

# The Great Simplification

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Nate Hagens (00:00:02):

You're listening to The Great Simplification with Nate Hagens, that's me. On this show we try to explore and simplify what's happening with energy, the economy, the environment, and our society. Together with scientists, experts, and leaders this show is about understanding the bird's eye view of how everything fits together, where we go from here, and what we can do about it as a society and as individuals.

(00:00:33):

This podcast primarily focuses on the scientific synthesis of the global biophysical challenges that we face. This is mostly a mental analytical discussion hosted here, but our biophysical world that we describe is an aggregation of billions of individuals. And now and then it's important to bring back the emotional, physical, and even spiritual in order to balance the conversation and to remember that we humans are more than just our rational selves. Today Nina Simons joins me to remind us of just that. Nina is the co-founder and chief relationship officer at Bioneers and leads its Everywoman's Leadership Program. Nina's career is spanned across the nonprofit, social entrepreneurship, corporate and philanthropic sectors. Her book, *Nature, Culture, and the Sacred: A Woman Listens For Leadership*, won a Gold Nautilus Award. How can we recenter ourselves on the human aspects living through such unstable and challenging times and embody the direction we'd like to see the world move towards? Please welcome my friend, Nina Simons.

(00:02:07):

Hello, Nina. How are you?

Nina Simons (00:02:10):

I'm well, Nate, thank you for having me.

Nate Hagens (00:02:11):

Thank you for taking time to do this in, we're both in cold and snowy weather in New Mexico and Wisconsin.

Nina Simons (00:02:18):

We are, and grateful for every day of it.

Nate Hagens (00:02:23):

Yeah, it's been a strange winter with ups and downs in temperatures and such.

Nina Simons (00:02:30):

Indeed.

Nate Hagens (00:02:31):

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Yeah. So, we have many mutual friends, and I was introduced to you, quite a while ago we've had this scheduled, and here's what I'm thinking. We are coming to what I call the human predicament or the poly crisis with a shared concern for the future of all life. And my work, I don't know how much you know about it, and many of my colleagues have approached this by understanding with some love and empathy, of course, the drivers and the dynamic, kind of an analytical approach. But the community is gradually shifting towards responses moving forward. In reviewing your work at Bioneers and your books, et cetera, I see that you have tried to lead the seekers through an oft neglected door down a much neglected path. One that's crafted by feminine intelligence and power, and if you're willing, I'd like to explore the intersection of these two paths with you today. With that, could you start with an overview of your perspective of the world and the situation and how we're facing these things?

Nina Simons (00:03:52):

Well, I think much as you see it, Nate, I see us at a confluence of crises and a confluence of erroneous systems. We have the deep cultural influences of colonization, of capitalism, of patriarchy, and of racism. And those four together have brought us to a place where we have managed to, we've managed to ignore a lot of warnings for a lot of decades now.

(00:04:42):

And so, I see us at a moment where civilization has to transform and it has to transform in really deep and profound ways that are informed by a fundamental shift in what we value or what our cultural cosmology is. And for me, that involves a rebalancing of inner and outer of what we, of course, what we find most important and meaningful. And it's a profound shift that through our work with Bioneers we've been seeking to highlight and draw attention to for 34 years now. So, but we're in a do or die moment where really the changes have to happen and they have to happen pretty quickly, because to use a sports metaphor, nature bats last and we don't really have an option to delay further.

Nate Hagens (00:05:54):

You mentioned Bioneers, of course, that's the organization that you founded and you co-run. Can you tell us a bit about your work at Bioneers and what you've learned over the three decades since it was founded?

Nina Simons (00:06:07):

Sure. Bioneers was co-founded with my husband and partner, Kenny Ausubel. And at that time in 1990 we were creating something in response to James Hansen first sounding the alarm about climate change.

Nate Hagens (00:06:27):

I didn't know that.

Nina Simons (00:06:28):

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Oh yeah. And at that time we were running a company called Seeds of Change, and Kenny was doing a lot of research about biodiversity and bioremediation. And in the course of doing that he was coming up with some amazing, innovative people that no one had ever heard of. And he was bemoaning this fact to a friend in a hot tub one day. And the friend said, "Why don't you have a conference?" And Kenny said, "Well, I've never been to a conference. It sounds boring. Why would I do that?" And the friend said, "Here's a grant for \$10,000, go have a conference." And Kenny came to me because I had a theater background and I too had never been to a conference. And so together we co-created an event, and I think for the first few years it felt like a homecoming to a lot of people who had been working in their own little cubby holes but had not had community together.

(00:07:33):

And so Bioneers started out as an annual convening, and in the last few years it has really transformed into a media enterprise. We have always recorded our conferences and videotaped them, and we have an award-winning radio series and podcast series. And a lot of our work is, I sometimes abbreviate it by calling it an environmental and social star search. Because we're scanning for all the people who have visionary and practical solutions for how to live on Earth in ways that honor our relationship to ourselves, each other, and the Earth. And we're doing that in a whole system way that includes many disciplines, many perspectives, and has an indigenous worldview really at its heart.

(00:08:31):

And so we started out with this conference, which grew year by year, and he and I produced it for no money in our first eight years. And then finally, just as we were ready to quit, a miracle happened and a donor came along and said, "I want you to make this into an institution." Bioneers has been evolving ever since. And what I couldn't have predicted, Nate, was that I was co-creating the very best school for myself that I could ever have wished for. And I was also fulfilling a childhood dream, which was that when I was younger, what I really wanted to do was what I called transformational theater. Because I knew that when people have an embodied experience of what Buckminster Fuller called the preferred state, it changes us. And so Bioneers is kind of like that. It's a three-day ceremony and much, much more.

Nate Hagens (00:09:40):

I have a lot of questions for you, Nina, and even more now that you gave that introduction. I don't know a lot about your work, but let me ask you this. I went to a lot of conferences last year on the poly crisis, and one of the most common words last year of a sudden that I didn't hear in '21 or '20 or '19 was a word you just used, embodied. Can you unpack that a little bit? What does it mean, what does it mean to you? Why is it important to these conversations?

Nina Simons (00:10:18):

Sure. Well, this goes to a concept that I call full spectrum leadership. And really I am a person who tracks patterns and seeks to make meaning based on those patterns and structures that I learned. And one of the early ones that I learned was to think of human beings as having four different ways of knowing or relating to the world, their body, our hearts, our minds, and our spirit or intuition. And so to

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me that became a sort of compass of, I want to be a fully actualized human in having all four of those capacities awake and aware and interacting with the world.

(00:11:10):

And what I've found is that the body is often the last to come on board and one of the most essential. And as I've reflected over the years about Bioneers, one of the things that I love about it, Nate, is that we bring together people from all walks of life. It's a very pluralistic culture that we are bringing together that is united by a sense of reverence for life. And other than that, there's a huge amount of difference among the people who attend and the people who present. And I think that that embodied experience of that kind of pluralism in a positive, experiential way has a profound influence.

Nate Hagens (00:12:01):

I have a list of prepared questions for you, but I'm already going way off script. Let me ask you this. I mean, I'll just admit, my podcast and me as an individual are heavily centered in the mind quadrants of those four things.

Nina Simons (00:12:19):

Yes.

Nate Hagens (00:12:21):

I mean, of course I'm spiritual and I work out and do exercise with my dogs, and there's a psychology component to it, but facts and figures and analysis is what this is about. Let me ask you this. Is it hard to have a full spectrum leadership where a human being has maybe not equal parts of those four quadrants but is fully ensconced in those four when the cultural narrative is focusing on the Twitter and the evening news and these facts and all these narratives? In other words, do we almost need, instead of more facts and the mind, do we almost need more humans to have this full spectrum capacity in order for the facts to land in a place that changes our values and our consciousness, et cetera? What do you think about that?

Nina Simons (00:13:23):

I think that that's beautifully said, Nate. And I actually would agree that we are a culture that is functionally, emotionally illiterate, that doesn't really know how to relate to our bodies besides muscle strength. And that has a varied experience, of course, of the spiritual and the intuitive and the relationship to the invisible world. And for me, the mind is a great thing and I greatly value my intellect. And I have had the privilege of learning from a lot of native peoples in the last few decades. And a lot of what they say is that one of the most important transitions we can make to address this poly crisis is to lead from our hearts, not our minds, and to let our minds be kind of subservient to our hearts.

(00:14:21):

And so my sense is that it's also, I think a function of a culture that is biased toward the "masculine" and also biased toward white privilege, actually, that leading from the mental and problem solving in that way is a function of those biases. And that the more that I learn about relating deeply to people

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of other cultures, other ethnicities, other ages even. I often find that they are far more literate in the other three centers than many of my white contemporaries. I think there's a great deal to be said for the value of humility and listening in approaching this time, because we are social creatures and we have so much to learn from each other and from the natural world. And I think nature is calling us very loudly to do both right now.

Nate Hagens (00:15:30):

You mentioned women and the feminine. How did you come to focus much of your work on women and the feminine and how can women play a larger role in this poly crisis, this cultural transition away from growth and material consumption as a cultural goal towards something more sustainable?

Nina Simons (00:15:56):

Yeah. Well, I came to exploring gender relatively late in my life. Excuse me, I was guided to watch a film that's available to all listeners online called, *The Burning Times*. And it's a film that was made in the early '90s. It's a bit dated now, but it tells the story of the three to 400 year period in European history where somewhere between 50,000 and several million women and some men and children were systematically tortured and burned and imprisoned for the supposed crime of being witches. And I don't know about you, but I learned a tiny bit about the Salem witch trials when I was in school, but I never learned anything about the burning times. And when I saw this film, I was gobsmacked. I thought, "How can I not have learned about this? This is one of the major events in human history." And what happened for me, Nate, was that for the first time a number of things that I had experienced in my body and in my life made sense to me as an imbalance of the masculine and the feminine as an inheritance from that time.

(00:17:25):

And what happened during the burning times, and there were different iterations of this that happened all over the world, it wasn't just in Europe. It set me on a course to research and learn much more about what had happened in that period. And what I found was that every system of human civilization was transformed during that time. There was a huge transfer of wealth that happened from the women to the men. Before the burning times women had more wealth in Europe. Before the burning times communities functioned around commons, they had a shared relationship to the land. And during the burning times a movement took place that was called *The Enclosure Movement*. And suddenly land became privatized and the systems of healing were changed. At the beginning of the burning times, of course, the women were the healers. They were the midwives and the herbalists and the death doulas.

(00:18:36):

And by the end of the burning times only men were allowed to practice medicine. You had to go to medical school and only men were allowed to be in medical school. And the healers and the midwives and the herbalists were among the first to be persecuted. And so, what I learned through seeing that film was that seven generations of children witnessed their mothers and wives and sisters and aunties get systematically persecuted and often killed. And I believe that the trauma of that period lives on in my bones, and perhaps in the epigenetics of every human alive on earth today. It really shifted my

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worldview seeing that film, and it set me on a course of realizing that I had had a lot of experience in my own life of feeling biased against simply because I was a woman. And sitting at boardrooms where I was the only woman at the table and making a suggestion and having it fall on deaf ears and then having a man next to me say virtually the same thing and hearing it, seeing it be adopted.

(00:20:03):

It was sort of a startling revelation. I had imagined when I got out of college that I was stepping onto a level playing field. And here it was some 20 years later that I discovered, no, not really. And I began to notice how much of my relationship to gender was affecting how I showed up in the world and my own appreciation of my gifts and talents and of my leadership. That was what set me on a course about gender. But it's important to say that for me, my interest in this area is not only about women and girls and gender, but really about the principles of the yin and yang, the principles of the feminine and masculine as they live in each of us and all of us and as they are manifested in the systems in our society.

(00:21:07):

And so that same bias, there are scholars who believe that gender bias is the deepest bias in the human psyche globally. And I've come to believe that that may in fact be true, and it's often hard to see biases when they're so deeply ingrained. It's been a journey for me of cultivating my own leadership in many ways by shedding a lot of the conditioned internalized depression that I had learned and working with other women and discovering how powerfully women, and I suspect all humans have the capacity to grow each other when we're in really intentional partnership and alignment.

Nate Hagens (00:22:02):

How do you see a possible path forward for women or the feminine to take a larger role in this cultural transition ahead? Do you have insights or speculation on that? How might it change?

Nina Simons (00:22:18):

Well, sure. I mean, I think Nate, in truth, it's already changing. There are many examples of women in leadership in nations around the world who are leading in extraordinary ways. There's a marvelous book called, *The Athena Doctrine* that documents a global survey that resulted in 67% of the respondents saying, "The world would be a better place if people led more like women." And I'm currently sitting on an advisory council for a group called *Daughters for Earth* that is all about supporting the work of grassroots women around the world who are actually both experiencing some of the worst effects of climate change, but also doing some of the most effective remediation around climate change. So, in many ways, I think the change is happening, but it needs to happen faster. And there are a lot more resources going to men-led efforts than women-led efforts. And I think that has to change. And I think even within the world of women, women need to be forging alliances with other women who don't look like them.

Nate Hagens (00:23:51):

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20 years ago I wrote a paper, and since I researched this, I've been advocating for having women play a much larger role in what I would call the poly crisis or the sustainability issues. From an evolutionary biology standpoint, men need to invest 15 minutes or less to procreate, and women need to invest a year. When people measure your time preferences, women have shallower discount rates or less impulsivity than men. And what we face now culturally is a long-term thing. Climate change, biodiversity loss, energy depletion, all these things aren't going to happen this weekend, but they're ongoing and longer term. Just biologically, I think women have a larger capacity to think in the longer term, and we are in a short-term focused culture right now.

Nina Simons (00:24:51):

Absolutely. And I think given what you just noted, Nate, women raised children for the most part more so than men, and that's a 20-year process. I have always felt that women actually have a kind of embodied alliance with the Earth in that back when I was menstruating, I would notice that when I was really centered and feeling healthy and grounded, my cycles always coincided with the full moon. And when I was with other women, all of our cycles actually synced up. And we are the Earth, we're not separate from the Earth. And I think women have both an intuitive and an embodied relationship to that, that gives us some sort of deeper knowing. And the other thing is that I really believe we're in a shift from, Fritjof Capra said this beautifully. He said, "In order to shift into an eco literate society, we need to shift from a culture that counts things to one that maps relationship." And women are designed for a relationship, as mothers we're designed for it. It doesn't mean we're all good at it or equally good at it, but I do believe that's the culture we're heading towards if we're going to make it through.

Nate Hagens (00:26:28):

Of course, this is a generalization, but just building on your point, women are designed for relationship. Were men designed for transactions then?

Nina Simons (00:26:38):

Not at all, but women, let me see. I mean, I think, Nate, that we're all in a process of exploring to understand what is a healthy masculine and what is a healthy feminine. And when I speak to full spectrum leadership, it's not only about those four levels of our humanity, it's also about we all have masculine and feminine traits within us. And I want to be living in a way that gives me access to all of my masculine and all of my feminine at any given time, and not to be pigeonholed because of what body I came in as. I don't think that men are designed for transaction, I do think that men carry a certain biological capacity for actually care taking and nurturance. It's a different relational focus perhaps than the feminine focus.

(00:27:44):

But when I reflect back about ancient cultures, and one of my favorite models is actually the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Six Nations in Upstate New York, and their model for democracy is that the men and women are treated as full equals. And they tell stories that when the founding fathers came to them to borrow from their Confederacy for the creation of the U.S. Constitution, part of what the Iroquois said to them was, "Where are your women? How can you do this without your women? And

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besides that, this slavery thing, it's going to be a problem for you and you're going to have to deal with it sooner or later." And so in their system the women actually choose the leader of the tribe, and they choose him by observing the little boys to see who has the leadership qualities most needed for that role. And they have the power to rescind that authority from the leader if ever they feel that he's not serving the common good. So, the women of the longhouse have a lot of power there. It's just a different kind of power than the men have.

Nate Hagens (00:29:09):

I sometimes think that our hierarchy and the kind of male dominated structures are a product of energy surplus that started 10,000 years ago. Because as our ancestral past, we didn't have possessions and we shared tasks within the tribe, and there was status, but the status wasn't based on resources and power. And now we are at the tail end of a long period of massive energy surplus, which has led to economic surplus. And so I think the male, or as you would say the masculine traits have had a more fertile ground in this up slope. And I think it's an open question, what's going to happen next? What do you think?

(00:30:04):

I mean, I don't know how much you know about my work, but I believe we're headed for a great simplification, tougher economic times, because the carbon pulse we're midway through it, and now we're going to have less energy over time, and we're going to have to replace our financial capital with social natural built human capital. If we are headed either gradually or suddenly for post-growth economies, in a world where the total economic pie is going to be smaller, how do you see gender, equality, and social issues developing?

Nina Simons (00:30:45):

Well, my sense is, I mean, of course, I don't know. And my sense is, Nate, that we are going to need to rely more and more on the wisdom of women and people of color who actually together carry a lot of the learned information over time about how to live in community, how to connect across difference, and how to give and take from and with each other in ways that are reciprocal and respectful and reverent. I mean, in many ways we sometimes joke that Bioneers is going to be the stories that people tell sitting around campfires down the road about the civilization we could co-create. To me it's largely a question of, how bad does it have to get before the systems start to really respond in a major way?

Nate Hagens (00:31:57):

You envision women as being post-growth diplomats or facilitators that are the glue that holds community together in a time of tumult?

Nina Simons (00:32:09):

I do. Well, and not just women, I would really say women and people of color. Because I think there are many other ethnicities that actually hold keys to communal life and to valuing relationship in a reverential way and reciprocal way. And I think that's all going to be really needed. And there's already evidence of it throughout the world right now.

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Nate Hagens (00:32:37):

I was just going to say, there's a lot of places in the world that have a lot of people of color that are already living post-growth lives.

Nina Simons (00:32:45):

Exactly, yes, there are. And there are a lot of places where women are functioning as peacekeepers and peacemakers. Not nearly enough, but that's a point of great promise, I think.

Nate Hagens (00:33:02):

Well, a tiny little anecdote, my blood pressure feels like it's a little bit lower, just having this conversation with you. I don't know if it's because you're a woman or just because you have a soothing demeanor, but I'm pretty chill right now even though we're talking about these intense topics. So-

Nina Simons (00:33:23):

I'm so glad. It must be part of my calling.

Nate Hagens (00:33:30):

I bet it is. I think there's something there. Most of the people listening to this podcast, Nina, are already aware of the importance of biodiversity to the natural world. Does this same concept of diversity apply to the social world? And if so, how? And is Bioneers, when I first saw the word Bioneers, I connected biology and pioneers. But is it biodiversity? I mean, what was the etymology of that?

Nina Simons (00:34:04):

No, it is a word that Kenny named, and it does come from biology and pioneers. It's people who are informed by nature how to heal and work with nature. And not strictly speaking everyone is that, but that's where the word comes from. And yes, absolutely. I mean, I would point to what I see as a false division in your question, Nate, which is, how could the social world be anything but a part of the natural world? I believe that the social world is a fraction of the natural world and therefore is governed by exactly the same laws and principles as the natural world. And as I'm sure many folks listening already know, they did a study of resilience in nature, and I think it's ... Okay, they studied resilience in nature, and what they found was that an area that was rich in biodiversity recovered after trauma much, much faster than a monoculture.

Nate Hagens (00:35:24):

That's what I was getting at. Does that same thing apply in our social networks?

Nina Simons (00:35:29):

Well, I'm sure it does. And one of the things that I use as a reference point is something that Janine Benyus, the mother of biomimicry said years ago at a Bioneers conference. She said, "In nature the places of greatest innovation are the places where two or more ecosystems meet. So, where the river

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meets the ocean, meets the forest, that's where nature creates newness. So, why would that not be true in our social ecosystems?"

Nate Hagens (00:36:00):

So, where we have, there have been people talking that there's 20 or 30 current memetic tribes that have different philosophies and worldviews. What you're saying is, at the intersection of those different beliefs of two different groups of people talking about something, that's where the cutting edge conversation and the emergence for the future might happen?

Nina Simons (00:36:21):

I believe so.

Nate Hagens (00:36:22):

Among other things?

Nina Simons (00:36:23):

Absolutely, and it would also be cross-sectorally, interdisciplinarily, all of those ways. I think it's also a fundamental principle behind something that has motivated my work for a long time, which is that once I experienced being among a group of women who were very diverse not only in race but, or ethnicity, but by age, by discipline, and experienced what Dr. Martin Luther King called Beloved Community, where everyone there, regardless of how disparate their perspectives and orientations and backgrounds were, was totally in support of each other. And that's an amazing experience, and it's one that I want for everyone, and it's one that I see as one of the most hopeful embodied experiences that I refer to when I imagine the future I'm working towards.

Nate Hagens (00:37:28):

I agree with that, and I recognize in my own work the importance of diverse voices. And like you said, with Bioneers, this podcast has been a wonderful learning experience for me, including this conversation so far. But can't that be taken, can't diversity of perspectives be taken too far? Because you could have someone that thinks climate change is a socialist hoax and that we're going to colonize Mars once Earth is destroyed. And as that perspective, I mean, I believe we need diverse perspectives that are tethered loosely at least to our biophysical reality, and then all the different temperaments and people and ages and perspectives make it stronger. But can we take it too far?

Nina Simons (00:38:20):

Well, I mean, of course. And I think the example that you cite relates to something that you were planning to ask me, which was, what do I see as one of our greatest threats? And it's misinformation. It's the disinformation campaigns that I think are driving our species into polarized post-truth realities, which are deeply problematic, of course. And we're also all being emotionally manipulated by those campaigns and those medias. Part of the reason we created Bioneers in the first place was because the mainstream media really focuses on the bad news, and they rarely tell stories of the emergent culture

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and the emergent civilization and the innovations coming forward. And so we really created this as a way to actually reveal the future that's possible, if only we had the political will to help us get there.

Nate Hagens (00:39:27):

I work with people on the social media stuff and it underpins almost all our other problems. If we don't fix that, how are we going to have a conversation on these things? Thankfully people are waking up to it on both sides of the political spectrum, but it is a concern. You've brought up in your work, and you've mentioned it already on this call, that we don't often consider the learning and intelligent types of people when we consider diversity. Can you explain or unpack that a bit on how most people vary in this category and how it affects a human's ability to learn, communicate, process emotions and the like?

Nina Simons (00:40:10):

Sure. Again, as a person who seeks patterns and studies systems, what I've found is that there are some very obvious ways like introverts and extroverts, that our culture tends to privilege extroverts over introverts. And that's just beginning to become aware of. There's a wonderful woman who was a mentor to me named Dawna Markovaa, and she did work about three different ways that we process information, auditorily, visually and kinesthetically. And those three ways of processing information line up with different modalities of learning.

(00:40:57):

If you think about our education system, it's almost entirely focused on visual and auditory. And kids who learn kinesthetically don't get to learn, because they learn best when they're in motion, so they get foisted onto sports. There are many different ways that we process information, and then of course, everything that we absorb, we absorb through the filter of our cultural background and our lived experience. Our class experience, our ethnicity, whether we have had grave losses in our childhood or not. All of that goes into what comes into us and what we are able to absorb and process really and learn from. And we are part of a culture that doesn't tend to acknowledge all those different ways of learning.

Nate Hagens (00:41:58):

Is it perhaps because our cultural objective is monetary profits tethered to energy, tethered to carbon, that we bias the extroverts and the auditory and visual ways of learning?

Nina Simons (00:42:12):

Absolutely. I mean, I think our primary objectives in education was to put out workers for factories. Why would you then cultivate the artists and the deep thinkers and all of that? Yeah, so I think really what we're in for is a complete civilizational do-over and remake, and it's going to be a question of how bad it has to get before. And interestingly, as you noted earlier, this is a long, slow process. There has been work for decades and decades on reinventing education and reinventing industry and chemistry and all these things, and discovering much about our relatives in the biological world who we know so little about.

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Nate Hagens (00:43:17):

Well, let's move to that, because that's something that you and I definitely have a deep shared concern and love for. In your work, in your books, you referenced the sacred often. Could you explain what that means to you and in the future, could there be something that everyone commonly understands or feels is sacred? Or does this concept vary from person to person? What do you think?

Nina Simons (00:43:51):

Well, I chose the word the sacred because it has less baggage than the spiritual and certainly is a distant relative of the religious. I grew up without any religious training. And what I discovered relatively early on was that nature was the place that I went to for sanctuary, for refuge when I needed to be healed, to feel better. And then as we started doing Bioneers, I began to realize that I love nature in a way that, I don't even want to call it nature anymore, because we are nature. It puts nature separate from us, and we are nature. But my love of this life and the land and the globe that we get to inhabit is so deep that I thought, "If I ever show this to anybody, they're going to think I'm crazy."

(00:44:56):

And then the more that I learned and was mentored by native peoples, the more I saw that they relate to everything on this earth as sacred and as a relative. And so the sacred became for me a way of referring to what I care about most deeply, what is most important to my heart, and that doesn't preclude people. I love people and I'm very devoted to them, but I think our loss of the sacred in modern culture, in modern western culture, is a root source of what's awry in the world today and what has led us to this point.

Nate Hagens (00:45:53):

Multiple thoughts here. First of all, I don't know if you watched my Earth Day talk in 2022, but it was an ecological tarot deck, which I'm actually going to be releasing in physical form in a few months. And the cover page is going to be a card called The Sacred, and it's one of my students drew it. I'll show it to you after this call, but you mentioned-

Nina Simons (00:46:13):

How great.

Nate Hagens (00:46:14):

Yeah, it was kind of a side thing, but I really, I really liked it.

Nina Simons (00:46:20):

That's thrilling.

Nate Hagens (00:46:21):

Well, it's what you talked about, it's the head and the heart. It's not charts and graphs. It's a beautiful art picture that then tells an ecological story with each card. But you were mentioning Native

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Americans and how they are tethered and view nature as a connection and their relatives. If you take a six to 10-year-old native child and standard six to 10-year-old child in Santa Fe, or Chicago, or Minneapolis or something, I think they both feel this connection to nature. It's in us. It's almost been forgotten. I assume that the native cultures are continuing with the education and the rituals and the ceremonies and the stories, and we've just exercised those from our current culture, or is it something deeper than that?

Nina Simons (00:47:25):

Well, I mean, from my limited understanding of where indigenous cultures are in this country at this time, they're beginning to reclaim their language and their ceremonies. They are in a deep process of healing and recovery, frankly, because part of the hidden history of this country, of course, is our sequential genocidal tactics to eradicate native culture and native peoples from this land.

Nate Hagens (00:47:59):

We didn't really learn that in high school either.

Nina Simons (00:48:03):

No, we sure didn't. And so I think that they are in a process of reclaiming it. And there's a wonderful illustration of this that I like to point to that's actually a very short YouTube video that's called The Mycelium is Listening, and it tells the story with Paul Stametson's voice of who you know, right? Or know of him?

Nate Hagens (00:48:32):

I certainly know of him. There was another movie last year, something about mushrooms, I forgot what it was.

Nina Simons (00:48:38):

Fabulous Fungi, yes.

Nate Hagens (00:48:39):

That one I watched, yeah.

Nina Simons (00:48:40):

Okay. Well, this is a very short YouTube video, and what it describes is that science has now proven that the mycelium deep under the earth, which are of course the roots of mushrooms and which are unseen, but have enormous ecological functions, that they actually respond to sound frequencies. And the sound frequencies that they respond to the most are the really low frequencies like drumming. And so you can imagine that our ancestors or native people's ancestors doing ceremony on this land when they would do their seasonal ceremonies to express gratitude and to call in the rain, that drumming spoke to the

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mycelium. And all of nature is listening, right? I mean, it's kind of a remarkable, wonderful illustration of how much we don't know.

Nate Hagens (00:49:44):

I never knew that. But let me share a story with you. Yesterday I did a podcast with social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. It'll be out in a month or so, but one of his books called *The Righteous Mind* has a section on how humans can access the hive mind. In other words, how can we go from individual centered lenses to a group, everything is connected sort of lenses. And he describes, psychedelics is one of them, rhythmic drumming, and a cadence of deep drumming is a way that humans can get into a collective mindset. When you said that, I was like, "Wow, that works with humans too."

Nina Simons (00:50:35):

That's so cool.

Nate Hagens (00:50:40):

Yeah, it is cool.

Nina Simons (00:50:40):

And it seems to me it's a fundamental technology for transitioning from an I culture to a we culture, right? Which is a tall order, but there's a good clue.

Nate Hagens (00:50:55):

Rave parties was, oh and the other one was time out in nature. It was rave parties and drumming psychedelics and time in nature. So, and you work on the sacred, Nina, do you have recommendations if people are living in an inner city and they don't have access to nature per se? And is there a toolkit or a way, how do people find what's sacred to them? Do you discuss that or have a process, or?

Nina Simons (00:51:29):

Well, I discuss it in the book a lot, and I tend to speak about it as identifying what calls you, or what feels like your sense of purpose. And to me, these are relatively simple questions, but questions we don't ask ourselves enough, which are questions like, what do you most love? And what do you feel in service to? What most breaks your heart? I remember when I first started reading about whales dying of stomach cancer because of plastics in the ocean, it broke my heart. And I'm not studying whales, but I'm doing something related to how do we find ways to actually make this a livable planet for them?

(00:52:29):

I think it comes back to leading from the heart, Nate, because for me, one of my lifelong pursuits has been to explore how we are in a process of reinventing leadership. And because of my experience with Bioneers, I've had the opportunity to witness hundreds or thousands, thousands probably of leaders of all stripes and ages and backgrounds. And so my first book, which was called *Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading from the Heart* is an exploration of how we are reinventing leadership. Because I think

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the old definition is not serving. And the truth is, women and some men are demonstrating new models of leadership that are motivated and informed from the inside out. They are motivated by what people most love and feel in service to. And by listening for guidance about what to do next and by sharing authority. And we're seeing that all over civil society, certainly.

Nate Hagens (00:53:45):

At least in our country, a lot of what we refer to as leaders now are sign up for the path for fame and fortune and status, and how can we shift that towards true leadership? Does it happen once culture changes, or do these full spectrum leaders as you refer to them, kind of build from the ground up and become a larger percentage of our governing body? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Nina Simons (00:54:19):

I mean, I actually think that the personal and the transpersonal are really connected. And I think-

Nate Hagens (00:54:24):

Well, what is the transpersonal?

Nina Simons (00:54:27):

Well, to me the transpersonal is the collective, is the universal. And so I don't believe that there is a dichotomy there and that everyone who has a voice in this world, which is almost everyone, needs to be practicing these new forms of leadership and checking ourselves on our cultural conditioning to reify the forms that we've been taught to revere. I mean, as we all know, the fame and fortune recipe does not bring fulfillment or meaning to anyone's life. And in fact, the fame and fortune thing is part of what's destroying the planet and our futures, so we have to change it. And I think many of us are. And it's a very complex system shift that we're speaking about here. And I think we have to get better at teaching each other... at modeling it ourselves, first of all, at supporting and encouraging leadership in those around us, and at educating those who are misusing power and abusing it, which Lord knows we have lots of now.

Nate Hagens (00:55:58):

You've long been in a leadership position yourself at Bioneers. What have been over the last 30 years or so, your major learnings and takeaways for working through things that are unexpected, unprecedented, or on the surface seemingly impossible challenges, which also is a microcosm for our current cultural situation? What have you learned and has surprised you?

Nina Simons (00:56:26):

Well, I think one of the things that life keeps teaching me, Nate, is not to undervalue the invisible world. And here are a couple of quick examples of what I mean by that. There was a time when, one of many times when Bioneers was threatened with extinction, where we had a lot of money to raise, we had no idea where it was going to come from. We had gone to all of our major donors and been turned down, and the deadline was looming really close.

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(00:57:00):

And I actually went to a mentor of mine who is deeply knowledgeable in Mayan cosmology and practices. And I half jokingly said, "Is there anything you can teach me that could help me attract resources to Bioneers?" I really didn't expect her to give me anything practical. And what she did was she looked at me with a very straight face and said, "Yes, I'll show you how to program a crystal." And she showed me how to program a crystal, and I didn't have a lot of belief that it was going to make any difference, but I did everything she taught me very carefully. And about 10 days before our deadline one of our high donors reached out to me and said, "I got it in a meditation this morning that I'm supposed to give you what you asked for, so I'm sending a check." That was one example.

Nate Hagens (00:58:01):

I have a quantitative mind, I believe your story. I just don't see the connection of a crystal there, but that could be my bias in not knowing how everything is connected.

Nina Simons (00:58:15):

Well, it's imagining, I think that there is much more to this world than we can see and touch and understand. And so I think it's part of the great mystery, and I think that part of what our culture has dumbed down in us is our reverence for the great mystery. And I don't practically whether what I was beaming into that crystal and whether it was sending it out into the universe actually reached that person. I have no idea, it's a complete mystery to me. But I do believe that what we imagine has power and that language has power, and that we tend to undervalue those powers as we navigate these multiple crises.

Nate Hagens (00:59:11):

I fully agree with that. And maybe, well, I won't speculate, but when you said that we don't pay enough attention to the invisible, in my quantitative science mind I thought what you were going to refer to was CO<sub>2</sub>, PFAS, Forever Chemicals, things like that. But you meant the mystery of things that we can't understand.

Nina Simons (00:59:35):

I did. And I mean, I delight in the times when science verifies what I intuitively know to be true. For example, Nate, when I saw *The Burning Times*, I knew that the residue of that time lived on in my bones, and I could feel it. I knew it intuitively. I had no scientific background for it. Well, now science is proving epigenetic trauma and that actually things do carry generation to generation. And I total, and it's a delight, just like *The Mycelium is Listening*.

Nate Hagens (01:00:18):

When you said *The Burning Times* was a movie made in the early '90s, what I thought just to myself is since the early '90s humanity has burned half of all the fossil fuels ever. We really have lived in a different sort of burning time since 1992. Do you believe that?

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Nina Simons (01:00:39):

Absolutely.

Nate Hagens (01:00:39):

It's really kind of amazing and horrifying.

Nina Simons (01:00:44):

It is. It is. And Nate, one of my early experiences with Bioneers, we knew very early on that this, what we were doing had great potential value for education, and we had no money. We started going to education conferences with our little makeshift booth to help educators have access to these stories and this learning. And what we encountered there was huge displays set up by the oil and gas and other extractive industries, which were the foundation of what was to become climate denialism. And it was very well funded and very intentional. And when I reflect back on that experience, it's painful to realize how systematic that disinformation campaign was.

Nate Hagens (01:01:36):

How do you envision a realistic vision, a positive vision for the United States, say 20, 30 years from now, if we are able to have some sort of value shift and change in consciousness and full spectrum for quadrant, more humans maturing into that? Can you paint that or is it just totally unknown?

Nina Simons (01:02:10):

I'm not sure I can go 20 to 30 years out. What shows up vividly for me, Nate, is that if I could wave a magic wand, I would create connective tissue among all of the elements of civil society that are working towards an equitable and viable and livable future. I would create connective tissue among all of the women's organizations and all of the low income wage earners organizations, and all of the organizations looking to create a true democracy, for one thing. Because I think that that factionalization in civil society is one of our deepest obstacles.

Nate Hagens (01:03:02):

Practically, what does that mean to build connective tissue between those organizations?

Nina Simons (01:03:07):

Well, it means, I think it means a lot of healing and restorative justice work, actually. I think that there are deep wounds in the women's movement from times when white women dominated and didn't honor the contributions of women of color. There are profound wounds among Native American cultures that need to be addressed, and among African-American and immigrant cultures. I think there's a huge amount of cultural repair that actually has to happen. And critical race theory, of course. Our education system really needs to be completely revamped, as does our health system. And I think that, but I do think that the change that's coming has to come from the grassroots up. I think that it's going to involve

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huge demonstrations that force the politicians' hands to make bigger structural policy and financial changes.

Nate Hagens (01:04:18):

Do these same challenges exist in India, or Eastern Europe, or Bangladesh, or Taiwan, and how are they dealing with these sorts of issues?

Nina Simons (01:04:33):

Well, not precisely. Although, I mean at the core, I think that corporations are a big part of the problem, and they often go unnamed in that really we have a government that's largely being run by corporations. And similarly I think in those other nations they're either being run by corporations or by authoritarian plutocrats who are basically much more concerned with amassing wealth and power than with anything having to do with the long-term common good. I mean, there's a giant evolutionary shift that has to happen. And I'm not sure, what I don't know is how violent it may become. And again, I think back that my father used to say to me that he was amazed at how uncomfortable people have to get before they're willing to change. And it's kind of ironic to me, because I'm so grateful for the life that I've chosen and co-created for myself, but it's hard for me to understand why people choose to follow a path that is so obviously destructive and-

Nate Hagens (01:06:03):

Because it's the consensus trance. It's what most other people are doing. And so we need pilots of starting small, then growing, of people valuing nature-

Nina Simons (01:06:12):

Exactly.

Nate Hagens (01:06:13):

Living differently, respecting others, listening, et cetera, I think.

Nina Simons (01:06:20):

Well, and I think we need a lot of storytelling, and a lot of art, and a lot of sharing of examples of what's possible because people don't know.

Nate Hagens (01:06:29):

That's where the dramatic theater comes in.

Nina Simons (01:06:30):

People have a very limited idea - That's right.

Nate Hagens (01:06:32):

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Because more facts isn't really going to help at this point.

Nina Simons (01:06:36):

Well, I think that that's true, and I think it's also true that ... Because Kenny and I had never been to a conference, we co-created something that has ceremony in it, and it has arts integrated into it. It's not all linear and rational and mind focused. And it does really lift up these examples of people who are shining amazingly into co-creating the next civilization without structural support often. But yeah, it's coming.

Nate Hagens (01:07:17):

It's kind of a microcosm of the anti-violence movement with Gandhi, which eventually worked. But what you're talking about is the ceremony and the embodied leadership and the full spectrum. That's still in our current culture is out competed by the market and the momentum for profits and the existing structures that we have, which I would argue there's an energetic metabolism behind all that. So, it's up against that.

Nina Simons (01:07:55):

Yes, it is.

Nate Hagens (01:07:56):

It's almost like it's got to be just really strong and solid and for the long term resilient in a way like Gandhi's movement does. But I know very little about this, so I'm just speculating.

Nina Simons (01:08:12):

Well, I imagine so. And for me, Nate, what I come back to time and time again is that the truth resonates and love is the most powerful thing in the world. And I think we all crave love and connection and this corporate capitalist, monopolistic structure is not kind to any of those things or conducive to any of them. And so, ultimately I just have to believe, I have to believe that human nature will prevail, even though the wolf we've fed is the one that's destroying the planet.

Nate Hagens (01:09:02):

Well said. I have gotten to most of the questions I was curious about, but we are running out of time. If you don't mind, I have some personal questions to close the interview as I close all my interviews with. Given your lifetime of work and reflection on these issues, do you have any personal advice for the listeners of The Great Simplification who are aware of the things you're saying and anxious and paying attention to the poly crisis?

Nina Simons (01:09:40):

Well, one thing that I would offer is that this is a time of tremendous distraction. And I think that we have to be attentive to cultivating our own inner compasses to caring for our inner worlds as much as

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we care for our outer world. And by that I mean, I've noticed in myself how deep my conditioning runs to be responsive to the needs of those around me. And that's not a bad thing. I love being a caregiver and serving the needs of the world. And if it's not in balance with caring for my own body and my spirit and myself, then I risk perpetuating the burnout syndrome, which I don't want to do.

(01:10:45):

In order to navigate this time that asks so much of us, I think it's really important that we care for our inner worlds as much as for our outer worlds. And I would say, the other thing is, I try to cultivate both humility and deep listening and my own, what I've heard called discomfort resilience, so that I can take a lot of discomfort actually. And as long as it's for a higher purpose, I don't need to be so reactive.

Nate Hagens (01:11:27):

Wow. So, it's just so fascinating, because we are coming from totally different perspectives on all this, and yet there's so much that's in common. I tell my students, "Be kind to yourself and embrace uncertainty and discomfort, because it's easy to choose the polls on either side." I mean, just like you're saying. And I think it is very difficult in this time when we're distracted and there's so many demands in our time to forget about taking care of yourself, and I'm guilty of that as well, and I think it's really good advice. Do you have specific advice on how people can do that or get a start on that?

Nina Simons (01:12:11):

I find that in order to shift patterns in myself, the first key ingredient is awareness. And just really committing myself to being aware of the pattern is about 90% towards changing it. I find that helpful.

Nate Hagens (01:12:34):

Taking that a step further on advice, do you have recommendations for young humans who become aware of the economic, social, and environmental challenges that we face and are interested in playing a role and forging a different path?

Nina Simons (01:12:56):

I do. The first would be to cultivate yourself towards who you believe you were born to become. I find my life is a lifelong practice of self-cultivation, and it doesn't end. It's not like there's an end point where I go, "Okay, I'm done now." I keep learning. And that keeps me feeling vital and excited. But the biggest things, I think would be, do your own deep self-exploration to understand what you care most about, and then find a way to serve that. And do it in community, because that way you will find other people with whom you share a love. And that's a great way to build connection. And also to combat despair. Because the best antidote for despair is doing something, and doing something you care about helps a lot.

Nate Hagens (01:14:09):

Again, that's exactly what I tell my students. What do you care most about in the world, Nina?

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Nina Simons (01:14:16):

Oh, well, I care about mother life, Nate. I really am so devoted to the sacredness of the beauty that we get to live amongst, and I care about that. I care about cultivating love and connection. I'm blessed by having a partner who I adore, and I'm so grateful for that.

Nate Hagens (01:14:47):

After all these years.

Nina Simons (01:14:48):

Isn't that amazing? I know, we're both just stunned. And I regenerate myself by walking in nature every day. Now, I'm lucky enough to have that, but whether you're in a city and you have a potted plant or you walk in a park, there's a lot of ways, or you cook. There's a lot of ways to connect to the beauty and bounty and incredible resilience and the brilliance that's all around us. And in many ways, I mean, I feel so lucky to be mentored by my elders, both in the indigenous world of humans and in the natural world of four billion years of evolution, that's what's teaching me. And when I get stuck or really worried, that's where I turn.

Nate Hagens (01:15:43):

What is one question about the future, say 2050, that if you had a crystal ball that you could see that and know, what would be one thing that you're most curious about 20, 30 years, something like that?

Nina Simons (01:16:00):

What is the leverage point that tips rebalancing the feminine and the masculine in our cultures and ourselves? That would be my greatest curiosity. Because it is so deep, and so I see it as so fundamental.

Nate Hagens (01:16:18):

Do you have a checklist or a recommendation for a male to become more connected with his feminine side, or vice versa? I mean, I don't know much about this.

Nina Simons (01:16:34):

Well, one of my favorite reviews of my recent book was written by a father who said, "I've read your book and it's helped me to understand my wife and my daughters better." And I love that. It's sort of a window into how do you tune more attention into what your heart loves, what your body wants and needs. Not just muscles, not just exercise, but what about rest? And what about, I think the feminine thrives in spaciousness is something that I've learned and our hyper-productive culture-

Nate Hagens (01:17:15):

What does that mean?

Nina Simons (01:17:16):

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Well, it means that I am accustomed to having a very long to-do list and going from one thing to the other all day, with very little break in between and very little open space in between. There are-

Nate Hagens (01:17:36):

So, it's more about doing than being?

Nina Simons (01:17:39):

Well, our culture, yes, orients us toward constant productivity and doing, and very little acknowledgement of the value of being without an agenda, without an activity. Just being, to feel and listen and observe what comes. Because I do believe that we are being gifted with information from all around all the time. Whether it's from our ancestors, from nature, from the star people. I mean, everybody has a different idea of what's informing us and what's the sacred. I do believe there is much more available to us than we tend to receive, because we don't give ourselves the time and the space to be open, receptive, the feminine, receptive, whereas the masculine is the active. I mean, you asked earlier. Active and receptive, these are two balancing yin and yang principles, and the receptive is just as valuable as the active. And we need that now to navigate through this crazy keyhole we're in.

Nate Hagens (01:18:55):

Thank you. That made sense to me.

Nina Simons (01:18:58):

Oh, good.

Nate Hagens (01:18:59):

Yeah. Final question, Nina. If you had a magic wand, what is one thing that you could wish to happen to improve human and planetary futures? I've recently changed that from being benevolent dictator to having a magic wand because some people didn't like the benevolent dictator.

Nina Simons (01:19:24):

Right. Well, I might have to choose two.

Nate Hagens (01:19:28):

Okay.

Nina Simons (01:19:32):

But one, of course would be if I could wave a magic wand and rebalance the masculine and the feminine in everybody and our culture and our institutions, I would do that right away. And the other one is, I would shift our focus from counting things and quantifying to mapping relationship and to understanding. I mean, I also remember my father saying, "The measure of a person's life is really how many people you've touched and how many people you've affected and helped move towards love." And

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that feels true to me. And so that magic wand would be to create a focus on creating connective tissue and learning how to relate across difference and dance with apparent contradictions.

Nate Hagens (01:20:33):

Thank you, Nina. This has been great. I actually learned quite a bit on this call and I enjoyed it. I hope to see you soon. I think I will be at your conference in April, so I look forward to that. And thank you all for your many decades of work on these issues. Do you have any closing thoughts for those listening or watching?

Nina Simons (01:21:01):

Thank you for asking. I think my only closing thoughts would be to say that our emotions are a way that nature speaks to us. And I believe our culture has taught us to devalue and demonize and put away emotions as something that's not valuable. And I think that we can face into this time with grief and intention and love all at the same time. And that we need to, because actually the other thing that I would wave a magic wand about is to give everyone on earth permission to grieve our losses. Because I think it would change everything very quickly. So, honor your emotions. That's all I have to say. Don't dwell in them. Don't get stuck in them, but recognize they may have value for you and they're there to offer something.

Nate Hagens (01:22:02):

Yet another exact piece of advice I give my students. Grief is actually appropriate, given the future that we thought we had. And don't dwell in it, but periodically it's okay to grieve. Because if you hear about everything going on in the world, with the environment and with our culture and you laugh or are unconcerned, that's the unhealthy response.

Nina Simons (01:22:27):

Exactly.

Nate Hagens (01:22:29):

So, a little bit of grief is actually appropriate. Thank you so much, Nina. I will see you soon.

Nina Simons (01:22:36):

I look forward to it, Nate, thank you so much.

Nate Hagens (01:22:40):

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