

## Third Way Leadership by Nina Simons

Turning to arcs, circles and spirals to find our way home

Nina Simons exemplifies Mahatma Gandhi's guidance to "Be the change you want to see in the world." She's always felt called to transform culture, to make it more inclusive, tolerant and just. And now, decades after a life rich with experience, she is being the change she wants to see by modeling women's leadership in the world.

Simons' life path has been neither a straight nor logical line. A New Yorker, she originally sought to change the world through theater, music and film. But when she and her husband (social entrepreneur and filmmaker Kenny Ausubel) visited Gila, New Mexico, she "felt as if the spirit of the natural world tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'You're working for me now.'"

She jumped fully into developing heirloom seeds, organic farming and nutritional juices as agents for social change. Drawing on her skill for orchestrating diverse groups of people to work together toward a higher purpose, she guided Ausubel's start-up companies, Seeds of Change and Odwalla, to national prominence through community-based and innovative approaches to corporate management and strategic marketing.

In 1990 she and Ausubel co-founded the non-profit Bioneers ("Revolution from the Heart of Nature"), producing an annual conference that attracts thousands to San Rafael, California in October. The event's presentations, panels, keynote addresses and exhibits bring together internationally known social activists, environmentalists, technological innovators, journalists and indigenous wisdom keepers with an engaged audience to seed and propagate collective change with solutions usually inspired by nature. Bioneers also produces an award-winning radio series, anthology book series, television programs and rich media website.

Simons thinks of Bioneers as "a three-day ceremony." Typically, she and Ausubel open each day's plenary sessions with remarks. The essay below was developed from her oral address on the final morning of Bioneers, 2010.

SINCE STORIES CAN BE LIKE LENSES IN defining the context, bounds and scope of our vision, let's shed this dual perspective we have inherited—the zero sum game that ensures someone loses and that locks us in defensive and assertive postures. Let's cultivate tales that celebrate reconciliation, integration and interdependence instead. Let's compost the myths that the shortest distance between two points is a line and that our brains alone can think our way through—the myth that being busy is better or necessary or makes us more valuable or trumps self-care or being with those we love. Let's shed the notion that the sole options for addressing conflict are fight or flight.

Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien suggests we're shifting from an either/or to a both/and culture—one that requires opening the aperture of our irises to better perceive the truth that surrounds apparent paradox. Though two conflicting views may seem irreconcilably opposed, when we expand our vision enough to encompass a whole that's larger than both, a new reality often emerges -- a third way that's big enough to address each of them within its purview. In a both/and culture instead of avoiding dissenting

views, we might embrace the opportunity they raise for expanding vision, exploring them through practicing respectful disagreement. Apparent contradictions can serve to make visible truths that may not have been otherwise seen or acknowledged, enriching the health of the whole through their emergence.

From seaweed to ferns, birds' wings and rainbows, nature reveals that a spiral, arc or circle can connect and encompass—while resolving conflict—more directly, elegantly and without creating harm. When buffeted by the ocean's riptides and currents, seaweed curls and spirals in adaptation, conferring remarkable resiliency for weathering conflicting forces. Ferns unfurl from their buds in spirals, offering them greater strength as they face uncertain winds and rain to stretch to their full height. As the rainbow's arc emerges from the sun's fire meeting rainwater, and as birds' wings gracefully bend to slice through disparate wind currents to navigate, nature reveals how the flexibility of curves, circles and spirals creates new pathways for navigating seeming contradiction. As cold milk poured into hot tea elicits a spiral of reconciliation, I am reminded to question our linear ways of addressing conflict.

Jeannette Armstrong, of the Okanagan First Peoples, practices an ancient system for reaching group coherence. In their culture the most valued perspective is one that's 180 degrees across from the majority view. When encountering one whose position is diametrically opposed, they know that they must expand their vision to be big enough to encompass and integrate that dissenting voice. They know that without hearing and weaving in the perspective of that voice, the whole won't be fully dimensional, resilient or complete.

To transform the story, to escape the calcification of being stuck in opposition, what might we call on to find a third way?

On the edge of Kilauea, an active volcano, young people danced a traditional hula. Heads crowned with furry grasses, their bare feet padded softly, flexed gently and stomped hard on gravel of volcanic rock as sharp as glass. If it hurt, their teacher said, they weren't praying hard enough.

Bodies swayed with the winds, undulated like ocean waves and then offered syncopated prayers in precisely attuned staccato rhythms. Their 50-50 masculine/feminine embodied wholeness was exhilarating, enlivening and intoxicating. Each was able to call upon any point in that gender spectrum to access all their human capabilities, to offer their prayers fully. Without being confined to an identity that was either masculine or feminine, the dancers' wholeness transcended that polarity and encompassed them both. Their purposeful dance was so powerful it lifted them beyond the anticipated pain or conflict of feet slapping sharp stone so that their bodies became integrated instruments of a deeper sacred relationship to the goddess Pele, to Earth, to spirit.

I am daunted by the complexity we face. How might we bring ourselves to serve this transformative time in a good way, without becoming so identified with our own perspective, or being "right," that we add to the polarization? How may we navigate opposing forces to help identify the ways of the spiral, ways that reveal new possibilities? One clue comes from Third Possibility Leadership, a style that's proving effective in many areas. Developed by a woman named Birute Regine, it also brings the best of all aspects of our selves to bear. It reveals another pathway for embracing all of our relational intelligences, for integrating diverse ways of being while reconciling the false contradiction of inherited and limiting gender identities.

Human organizations are complex, adaptive systems, she says, where a traditional, command-and-control style of management will inevitably impair the system's creativity and adaptability. To enhance organizations as learning systems, complexity science demands a shift in focus toward the world of relationships, prioritizing the realm of the between rather than the separate, or distinct. Prioritizing the web of the collective over the individual. It suggests attending to the unifying field, the commonalities that connect, rather than reinforcing divergence or buying into arguments

that polarize or compete hierarchically.

To navigate and lead a complex system well requires a holistic view, one that can see from within and without at once. Native shamans have long taught “as above, so below,” since any part of a system may serve as a fractal toward revealing and understanding the whole. This third way leadership requires being able to recognize and adapt flexibly to patterns, rather than holding a singly-focused goal or perspective. Leaders that thrive in this environment bring not only strongly developed masculine values and behaviors—like being action-oriented, analytical and generative—but also embody strongly developed feminine traits, including nurturance, collaboration and relational intelligence.

Third possibility leaders, who flourish in complex adaptive systems, typically exhibit three traits:

- They are gatherers who bring people together and are careful to include those who are disenfranchised or marginalized.
- They are paradoxical, encompassing fire and water, capable of being both fierce, decisive and persevering, while remaining flexible, vulnerable and empathic.
- They are holistic, adept at seeing the big picture as well as the connections within. How will we find our way home to belonging?

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The native Hawaiian language is an elemental language. With each syllable the speakers are invoking their relationship to Earth, Air, Fire and Water. Each phrase or sentence becomes a prayer offered in gratitude for belonging. Who among us might not long for such a way of communicating?

How might we remember our place in the web, reconnect with our relations?

Perhaps it's by practicing a third way and humbly listening for the teachers who surround us—for the wisdom of the salmon who find their way home to the same river from which they were born, for the sea turtles who navigate the Earth's blue continent to return to lay their eggs on the same beach where they were spawned years before, for the whales who carry our ancient ancestral memory.

It may be by closing our eyes to see, listening with our knees flexed to feel the Earth's instructions, navigating by the guidance of our hearts and attending to our dreams, visions and intuitions and the guidance of those who came before us.

May we rediscover the power of circles, of sitting in council to listen and learn; the power of trusting the wisdom that emerges from the voices that are quietest, least valued or that we least expect to learn from. May we recall the power of listening patiently for the intelligence of the whole to emerge, without rushing toward conclusions.

May we risk that first step of standing on behalf of what we most love and value—knowing that the first step is the hardest, and trusting that once we take it we will be met tenfold.

May we practice growing ourselves, cultivating our capacities to connect and curbing our habituated tendencies toward comparison, hierarchy and isolation. May we be willing to feel the depths of our despair so that we may dream ourselves into the possibility of soaring together. May we be informed by our wounds but not defined by them.

May we remember the power of empathy and practice seeing the world through other's eyes. In this great interdependent web may we remind ourselves that whatever befalls others happens to us.

May art remind us that it can reveal and awaken new possibilities as we look to our artists to reveal pathways forward.

May we recall, celebrate and invoke our belonging to our one and only home. In Wyoming, as in Alaska, nearly every man, woman and child receives compensation from the oil and gas industries. It's also a state filled with pronghorn antelope, creatures almost every Wyoming native has seen, admired or felt their hearts gallop with as they leap across the plains. These animals have one of the longest migration pathways in the lower 48 states. They bound across landscapes as if released from gravity. Their 6,000-mile migrations are

now being thwarted by enclosures and development.

I invite you to experience the Council of Pronghorn, an art installation co-created by writer and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams, sculptor Ben Roth and artist Felicia Resor. Imagine that you walk into a courtyard that is filled with a circle of 23 pronghorn antelope skulls. Mounted on white stakes about six feet tall, their pointed noses face inward; their curved horns arc upward. Standing at the center, you are seen by the empty sockets of their eyes.

As Terry Tempest Williams says in her poem "Council of Pronghorn,"

We, The Council  
of Pronghorn  
have convened  
as witnesses  
to this moment  
in time  
when our eyes  
wish to peer  
into the hearts  
of humans  
and ask  
what kind  
of world  
are you creating  
when we can  
no longer  
run as Windhorses  
but are relegated  
to watching  
behind fences  
dreaming, dreaming  
of Spirit  
Migrations?

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May we make this migration together, Finding our ways through obstacles, habits and fears. Guided by the beauty, love and truth that surround us. May we liberate the pathways, for them and for us. May we remember to reach out for each other's hands, to ask for the guidance of those who came before us, to listen for the guidance of those who walk, swim, fly and crawl among us.

Amen, Awomen, Aho and Ashe.