

The world seems to be divided into two kinds of people—those who divide everything into two, and those who don't. Reading *Nature, Culture and the Sacred* is a step toward melting the false division into "feminine" and "masculine," and allowing each of us to become fully human again and at last.

— **GLORIA STEINEM**, Co-founder of *Ms.* magazine

Nature, Culture and the Sacred is the perfect book for this historical moment. Nina Simons not only knows the rare gifts of leadership women can offer, she also reveals how challenge and adversity bring these gifts forth more brilliantly and powerfully.

— **JOANNA MACY**, author of *World As Lover, World As Self*

Bioneers co-founder Nina Simons offers inspiration for anyone who aspires to grow into their own unique form of leadership with resilience and joy.

Informed by her extensive experience with multicultural women's leadership development, Simons replaces the old patriarchal leadership paradigm with a more feminine-inflected style that illustrates the interconnected nature of the issues we face today. Sharing moving stories of women around the world joining together to reconnect people, nature and the land—both practically and spiritually—*Nature, Culture and the Sacred* is necessary reading for anyone who wants to learn from and be inspired by women who are leading the way towards transformational change by cultivating vibrant movements for social and environmental justice.



NINA SIMONS, cofounder of Bioneers, is a social entrepreneur passionate about reinventing leadership, restoring the feminine, and co-creating a healthy and equitable future for all life on Earth. An advocate for social and environmental healing, she speaks and teaches internationally on leadership and transformational social change and is dedicated to the value of creating truly diverse collaborations and connections among issues, leaders and movements.



NATURE, CULTURE & THE SACRED
NINA SIMONS

**NATURE,
CULTURE &
THE SACRED**
*A Woman Listens
For Leadership*



NINA SIMONS

A compelling and honest tapestry of hard-earned personal and collective wisdom, honoring the earth and igniting the revolutionary ways of women.

EVE ENSLER, Founder of V-Day and author of *The Vagina Monologues*

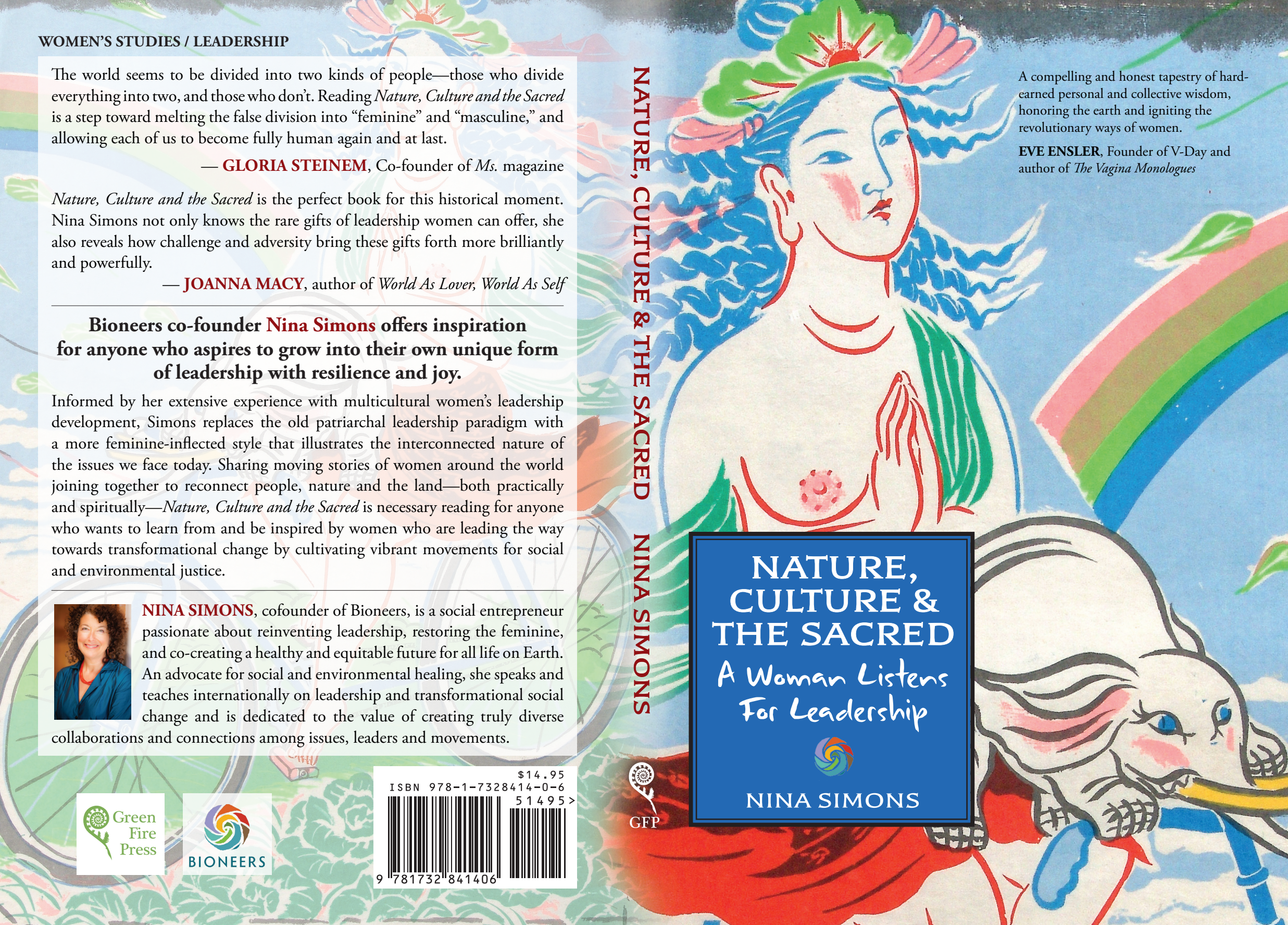


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INTRODUCTION

When I turned 40, I began receiving public acknowledgement for my leadership in Bioneers, featuring and making visible the innovative leaders, stories and visions related to sustainability. At the time, I had a very ambivalent response to being named a leader. I knew that I should feel honored, but instead found that I felt anxious and conflicted.

As I shared my experience with friends and colleagues, most of them women, I discovered that they too felt similarly conflicted about leadership as an aspiration or public persona. At the same time, I knew leadership from all quarters was hugely needed to address the social and ecological crises we were headed toward, so this incongruity plagued me. From that point forward I began a twenty-year exploration into the nature of leadership and its reinvention, an inquiry that has shaped my life ever since.

I began by unpacking my own internal definition of leadership. I wondered whether unconscious stories, roles, cultural biases or societal definitions might be contributing to the discomfort I was feeling.

In my mind, my previously unexamined assumption was that leaders tended to be characterized as solitary, accomplished and self-assured individuals who held final power and ultimate authority. They often worked to the point of sickness or exhaustion, and were inclined toward lifestyles of self-sacrifice. I also assumed that any leader existed within a hierarchical or dominator framework.

I started seeing that my culturally inherited definition of leadership was predicated upon a social assumption of competition, hierarchy and scarcity. As I scanned the leadership landscape, I saw how much of what I deeply aspired to for my own evolution didn't match up with what was conventionally being modeled. I noticed that appearances, stature, scale and outer achievement were much more highly honored in leaders than inner awareness, mindfulness, integrity or deep listening. I saw how certitude was a prevalent attitude among conventional leaders, with little room for questioning.

I observed how analytical and procedural thinking was typically more highly praised than creative, relational and innovative thinking. I recalled that Carl Jung ascribed the archetypal feminine to our interiority, and the masculine to our exteriority. I began to see that the imbalance that was true within me — of valuing my more “masculine” traits and undervaluing those I ascribed to the archetypal “feminine” within me — was also present within other people, men and women, as well as in our institutions and social structures. I also saw how valuable it could be to awaken people — especially women — to that internal bias, to be better able to shed or transform it in us all.

Indigenous peoples of the Amazon believe that the bird of humanity has flown on only one wing for far too long, notes Lynne Twist, who runs the Soul of Money Institute and co-founded the Pachamama Alliance. These times, they say, require that the feminine fully join the masculine so that the bird of humanity can gain full wing, flying to soar with its whole capacity.

But when I looked at what the concepts “masculine” and “feminine” meant to me, I could see that during my early professional career, I had presented first from my masculine side, making sure to appear capable, qualified, stable, focused and self-assured. I was quick,

rational and decisive. I prided myself on how much I could accomplish each day. When I didn't know the answer to a question or how to do something, I employed bravado, making up a response or solution, while hoping it would turn out well. I rarely admitted to being uncertain or needing more information or time to consider.

Inwardly, of course, I was sometimes unsure, nervous or emotionally variable. Within myself, I discounted many of the other qualities that served me as a leader: my ability to listen deeply, empathize and connect, my skill at collaboration, my capacity to see, encourage and inspire the leadership of others, and my contextual awareness of potential impacts to the whole systems involved.

I vowed that going forward I would live more explicitly integrating my feminine side, since we all contain a full spectrum of aspects within ourselves, regardless of our gender. As a leader, I wanted my toolkit to encompass all of my human capacities, and to be able to draw from anywhere on that spectrum at any given time, marrying apparent contradictions: for instance, being focused and decisive while considering full contextual and relational implications. I came to see that having access to a full array of my human capacities allowed me to show up in the world in a more authentic and effective way. It permitted me to bring more aspects of myself into my daily life and interactions.

That full-spectrum approach also gave me a greater capacity for renewing myself after periods of intense productivity. I discovered that the feminine within me needs periods of rest and reflection, spacious time to re-inhabit my body, heart and spirit, which revitalizes me. I discovered that integrating even brief times for rest into my daily routine led me to be able to feel better resourced and nourished, throughout my days.

In considering full-spectrum leadership, I noted the extent to which our U.S. culture tends to avoid what's difficult, vulnerable or painful. We chronically tend to deny, avoid or medicate the kinds of inner turmoil that can lead to real personal growth. Shadow is defined psychologically as unconscious aspects of our personality, which the ego does not acknowledge.

Without bringing those aspects into awareness, they exert undue and often unconscious influence upon our actions. Our collective aversion to experiencing grief and depression also fits into this overall bias. I saw that without facing, valuing and integrating our personal and collective shadows we might be doomed to recycling our wounds and to a perpetual personal and emotional immaturity.

I yearned to reinvent and reclaim a new form of leadership that we might all aspire to. Seeking models, I looked to people from the Bioneers networks from different disciplines, backgrounds and walks of life, and at different stages in their leadership or life journeys. These exemplary leaders, many of whom you will meet in the essays that follow, were creative and collaborative, curious and courageous, humble and passionate, and had diverse, yet authentic responses to the challenges their work posed. They merged the rational with the intuitive, at once. They wove the relational, the strategic and the collaborative — and were able to balance deep listening, openness and humility with asserting their own understanding, or what they knew to be true.

Some may not have even considered themselves leaders. Regardless of what they were called, what I found was that those who most inspired me were the ones who didn't necessarily have a title, graduate degree, or external markers of authority.

What they had was a passionate commitment to some aspect

of the living world, and that dedication or love was so profound that it caused them to act with a dignified authority. It was like they'd received an assignment from their intuition, heart or spirit. They might not have called it that, but it was as if their inner voice said, "I have to do something to protect or defend or reinvent what I love."

Reflecting on these new models of leadership led me to co-edit (with Anneke Campbell) the book *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart*, an anthology of more than 30 essays from a collection of diverse women (and some men) trailblazers, that has been widely read and employed in university and graduate courses about leadership, women and diversity.

I was also inspired to co-create the Cultivating Women's Leadership (CWL) intensives in 2006 with Toby Herzlich and Akaya Windwood, two longtime facilitators and transformative process designers with deep life experience both with women and leadership trainings. These six-day residential intensives, housed within Bioneers, were designed to: clarify each woman's sense of purpose; experience beloved community among a very diverse group; explore the shadow side of women's leadership; develop intentional practices for ongoing self-cultivation; and offer women an embodied experience of how powerfully and quickly women can accelerate one another's learning and leadership capacities.

Co-facilitating the Cultivating Women's Leadership intensives, (most recently in partnership with co-founder Toby Herzlich and Rachel Bagby and Elsa Menendez), has inspired me to appreciate diversity (or a full spectrum of perspectives and people) in *all* of its forms. Not only ethnic or racial diversity, but the real value of working among an array of ages, orientations, classes, abilities, faiths,

disciplines and sectors. It has led me to a deeper understanding of the complementary values of extroversion and introversion, and how we all process information differently, applying visual, auditory and kinesthetic capacities and ways of learning in varied ways.

None of the women's leadership work of Bioneers has ever been about exclusion or reinforcing binaries. It has always been oriented toward balance and belonging, wholeness and integration. Some call it blended leadership, informed by a healthy integration of all of our feminine and masculine qualities. After twelve years of workshops with women, I've come to believe that leadership is more about finding the place where each of our unique gifts and talents connect with a real need for reinvention in the world. When we find that connection point, that nexus, we become unstoppable. The joy that is generated by doing the work creates a self-reinforcing loop. Once you find it, it's powerful and revitalizing, and defies those inherited definitions I had found so distasteful in myself.

I now believe that bringing the complete capacity of each of us — our own full spectrum diversity — to our leadership might actually be the most appropriate, potent and useful response to this moment in time, when the world is asking so much of us. It has surprised me to notice how much energy, joy and creativity is unleashed within me as I reclaim my own greater inner wholeness.

As studying nature reveals, diversity is about far more than political correctness. It's actually about resilience and survival. In nature, diversity means having a plethora of options for adaptation in order to ensure survival and to mitigate against extinction. Ecosystems that are rich in diversity rebound much more quickly after trauma; systems with less species diversity are far slower to recover and heal. Since human systems are a subset of nature's

systems, if diversity serves nature's resilience, well-being, and survival, it will serve ours as well.

What is needed in this pivotal time of ecological and social collapse is an uprising of this full-spectrum leadership in every one of us. A reclaiming of all our internal or personal parts into wholeness must also be mirrored by a full spectrum externally and politically — of engaged people across all sectors, disciplines, races, orientations, classes and ages who together are strengthened by the full capacity of our diversity, both inwardly and outwardly.

As you read these pages, I invite you to notice which parts of yourself that may have been previously hidden may be called forth, silenced or kept small. I hope you find this book — and the videos and podcasts referenced throughout — inspiring, expansive and heart-nourishing. Perhaps ideas or stories within it may enter your dreamtime, or inspire you to grow into or reclaim previously undervalued or banished parts of yourself.

I am honored and thankful to invite you to join me in this journey of exploration. To do so, I suggest that you first give yourself permission to fall in love. Fall in love with a place, with a people, with kids, a cause, an organization, a creature, anything that really lights you up. Then give yourself to it in some sort of purposeful action. You don't have to know what that means, exactly, or have it strategically mapped out in advance. You just have to commit to being its ally, to acting to defend or protect or improve its life. Then see who else is committed to it. Who is in this river you've opted to swim in, on behalf of our collective future?

I suggest bringing yourself to it with all the wisdom of your magnificent body, the knowing of your heart, your intellect, and your intuition. Call on all of your aspects, from your discipline and rigor to

your compassion and empathy; from your strategic thinking and analysis to your body wisdom and instinctive feeling, from your masculine to your feminine, and everything in between. Bring all of yourself.

Lastly, I suggest that you trust that exactly who you are is what is needed at this moment in the world and that you are enough in every way to meet this assignment. Here's the best part: I'd suggest you do this not because it's right (though it is), not because it's needed (though it surely is), but because it is the most joyful, purposeful and fulfilling way to live your life.

Warmly,

Nina Simons

A RIVER OF PURPOSE

A Human-Nature Landscape

If anyone had suggested to me as a youth that I might spend my thirties, forties and fifties co-creating an annual environmental conference serving a vision of restoration, I'd have said "No way!" In college, I always found biology and chemistry classes to be utterly boring and lacking any relevance for my life.

As a child growing up in New York City, however, nature provided comfort and sanctuary. When I was a girl of six or seven, I had a large and varied collection of stuffed animals that lived on my bed. One day, after my parents had read us *Charlotte's Web*, I piled them into shopping bags and took them to Central Park. There, I set each of them carefully into their own nook within a huge tree, returning them to nature, to be free among their own kind. I came home to an empty bed, happy with what I'd done.

Since that day, a strong sense of purpose has continued to grow and morph as new experiences and learning have shaped me. It's manifested as an evolving call, or assignment, and not something that remains static. In significant moments along the way, I have fallen in love, my heart and mind converging in newfound commitment to a people, a creature, a place or a challenge. And I have come to understand purpose as being what happens when one's own particular loves, commitments and talents converge with a need for change in

the world. Those moments have shifted the course of my leadership, creating a long and windy river of expression, and not the direct and linear pathway I'd anticipated. As more of myself has become consciously engaged, bringing a full spectrum of my capacities into play, that has also informed how I've come to understand my purpose.

A daughter of artists, I assumed that it was through producing radical art that I'd make my contribution to the world. After college, I worked for a theater company, as I'd hoped to produce what I called transformational theater, theater that was capable of transforming peoples' hearts and minds. Discovering how hard it might be to earn a living that way, I managed restaurants and studied extensively with a school for consciousness called Arica.

In my late 20s, I moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and a few years later, I met Kenny Ausubel, who later became my husband and partner. It was early 1987, and he was completing a documentary film, *Hoxsey: How Healing Becomes a Crime*, which told the story of the politics of medicine and the history of alternative cancer therapies in this country. As I learned about the growing number of cancer patients and their lack of access to good information or options, I became passionate about addressing that gap, and helped him to complete, market and distribute the film.

Kenny has said that we came together like peanut butter and jelly, and it's true — our collaboration happened quite organically and seamlessly. We were so complementary that we finished each other's sentences and manifested each other's ideas, effortlessly. Working on distributing *Hoxsey* was a breakthrough experience for me in many ways. I learned that I loved helping get stories that are important for healing widely told. I found myself enthused and tireless in that pursuit, and strengthened by the synchronicity of my emerging partnership with Kenny.

A couple of years later, Kenny was asked to film footage of an unusual garden at San Juan Pueblo near Santa Fe, New Mexico. He went to visit the garden and became fascinated by the garden's diversity, uniqueness and fertility. The pueblo had hired master gardener Gabriel Howearth to design and plant the garden. Previously, Gabriel had traveled all over Central and Latin America learning about Indigenous agriculture, expanding his repertoire of diverse plant families. As people began to trust him, they shared with him what for them was the most precious of gifts — the gift of seeds.

At that time, I was working with the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, but walking through Gabriel's garden changed the course of my life. Strolling through it I encountered whole societies of tomatoes and peppers, of every shape, size and color, and the smells were beyond anything I'd ever experienced — totally intoxicating. There were tall stalks of glowing red amaranth, golden braids of quinoa, and other things that I had never seen before. As we walked, I was encouraged to taste, so I picked leaves and munched my way through, feeling the utter vitality of the whole environment coursing through my senses. There was chocolate basil and lemon licorice mint. The richness and the fertility of the garden resonated deeply within me, and I felt as though my senses were dancing. Then, Gabriel told us of the impending crisis in the food system. He shared how dozens of small seed companies were being gobbled up by multinational corporations, diminishing the number of varieties being grown and thereby threatening the diversity of life itself. As we left the garden, I felt the spirit of the natural world tap me on the shoulder and say, "You're working for me, now."

Kenny and Gabriel entered into a partnership to begin a biodiversity seed company. I knew nothing about gardening, farming or plant diversity and very little about the crisis in biodiversity. But I

did know that the life force I'd encountered in that garden had what I saw as a thrilling capacity to renew and heal our world, and I threw myself into the work fully. I quit my job and began working as Director of Marketing for Seeds of Change, and while it was daunting to realize how little I knew, it was exhilarating to work for something I believed in so deeply. I found myself feeling more alive than with any work I'd previously done.

In 1990, after bemoaning in a hot tub about all the amazing innovators working to heal nature with nature that his research was revealing, but that no one knew about, Kenny was offered a grant by Josh Mailman to start a conference. Kenny had never been to a conference, and wondered about it as a strategy, imagining conferences as inherently boring. Knowing of my theater background, he approached me to partner with him to produce a conference, and Bioneers was born. Since neither of us had ever experienced a conventional conference, we were able to design something with beginner's mind, and we co-created a form that could simultaneously integrate a sense of the sacred with ceremony, that could speak to the heart and imagination with arts and culture, and bring brilliant and largely unknown ideas and people to light.

I embarked on three steep and deep learning curves — one about food and farming, another about being a social entrepreneur, and the third about leadership. Those inquiries led me into a lifelong exploration of Indigenous wisdom, and how to interact, design, invent, educate and organize on behalf of the sacred web of life on Earth.

When I first heard the speakers that Kenny invited at that initial Bioneers conference in 1990, my jaw dropped. Science came alive for me for the first time, and I felt my childlike sense of wonder return. Here were courageous and curious explorers whose experiments with

natural systems were revealing the complexity and brilliance of 4 billion years of evolution. Contrary to the arrogant and mechanistic way I'd previously experienced science, here were people quivering with the delight of discovery, humbly studying at the feet of a real master — nature herself.

It was at Bioneers, too, through Kenny's commitment to Indigenous voices and values, that I first heard Native American people speak about healing from an Indigenous perspective — one that included greater relatedness to place, to each other, to the Earth and all its creatures. Hearing them, I understood that their knowledge and experience were essential to our survival as a species. Having already adapted to thousands of years of change, Indigenous peoples have information about how we are meant to live that I believe must be reintegrated in order to reinvent our entire culture.

At the 1992 Bioneers Conference, to commemorate Columbus' tragic landing on Turtle Island, we assembled a group of Indigenous leaders to discuss what could be learned from considering this 500th anniversary. A man from Acoma Pueblo, Petuuche Gilbert, said, "Five hundred years ago you came, and we welcomed you with open arms. If you came again today, we would do exactly the same." I was humbled, awed and shaken by his words. I sensed how much wisdom his culture carried about forgiveness and generosity, about how to be a good person, as well as about survival. Many native growers knew about dryland agriculture, about seed breeding for resilience and nutrition, about how to live in reciprocal relationship with nature. Relating to all life as sacred seems just about endemic to Indigeneity.

My days were on fire with learning and producing and convening, but it wasn't until a few years later that my path took another unexpected turn, when I began exploring my identity as

a woman. I had always assumed, coming out of college, that I was stepping onto a relatively level playing field thanks to the hard work of the feminists of the 60s and 70s. It wasn't until I was working in my thirties that I began to realize how untrue that assumption had been. I had the repeated experience of sitting in a board room, saying something, and having it fall on deaf ears, and then the man next to me would say it with slightly different language and everybody would nod their heads, saying, "What a great idea." I began to understand how bifurcated and unconsciously biased I, like our whole society, still was around issues of gender.

One day, after we'd left Seeds of Change and my father had suddenly died, I went into a favorite video shop seeking a film to rent, hoping for solace, or to fill some of the void I was feeling. Carmen Blue, the woman who ran the store, said, "I've got a film for you. I feel it's so important for everyone to see that I lend it out to people for free." She handed me *The Burning Times*, which is an hour-long documentary now viewable for free online. The film changed the course of my life.

When I learned about the period in European history between the 14th and 17th centuries — a time many refer to as *The Burning Times* — my mind and heart's eyes were opened to a root cause of centuries of pervasive gender patterns and biases. I marveled that this immense event in human history wasn't being taught to every child in school.

I discovered that seven generations of children across Europe saw many of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters tortured and burned for the supposed crime of being witches. Men, too, lost loved ones — wives, daughters, local healers. To save their families and themselves, women were often turned against each other.

The culture also sustained deep institutional losses that further cemented structural biases. Traditional systems of healing, spiritual practice, communal land use and economic relationships were upended, as power was systematically transferred from the collective purview of women in these domains to the primary control, authority and leadership of men. What some have called “The Hidden Holocaust of Women” lives on in my cellular memory, and I believe still insidiously permeates our society, institutions and collective psyche.

It was also the first time an irrational fear I’d always had of speaking my truth in public made sense to me. At this point, all of the issues I’d become passionate about through Bioneers began to come into focus *within a single lens*: the imbalance of “masculine” values and a patriarchal relationship to competition, hierarchy and power over “feminine” values: cooperation, shared authority, and the equity of women. I saw this as evident both externally, in the disproportionate allotment of leadership roles to men in nearly all spheres of life, and internally, as an archetypal inner imbalance that affects the design and functioning of every individual, institution and sector.

I began a deep inquiry about the role of gender in my own life and realized that I carried stories within me that were self-limiting. I observed how long I’d held myself back due to unexplored fears and unconsciously adopted stories. For example, once I was asked to write the story of my relationship to Bioneers, the organization that I co-midwifed and co-shepherded into being. I wrote that my role consisted of supporting my husband’s vision, and then I wondered, “Ugh, is that the whole truth?” What I found was that other people around me, including my husband, didn’t see this story as true at all. They perceived its evolution as co-created, and they frequently valued my contributions more than I valued my own.

Along with many other self-limiting beliefs that I had unconsciously absorbed, I recognized that I was relying upon these stories to make myself small. And the gift in that, of course, was realizing that if I had let those stories shape my thoughts or constrain my dreams, I could, now that they were exposed to the light, let them go, or at least re-craft them. Much of my work on myself since then has been to do that. As I shared my own discoveries with other women around me, I saw everyone nodding their heads. Then I realized, “This isn’t just me; this is a rather pervasive pattern held by many women, a pattern that must be illuminated so it can transform.”

As I investigated my inner landscape, I realized that I had lived much of my outer life through my more “masculine” qualities — showing up as competent, self-assured, intelligent, decisive, linear and rational, while my more “feminine” aspects — my intuition, relational intelligence, embodied awareness, empathy, flexibility and a tendency toward a chaotic process of creativity — I tended to keep hidden and rarely revealed in a public context. Of course, I knew that we all have feminine and masculine aspects within us, but when I saw this imbalance within myself, I wanted to claim more of my human wholeness. I began to practice valuing my more “feminine” aspects, exploring how I might express them more fully in my work, relationships and everyday life.

At the 2001 Bioneers conference, a remarkable activist named Diane Wilson closed her speech by adopting a quote from George Bernard Shaw. She said, “A reasonable woman adapts to the world, and an unreasonable woman makes the world adapt to her. So, I encourage all of you women out there to be unreasonable.” After the conference, she called Kenny and me at home and told

us how so many women had thanked her, tearfully, for what she'd said, and that she'd had a vision that there would be a movement of unreasonable women.

With Kenny's encouragement, I decided that I would help seed this vision by bringing together a diverse group of women leaders to explore what such a movement might look like. I expanded the title of the gathering — as I knew that resistance wasn't enough, and we had to be *for* something — to “UnReasonable Women for the Earth.” I invited 34 women ranging in age from 23 to 70 years old, from across many disciplines, social classes, gender orientations and ethnicities. They worked in domains as varied as environmental health, law, poetry, social organizing, performance art, writing, seed diversity, urban farming, spiritual teaching and science.

When we first arrived at the meeting, each spoke about her own feelings of isolation, and we recognized that we each had a need for a community of peers. By the end of the four days, a solidarity developed among us — a pledge to stand at each other's backs — that nourished us in unexpected ways.

One thing that grew out of that gathering was the emergence of CODEPINK: Women for Peace. Jodie Evans, Medea Benjamin and Diane Wilson, inspired by the visions at the retreat, and prompted by the urgency of that time and their resistance to the U.S. invasion and war in Iraq, founded CODEPINK several months later.

We had been programming diverse women's voices in leadership at the Bioneers Conference for several years, and had also explored the theme of what I called “Restoring the Feminine.” Our radio series had also been featuring shows each year that explored and helped promote multicultural women's voices, visions and perspectives, but I wanted to go deeper.

I wanted to explore how women can come together and strengthen each other. We had experienced conventional forms of leadership, based upon hierarchy and competition rather than relationship, and power rather than respect, for 6,000 years. It had left our world in dire shape. The time had come to model the respectful, relational connectivity that we know as a true pattern of life and stand up for that option to emerge among women leading change. And so in 2006 I reached out first to Toby Herzlich and then Akaya Windwood, a couple of very skillful facilitators of group transformative processes, and together we three co-created a six-day, deep-dive immersion training into leading from the feminine, which was incubated and housed as a program within Bioneers. We named it “Cultivating Women’s Leadership” (CWL).

During these 6-day residential trainings we prioritized probing what leadership meant to women. We focused on exploring how it differed from conventional male models and investigated how we might more wholeheartedly claim leadership and aspire to it. Through experiential learning, we encouraged the women who were participating to identify and overcome internalized limitations and to face and acknowledge the shadow side of women’s leadership. We developed exercises to help clarify each woman’s purpose in life, and to learn how powerfully women in intentional alignment can strengthen each other’s capacity. Toby and I, as the primary cofounders, have produced CWL trainings each year since 2006. Each cohort of twenty women was carefully selected (through an application process) for their leadership vision and capacity, and we also sought to optimize diversity in all its forms among each group.

This group process included many aspects; it was intentionally highly multi-dimensional, but for me, a highlight has been that

it's revealed how we as women have the capacity to rapidly and exponentially enhance each other's skillfulness and to stand at each other's backs. Once the women hear and see each other's visions and gifts and power, they become committed to supporting each other. Everyone who comes has an opportunity to do her own deep inquiry and to explore fundamental questions: What is calling me? How can I refine my sense of assignment or purpose? One of our core premises is that each of us has a very distinct, unique purpose/reason for being alive on Earth at this momentous time.

In recent years, co-facilitating while continually improving the program with cofounder Toby Herzlich, and the remarkably gifted Rachel Bagby and Elsa Menendez, we've been adding skill-building around freeing women's voices, awakening body awareness and sense of play, and dealing with relational ruptures that occur around power and privilege.

We discovered that in order to feel comfortable enough to fully express themselves, members of any minority group need to have at least 30 percent representation, so we established that minimum for women of color in our trainings, and now often attract 35–50 percent. About five hundred women leaders, across a huge span of ages, disciplines, races, backgrounds and orientations, from the U.S. and around the world, have now been through CWL. A vast majority of them report that they were profoundly changed by the experience.

As my understanding grew, I sought to identify patterns among the leaders I'd most admired throughout my years with Bioneers. In 2010, Anneke Campbell and I edited an anthology called *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart*. We collected the stories by reading scores of transcripts, and in spite of the publisher's protests, we realized that we wanted to include the stories of some men who also

embodied relationship intelligence and leading from the heart. I think of the book as an homage to my mentors, as everyone profiled in the book has inspired me deeply with the way they've modeled innovative and effective forms of leadership. The book is being used in colleges as part of the curriculum for Women's Studies, Leadership & Social Change, and Multiculturalism classes, in addition to, of course, being read by individuals and shared in book clubs and other organizations.

Seeing the need for some larger organizing principle to build power among diverse factions of women's movements, in 2014 I began convening diverse women leaders of networks and organizations to explore their interest and availability in creating such a connective tissue. These gatherings were called "Co-Madres," borrowing from the Chicana term for women who've pledged to have each other's backs, for life. Although they have been relatively small and intimate, they have been effective at seeding key relationships. Through that work, and CWL and Bioneers, I've formed some deep friendships with women from many different cultures. The more I got to know and heard people of all colors and classes speak, the more I understood the degree to which our culture operates in a hierarchical paradigm that tends to devalue people of color, people of lower income, and ultimately women as well.

I guess I must have been naïve, but what I learned about our racialized culture and the ways it impacts people I love shocked me and woke me up. Experiencing it personally through friends I'd come to know helped me to understand that if I had felt limited, oppressed or constrained because of my gender identity as a woman, it was minimal compared to the experiences of the indigenous women and women of color I was coming to know. They typically had many of the internalized oppression and self-limiting beliefs that come with gender in our culture, but they also had had to face the intense

constraints a racist social order and colonization places on people of color, a double whammy.

I began to learn more directly about the physical impacts of living in those African American, Indigenous and Latino communities that suffer the worst toxic health threats and the toxic psychic and psychological impacts of current and intergenerational trauma. This began to radicalize me, and awakened within me a far more visceral understanding of the depth of the injustices racism has wrought.

What shocked me most was coming to see my own prior ignorance, denial and complicity. Over time I began to challenge myself to compare the experiences all women have had of gender bias with that of racial bias. I have to admit that exploring these charged topics has been unsettling and has stirred up a lot of deep fears I'd not previously known I carried within me.

As painful as it is, facing these fears is something we all have to do in order to realize the dream of building sustainable multicultural and cross-class alliances. I've tried to continue learning from women of color, and as they shared their stories, I began to feel in my gut the insidious, pervasive costs of white privilege we all ultimately pay for, and how those deep wounds are compounded by how we are all programmed around gender. I'm still working to shed my own blinders, ignorance, guilt and shame, something I'll have to continue to do for the rest of my days, but I'm slowly learning, and I'm now able to recover sooner when I make mistakes or find I've made false assumptions.

I am also finding it helpful to explore my own Jewish heritage, to relate to my own lineage with dignity and respect and gratitude for what it can offer me. In this way, I can bring my own culture with me into relationship, and not just behave as if I don't have roots, though, of

course, Jewish culture has been uprooted repeatedly throughout its long history as well. Perhaps we are a people who've learned over thousands of years of displacement how to carry culture on our backs, like turtles carry their shells.

If you had told me ten years before that my interest in the arts, healing and leadership would lead to this, I would have been shocked. It was never in my game plan or vision for myself but following the path of what I most cared about led me there, organically, and I am deeply thankful for it. My life continues to be an unpredictable and winding road, and I'm finally making peace with that aspect of my true nature.

A theme that has come up frequently at Bioneers over the decades is that in nature the systems with the greatest biodiversity are the ones that are most resilient and most capable of rebounding after trauma. Our human systems are exactly the same. Therefore, well beyond tolerating diversity and valuing it, I am committed to a future where we celebrate and recognize how essential our human diversity is toward regenerating our relationship with ourselves, each other and the Earth. We've inherited deep relational imbalances in those three fundamental relationships. They are interdependent and interrelated, and all need to be healed for the system to be transformed.

The issue of climate justice has also emerged as a central focus for me. I have found that the movement emerging to address it encompasses so many of the things I have cared most deeply about in my life: art, healing, biodiversity, environmental justice, indigenous wisdom, women's leadership and racial justice. My heart is now calling me to find new ways to engage with some aspects of that movement's framing and organizing, and supporting frontline leaders in the struggle, especially the Indigenous ones, in defense of our mother Earth.

Through this twenty-year, multifaceted engagement with women's leadership and the feminine, I have come to see how these fractal, yet mutually dependent issues are essential to us all — individually and collectively — in order to unearth, explore and reframe our narratives as we navigate this immense systemic transition we face. If we're humble, persevering and honoring of the wisdom that's all around us, respecting the true value of the feminine to bring new life, and guided by our hearts, intuitions, dreams, ancestors and bodies, as well as our minds, we may just find our way through.

HEALING AT THE INTERSECTIONS

Environment and Social Justice Conjoin at Bioneers

Nina Simons' acceptance speech for the 2017 Goi Peace Award. Based in Tokyo, the Goi Peace Foundation established this annual award in 2000 to recognize individuals and organizations that have contributed to creating a peaceful and harmonious world as well as building a better future.

First, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to the Goi Peace Foundation, for honoring Kenny and me, and Bioneers, with this award. We accept this honor with humility, and on behalf of the large and extended community of those visionaries Kenny Ausubel — my partner, husband and co-founder — back in 1990, coined a term to describe: “Bioneers.”

What we mean now by Bioneers is: scientific, political and social innovators, activists, cultural bridge-builders and leaders from many walks of life and fields of endeavor who are collaboratively contributing to the great global ecological and socio-cultural transformation now underway. It is an enormous validation that you here at the Goi Foundation, who have done so much to promote world peace, and are based halfway around the planet from the U.S., have heard of Bioneers and perceive value in our work. Thank you.

In accepting this honor, I wish to offer some reflections about what I think makes Bioneers a unique enterprise. On the physical plane, it's a relatively small nonprofit organization, but one that has developed into a key nexus for many diverse but intersecting social movements. It provides a forum annually that highlights some of the most inspiring and practical solutions to humanity's most pressing crises. We sometimes call it a "network of networks." In fact, it's a dynamic, ever-evolving living system whose goal is to help co-create, midwife and nurture a new world, the birth of a new civilization, one that's far more peaceful, equitable, healthy and resilient — goals that we, of course, share with you here.

We work toward a future that goes beyond the idea of sustainability as a goal. Merely sustaining ecosystems and communities — while much better than destroying them, as we currently so often do — we find to be too timid as an ultimate goal. We aim for not just a sustainable human footprint, but one that is regenerative for all of life. We seek the restoration of health and vitality to natural systems and to human communities by combining the best of ancient wisdom with the leading edge of contemporary "whole-systems" approaches.

At the heart of this notion is the idea that we humans need to be humble, to become students of nature's extraordinarily sophisticated design genius. We have to reorient our learning by observing how nature operates, and reinvent our civilizations by cooperating with her rather than by seeking to dominate her. This requires us to remember that there is wisdom all around us, including from our old-growth cultures, the indigenous peoples of Earth. We see this collaborative vision as helping to strengthen life's capacity for healing and renewal through a respectful and loving partnership with life's mysterious, ancient and complex nature.

One of the foundations of our worldview is that, just as in the natural world in which the most diverse ecosystems are the most resilient and vital, the human enterprise also thrives best when it is characterized by high degrees of diversity. In our work, therefore, we have always sought to highlight a broad array of innovative approaches to solving problems, presented from diverse perspectives, disciplines, generations and cultures, including a very strong emphasis on honoring the wisdom of Indigenous “First Peoples” and of long-lived traditional ecological wisdom.

At a conference in 1994, the physicist, ecologist and activist Vandana Shiva from India offered some crucial distinctions between a “bioneer” and a pioneer. She warned that rapid scientific innovations intended to improve upon biology posed tremendous risks. Highly aggressive biologists and corporations seeking to profit from poorly conceived genetic manipulation look very much like the European pioneers, who thought that every land they conquered was an empty land. They believed that land had no people, or no people that they respected as full human beings, so they saw no need to respect any pre-existing rights.

Those we have called bioneers, on the other hand, recognize that every step we take is on a full Earth populated by a tremendous variety of species and many other people. The pioneer “empty land” ethic, Shiva noted, “leads to violence against species and to genocide. The colonizing pioneer’s mind assumes there are no limits to be respected, no ecological limits, no ethical limits, no limits to greed or accumulation, no limits to inequality. No limits to the violence to be unleashed on other species and people.” And no limits to seeking to reshape molecules in complex living systems that we don’t understand.

“Whereas authentic bioneers,” she said, “know that limits are the first law of nature, encoded in the ecological processes that make life possible. Limits of the nutrient cycle in soil, limits of the water cycle. The limits set by the intrinsic right of diverse species to exist set limits on our actions, if we genuinely respect other beings. Ethical limits are what make us human. To be sustainable, a society must live within those limits.”

Shiva spoke of a Hindi term, *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*, that means “We are one-earth family,” or the “democracy of life.” She explained that “to bioneers, it means not just diverse human cultures, but all beings. The mountains and the rivers are beings too. We bioneers respect all the beings, large and small, without a hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, because everything has a part to play ecologically in the web of life, even if we do not fully understand how.”

And being a bioneer also means recognizing that, just as the web of life is interconnected and interdependent, so too are all the issues we face.

Over time, the large annual conference we have produced for the past 28 years expanded to present a wider spectrum of interrelated issues and solutions. It became increasingly clear to me that there could no longer be any perceived separation between people and the “environment.” We are a part of nature, not apart from it. We are not separate from the environment or from nature. Our bodies are made of the same materials, the same DNA as plants, fungi and animals. We are all connected, both biologically and spiritually. Since the Earth is a closed loop, the cup of tea you drink today may have once been Cleopatra’s bathwater.

What we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves. When we harm ourselves and other people, we wound the Earth. Therefore, being a

bioneer *must* include pursuing social justice and equity for all humans as well as protecting ecosystems.

For the first ten years or so, I used the term “bioneer” to describe the people on stage, the presenters we invited to speak, leading figures who offered brilliant new approaches and practical models of ecological or social restoration. I was unconscious of my own internalized hierarchy, but all that changed when the late J.L. Chestnut spoke in 2001. He was a renowned attorney and legendary Civil Rights activist since the brutal struggles in the U.S. South of the 1950s, and he expanded my definition of a bioneer into something larger.

He was telling the story of winning the largest class action lawsuit in the history of America — against the U.S. Government for institutional racism against Black farmers in the southeastern U.S. It was a powerful talk, and he did something I’d never heard before. He began to use the word *bioneer* to address everyone in the room.

He noted that the progress that’s being made, slowly but surely, to bring our country toward racial and social justice and true democracy was due in part to the efforts of “You bioneers, dedicated progressive people like you.” He went on to say, “I raise these concerns to you because fighting on behalf of women, on behalf of minority people of color, fighting on behalf of the environment and the planet are all one big battle. We bioneers know that violence, greed, racism, unchecked materialism, and abuse of this planet and the nature in and on it is its own form of terrorism, and will eventually destroy us if we don’t first put an end to it.”

It was a revelatory moment for me. Suddenly, that word didn’t just describe the visionary innovators on stage, but applied to us all. Not only the speakers, but every man, woman and child present, or

hearing Bioneers podcasts or radio, or seeing our videos, or anyone working toward healing our relationship with Earth in thousands of different ways.

We each had a role to play. We were all *bioneers*, if we chose to be. All our contributions, all our collective creativity and imagination were needed to help reinvent this world.

As J.L. Chestnut said, the way our cultures have treated women, people of color, Indigenous people, immigrants and the Earth are all just different octaves of the same legacy. We all, regardless of our differences, bear the scars of a culture that's founded on conquest, exploitation and oppression. This tendency we have shown over time, to invest in the false myths of superiority or separation, seems to be at the root of our common challenges. With patterns so entrenched, so pervasive and so overwhelming, how can we shift our course?

I began to see that we're all, in varying ways, responding to often unconscious influences and implicit biases from a legacy of disrespect and violence that manifests on all levels of society — from the personal, emotional and physical, to the economic, political and environmental.

Thankfully, we also know the power of community and connection, and we are gifted with a capacity for self-reflection and choice. Each time we opt to relate caringly, choosing to meet others on common ground instead of reinforcing separation with those whose views may differ, we begin to help heal and restore our social landscape. Each time we renew ourselves in nature, sensing with our full bodies, hearts and intuitions the repair and guidance she so abundantly offers, we help the healing happen.

During the years since, Bioneers has evolved greatly, prompted in part by this understanding.

We've sought to design for a whole-systems approach to how people learn. Since people process information in different ways — integrating audio, visual and kinesthetic information with varying priorities — we've designed sessions that speak to those multiple ways of perceiving. Appreciating that diversity includes speaking to introverts and extroverts, creative and analytical thinkers, people of all ages and ethnicities and disciplines and also of all classes, orientations and abilities, we strive to be as inclusive and accessible as possible. We hope to meet people where they are, and reach peoples' hearts through their rational minds and sensing bodies, as well as their intuition and values.

We are also committed to not shying away from the difficult conversations, the challenging, complex issues, in order to deepen our own understanding and learning.

We hope to educate, inspire and ignite engaged action, while identifying and illuminating the most promising solutions and strategies. By juxtaposing seemingly disparate issues and mingling them with arts and ceremony, we help reveal how all issues are part of one dynamic, interrelated living system, which embeds us within the context of the living world.

We all need each other to make the large-scale changes we face. Relationships of authentic cooperation, collaboration and community will become absolutely critical in the years ahead, because we are facing immense challenges. Bridging our differences respectfully will determine whether or not we succeed at shifting human civilization from our current ecocidal trajectory.

In the past several years, I have realized that for me to be able to help create effective change "*out there*" in the world, I have to also work on seeing — and then changing — myself. There have been many ways in which I have internalized the unresolved wounds, blind spots

and biases of our U.S. culture, from gender bias to racial injustice. I am trying hard to reconcile them, to make peace within myself.

As I've searched for insights to help me in this quest, I've come to feel that, while racial divides still roil and rupture our societies — and I can't imagine experiencing the discrimination and micro-aggressions so many minority people experience each day — the biases that privilege the masculine over the feminine create at least as great an unconscious barrier to equity and peace among people as faith, race or cultural differences. In recent years, studies have shown gender to be the bias most deeply embedded in the human psyche globally.

Like most women, I've experienced thousands of moments of feeling diminished, threatened or intimidated because of my gender. Inwardly, I also see ways I've unconsciously acquired some learned beliefs about women and limited my own options and pathways as a result.

But I realize that gender and race are only two of the many ways we diminish each other and ourselves. Nearly all of us have experienced feeling slighted or disrespected somewhere, whether for our ethnicity, age, size, sexual preference, ability, class or appearance. While I am inspired to see that much progress has occurred in some of these areas, we have far more work to do to heal the wounds that separate us.

I believe that investing in the leadership of women — and restoring the “feminine” to a place of equilibrium with the “masculine” throughout all of our lived experience as individuals, as well as in our institutions and culture — are essential to the global transformation that we, as a species, are being called to make, in order to shift our course to a life-affirming future on Earth.

Around the globe, we see clearly that wherever the rights, opportunities and safety of women improve, benefits result for all areas

of society. As women's leadership and gender equity increase, so too do economic prosperity, public health, education, peace and the security of nations. As women's education and reproductive rights improve globally, they will also have significant effects in curbing population growth, drawing down carbon and slowing climate change.

Since we've inherited some skewed stereotypes about what the masculine and feminine really mean, I suggest we seek to identify and reclaim healthy identities that can include and embrace a full array of our human capacities, regardless of what our physical gender identity might be.

We need the full generative capacity of the active principle, informed by the best listening and guidance of the receptive within us all, to succeed together at collectively midwifing a peaceful, regenerative and just world, to be born out of this turbulence.

Since we all contain masculine and feminine within us, this is ultimately about restoring our human wholeness. About practicing listening and not-knowing, more often than asserting that we know the answers. About evolving from power over to power with and power to co-create change. It's about trusting that leadership is often better shared, and that win-win solutions frequently exist, if we seek them out patiently, practicing mutual respect, patience and trust.

As Indigenous peoples of the Amazon say, "the bird of humanity has been trying to fly for far too long with only one wing."

May we have the humility to listen for guidance from the land, from our ancestors, and from our bodies and hearts, as well as our minds, dreams and intuition. May we have the wisdom to hear it, and act upon it, even if it comes from the least expected or most surprising places.

May we find the collective vision, courage and will to decolonize our minds and hearts, reclaiming a balance of feminine & masculine, of receptive and active, of yin and yang in equal measure that flow through us each and all.

May our partnership with the land, our mother Earth, Gaia, and the sweet and salty waters that flow in her veins, the winds and clouds that caress and bathe her, and the fires that cleanse and restore her vitality, and our kinship with all the creatures large and small who share this sacred home become our devotional, long-term relationship practice.

May this lead us collectively toward a world that's re-infused with a sense of the sacred, where the future children of all species live and flourish in peace, and where restorative justice, health and regeneration thrive.

Awomen. Amen. May it be so. Thank you.

ESCAPING THE TILTED ROOM

Has anyone among us not felt powerless, experienced being the dissenting or minority voice, or felt unfairly judged, devalued or dismissed for being different?

We have all experienced a culture that elevates some while denigrating others. As a young woman right out of college, for some years I believed the feminist movement had accomplished its goals, and that I was stepping onto a level playing field. That same naiveté, mixed with idealism and some cultural blindness, also had me imagining that the Civil Rights Movement had largely ended racial bias and injustice in this country.

It wasn't until much later — after years of being the only woman in business settings, of negotiating biased gender dynamics personally, professionally and politically, that I began to realize how much gender roles and related power dynamics were impacting my experience — and how painful and damaging those impacts were.

It wasn't until several years after that, when I began peeling back the layers of my own defensiveness and denial, that I began to learn how racialized our society still is, and to discover my own personal and cultural complicity in it. Gender and race are only two of the ways we rank and compete with each other — benefiting some, and harming others. In this society, we also create hierarchies based on age, sexual orientation, body shape, class, education and abilities, to name just a few.

As I work to integrate and distill what I've been learning, an especially useful metaphor for me is the "Tilted Room." I found it in Melissa Harris-Perry's book *Sister Citizen*, about the stereotypes that Black women in America encounter as they work to establish a unique identity, and achieve agency and recognition. She describes a cognitive psychology experiment in which people were placed in a crooked chair within a crooked room, and asked to align themselves vertically. Researchers were surprised that — even in a room tilted as much as 35° — some people reported that they were perfectly straight, simply because they were in alignment with their surroundings. Only a few managed to find uprightness.

As Harris-Perry notes, "It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room." We're all products of a culture that's filled with tilted rooms, spaces designed to get us to relate in ways that defy the natural instincts of our bodies, hearts and souls. Though the room may be tipped according to differing sets of biases, it's rarely level. Some benefit from a headwind, while many face persistent and systematized obstacles.

Our dysfunctional families, educational institutions, media, cities, food and health care, economic and political systems create and reinforce striated structures of race, class, gender and other "isms" that keep us apart. Since these biases aren't conducive to symbiosis, and we all contain both victim and perpetrator within us, we become stuck in win/lose, dualistic and polarizing dynamics. The systems that tilted rooms represent, and those biased perceptions and the policies and social structures they inform, keep us divided — preventing collaboration, coalition and movement-building.

And, though it may seem otherwise, they damage the ones who benefit from the tilt as much as those who are disadvantaged by it. They hurt us all.

At a Cultivating Women's Leadership intensive, the women of color requested a time to caucus, where they could visit together apart from the white women. (I'll never forget this, as the sensory image is forever imprinted in my memory.) Across the lawn, the women of color and Indigenous women gathered on a porch. Like birds with showy plumage, they were a feast of vibrant color. With long dresses, scarves, painted toenails and hair done in ribbons, their visual expression was glorious and brilliant. Sound-wise too, they were expressive, as gales of laughter, a musicality in their voices and an occasional shout carried across the space between us.

Among the white women's group, everyone was wearing white and khaki. Their faces were glum, and their expressions sad, guilty and depressed. They couldn't understand why such a division might be needed, and why it had been initiated. As they hesitantly voiced their chagrin at feeling the separation, I noted how much the dimming of our light, the quieting of our voices, as white women, might be a cost of our unearned privilege.

How do we escape the tilted room? It is no small feat. It requires practice to disengage from those prevalent, insidious beliefs within us that help keep it in place. It requires a willingness to learn, humility about what we don't see or know, and a choice to shift our perception and understanding.

It asks that we reorient ourselves toward reaching across these divisions of gender, race and class — *and be willing to risk and to fail, for the sake of learning*. It means strengthening that intrinsic relational intelligence that comes from our body's wisdom, our heart's guidance and our moral compass.

Being white, or male, or heterosexual, or middle class, or highly educated, or rich or successful makes it particularly difficult to

recognize that a tilt exists. But if you're on the losing end of the tilt, it's hard to ever forget, or not feel, the injustice of it, every hour of the day. One friend, a leader of mixed ethnicity, told me she felt as if she is continually climbing uphill on her knees, with broken glass strewn across her path — while white folks have running shoes, a clear walkway, and the wind at their backs.

Hearing the truth of others' realities, and sensing how painful they've been, I have realized that I previously grappled with injustice principally through my rational analysis and intellect — and from a distance that my privilege afforded me. Now, trying to listen at the deepest level, while loving and respecting the beauty, dignity and power I see in others' lived truths, has wrought a deeper change in me.

To overcome the tilted room, to heal ourselves from the habit of ranking, will require amplifying our listening to our hearts, intuitions and bodies. Our minds as primary navigator tend to perpetuate patterns, and are treacherously good at inventing stories to rationalize behavior that seems 'normal,' because it's habituated. It's only by strengthening those ways of knowing and choosing to keep our hearts open, receptive to others' pain, and feeling, that we can shift these insidious patterns and break free of the chronic tilt.

Many women across the nation and the world experienced it on the historic day of the January 2017 Women's March. It was transformative to see the kindness, creativity and care that were exhibited that day, as well as to sense the joy of feeling aligned with others who are different, focusing on connection and commonality of purpose. No one was arrested. All were respectful. It gave us all a palpable sense of what's possible, together.

It also revealed the shadow side of women's leadership. During the weeks and months that followed, I read on social media rants by sub-groups who felt they'd been snubbed, disrespectfully treated and were angered at the ignorance of many of the newcomers there. Generations of wounding revealed deep rifts among diverse women, where little empathy or understanding has been encouraged or taught. Frustration emerged from women of color, demanding rightfully that white women take responsibility for educating themselves. White women's feelings were hurt, and some of them turned away. Of course, the media featured and exaggerated these rifts.

As I practice getting better at appreciating these gifts (of feeling, intuition and embodied awareness), I recognize and encourage them more, both in myself and others. This is helping to free me from tilted rooms, strengthening my resolve, and increasing my toolkit toward co-creating the beloved community which is my heart's deepest yearning.

Thankfully, we can cultivate relationship intelligence by choosing it.

One specific practice that I've discovered is that my body's reactions — when I think someone might have said something racially or otherwise offensive to another — are far more reliable than my mind. As my mother taught me, my body never lies. If I pay close attention, I notice that my stomach lurches when I hear something that could be perceived as harmful, though it likely was not intended to be. If I am paying adequate attention to notice this in myself, then I can say, *"My stomach just let me know that what you just said might have been hurtful or felt off to another in the room. Is that true?"* In that way, I can take responsibility for stopping the conversation, creating a pause so that if a harm was felt, it can be unpacked and learned from. By responding to my body's signals, I don't need to accuse anyone, or presuppose intent, but can simply notice a disturbance in the field.

Another story: I became friends with a young woman of mixed Lakota descent who participated in another CWL intensive. She was a young mother, a businesswoman, community organizer and a cancer survivor who had created innovative opportunities to help women from her nation to come together for healing. I was deeply impressed by her courage and creativity, found her wise well beyond her years, and admired her greatly.

Months after the retreat, I learned she was going through a difficult time, though I knew nothing of the details. I called her to offer my support and express my concern on her behalf. She told me that she'd recently learned that her two nieces — aged 8 and 12 — had been raped. Sobbing uncontrollably, she told me their names, and about what loving, innocent and tender young girls they'd been. She explained that the perpetrator lived within their family house, and that there were no counseling resources available to them. The girls were not willing to report the abuse, or leave their home. I listened to her express her pain, frustration and grief for over an hour. When I hung up the phone, I felt shattered.

I had known about rates of rape and sexual abuse of women in Indian Country, but I had known about them from afar. I had read articles and seen news reports on the systemic challenges of jurisdiction on reservations, on the increased incidence of rape and sex trafficking in oil and gas drilling camps and on reservation lands, and had felt an affronted indignation at the failures of our systems to protect Indigenous women and girls. Hearing this beloved friend wail her grief and frustration with the names and descriptions of her young kin brought the truth of that epidemic home to my heart, in a way I had not known before.

TRAUMA, RUPTURE AND REPAIR

One of the things that unites us deeply, as people, is that at some point, to become fully integrated, we all have to actually walk through the flames of the traumas that we and/or our ancestors have experienced. This is part of the shadow work we must address, the unconscious painful stuff we've put aside that must be walked through in order to heal and transcend those wounds, so that they don't continue to recycle in our lives.

Trauma lives in our bodies in insidious ways that are hard to ferret out because we've got so many layers of conditioning and adaptation on top of it, attempting to banish or brush it under the rug of our lived awareness. It often feels to me like peeling back layers of an onion skin in order to get at our core selves.

I am reminded what Canadian author and physician Gabor Maté says about addressing trauma: that it's not really about the event itself that happened, but about how that event stimulated a separation from self that must be addressed.

I hear a deep call to address some of the underlying wounds that we are carrying as individuals, as a society and through diverse cultural lineages today, to be able to move wholeheartedly towards co-creating the future we want and need. Over many years now of working with diverse women, there are some similarities in terms of intergenerational wounding that I believe all women carry as a result of the burning

times. Whether we were the watchers, or the children or the ones who were burned, those ancestral memories are alive in us, as they occurred over the span of seven generations, in countries throughout Europe. Whether our ancestors were from Africa, Europe or Asia or from Native America, I believe we each have our own versions of those stories of oppression, conquest and persecution, and carry them in our bones or genetic memory.

There is certainly a great deal of intergenerational trauma among many of our brothers and sisters who are people of color. As there was also among my Jewish ancestors, who were chased out of every land they ever called home, often violently. In many ways, these United States, with all of our myths of democracy, is built on a core of rot, and I've been increasingly feeling called to stand in solidarity with Indigenous people and all of those who are standing on behalf of the sacredness of life in all its forms, and for justice.

Thanks to the brilliant words and voices of Ta-Nehisi Coates and Michelle Alexander, perceiving the New Jim Crow, and in solidarity with my many beloved friends who share African American descent, I now feel called to stand with Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives. I've had to recognize that the U.S. Capitol and the White House were built by slaves, and to acknowledge the serial efforts at genocide that Indigenous people have suffered as well the appalling history of land theft, forced relocation and broken promises. I've had to accept what Ta-Nehisi Coates calls the "bloody heirloom" of this nation: the intentional and structurally reinforced myth of white supremacy.

Although there are similarities across our cultures, of course all of our stories are very different. But I think we're living at a time where the experience of trauma is widely available and it's important

for us as women who want to bring our best selves to this moment, to be able to look it squarely in the face and see how we can bring ourselves to being effective agents of healing.

Now the question is: How do we begin to repair our relations with the Earth and the dysfunctional social systems that we live with? It's a question of relationship, because we live in a world where so many of our relationships have been ruptured.

My beloved mentor Dawna Markova taught me that "Relationships are a function of rupture and repair." I invite you to consider this premise, whether you're thinking about your family or your loved one or your spouse or your kids. We all have fights and face conflicts; we all have ruptures — that's what happens in relationships in the inevitable process of negotiating between two lived realities. It's whether and how you choose to turn towards repair that confers strength and resilience to our relationships.

I believe we have massive repair work ahead of us, and it needs to begin in the most intimate place first, with our selves. We have to repair our relationship with ourselves, with the Earth, and also with our families, our friends, our neighbors. But as we work on ourselves, in order to stand against the serial assaults we face, we must stand together with those who may not look, act or seem like us. But as the mystics teach through the ages, and traditional cultures have always noted, they are us. As my friend Ilarion Mercurieff, a traditional wisdom keeper from the Unangan people, likes to remind me: in his village, when greeting another, it's customary to say, "Hello, my other self."

This commitment means sitting in discomfort sometimes, not knowing who's right, or whether or how to repair, and not running away. That discomfort has often come up for me in

addressing issues, moments or comments about racial justice issues and white privilege.

I find that staying present while I'm uncertain and uncomfortable is a muscle I can strengthen through practice. It's also helpful in colleague, family or partner relationships. If we are willing to give focus, time and love to practicing this, along with real commitment, we can evolve through a lot of messy growing pains to be able to work together in a new and regenerative way.

An incident that pierced the shell of my privilege occurred during one of the Cultivating Women's Leadership workshops that I co-facilitated with cofounder Toby Herzlich in a rural retreat site in Northern New Mexico. Our time together included a collective dive into the pain of racial wounding. We heard about the Chinese grandmother whose bound feet hurt so much she had to be carried, the great uncle who had been lynched in the South, the Peruvian Indigenous grandmother who had been forced to leave her ancestral lands, the woman of mixed ancestry who had grown up ashamed and targeted because she was the darkest of her siblings. A white woman spoke of her slave-owner lineage, and acknowledged the shame and guilt she feels, alongside of her privilege. We listened to each other's stories deeply, and held each other tenderly. We noted how darkness is widely demonized. We named positive associations for Black and darkness, to reclaim their value.

We collaborated to create and enact an embodied healing ritual. Each of us made a symbolic piece from nature artifacts that spoke to us, often twigs, branches and weeds, and tied messages to it with colored yarn, that captured the hurts and beliefs we sought to shed. With help from the cleansing spirit of fire, a drum to connect our heartbeats, and naming the aspects within ourselves that we sought to release, one by

one we burned the beautiful pieces of ceremonial art we'd made. We basked in the sense of liberation and alliance we felt in witnessing each other's' work.

On the last night, Toby and I were awakened at 3 a.m. One of the women was having an asthma attack, and she had forgotten to bring her inhaler. We rushed to her room, uncertain what to do. We were in a rural setting at high altitude, hours away from a hospital or medical care.

Arriving, I sensed the woman's panic, heard her gasping desperately for breath, trying to fill her lungs. I saw the terror in her eyes. My mind had no previous experience, and was of no help at all, so I dropped into a place where I could receive my body's instructions.

With her permission, I held her head against my chest. I breathed slowly and deeply, hoping she might entrain her breathing with mine. As I stroked her head, I began to rock, my body rocking hers in time with my breath. To help comfort her, I then began humming a wordless tune, like a lullaby.

I had come to love and admire this woman, and to care deeply about her leadership. She was doing environmental justice work, and her asthma was likely a product of environmental injustice. Every particle of my being willed her to live, and I poured my love and desire for her wellness into her, hoping she would relax, yearning for her to recover and be able to breathe. I don't have any illusion that I healed her. But thankfully, after what seemed an endless time, her breathing steadied and slowed.

As she calmed, I laid her head back down on the pillows. I sat beside her, stroking her head and face. When she'd closed her eyes, and was breathing normally, I sank down to the floor beside her bed. Tears were streaming down my cheeks. Wondering about the source

of my sadness, I knew this was about more than relief. I knew that the shell of my separateness had cracked open.

I sensed that the barrier that my privilege had created between my head and heart had been pierced. I felt the pain of this woman's asthma and the profound injustice of her having to live with it acutely. I knew that it was caused due to racial bias, redlining and corporate greed and malfeasance, and my heart ached even as my anger was kindled to change it. In that instant, I also knew my own complicity and accountability for it.

No matter how many years I'd known about the most toxic industries being sited in poor inner-city neighborhoods, and the suffering that results from the toxic inequities, corruption and corporate abuses of our current systems, no matter how long I'd known about the elevated rates of asthma and diabetes, of heart disease and cancer in these communities, I had known them from the distance my privilege afforded me. I had known them as statistics that shocked and saddened me, but I had never before felt the direct impacts of that injustice the way I did so personally that night.

After holding her in my arms, rocking her and breathing with her, summoning every bit of love and will I could muster, I'd felt no difference between us. The mother bear within me had been wholeheartedly engaged, and my desire to stand with her fully, to see her live and thrive had broken my heart wide open.

This experience changed me, as others have continued to do since. They not only widened the scope of what I feel in service to, they deepened my compassion and commitment toward justice. Justice has become personal for me. The author/educator/activist Cornel West suggests, "Justice is what love looks like in public."

These experiences remind me to invest in my heart's experience when hearing another's suffering, and to focus on *feeling* injustice, not just *thinking* about it. And they remind me to encourage others to practice deepening their own capacity for empathy. For cultivating both a thin and a thick skin, at once. For cultivating the muscle to witness and feel the suffering of others and ourselves, while staying present, separate and well-resourced in our capacity to respond to it. Rather than feeling overwhelmed, incapacitated or guilty when confronted with others' suffering, I believe we must develop ways to be both compassionate for it, knowing its seeds live inside of us as well, and aware of our own choices in responding to what we know will only change with our honest and resourced engagement.

Photo by Genevieve Russell



NINA SIMONS, the co-founder of Bioneers, is a social entrepreneur passionate about reinventing leadership, restoring the feminine, and co-creating a healthy world for all. Nina is co-editor of *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart*, and a contributor to *Ecological and Social Healing: Multicultural Women's Voices*. She co-facilitates transformative leadership intensives and retreats on regenerative leadership through relational mindfulness. Nina received a Robert Rodale award in 2003 and was a recipient in 2017 of the Goi Peace Award. For more information on Nina's work, and to learn where she may be speaking or teaching, please visit ninasimons.com.

ANNEKE CAMPBELL has worked as a midwife, nurse, yoga teacher, English professor, poet and scriptwriter. She recently co-authored (with Thomas Linzey) *We The People: Stories from the Community Rights Movement in the U.S.* and co-edited (with Nina Simons) *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart*. She co-produced, with her husband Jeremy Kagan, the dramatic feature film *Shot*, which she also scripted.

ABOUT BIONEERS

As the world hurtles from urgency to emergency, we can move from breakdown to breakthrough. We can shift our course to reimagine how to live on Earth in ways that honor the web of life, each other and future generations.

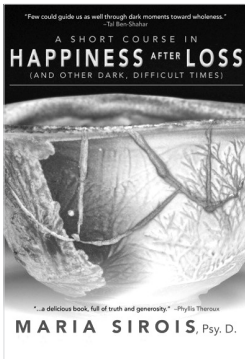
Bioneers highlights and helps realize the profound transformation already taking hold around the globe: the dawn of a human civilization that partners with the wisdom of nature's design, and practices values of justice, diversity, democracy and peaceful co-existence. Around the world in diverse fields of endeavor, social and scientific innovators have been developing and demonstrating far better technological, economic, social, and political models inspired by the wisdom of the natural world. Human creativity focused on problem-solving is eclipsing the mythology of despair.

Since 1990, Bioneers has acted as a seed head for the game-changing social and scientific vision, knowledge and practices advancing this great transformation. As a community of leadership, Bioneers is helping disrupt our current failed institutions by offering people better choices. We show a compelling vision, practical models and "the how," through our annual national conference, award-winning media, local Bioneers conferences and initiatives, and leadership training programs.

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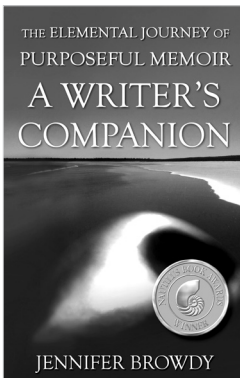
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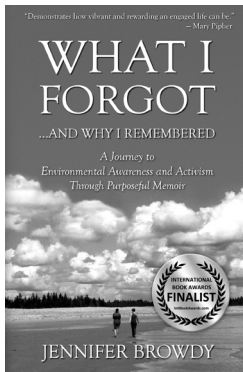
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