

Embracing FULL SPECTRUM LEADERSHIP

Bioneers co-founder Nina Simons cultivates the power of the feminine By Diana Rico

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR NINA SIMONS, A CHARISMATIC NEW YORKER-turned-New Mexican, is a living example of someone who walks her walk and talks her talk. As cofounder, with husband Kenny Ausubel, of the annual Bioneers Conference: Revolution from the Heart of Nature, Simons helped create a phenomenal annual forum that brings together thousands of internationally known social activists, environmentalists, tech innovators, indigenous wisdom keepers, journalists and engaged audience members to envision earth-inspired solutions to our most pressing global problems. Simons had previously used her broad-spectrum background in innovative corporate management, strategic marketing and community-building to guide *Seeds of Change*, Ausubel's startup venture, and the public company *Odwalla* to national prominence. All of her work is informed by her passion for the natural world, systems thinking, engaged action and the arts' capacity to shape culture and consciousness.

In the course of her experiences Simons has identified and embraced an alternative model of leadership, one that emerges from archetypally female qualities such as empathy and collaboration—although she points out that this new model applies to men as well. “The place I aspire to is having full access to the spectrum of my human capabilities, ranging from the ‘feminine’ to the ‘masculine’ at any given time,” she declares.

Her intensive five-day retreat—*Cultivating Women's Leadership*—is offered to carefully selected, extremely diverse groups of women, and in 2010 she edited (with Anneke Campbell) the anthology *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart*, which includes essays by a wide range of women (Terry Tempest Williams, Jean Shinoda Bolen, Alice Walker, Eve Ensler, Julia Butterfly Hill, among others) and a few good men. Simons spoke with *WLT* by phone from her home office in Santa Fe, where she was busily getting ready for the 22nd Bioneers Conference, scheduled for the weekend of October 14 in San Rafael.

Why is women's leadership important—and why now?

With all of the earth's life support systems in serious and accelerating decline, I see this moment as a massive reinvention of everything in our civilization about how we live on earth and with each other. So creating new possibilities is tremendously important. What's exciting to me about the emergence of women's leadership is that we bring a tendency toward a more inclusive and collaborative, flexible stand that is less hierarchical and more creative than previous leadership models.

I'm fond of the reframe that's going around now that women's rights is a human issue, not a women's issue. Study after study has proven that when you improve the health and education of women it has cascading benefits—everything gets better for everybody. And this patriarchal culture has been at least as damaging to men as to



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women. We've inherited a definition of leadership that is self-limiting and repugnant. Since I believe this pivotal moment in history calls us all into leadership, part of my work has been to help reframe leadership as something to which we can all wholeheartedly aspire.

How would you describe this new leadership model?

I understand it as both identifying the gifts that each of us brings to the world and that ignite us and bring us joy, and finding where those gifts meet a need for reinvention in the world. I believe that when each of us does that, we can become unstoppable. I also think that this new form of leadership we're birthing is a collaborative form. Together we have so much more capacity for effective change-making. Another thing that seems essential to this new definition is that the greatest leaders expand, encourage and mentor people around them.

So it's a model based more on nurturance than competition?

Yes. It's a shift from the notion of winning as a zero-sum game to mutuality and a win-win-win-win scenario.



A win-win scenario sounds very promising! You've been leading Cultivating Women's Leadership intensives since 2006. What do you teach there?

We do a bunch of work that's about increasing our inner awareness, including practices for self-cultivation, for recognizing and honoring the shadow within us, for self-appreciation and self-love, and for developing a balance of rigor and compassion.

We practice connecting across differences, especially across racial divides, so that the women have an opportunity to experience what Martin Luther King called "beloved community," which, once experienced, you know you can create elsewhere in your life. The power of story is a tremendously strong element. As well, it has a kind of underpinning that is nondogmatically spiritual in nature. And then we offer everyone an experience of how powerfully women in authentic commitment to each other's leadership can grow each other's capacity.

I'm curious about how a woman leader might function optimally in a partnership. Can you talk about your personal experience as a co-leader with Kenny?

At the beginning of our relationship, since he was both older and more experienced in business, we had a kind of mentor-mentee relationship. I had to very purposefully grow beyond that. Partnering with a strong man has given me the opportunity to become less conflict averse, which I believe as women many, many, many of us are. It's strengthened my own capacity to summon those masculine qualities within me, to be able to meet him and practice that full-spectrum leadership that I aspire to, and to learn how to meet the power of his vision with my own, so that we can effectively dance together.

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What did you learn about women's leadership in the process of editing *Moonrise*?

I found that the leaders I most admire have a deep connection to their own personal calling. It's a voice—which some might call spirit—that offers them guidance and creativity and grounding when they are facing challenges, and opens new possibilities for ways of responding. The leaders who most inspire me are those who are strongly attuned to that inner voice in guiding their external leadership in the world.

Any final words about women's leadership?

Twenty-two years of Bioneers as my graduate school has given me a kind of systemic view that says that those same issues we are facing globally and in our culture exist in a fractal sense within all of us, and that the imbalance of the masculine and the feminine is both a personal and a global issue. It's clear that we can't heal our relationship with the earth until we heal our relationship with ourselves and each other. ■