has huge arched windows cut out of it. And standing in the middle of it, it's a crazy feeling, it's just charged with energy.

From these people who never married or had children and never wanted to...they weren't leaving much behind but this incredible huge stone circle that just felt like proof of a majesty of lives lived without the usual life experiences of marrying and having kids. So, I had this great epiphany in the Crown of Oban—I knew that I wanted to make films.

Michelle: And you wouldn't have to marry or have children.

Hannah: Well I wanted to be with Mike all my life, and we do want children. But I didn't want being married and having children to be my only reasons to exist. As a Jewish woman there's a certain amount of pressure to procreate and make more Jews. We lost a lot of people in the last century.

So I came back, and in a few weeks wrote my short film that took about a year and a half to produce. Mike was already a filmmaker. He'd done his degree in film, and I'd worked on a couple of films he'd made. The filmmaking process wasn't totally alien to me.

Still it's amazing how much there is to do on even a tiny Super-8 film like that—I had to get actors, recording studio time, costumes, musicians, places to shoot, sound effects, editing space...it goes on and on. Then I needed an editor to finish the whole thing. We made it, it's called "Phoszote and Other Stories."

For the first time I got to find out what would happen if I didn't try to make people happy by incorporating things I didn't like—I just wanted to know if my instincts could make something good. Mike and I have a strong belief that whoever writes, drives a project. Driving means that whenever there's a conflict, the writer gets final say, no argument, that's it. Discussing it before a decision is made is fine but once something has been decided by the writer, that's it. That means your ideas are respected and you make all the important decisions (and you're responsible if it sucks).

So it was incredibly gratifying when the film got into a few film festivals and then got a distribution contract from a Chicago distribution company.

Following a film across the country is so wonderful. It's the greatest ego trip I've ever experienced. It's swimming in the ego ocean. I now see that as not a perfectly healthy thing, but at the time it was wildly satisfying.

I didn't sell nearly enough copies to make up the cost of producing it, but in self-produced independent film work you don't necessarily expect to.

So I was drunk on that experience when I got started on my feature film. That took lots of money, three years, and everything I had. I was worked nearly to pieces by my experience of that film. Over 200 people, many of whom were involved for much of the three-year period--a few of whom worked for us full-time for months at a time--all of this, and nobody's being paid. We were lucky to find an incredible group of people to work with, and my cheerleading skills came in very handy.

But films age and they die. My film might have died—I finished it in 2002. It was a surprise to me that it didn't make anything and I couldn't pay anyone anything. All along I really thought more would happen with that film. Since I'd already sold one film to a distributor, I could get other distributors to talk to me. But then they'd ask if this project was in any of the three magic categories: sci-fi, horror, and lesbian, and the answer was no.

So of course, I decided to make a sci-fi lesbian horror, but I couldn't really fake it—the whole process is so hard--and if I don't love it, I can't expend that kind of energy. So that went out the window.

Then we moved here so Mike could go to grad school at Cal Arts. And I had to stop being a fine artist for the first time since I'd started. I was still a commercial artist, but that's a different world. My whole sense of identity was as an independent artist. Most of our friends in Chicago had never known me any other way, not just as an artist but someone who ran big, complicated productions. It was strange to move here where people know that Mike's artsy since he's the one in school, and sometimes I hear things like, "How nice to be married to an artist, that must be so interesting for you."

Mike had been treated that way for a few years when I was making my films. He'd been the husband of the writer/director, and he didn't like it either. So when it got switched, and I was just the wife of the artist, I felt awful. But how could these people know what I could do when I didn't do anything like that anymore? And if I wasn't working as a designer full-time, how could we live?

We came down from two incomes to one. I made much less money here, and our expenses skyrocketed. That's what took me to Quaker Meeting originally. I just felt off-center and needed to find another way to live. I'd been meditating at home for a while and loved it and wanted to

join a meditation group. The Zen center I found charged \$7 a session, but in our financial position that wasn't possible. I knew about Quakers, I'd interviewed one for my feature film and had been to Meeting in Evanston. So I thought I'd find one here and check it out.

Michelle: Were the money problems a strain on your relationship?

Hannah: Not really. It was hard, and hard for him feeling guilty about the whole thing. But I choose to be married, and if having this crappy experience is what it takes to be married to a happy partner, I choose it. I choose to be married before I choose to be an artist. It's a major value in my life. I'll take the sacrifices.

Through Meeting, yoga, and hiking, though, I somehow came to the understanding that I don't have to do anything to be worthwhile (laughs). I don't have to accomplish anything to be successful, don't have to prove anything to be meaningful. This was stunning news. It gave me a different view of all the work and things I'd done.

Before then, if I wasn't deeply involved in some big project, I felt awful. I used to describe it as feeling like I could taste, smell, and feel something rotting in my heart, like fruit rotting. Horrible feeling. Doing giant creative ventures or planning six-month trips relieved that feeling. But I'm not doing anything like that now, and it doesn't sting anymore.

It's been an incredible gift to not feel guilty about not being productive. The last three years of not being able to be a fine artist and having to find an identity separate from that has made it possible for us to really consider parenthood. I didn't have any space for that before. I felt like I'd die if I stopped working so hard at my art. Finding out that I didn't die...it's great. If I make something like a film again, that's good; I love doing it, but it would be very different now. It's something I can do, but it's not who I am.

A friend pointed out that if I had realized this eight years ago, I wouldn't have made my films. That would be too bad because I'm really proud of them. They were the best I could do. If I had known that I had two chances in my lifetime to say something in film, those are the films I'd have made. I'd like to make more films, but if I can't, it's not going to kill me. I can be happy without it.

I feel incredible gratitude that I got to give away the best thing I could do. It makes me feel so deeply understood even though the films aren't that autobiographical. It's like a drug. I haven't been drunk or stoned in fifteen years, but I've been incredibly drunk on creative work. It's like a flood of joy that I got to express these things. I haven't had a kid yet though, and I hear people say that they feel that way about them too. Occasionally, while meditating I'll feel something similar, an openness and lightness that's quietly joyful. That's when I feel like the mystics are saying something that I have access to, that existence is a deep euphoria if you listen to it. So I guess I'm in a weird space but it feels nice.

Michelle: It doesn't sound like you're done with filmmaking.

Hannah: Who knows? My short film still wanders around and plays here and there. It just played somewhere in Africa and in Reykjavik, Iceland. But if I'm letting go of my need to achieve outward things while hoping that something will sneak in the back door, I haven't really let go of anything—I'm still ruled by ego need. To truly release it means it doesn't matter if it happens or not, and that's how I'd like to feel. It may be hokey, but right now I just want to be.