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SOURCED FROM LOVE
Pathways toward cultural healing

A dialogue between Anneke Campbell and Nina Simons

Introduction

We chose “Sourced from Love” as the title for this dialogue because for each of us that is the bottom line of our collaboration, which started 17 years ago when Anneke first heard a Bioneers radio show and then came to a Bioneers conference (Our Purpose, 2022). Held since 1990 annually, the event gathers people who are social and ecological practitioners and innovators from all walks of life, and all ages, disciplines, and backgrounds. Their practical work and visions describe a future that’s possible today, and one that’s frequently informed by nature’s genius, and by values of reciprocity, interdependence, and justice. Anneke experienced a festival of mutual connection, education, sharing of inspirational solutions, and celebratory support. Co-founded and produced by Nina Simons and her husband and partner Kenny Ausubel, the conference has always centered the wisdom of First Peoples, featuring members and leaders from many tribal nations, as well as artists and brilliant innovators in many fields from far abroad as well as locally sourced. It has evolved in recent years to include virtual conferences, podcasts, radio and newsletters and as an accessible wellspring of online media. At Bioneers, all our human endeavors that need re-imagining and re-inventing are presented by people with holistic, inclusive, and intersectional solutions.

When we agreed to create the following dialogue, we sought to address the challenges we face as a species, drawing on and weaving together our best current wisdom based in our separate and distinct life experiences. We agree that our systemic failures and crises are a result of gross imbalances in the gendered and archetypal realms of consciousness, of relinquishing our own personal authority while adopting false beliefs and worldviews based in separation, scarcity, fear, and win-lose paradigms. These have systematically separated us from aspects of ourselves, from each other, and from nature and the sacred. We’ve also inherited patterns of judgment and alienation from our emotions, from our bodies and our spirits, from others who are different than us, and from the natural world. This dialogue explores pathways toward healing these divides.

Dialogue

Anneke: Year after year I derive hope and joy as well as great education from attending the Bioneers conference. You and I have worked together on shaping both of your books
about leadership that’s sourced from love. So, as I edit your writing and speeches, I am always learning with your learning. Your expansive knowledge and leading-edge intersectional work have expanded my intellectual understanding of what I am actually doing in my life, the framework within which I’m being an activist. And of course we have fun together and love each other, so we’ve played as well as worked together over the years.

Nina: Thank you. I feel similarly about you. I think in addition to helping midwife my books, you helped make a film about Bioneers that was filtered through the lens of your appreciation, which was beautiful. And we’ve attended conferences together as friends, like the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UN Women, 2021).

I feel like you’re a partner in loving and learning in my life. There are ways that your depth of lived experience have helped to inform my perspectives, as an elder in your family, as a woman who was raised in the Netherlands rather than the US, as a woman who’s in a beautifully deep and committed partnership, so that even our couples processes have been helpful to share, but also the way you’ve immersed yourself in both health and community organizing. In addition, my vicarious experience of your mothering and of being a parent, which has certainly stretched you, has expanded my understanding of what that experience can mean. In addition, your work with death and dying has deepened me in ways that I’m really grateful for. I enjoy particular qualities between us of non-judgment, of deep curiosity, and of shared purposes in multiple dimensions. That makes you a perfect playmate for me.

Because of my experience with Bioneers I have this catbird seat from which I can scan various movements and witness what’s being born in that social and ecological organizing sphere. What’s most exciting to me is much of the emergent movement work that I see, and the new dimensions they are encompassing. In particular, within the Movement for Black Lives, the Working Families, Climate Justice, and Indigenous water protector movements, because they’re each so intentionally inclusive, and they’re also purposefully non-violent. But what’s also clear is that the progressive movements for change are still so factionalized.

That’s what I find myself yearning, praying for, and wanting to encourage people to work toward – is cultivating connective tissue among movements so that the Domestic Workers Alliance and the Poor People’s Movement and the Black Lives Matter and women’s movements could collaborate to build power, in coordination with the climate justice movements and the Indigenous and youth movements. The challenge, of course, is how to agree on a unifying vision, how to prioritize what’s needed to build trust, and then to share authority. And to co-create collaborative leadership. It will take time, but it will be so well worth the effort for the massive potential influence we can have to affect change, together.

So I’m interested in leaning into this notion of growing connective tissue in a world filled with hierarchy and false separation. In your lived experience as a midwife, a community organizer, mother, and death doula, what are some of your thoughts about that, Anneke?

Anneke: For me, organizing work is very much one to one. I feel like what I create is small nodes of local connective tissue. I started a Transition group, inspired by the work of Rob Hopkins, a permaculture teacher who started the Transition Town Movement (Hopkins, 2022), which is a sort of neighborhood activist group where we got together to make our lives and community more resilient.

We started out with big plans, food systems, and energy systems and water systems. But we live in Los Angeles. And we quickly realized that what we really wanted to do was to
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sit and drink chai and talk and talk about our actual lives and connect. And out of that came action. But the action was nothing like our grandiose plans. It really was pulling up a neighbor’s lawn so we could make it either drought tolerant or grow food. It was a lot about what we call inner transition or inner resilience. Like: how do we help each other cope with our fears? I came up with this slogan, which is that the most radical thing you can do in a city like Los Angeles is get out of your car and talk to your neighbor. But still I wished I could do larger things, as I’ve associated leadership with bigger things. But in actuality, what my life has been all about is one on one or small group connections with women whose children I delivered, the people I nursed, taught writing or yoga to, and organized in various ways – always with lots of listening and sharing food.

Nina: It is important to me to reflect back to you is that I hear you discount the value of what you do because of its scale. And I think that’s a part of our cultural inheritance and our implicit bias that gets in our way. I keep finding in myself that the bias toward bigness is one of the things I want to keep practicing peeling away and shedding. I want to encourage you and others who may feel drawn to be active in their local communities to not minimize the value of that, because I believe we’re heading toward a time where localization is more important than anything, since the big systems that we’ve come to rely on and imagined were going to support us are all broken and failing anyway. You’ve perceived a need for your own neighborhood or community and then acted to organize around it. I think you’ve done that in more ways and with different constituencies than you may be giving yourself credit for, with emergency preparedness as an example. Really, when it comes right down to it, being able to rely on our neighbors is perhaps the most important survival strategy we could be cultivating. And I want to also reflect something back to you about your leadership, which reflects the centrality of relationship and gathering around food to make connections, as women have done for millennia.

I also want to honor the part of your leadership that has to do with your role in your family and your relationship with your extended family, where you are currently the elder matriarch and also as the mother to your daughter, who is your only child and whose ongoing health issues have been a source of tremendous challenge and learning for you. One of the greatest losses of our cultural inheritance has been the devaluing of parenting as leadership, and especially of mothering.

Anneke: Well thank you, Nina. It seems that I still discount what comes so naturally to me in favor of a grandiose vision of what leaders are supposed to do. So what has your experience revealed to you about the inner and outer work of creating connective tissue as they relate to activism and social change?

Nina: I consider the question of how we reclaim our human wholeness inwardly while also cultivating connective tissue, both in a very micro sense and in a macro sense at the same time. In terms of my inner reality, I understand that I adopted from our culture a judgmentalism that tends to rate or rank what I’m feeling as being appropriate or inappropriate, as being acceptable to express or not acceptable, and therefore requiring editing or suppression. I suspect that to varying degrees, perhaps most of our human relatives on the planet have integrated some version of this. I can’t know exactly how in each of us it may be a result of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, or racism. I believe they’re all entwined in our collective consciousness and experience of now.

I try to practice creating an internal field of acceptance that says that whatever is coming up for me is valid for me to feel and is worth my paying attention to. That doesn’t mean that I’m not going to be discerning about whether, where, and with whom I express or act upon it. But it does mean that I’m not going to beat myself up for having feelings. It
does mean that I’m going to try to check my habit of apologizing whenever I get excited, interrupt someone, or cry. It does mean that I’m going to look for spaces where I can express my healthy outrage or my grief over the loss of what’s happening to the Earth and all our fellow creatures. I also cultivate an ability to witness myself, to know that while waves of emotion may wash over me, my essence is more stable than that. I try to notice if something triggers a strong response in me, to be aware of managing my own internal state to be able to respond rather than react, to be more fully present for whatever comes my way in the physical world. The better I know myself, the more skillfully I can bring myself to serve what I love.

The other thing I want to add about connective tissue is that, although it may sound like a cliche, part of my practice over the years has been learning how to love myself. Not in a superficial or hallmark way, but in an authentic way. The more that I am able to embody that, I can then value the opportunity to be here in this transformative moment and integrate as many of my talents and perspectives as I can – in a balance with humility – in fulfillment of my desire to serve life and what I love. Those are some quick touches on the inner world connective tissue to action.

Anneke: In terms of inner connectivity: yes, of course, our first connection has to be with ourselves or we are out to lunch. Doing that in our practices, our internal practices of even taking a breath and being present and therefore mindful, is so important. But in terms of external connective tissue, I feel like you’re much more conversant in this world of growing connective tissue between disparate groups. Because one of the things I’ve most admired about you is your fearlessness of going into situations and creating conditions where you bring together groups of people, women especially, but people with disparate experiences, diverse ethnic groups, every age and class, and working with the difficulties that can come up, not only around our internal biases but learning to navigate the ruptures that sometimes happen. In my local neighborhood, I’ve not had success getting Latino people to participate. Living in a city that is majority Hispanic, it’s embarrassing. So how do you do it? How do you create connective tissue between groups?

Nina: For me, that work emerged from a deep desire I had to experience and create access for others to what Martin Luther King called “Beloved Community” (Ritterman, 2014), and also from my belief that healing our social systems required celebrating our diversity in all its forms.

A framework I’ve found tremendously helpful describes what she calls a “prosocial triad” of practices, from Dr Kamilah Majied, a consultant and professor at California State University at Monterey Bay (Compassion and Wellness, 2021). She cites cultural humility, fierce compassion, and discomfort resilience as being essential capacities to cultivate in ourselves.

One time that I was aware of an intense discomfort and fear around racialized difference was when I was readying to speak at a Bioneers conference about becoming aware of my own white supremacy conditioning. I was so afraid I would make the problem worse or that I would offend people. It was just such a deep-seated, gut response that I’m still in a long-term inquiry about how this Western racialized culture has instilled in all of us who pass as white a fear of not roiling the waters or of not talking about race, or betraying our own people. Maybe it’s a tribal fear. As it turned out, I gave the talk regardless of my fear, and it led to many people of color seeing it and deciding I was trustworthy.

When I think about you and bridging into Hispanic cultures, I wonder whether you might volunteer to help teach a class on English as a second language and get to know...
some of the students or go to a nearby church, park, or restaurant and meet in one of the places that are part of their community, not on your turf. For me, that’s another version of practicing discomfort resilience, as it means leaving your comfort zone.

Another practice inherent in cultivating my own discomfort resilience is putting myself in situations where I can perceive the systemic impacts of racism on others and myself while walking the fine line between recognizing my own ability to help change the systems by leveraging my own privilege, but not feeling guilty or taking personal responsibility for that person’s pain. I can only be accountable for my own behavior and my own belief systems. And so in terms of bridging racial, class, and ethnic divides, I practice being curious about the layers of unconscious cultural programming that I carry and work to shed, and I practice listening with my heart rather than my head. I have seen painful racialized ruptures where many of the white people in the room seemed incapable of actually having any real compassion or empathy but were instead responding defensively or only from their Rational minds or intellects.

Bioneers has been an incredible learning ground for me. I mean, for 33 years we have practiced bringing together speakers and community and participants from different walks of life and generations and classes, backgrounds, and orientations. One thing I’ve learned has been to recognize the value of pluralism at the same time as naming the differences honestly while creating the conditions for an experience (but not asserting one) of some sort of a unifying field. Not seeing diversity as divisive or paradoxes, but as a virtue to be cultivated. That’s an example of how our Western culture has often taught us that differences or binaries must keep us apart. The divide and conquer strategy – combined with policies that have both normalized and reified those separations – have kept us factionalized and separate for far too long, undermining our collective capacity to influence progressive change. I want to keep learning how to integrate the value of distinct perspectives and lived experiences combined with the ability to experience a unifying field that doesn’t discount anyone’s individual perspective while sharing an inclusive sense and orientation toward what’s possible.

Anneke: You mentioned paradox. How do we learn to or practice integrating paradox or binaries? I love when Terry Tempest Williams said in her speech at Bioneers a few years ago that “everyone’s talking about scaling up, but I think we need to scale down. I don’t want to go anywhere. I want to just stay home” (Williams, 2019).

Nina: She got her wish.

Anneke: Thank you, COVID! I feel one paradox inside me a lot, the urgency of the time we are in and the need to slow down. I feel this in my body. When I feel fearful about the future, that fear makes me think I need to act now. I have to do more. I need to do better. I need to do bigger. If we don’t scale up these solutions we’re toast. So that’s a frantic energy and I know enough now to understand that frenetic energy does not get me where I want to go. So I’m constantly calming myself down from that sense of urgency and reminding myself, oh, this little thing I’m doing is enough. I can rest. When I remember to see what is going on in the world from a larger perspective, and a longer time scale or deep time, as Joanna Macy coins it (Macy & Brown, 2014), I find it’s helpful in slowing myself down and embracing the current moment. Jeremy and I sat outside the other day for two hours in the garden, just watching the butterflies and the hummingbirds. Feeling lucky we could. And I said to him, what’s going on? We’re both so busy and we’re not doing, just being, so beautiful.

Nina: That goes right back to talking about leadership and being enough and doing scale. I also think it’s more about letting go of the fear and just relaxing into the next thing, the
next little thing I can do. Buddhists and the Vedic traditions all say that we each have our dharma, what’s specifically ours to do. And if we do that, we will have done enough. Healing false separations within ourselves and loving whatever we love. I also think it’s connected with loving yourself and loving life, perhaps even sourced from that. Many Native traditions suggest that the creator put us here to celebrate life. I think it may be part of white people’s madness (or white supremacy culture), this notion that we have to be constantly doing. The longer I live, the more I believe that change actually starts within, in valuing our beingness as much or more than our doing.

And there are other paradoxes for me that I’m acutely aware of working with in my own life. One relates to the seeming contradiction between self and service. Because I grew up with a mother who was very self-involved, I grew up thinking self is bad, any focus on self is selfish. Service is good. Well, if all of our leaders follow that program and serve till they drop, we’ll continue a pattern of leaders burning out, and then we’re sunk. So how do we value and love ourselves enough to cherish, as the poet Mary Oliver says, “my one wild and precious life?” How do I learn to care for myself in balance with my care for the world?

Every time I notice an apparent binary or paradox, my challenge is to dance with both of them. The ways that young people are doing this with gender binaries and gender fluidity is so exciting. I am so jazzed for everyone being masculine and feminine in whatever measure is right for them and able to draw from anywhere along that spectrum at any time. And similarly, how do we befriend death and dying and darkness and stop only valuing birth and light and progress? Because frankly, we’re not going to get to the next paradigm or culture without suffering a lot more loss and death. As a culture, I think we’re overdue to rebalance, having been so biased toward those aspects of life that have been relegated to the masculine and therefore have been lifted up archetypally in a massive way. Time now to learn to reintegrate and find our human equilibrium. Maybe that is why we’re facing this near-death experience as a species, to help us to mature enough to change how we relate to the entire Earth community.

So for me, relating to binaries or apparent contradictions is a practice of holding “Both And” in a way that has curiosity, patience, and openness, in hopes that a third way arises as an option. Another practice I’d name, as you mentioned with your Transition Town experience in local organizing, is prioritizing relationship before task. I do think it’s part of white supremacy and patriarchal conditioning to embrace big strategic or conceptual goals that are often way beyond our reach, and then we become discouraged. I often remind myself of a quote from Fritjof Capra, the Austrian physicist, who I’ll paraphrase from the Epilogue of Web of Life (1997), to say that in order to evolve into an eco-literate culture, one that knows how to live in right relationship with the natural world, we have to shift our attention and focus from counting things to mapping relationship. From accumulation to connection, and from quantity to quality.

Anneke: I didn’t realize that was what was actually happening until I heard you talk about prioritizing relationship before tasks in your best practices, how you convene groups and spend the first few days storytelling and getting to know each other. Then I saw that we moved from this task orientation toward becoming friends first. And still getting things done but from this base of friendship, care, and trust. We have potlucks. Feeding people is one of the ways I connect with people naturally. And our monthly neighborhood potlucks have continued for 13 years now and are a space we’ve created for connection, relaxation, sharing, and asking for help, which is a practice that goes against the grain of our individualistic, do it all yourself, rely only on yourself culture.
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And in the end, this is what you are saying about creating a field where we can experience in an embodied way; I would use the word solidarity as humans, whatever all our individually different experiences are. Which is also why I’ve come to value ritual so much, both the rituals from old cultures and rituals that we create. For instance, the rituals I learned initially around giving birth, like the blessing way for baby showers or rituals around death and dying, which have held people through transitions in community for many centuries. Ritual creates a unifying field. When people come together to honor someone who died, ritual is healing. Religious ritual offers that, and while I may have rejected the Catholic Church, the old Irish wake is powerful medicine.

Our culture is so death phobic but the reality is that without death, there would be no life. It’s death and decay and dirt that actually give us life. There’s something beautiful about this life cycle. But this culture hides dying, pretends it isn’t there, puts makeup on peoples’ bodies so that they look alive. It’s insane. So as you mentioned, we need to learn to value death, to value darkness. Our so-called dark emotions such as rage, despair, and grief need expression. We need lamentation – both individually and collectively – for the species that are dying, and all the losses … If we were a sane culture, we would be holding each other in absolute grief right now. Cultural healing means being able to hold all that. Older religious or tribal traditions have all these beautiful ways of having us experience our connectivity. They are about being present and having something larger than our own personal selves to hold us together. And, of course, when it comes to coming together at Bioneers every year, that’s a field I experience as it opens with drumming and blessings and invocation. I love the fact that there’s the Indigenous conference going on at the same time, and all these people I admire so much also get to be held in this unified field.

Nina: Well, I agree. And food is ritual, too. I think about how when many of the Native Pueblo peoples where we live in New Mexico have feast days, when they have ritual dances, the women gather in the kitchen for hours and hours and make food for the whole community. Their feasts include anyone who’s visiting who are welcomed, and eating together is its own ritual. I so agree about perceiving a sense of the sacred together in a way that’s totally inclusive. That field is healing and we have the power to make it happen, co-creatively. So how do we get to the point where we recognize the power that we actually have? Because in many ways, I do feel like the confluence of crises that we’re facing may perhaps be meant to help us awaken from a kind of complacency, a “go along to get along” mentality, and a place where we have relinquished our own authority. We need to reclaim that inner power, not give it away anymore.

Anneke: When did you realize you gave away your power, your inner authority, and how did you reclaim it?

Nina: Well, I’ve lived through many examples, but the one that comes to mind now was a time when we were working with an organizational development consultant who assigned each of us to write the story of our relationship to the organization. I wrote that I saw myself as the woman behind the man, as someone whose primary role was in support of my husband and partner Kenny Ausubel’s (co-founder and CEO of Bioneers) vision. I was horrified when I recognized that I really believed it. It was probably 20 years ago, but still. So I went to my colleagues who were all male at the time, including my husband and I asked: “is this the way you see me?” They all said, no, not at all. So I found myself recognizing that if that was only my inner story, then I had the capacity to change it. And I started creating rituals to appreciate my own skills or talents, because I realized that since so many of my gifts are in the relational field with some in a spiritual context that I had
tended (because of my culturally inherited bias) to discount and devalue them. I began practicing a ritual each day before I went to bed. I would lie in bed and reflect on the day, not in an egoic way, but in an inventory kind of process, and review what I appreciated about what I’d done well. Eventually it started to help heal my sense of what I was actually good at and I became more able to own what I was contributing of real value.

Anneke: When I was in labor with my daughter, I was told by the doctor that my labor wasn’t real because my contractions weren’t regular. And I believed him. And so I didn’t work with my contractions to make them easier. I kept timing my contractions, hoping they would get regular so that then I could do what would help and relax me. I didn’t empower myself, because I trusted that doctor more than my own experience. And when I went to the hospital, they said, oh, you’re dilating, so you’re in labor, those contractions will get regular now. But they never did. Not even on the delivery table when I was pushing her out, which was a tremendously empowering experience for me. I even asked the doctor, so am I really in labor now, which made everyone laugh. But it made me wonder if this particular theory about birth was wrong, what else might be, since the theory of obstetrics was created by men. That realization started me on my path of trusting my body and inner knowing, which made me want to be there for other women to have their experience validated and their best choices encouraged. Which is why I became a midwife.

Nina: Your story reminds me that in many ways, we’ve commodified the Earth and our bodies in similar ways, and that part of the pathway toward a regenerative future and cultural healing has to do with re inhabiting our bodies. I attend a weekly class online with a friend who is an ecstatic dancer. And every week I send out invitations to hundreds of people, and they don’t come. But every single week, when I move to music in an intentional way, I always complete the hour feeling so much healthier, feeling so much relief that my body has somehow alchemized the emotions that I was feeling or the stress that I was experiencing. I’m acutely aware of the bias that has been culturally transmitted that says emotions and embodiment are the purview of the feminine, and therefore less trustworthy, reliable, or valuable than rationality.

Anneke: The great PTSD expert Bessel van der Kolk (2014) says ritual and dance and yoga can heal the body from trauma, whereas talk therapy is not effective.

Nina: Yes, “because the body knows the score,” as he wrote. The body remembers, so mental practice alone isn’t going to move anything. Within the context of Bioneers, there has been resistance – often from men – to programming embodied practices and typically it’s most often women who show up for those. But it’s important to note that in relation to addressing trauma, integrating our wholeness, and ways to be able to go forward in a centered way, embodiment practices are essential. So how do we address cultural healing in a time when everyone’s been traumatized in one way or another? We can’t do the oppression Olympics, where people compete over who’s been more hurt – that’s been tried and failed. On the other hand, there is a level of common humanity that we need to find, appreciate and reclaim. And I think it happens through intimacy, empathy, and compassion, and creating a field where love is possible, and becomes easy.

Anneke: Through food and storytelling and dancing together, and let’s not forget the power of music to evoke a unifying field. I want to live in a world where once a day everyone steps outside to sing a song together. Like what happened in New York with the spontaneous clapping for first responders.

Nina: Another thing I notice is that in a similar way that I have cultivated practices to grow my ability to authentically love more aspects of myself, I think we have to give ourselves
permission to fall in love with each other, and with life. I had a revelatory moment recently when a Diné ceremonialist and educator named Pat McCabe, or Woman Stands Shining, prayed for us all to be willing to wholeheartedly love the future. It caught me completely off guard. I suddenly realized, what, love the future? I’m so busy loving the present, and I have a lot of concerns and caution, fear, and contraction about the future. Not so easy for me. And I thought, oh, this is an important thing for us to cultivate in ourselves to be able to envision that future and help paint a viscerally vivid picture for each other and express it so that we can collectively and collaboratively head in effective directions.

Anneke: That’s a revolutionary idea for me. I am scared of the future. Reading climate change statistics, looking at children, worrying about what will life be like for them, I feel grief, I feel fear. So finding love inside of that instead will be a challenge. Maybe it’s the medicine for that fear. One of the themes in the transition movement that Rob Hopkins (2022) started was to practice imagining possibilities. Moving from “what is” to “what if,” a positive what if. He said we have all these examples in our cultural story telling of apocalyptic futures. Dystopia is popular in endless movies and shows and books. But unless we can actually imagine a positive alternative, we’re not going to create it. So Transition groups were inspired to create art to envision in storytelling and dance and music and visual representation, the more beautiful future our hearts know is possible (Hopkins, 2022).

Nina: The power of imagination is vital, both personally and collectively. As Black Elk said, “it is not enough to have a vision. In order to have its power, you must enact your vision on Earth for all to see. Only then do you have the power” (Black Elk & Neihardt, 1988). Let’s get our visioning together. Maybe we love the future by bringing all of ourselves to this task of creating and living into the preferred field. That’s how we love life as it is now, and into the future. Because love is the only source I know that is consistently renewable within the human psyche (or at least mine). It’s the only source that seems endlessly deep, if I gift myself the time, space, and focus to explore its depths. It’s the only quality I know that – the more I give of it, the more I receive in the giving, making it regenerative. Love is also the only wellspring I’m aware of in myself that is fluid and endlessly flexible, and also fierce, determined, and persevering – like the sacred feminine.

References