INTRODUCTION

Cultivating Connection and Capacity Through Story

Nina Simons

Perhaps you have come to this place, to this moment, to these people, to this challenge, for just such a time as this.

Mordecai to Esther, in the Book of Ruth

Around the globe, women are rising up in creative and unexpected ways to defend what they love—protecting their families, villages, neighborhoods, homelands, and lifeways, while creating community and connection to strengthen resiliency and healing. Responding to urgent calls from the earth, and to social harms that threaten the livability and fabric of our world, women are leading efforts to defend what they love, reinventing and challenging facets of society everywhere. Recognizing the ineffectiveness of conventional approaches, they're midwifing new models and ways of relating to the earth and each other that want to be born. Women are inventing new forms (and reclaiming old ones) in every area of life, ranging from childbirth to education, and spanning peacemaking, healing, economics, and restorative justice. Many are also reimagining business, governance, and education.

These women and many men are leading as pathfinders, whose

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vision and passion for a better world motivate others to act to help heal our collective home (the earth) and advance the common good. We may choose to risk reaching for our dreams not only for the benefit of those around us, but because making a stand on behalf of what we most love, of the future we yearn for, is the most fulfilling, joyful, and meaningful way to spend our short and precious lives.

Though people today often lament a lack of leadership, a new form is arising everywhere—largely from women—and is as unstoppable as grass that grows up through the cracks in concrete. Since it does not resemble what we were taught to expect leadership to look like, this emergence is largely unseen.

In the new leadership landscape described in this book, women (and some men) are wielding power in different ways than what we have been taught to expect. Like Sarah Crowell, whose students keep her practice vulnerable and deeply honest, many are experimenting with collaborative, win-win structures, in which each participant is enriched and expanded by her engagement. Some, like Judy Wicks and her vision to improve business, what we eat, and how we treat each other, are sharing their accomplishments openly and freely, to better equip even their competitors in order to help transform a whole community.

Leslie Gray's story offers insight into an alternate use of power that comes from within, reminding us of the profound value of somatic and intuitive cues. Women leaders often opt to lead from behind or alongside their colleagues, and less frequently from out in front. As the stories here so amply illustrate, being a leader does not necessitate asserting dominance, but rather asks that we listen actively and inwardly, reach across the differences that tend to divide us, initiate and choose the hard work of collaboration, stay connected with our passion, and inspire enthusiastic engagement to strengthen and catalyze others into action.

For most of my career, though I had many accomplishments and successes, I did not consider myself a leader. I have worked in the arts, as a social entrepreneur, in the corporate world, and as co-leader of a nonprofit organization. The way my path meandered and changed embarrassed me, until I identified the common thread: I loved helping

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orchestrate diverse groups of people to work together toward a higher purpose, a common goal. Rather than diminishing my inclusiveness and ability to inspire cooperation as having little value, I have come to appreciate them as leadership skills. The twists and turns my life has taken have become a source of pleasure for me, as they have given me greater flexibility and a wide range of experiences to draw upon.

After college, I pursued a career in theater, as I believed the arts were the most powerful way to reach people's hearts and minds in order to transform culture. Once I realized how difficult it would be to make a living at "transformational theater," I became disillusioned, took a practical turn at managing restaurants, and then continued to work in music and film.

When I met my husband and partner, Kenny Ausubel, he was finishing a feature-length documentary about alternative cancer remedies, *Hoxsey: How Healing Becomes a Crime*. I learned about the corrupt history of medical politics that has obstructed patients' access to natural treatments, and felt the pain of patients recently diagnosed with cancer, without access to adequate information. My idealism was rekindled. I helped him to market and distribute the film; we got it widely reviewed, broadcast internationally, and screened for Congress. We discovered we were a remarkably compatible and complementary team, and we have worked together ever since.

My first sense of feeling called toward leadership took me completely by surprise, shifting my path toward serving the beauty, health, and fertility of the natural world. In 1989, Kenny and I spent a weekend near the tiny town of Gila, New Mexico, visiting with master gardener Gabriel Howearth. Upon our arrival, Gabriel offered us a tour through his biodiversity garden, which was an orgy of colors, smells, tastes, and sounds. Entering, I saw whole societies of tomatoes—of every size, shape, and color—more varieties than I had known existed. The sweet scent of their juices, warmed by the afternoon sun, intoxicated me as it mingled with the smell of the dark, moist soil. Bees, ladybugs, butterflies, and birds circled overhead, attracted by the fertility below. My senses were dancing. Having grown up in New York City, I never grew

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food. I wondered whether a garden like this might have inspired the myth of the Garden of Eden.

This one was filled with unusual heirloom and traditional varieties, foods I had never heard of before. As Gabriel fondly introduced us to each plant, he explained how it was related to those on either side. He related to these plants as intimately as one might one's own family.

I learned that this diverse abundance of food plants was threatened by the concentration of corporate agribusiness, and that a tremendous effort was needed to conserve and spread them. I understood that diversity is not only evidence of nature's complexity, wisdom, and beauty, but it is also life's best strategy for survival, offering options for adaptation and resilience in response to change. I knew that what I experienced in that garden was sacred.

I felt as if the spirit of the natural world tapped me on the shoulder and said, "You're working for me now."

Though I felt utterly unprepared and knew nothing about farming, biodiversity, or business, the call was undeniable. I never paused to doubt myself. I returned home and quit my job to work for Seeds of Change, the entrepreneurial organic seed start-up that Kenny founded with Gabriel.

I embarked on the steepest learning curve of my life, eventually becoming the company's president. I quickly learned to trust my instincts and innate business sense. I chose to let go of my embarrassment about not having formal training or knowing all the answers, and to instead appreciate my common sense and beginner's mind. We grew the company rapidly over the next five years, developing it through innovative social marketing into a successful national brand.

My husband, Kenny, first came to me with the idea of producing a Bioneers Conference in 1990. His research had unearthed visionary leaders who were effectively responding to many of our most pressing environmental and social challenges with solutions often inspired by nature. We imagined it would be valuable to spread news of their many effective innovations for restoring the relationship among people and planet, and thereby help leverage the pressure for change.

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We assumed that these leaders would already know each other. We were surprised to discover that almost all of them were operating separately, many having no knowledge of each other's work. One primary purpose of Bioneers became to cross-pollinate ideas, best practices, and approaches across fields of endeavor. Connecting the people became as important as spreading the ideas and solutions.

As people new to producing conferences, we created a form that we hoped might affect people deeply—not only intellectually, but to reach their hearts and even touch their sense of the sacred. We came to think of Bioneers as a three-day ceremony, one that integrates arts and culture in a tapestry woven to include and integrate many ways of knowing. Without ever consciously intending it, and in a form I would never have dreamed of, I had found a way to do transformational theater after all!

Through Bioneers' diverse combination of people and perspectives, I came to understand the fabric of the world in a new way. A way that integrates respectful relationship to all of life while remaining deeply connected to the mystery and complexity of creation. A way that values the lessons of history and recognizes the subjectivity of its stories. A way that recognizes the wisdom of indigenous peoples as having essential instructions for how to live on Earth in a good way. A way that listens for the voices of ancestors, as well as those of the land, plants, and creatures. A way that listens for *all* the voices, especially those that are rarely heard or valued in our culture. A way that attends to dreams, intuition, the invisible world, and the wisdom of our animal bodies and authentic selves as vital sources of information.

I learned from hearing scores of leaders' stories over many years, stories of what called to them, of their challenges and victories, and stories of what they had to overcome to respond in wholehearted and creative ways. Appreciating gifts in others sometimes helped me to identify similar capacities in myself that I would not otherwise have recognized. Stories can encourage compassion among people who are different. I was changed by so many stories offered with honesty, heart, and courage. The love and sense of serving something sacred that motivated so many of them reshaped my understanding of leadership. As they transformed

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me, I realized that perhaps they can shift our culture. Few things can create connection and grow our own capacities more meaningfully than immersing ourselves in each other's stories.

Five years after starting Bioneers, a documentary film added a gender lens to my worldview, shifting my sense of purpose and calling. *The Burning Times* tells the story of the 500- to 600-year period in European history when—depending on which historian's estimates you believe—somewhere between fifty thousand and millions of women were tortured and murdered as "witches." Suddenly, the irrational fear I had of speaking my truth publicly had a possible explanation in our collective history. That sustained reign of terror against women seemed to live deep within my unconscious, that lineage residing in the marrow of my bones.

As I considered this information in light of the various environmental, economic, and social challenges we face, I saw a pattern of imbalance of "masculine" over "feminine" qualities everywhere I looked. Rational, linear, goal-oriented, quantitative, short-term, and competitive approaches were consistently front and center. Concerns about future generations, emotional intelligence, subjective experience, process, relationships, aesthetics, and qualitative and cooperative efforts were hard to measure and therefore generally discounted as "soft" or irrelevant.

I began to see an insidious and largely invisible cultural legacy of devaluing or even demonizing those human characteristics relegated to the domain of the "feminine," and elevating and institutionalizing those qualities associated with the "masculine." I realized that it was not only women who have been systematically culturally devalued, but the "feminine" qualities within us all. This legacy of cultural bias has damaged *everyone*.

Fritjof Capra notes that the transition toward becoming an ecoliterate society (one that understands how to live in balance with the natural world) requires a shift in emphasis from counting things to focusing on mapping relationships. Seen through my gender lens, this change in our priorities reflects a reintegration of the feminine back into our human wholeness.

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As I explored this idea, it was striking to discover that, from a Jungian perspective, the feminine is associated with the inner, and the masculine with the external or outer. I began seeing twin pathways to help restore our cultural health—one of inspiring and equipping women toward greater leadership, and the other of elevating and restoring the qualities of the feminine within us all. I began to program panel discussions at Bioneers to explore a theme I called "Restoring the Feminine."

When I investigated my own relationship to leadership, I noticed a disturbing incongruity. Although others saw me as an accomplished woman leader, having entrepreneurially helped to develop a national company and having cofounded an influential nonprofit, I did not see myself that way. Inwardly, I felt uncertain and deflected compliments so consistently that Kenny teased me for being Teflon. I began the inner work to find a way to align how others saw me and how I saw myself. I started seeing that the ways in which I undervalued my common sense and intuition, my relational intelligence and creative contributions, might have roots in a larger cultural story.

I knew that these innate gifts were essential for my work, but I saw them as lesser contributions than the rigorously fact-based, analytical and intellectual gifts of my husband and other male (as well as some female) colleagues. To grow into my own sense of purpose in the world, or my own potential, I realized I had to stop comparing myself to others. I practiced receiving compliments, really letting myself feel them, and began appreciating my own very different brand of eloquence. I forgave myself for not remembering facts and figures.

Reflecting inwardly, I realized that I had a deeply embedded belief that I was serving Kenny's vision, and saw myself as the "woman behind the man." When I encountered obstacles, I was quick to attribute them to a sexist system, or to inwardly blame his or others' leadership style. Once I recognized the story I was telling myself and saw how self-limiting it was, I knew that I could shed that narrative and adopt a new one—one in which I became the generative actor in my own story. Though a small voice within me worried about being self-centered, my desire to serve the world's healing helped me to shed it. I was elated,

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and I knew that I had found the keys to my own liberation.

My relationship to Bioneers began to change. With the help of feedback from colleagues and friends I trusted, I reassessed and reclaimed the value of my contribution. For the first time, I began to perceive Bioneers as an authentic cocreation. In reality, it is a collaborative social sculpture that is the product of many hands, hearts, and minds. My own story changed from seeing it as one man's vision to a collaborative cocreation, a place where my leadership is both welcomed and needed.

Through Bioneers, I occupy an unusual catbird seat in knowing so many disparate women leaders. Motivated by the opportunity I saw to find common ground among them, I organized a retreat for diverse women leaders, called UnReasonable Women for the Earth. I invited thirty-two women leaders, most of whom did not know each other, to come together to imagine what a women's movement with Earth at its heart might look like.

Over several joyful and tumultuous days, we explored what we commonly believed was most essential to transforming culture. We agreed that it was our interconnectedness, our interdependence, that was most crucial to invoke and impart—the reality that the suffering of one person or species anywhere affects us all. We saw our illusions of separateness and "safety" as creating compartmentalized thinking, feeling, and being. We recognized that seeing life as interconnected and utterly interdependent is central to most spiritual and sacred traditions, and also to systems thinking. Three of the participants went on to found CODEPINK: Women for Peace, as the United States prepared to invade Iraq.

I began to understand producing and convening as vital elements of social-change work, and they became a potent part of my tool kit as a leader.

As I changed my inner story and developed a more vital sense of myself, I learned from many mentors among Bioneers' networks. Often their stories showed me that it is possible to integrate vulnerability, not-knowing, and compassion with strength. I began sharing my discoveries

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with other women around me. Each time I did, women nodded their heads in recognition of similar patterns and stories within themselves. It seemed that much of what I was learning had value for others.

Wanting to translate what I was learning into tools and practices for other women and girls, I sought to help strengthen their capacity to lead the transition toward a healthy, peaceful, sustainable, and just world. I invited a friend and colleague, Toby Herzlich, to partner with me to cocreate and cofacilitate a residential training. Toby had been a professional facilitator of groups for many years, was a Rockwood Leadership* trainer, and had worked previously with women in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I knew she had the skills and knowledge we would need to create a transformational experience for women. I also knew it was necessary to gather women of differing backgrounds, ages, and ethnicities to connect across their differences and learn practices to help grow themselves and each other.

Since we began five years ago, over 190 women have participated in Cultivating Women's Leadership trainings. Everyone leaves with a stronger sense of her own purpose, understanding more clearly her unique "assignment" and what lights her up, and with a preliminary toolkit to continue to cultivate her own ongoing, emergent leadership. Most discover how strengthening it can be to be honest and caring while challenging each other to do our best, to authentically support each other's dreams and vision.

When we first began offering the workshop, women called to say, "Sure, I would like to come and learn with a group of passionate, capable, and engaged women, but I'm not so sure about this leadership thing." As we discovered how many of us have conflicting views about leadership, we designed processes to unpack our beliefs and to sort through our fears, conflicts, and dreams.

*The Rockwood Leadership Institute is an organization whose mission is to provide individuals, organizations, and networks with powerful and effective training in leadership and collaboration. Founded in 2000, it focuses on equipping individuals with the skills and tools necessary to overcome challenges and inspire the outcomes of social policy reform and grassroots movements.

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Since many of our concepts of leadership have been unconsciously informed by the biases of our culture, relatively few women actually aspire to leadership roles. Frequently we found that women assume that leadership is conferred principally through privilege, job stature, or other symbols of authority that some of us simply do not possess. Often women imagine leadership as an innate talent available only to a select few, rather than one that is learnable and may be cultivated intentionally over time.

I came to see that many of us have an inherent distrust and antipathy toward leadership because of our negative experiences of it, and the way it often manifests in the world. Many of us associate it with ways of relating to others that are disrespectful, damaging, and top-down, perhaps seeing power as a zero-sum game in which putting people down is required if one is to stay on top. Many women see leadership as necessarily involving lots of conflict, which many might prefer to avoid. It is often seen as a solitary practice, which isolates those who pursue it. Our inherited models have frequently involved compulsive self-sacrifice, becoming a target, and relinquishing any work-life balance. Since these characteristics and the lifestyle that accompanies them are often profoundly unappealing to many women and girls, many avoid leadership roles altogether. The women we worked with were not signed on for leadership like that.

The generous and caringly motivated forms of leadership I knew from Bioneers were rarely reported in the media or seen in popular culture—rather, they were emerging largely under the radar. Reflecting on the many leaders who have helped inform my life and learning, I wanted to find a way to share their voices and stories with a wider audience.

This, then, is a book to describe this new form of leadership that is arising all over the world. Though this new way of leading embraces the value of our "feminine" characteristics, values relationships as essential to individual and social health, and is being practiced mainly by women, some courageous and innovative men are doing it too. While this book seeks to encourage and equip women to step more fully into leadership, my larger purpose is to inspire anyone interested in bringing

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her or his fullest capacity to transforming how we live on Earth and with each other. The goal of *Moonrise* is to ignite the power and capacity within us all to create change by leading in ways that are joyful, healthy, and whole.

These leaders' stories express an integration of both their "feminine" and "masculine" natures. Their ways of leading value the discipline, focus, and determination that are often attributed to the "masculine." Their approaches illustrate that by wedding these "masculine" traits to our relational intelligence—our compassion, humility, intuition, somatic wisdom, empathy, and receptivity—we can each express a potent union. Reflecting the ancient wisdom of the Tao, the Yin/Yang symbol, and most indigenous and shamanic traditions, our leadership and institutions will achieve their greatest influence to transform our cultures only when they integrate all aspects of our human potential.

This leadership arises from the heart and the soles of our feet, and it is motivated from within. It stems from a desire to protect, defend, and nurture whatever we most love, whatever in life has the most meaning for each of us. For that reason, this book describes a progression that flows from the inside out. This perspective, in line with the ancient Hermetic axiom "As above, so below," is that authentic leadership in the world emerges from and reflects the personal, inner work we do. As Gandhi famously said, "We must first be the change we wish to see in the world."

These stories arise from a diverse array of voices, reflecting the prism of who we are. The call to leadership that these stories collectively present is an invitation to us all, to people of every hue, age, shape, and history. All our contributions, all our collective creativity and imagination, are needed to remake this world. By reading and reflecting on these richly differing perspectives from people of many backgrounds, ethnicities, and ages, a *whole* picture of how we are reinventing leadership can surface. Only then may the themes and through-lines of a new pattern emerge.

Gandhi also knew that "social change occurs when deeply felt private experiences are given public legitimacy." The stories in this book

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unfold in an intimate and personal way that is a key element of this new leadership, a style rarely heard today when leaders tell their stories. Since most were originally delivered as talks at Bioneers conferences, they are also more conversational in tone than if they'd been written for the printed page.

Here is an overview of the arc of the stories contained in this book.

In the first section, "Knowing Our Selves, Our Inner Landscape, and Our Sense of Purpose," you will encounter women who have learned that their own self-knowledge and sense of purpose and authenticity are central to how they show up in the world. They conduct themselves impeccably and kindly, holding themselves rigorously accountable to being honest and real with the people they encounter. Their actions are informed by their self-awareness and sense of purpose. Each has paid exquisite attention to what makes her flame grow brighter, to identifying her unique "assignment," and has used that to inform her leadership pathway. These women have listened inwardly and have been informed by all their emotions as well as their body's own somatic intelligence. When we realize that whatever we have to offer the world and what lights us up are both clues to the same assignment, we can reconcile the false dichotomy between self and service. This leadership is inherently both joyful and fulfilling, and through practicing it, we may each become beacons to attract, strengthen, and inspire others along the way.

The stories of "Leadership Sourced from Inner Authority" describe how women have found all the authority and power needed to face adversity by tapping into their hearts, their souls, their bellies, and their convictions. None of these women required or sought the support of any power outside herself, but rather they were ignited to act, strengthened by a knowingness that came from deep within. No job title or institution gave them permission to innovate and inspire others, to be resolute and fearless. When they feel uncertain or need support, they look within to find the strength, courage, and guidance they seek. It is there they find their most valued, or sacred, instructions. Though con-

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nection and collaboration offer further resources, their first connection and sustenance arises from within.

In the third section, "Reweaving the Web of Connection," we explore the heart of this leadership: how we form, cultivate, and strengthen relationships to advance a vision. This emphasis on relatedness and connection offers medicine for a world torn apart by individualism and greed. It expands from the deeply personal outward to our relationships with each other and the natural world. This reawakening of the wisdom within us invites awareness and contact with the invisible worlds of energy, intention, and intuition. Some of the stories reveal ancient relations among women and land, plants, and culture. They speak to a mindfulness of our lineage, ancestors, and those yet unborn. In service to our wholeness, they also invite reclaiming our connections to loss, grief, and the "dark" emotions that have been chronically avoided, ignored, or denied, but which are needed for the reinvention of what it means to be fully human.

Section four, "Renegotiating Power: Generosity, Mentorship, and Respectful Relations," offers some novel approaches to help morph the old paradigm that sees power as a limited resource, in which someone has to lose for another to win. Ranging from business to philanthropy and economics to mentorship to the natural world, these stories explore the power of generosity and humility to transform ourselves and others. Describing a social transformation with roots in our indigenous past, these stories look to our hearts' desires, indigenous cultures, and how nature operates to identify, create, and spread strategies of mutual aid and abundance.

In the fifth section, "Restoring the Feminine in Our Strategies, Institutions, and Culture," we visit with leaders responding to ways the systemic devaluing of the feminine—the relational, intuitive, spiritual, and embodied experiential qualities—have created imbalance and caused inequity or harm in our culture. Three bold and innovative men's stories are included here, as each integrates qualities of the feminine central to his approach to healing, innovation, or conservation. They remind us how accessible and inviting this new leadership

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form may be to us all. The women tackle institutions including science, media, health, and governance to help create systems of balance, wholeness, and health.

Their stories offer solutions that speak to the needs of constituencies ranging from women and children to war veterans, and from inner-city dwellers seeking cooperative employment to the oceans' inhabitants. Their systemic solutions offer relevant ideas for all global citizens. While each relates a vision for addressing an aspect of our culture, so many other facets still call urgently for reinvention. Their examples illuminate pathways for seeing how much positive change is possible through the leadership of one impassioned, intentional, and loving person.

Their stories have ignited, catalyzed, and strengthened me in countless ways. To further articulate the vision contained within them, I have, at the head of each of them, added my own sense of the person who is telling the story. I am grateful, honored, and deeply enthused to share them with you. The Dalai Lama noted recently that "the world will be saved by Western women." If, as His Holiness, Alice Walker, the indigenous Wisdomkeepers, and Sweet Honey in the Rock suggest, we *are* the ones we have been waiting for, then let us reorient our vision, strengthen our hearts, and liberate our capacities, so that we can see, appreciate, and participate fully in the leadership that is emerging. To really *become* the ones we have been waiting for, we need a call to leadership that we can relate to, be inspired by, and embrace wholeheartedly. That is the medicine these stories have to offer.

May we convey stories like birds carry seeds in their feathers,
to sow them in purposeful and transformational ways.
May we fully embrace all of our human wholeness—
honoring the depth of our losses and the breadth and power of our love.
May we find our way to right relationship with ourselves,
each other, and the whole Earth community that is "all our relations."

May we lead in ways that are joyful, rigorous, kind, and effective,
Serving the beauty and mystery of Mother Earth and all her kin,
Enlivening, inspiring, and encouraging others along the way.
Awomen, Amen, Aho, and Ashé.



Nina Simons, the editor of this book with Anneke Campbell, is a social entrepreneur experienced in both the nonprofit and corporate worlds. In 1990, she cofounded Bioneers (www.bioneers.org) and, as co-CEO, she has helped lead the organization through twenty-one years of identifying, gathering, and disseminating breakthrough solutions for restoring people and planet.

Nina was also the marketing director and later president of the entrepreneurial start-up company Seeds of Change from 1989 to 1994, helping grow it into an emerging national brand in a mere five years. Subsequently, she was the director of strategic marketing at Odwalla, the fresh juice company from 1995 to 1997, a time when it was expanding rapidly across the nation. Both of these professional experiences instilled strong leadership skills in her, which were later refined and strengthened and further developed through her seminal work with Bioneers.

Nina currently focuses largely on writing and teaching about leadership women, and nature—while cultivating her own leadership—and on leveraging Bioneers' abundant solutions and stories to catalyze and inspire greater social and environmental transformation worldwide.

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