

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, I'm Vicki Robin. In partnership with the Post Carbon Institute, I'm hosting short to-the-point conversations with diverse cultural scouts, asking each one the same question: What could possibly go right? The invitation is to see through these wise eyes what is opening up in the present moment, as normal as up-ended and next is not at all clear. These conversations were recorded a few months into the pandemic, and in the weeks following the murder of George Floyd. Let's see what today's guest says.

*Vicki Robin*

Hi, Vicki Robin here with "What could possibly go right?" and today I have my dear old friend, which means long time, and actually, we're all a bit old: Nina Simons. Nina is Co-Founder of the nonprofit Bioneers and serves as its Chief Relationship Strategist. She is a social entrepreneur who is passionate about the power of women to transform the world, reaching racial and gender justice, indigeneity and rekindling a sacred relationship to nature, while co-creating a just transition that's regenerative, loving and peaceful. She speaks internationally and co-facilitates transformative leadership offerings that integrate relational mindfulness, restoring the deep feminine, and the work that reconnects. Nina co-edited "Moonrise: The Power of Women Leading From The Heart" and recently wrote the award-winning book "Nature, Culture & The Sacred: A Woman Listens for Leadership". She was named a recipient of the Goi Peace Award, in recognition of her pioneering work through Bioneers to promote nature-inspired innovations for restoring (reciprocal relationships among) the Earth and our human community. Nina, your motto for Bioneers has always been: "It's all alive. It's all connected. It's all intelligent. It's all relatives." I have watched you expand that circle of "it's all alive, it's all connected" from the original work. that's mostly focused on the natural world, out into women, and health and justice. I'm really curious about where your gaze is now. What are you seeing now? Because normal is over and next is a mystery. So what in all the upheaval do you see could possibly go right?

*Nina Simons*

Well, I love, love, love that question Vicki. I have to say, in my heart, I'm doing a little joy dance that normal is over, because normal was not so great. In fact, normal was feeling like lemmings walking off a cliff. So, wow. I think that bio is a little old and Bioneers has actually been going on for 30 years and I feel like what it's taught me is to see everything systemically. I feel like I'm here as a representative of the connective tissue people or the spider family because I'm always aware of the connections between seemingly disparate ideas and movements and constituents and people. For me, this particular confluence that we're in, which I tend to think of as the confluence of three rivers; I think of it as COVID-19, converging with economic collapse, converging with - Hello! - converging with obviously, social justice awakening and racial justice awareness flourishing. So I think of it as this confluence of all these different major events and it's been interesting for me because for many, many years, we've known - we and the vast community of people who've been involved with Bioneers, and who are Bioneers, whether they know it or not - have all known that the systems were ready to crash. We all knew that fossil fuels had to end. We also knew that climate disruption was upon us, and that there was a growing urgency that we had to address it, but we didn't know how. I always imagined that there would be some sort of system crash that might be power related, or it might be a food shortage, or a water shortage. But in fact, COVID has brought us to this moment, in a way which is both painful and incredibly elegant. I used to think, I sometimes think of Gaia as being like a great beast. I used to think, Well, there are too many of us on her and one of these days, she's just going to shake her coat and get rid of some of us. I thought, well, maybe it will happen through tidal waves and hurricanes and other kinds of Earth-based events that will be exacerbated by climate change. Certainly that's been happening. But COVID is much more elegant than any of those things, in that it's caused us globally to recognize that we have the opportunity now to

shift from an "I" consciousness to a "We" consciousness; that we are one family on this Earth, one species, various colors and shapes and sizes, but really, we are one people. I believe it's part of the legacy of racial injustice, that some of the conditioning of whiteness has led us to think even more as "I" people rather than "We" people, and that the people of color, the indigenous people, the people of African-American diaspora descent, have all learned how to think more in "We" consciousness. So we have a great deal to learn from them at this time and to undo the conditioning that I believe being raised in a biased white culture has put on us. But I also sometimes tend to see the world with gender-colored lenses. Part of what that has made me so aware of is that, again, the cultures that we inherited have been so outer focused. They've been cultures that have been informed by patriarchy and capitalism and consumerism and an extractive economy. All over those things tend to orient us toward activity rather than reflection and towards being aware of what's on the outside, much more than what's on the inside. When Carl Jung looked at the gender archetypes, he said, Well, the feminine really correlates to our inner state, and the masculine to our more outer state. So as a feminist and as someone who's done a lot of work with women and reclaiming the feminine in us all, I believe that part of the gift of COVID-19 has been that through having to shelter in place, and through not being able to travel and gather and be as social beings as we were accustomed to, we have this opportunity to look inside. For me, one of the greatest gifts of that, Vicki, is that we've long known that we need to shift our culture; that the opportunity here is to shift the whole system. It really is to shift simultaneously our economy, our relationship to ecology, to justice, to health, to all of those things, to education, to youth, to eldership, all of it. In order to do that, we have to have a change in culture. For me, the more that I've wondered about and considered, what are the underpinnings of culture - you've done a great deal of work on this - it has to do with what we value, right? So COVID has brought along this incredible opportunity to look at what we value and to really shift from a culture that has been in effect death-affirming to one that is life-affirming in its truest sense, and to shift from this distractive, hypnotic haze that we've been in that I think consumerism, patriarchy, our wildly distractive governance, and climate chaos has us all sort of spinning. COVID has created this enormous opportunity to go, Wait a minute, what really matters? How do I look at my life, knowing that actually, everything is uncertain. You know, the amusing thing is that, of course, everything's always been uncertain. But we had an illusion of certainty. We had an illusion of security. One of the things I've found is that I've been reflecting on my life to understand how it has prepared me to navigate a time of so much uncertainty. For a while I had this inner joke, which I'll share with you because you'll appreciate it, which is that 30 years of nonprofit leadership has been magnificent preparation for living with uncertainty, because I can't even count the number of times we didn't know if we'd make payroll. We didn't know if we'd have to lay people off. We had no idea if we could produce a conference the next year, all those things. I'm really intrigued now with how we learn to go from an "I" culture to a "We" culture. Some of the really beautiful, practical, actionable things that I'm witnessing emerging in the field include the mutual aid networks that are beautiful, and the community gardens that are springing up even more, and the tendency for everyone because we can't travel, to localize. What a brilliant thing, given that we are part of a nation that's simply too big to govern at this point; and that in order to reclaim our own inner authority and capacity to self determine what our future looks like - collaboratively, not self-determined, but collaboratively determined - we really need to get to know our neighbors. We need to get involved in local politics and see who's on the town council and see who's the county commissioner, because the land use and the water use, given everything we know about climate instability, is more important than ever. How do we each, whether we're in cities or rural areas, increase our local food security? Well, part of it is related to getting to know our neighbors, right? And to actually learn how to grow food; what a novel concept. One of my favorite models, because I am such a systems junkie, is the Just Transition model. I have to say, I love that. To anyone who's listening, I would encourage you to look it up and check it out.

But it's beautiful in that it describes a whole system shift by recognizing the full interdependence of economy, ecology, culture. It looks at how we shift from a system that's based on extraction and exploitation, that its logical conclusion is the enclosure of wealth and power, and the centralization as we know, of the 1% owning vast amounts of wealth, insane amounts, horrifying amounts. It looks at how we shift from that to a model that instead of being extractive is actually designed around a spiral, just like all of nature is. At the center of the spiral is sacredness and caring; and then as the spiral comes out, it moves to ecological and social well-being, and to regeneration and to cooperation, and to collective self-determination. So, I'm finding in this time... I've always been extremely interested in how we become more conscious of our inner state, and how self-regulating our inner state can bring us into action in a whole different way than we can possibly do otherwise. I find myself very aware right now that approximately a third of the US population is in anxiety at this moment, and that makes total sense to me. So I'm finding myself further drawn to mindfulness practice, and particularly a beautiful practice called relational mindfulness. What I love about that is, I collaborate with a wonderful teacher named Deborah Eden Tull and she has invented this term relational mindfulness, and she refers to it as the subtlest form of self-love. Being a student of indigenous cultures for a long time, one of the things I've really come to understand and embody deeply is that we will never stop making war with each other until we stop making war with ourselves. So relational mindfulness is an opportunity to actually come to peace with ourselves and the part of ourselves that is informed by the mysterious vastness of this sacred living, divine life on Earth, whatever you call it, right? We all have different names for it, but the vastness and the presence and the peace that's always there to be tapped into. I find it's enlivening me; the combination of not getting on planes, this inner direction, and practicing being kind to myself. Then seeing how that radiates out to my family and my dogs and my community and the land I'm on, is just so joyful. It's helping me find step by step and be centered in the middle of this wild chaotic time.

*Vicki Robin*

Yeah, totally. I just went on the whole journey with you and I'm right in it. The thing that I know, you and I have both, we've worked so hard to reveal the structures that we live inside that are so damaging. They're so damaging, they hurt so much, and they hurt tier after tier of people, and we have to presume they hurt the 1% at some level, but it's less visible. The journey when you said this thing about lemmings going off a cliff. Is this a time when the lemmings are going to have this "Oh" moment, and they just go like, "Wait a second. Wait, wait, guys. Wait, wait, wait." The journey, you're making that journey sound very beautiful; the journey within, the journey to self and core and the roadmaps that we've already developed for what that journey is. But I know that that is not an easy journey from head to heart. There is this really sort of jarring, like you're on a highway and suddenly you get to this for-service road that's completely bumpy and rutted and it's so difficult. For women, maybe we're more fluid because people who've been at the bottom of the pyramid of power, you have learned how to be more fluid, because how else are you going to survive? But the people who need to actually relinquish power are more settled in the power-holding positions. They could speak about this head to heart, me to we; but for me, it's like, we just don't have that much time left but would you just reflect on that? What does it take for a person who is a power-holder in this moment of COVID and economic collapse and the justice uprising... Where do you see that cracking for the people who are holding the power, holding the money, holding the ability to draw down the beautiful biocapacity of the planet. In two minutes or less!

*Nina Simons*

Well, that's an easy question! First of all, I want to acknowledge that it is a treacherous hard path, and that our capacity to feel joy is directly related to our capacity to really face into the challenging, yucky, illusory, dark, crappy stuff within. Frankly, as someone who has been on a

journey from imagining myself as a liberated, conscious, white person addressing race, to realizing how much the privilege of having white skin confers blinders, in a similar way that having any kind of power over confers blinders. What's it going to take? I don't know the answer. Honestly, I think that the demonstrations that are happening are huge. But I think it's going to take a lot of us who are in the middle range of having power and privilege, being willing to give something up, and being willing to take risks. I don't think of myself as someone who demonstrates in the streets a lot, but you know what? It's making a huge difference and I'm so grateful everyone is and I can help rally people to get out in the streets. I also think that there is a way that we don't talk enough about the benefits associated with the long dark, hard, arduous path. Because I feel like one of the things I'm proudest of in my life is my own growing awareness about what it means to walk through life with white privilege, and to have sort of ripped myself open enough to acknowledge: No, that identity that I grew up with was bullshit, frankly, and that I have to toss it aside and be willing to say, I know so little about what the black experience is in this country, and to really learn and to open our hearts with huge compassion because as long as my sisters and brothers are suffering in that way, I'm suffering. Really, as a human species, I think we have the opportunity, let's say, to move from a victim-perpetrator model into one that is truly mutually respectful, collaborative and cooperative. That means, how do we learn to not only value difference but to celebrate it? It's a big deep learning and it's gonna be bumpy. As Van Jones says, When you walk across the room of racial justice, it's like walking across a roomful of rakes. You can't walk without stepping on a rake and whacking yourself in the head, probably numerous times. But what I feel is, I want to go to the mountaintop and trumpet how good it feels to have walked through that room, and how much I want to encourage others who are living with more than they need, of whatever sort it is - whether it's privilege, whether it's resources, whether it's actually money - to actually take the risk, to pare away some of that extra and to realize that. The greatest joy in my life is in giving and it's pretty consistent, so I don't know how we're going to change the big systems. I think it's going to take all of us and a lot of different approaches and challenging all of the policies that allow monopolies to just centralize and get bigger and more unwieldy. But may we succeed, is all I know. I can't really imagine a better way to spend my life than towards that pursuit.

*Vicki Robin*

Right. I used to live with a group of people and we used to talk about the room of love; that love is not directional, it's a space that you enter. The way you enter that space is you give up your stuff. We're carrying these huge suitcases of identity and power and privilege and "I'm a smarty pants" and "I have a best-selling book"... We're just laden with these ginormous trunks of self. The only way that you're going to get into the room of love - because the opening is simply your simple self. It's just simply your humble self. So it's really laying things down. not picking things up. In a way, that's what I hear you saying, that the passage is narrow. You get through it by not having as much attached to you as you have. There's so many layers of identity that we can go through. Anyway.

*Nina Simons*

It's so true. You know, one of my north stars for many years has been a quote by Fritjof Capra who says the transition into an eco-literate society involves a transition from counting things, to focusing on mapping relationships. In order to do that, we have to get humble. We have to not know. We have to be willing to be wrong. We have to get very small in order to be our biggest selves. It's one of those funny dichotomies. It's not really a dichotomy. It's the marriage of opposites.

*Vicki Robin*

Absolutely. Well, we could probably have repeat conversations about this. Really. As the scales fall away from our eyes and the identities fall off our shoulders, and we actually become decent human beings. It's like that old song; 'Tis a gift to be simple. 'Tis a gift to be free. 'Tis a gift to come down where we ought to be. We will find ourselves in place just right. We will be in the valley of love and delight.

*Nina Simons*

And if we're lucky, we get down to what our soul purpose is, right? We get down to where we know that our steps are guided by something bigger. What a gift that is.

*Vicki Robin*

Totally. Wow. Thank you so much, Nina, for this time together. So rich. Yeah, so rich. Such great guidance really in there. It's not a 10 point plan or boom-boom-boom. The plan is to become a mensch.

*Nina Simons*

And learn deep listening and surrender in order to get there.

*Vicki Robin*

That's the doorway. Anyway, my friend. Thank you so, so much for being part of this.

*Nina Simons*

Thank you, Vicki. Thanks to everyone listening.