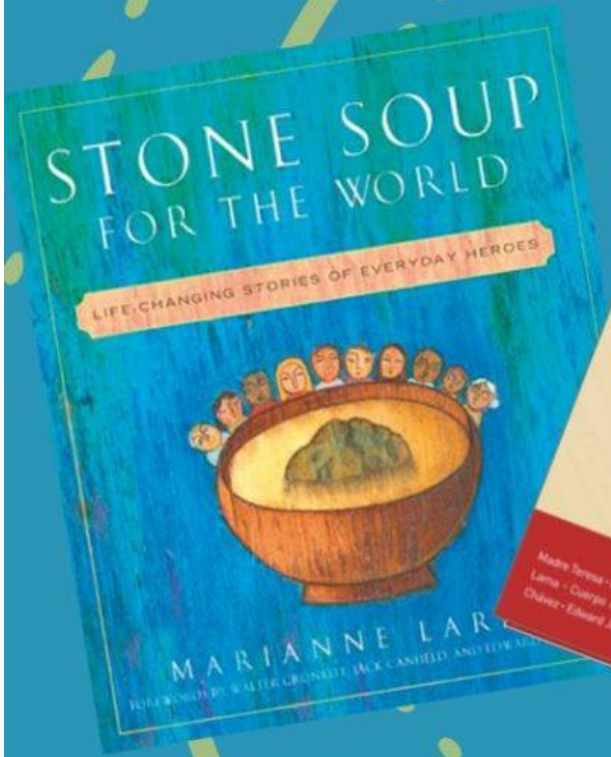


A LESSON IN GIVING



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Claire Nuer



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“Don’t wait for a crisis to happen to change your life,” Claire Nuer said to a group of business leaders. They’d come to learn how to build better companies. What could personal crises and changes have to do with that?

The mother of two children, wife of a successful businessman, Claire ran an optical shop in Paris. In May 1982, she got a life-threatening wake-up call. “I think you need to change my glasses,” she told her doctor. “I have a black area in my vision.” Her exam revealed cancer, an ocular melanoma. She was given only a few months to live.

In French, *claire* means “clear.” And the cancer was in her eye. Interesting coincidence. So began her fascinating journey, on which she learned to make meaning out of life’s bad breaks, and help others to find meaning in their own lives.

In those days the prognosis was indeed terrible. Claire wanted desperately to live, so her two children would have a mother. As a hidden child during the Holocaust, she’d lost her own father. Some days her fears would just about paralyze her. “I’m not a very brave patient,” she would say. “I’m going to die in twenty minutes—this time it’s for sure.” Her husband, Sam, would remind her, “It’s been three years since you’re going to die in twenty minutes, so come on.” Claire could be adamant in her despair: “Precisely, it’s been three years, so this time it’s going to happen!”

Then, one day, Claire had an epiphany: “Okay, I’m going to die in twenty minutes. So what?” she asked herself. “What do I want to do with the next twenty minutes of my life?” Without hesitating, she replied, “To hug my children.” From then on, when she felt this fear taking over, she would pull herself out of

bed and go to her sleeping children's room. Often she didn't think she'd make it, but little by little the breath of life came back into her lungs. The fear would subside—and her passion for her life grew more vigorous than ever. From this simple exercise, Claire learned how her fear of dying could disconnect her from what was most important. She also received a great gift: the present moment.

As Claire came to see that she could learn from her cancer, she became less preoccupied with it as a death sentence and more interested in seeing where her curiosity and revelation would take her. She discovered what unconscious obstacle was in the way of her happiness. She started sharing her experiences with others, urging people to live fully in the moment. Over time, Claire pieced together a methodology that became the foundation for her educational seminars. She taught people to look beyond symptoms and appearances for the fundamental issues and solutions, challenging and then changing their thinking and communication habits. She encouraged them to take each opportunity to improve the quality of their relationships, and to transform their lives, their families, their organizations.

As Claire's seminars became richer, their impact greater, the opportunities multiplied. She facilitated intercultural dialogues, led business seminars, and spoke at such prestigious venues as the Commonwealth Club and the State of the World Forum.

Claire vividly remembers V-E Day, the end of World War II. Everyone in Paris was celebrating at the Arc de Triomphe. Planes flew overhead in a V-for-victory formation. While Claire was grateful for her freedom, she was devastated since her beloved father had died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. That day, this twelve-year-old decided never to let such a thing happen again. On her healing journey, she anchored her life with a goal: "to co-create a healthy context for humanity."

At a gathering convened by MIT visionary Peter Senge in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference, Claire asked an audience of three hundred business leaders, "Fifty years from today, looking back, what decisions would we each have been proud to make to create the future we all want?"

Whatever the business leaders went on to do, this question led Claire to the most important work of her life, the Turning Point Project. In August 1995, fifty years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Claire brought together 367 people from thirty-three different countries near the site of the concentration camp in Poland. “Our ‘never, never again’ can be a starting point,” she told them, “to start learning, to start doing whatever is necessary—in each moment of our lives—so this never happens again. We can be a strong anchor for humanity.”

In 1996, Claire developed a mass in her liver. Undaunted by her physical pain, she brought the lessons learned from the Turning Point to help companies align their goals, implement their missions, and develop healthier work environments. They learned about “ecosystem” leadership rather than “egosystem” leadership. “We don’t see the cost of the actions from our ego—the pain we cause ourselves and others—or we would do something about it,” she would tell participants in her seminars. “In an ecosystem, we operate beyond competition, beyond being ‘stars.’ We are each a link in the chain, adding to each other’s strengths.

“This work on our ego takes a lifetime,” Claire told them. “But the shift, the decision, requires just one second and can happen at each moment, which can be a turning point in our lives, in our families, in our companies, and in the world.”

Rick Fox is one leader who turned at such a point. When he met Claire in 1997, he was struggling. An asset leader on Ursa, Shell’s largest deep-water project in the Gulf of Mexico, Rick and his team had faced a series of setbacks. A drilling problem had delayed operations for six months and cost him 250 million dollars, putting pressure on Rick and his team to achieve what they thought were impossible objectives. He knew it would take something extraordinary for his team to overcome these challenges. When he traveled to San Francisco for his first Learning as Leadership training with Claire, he was looking for a way to prepare his team and deepen their commitment.

Rick realized in the first workshop (a self-discovery process through guided journaling, experimental exercises, and sharing with other participants) how he was limited by his fears and how his reactions to those fears provoked fears in others. He was shocked to see how he was creating exactly the opposite of what he intended.

When Claire explained that “one person can be the rock that changes the course of a river,” and that “it starts with me,” Rick suddenly realized that *he* was the one who needed to be more committed. “I had lots of tricks to preserve my image as a visionary leader instead of a work-through-the-details leader,” he admits today. Claire’s commitment to Rick and his team was a guiding light. “If I want to be trusted, I need to trust,” Rick realized. “If I want commitment, I need to commit. If I want love, I need to create it.”

With newfound courage, Rick invited eleven members of his team, including his boss, to take Claire’s next seminar. He also decided to do something about his other big problem, his seventeen-year-old son, Roger. A high-school senior, Roger had taken up training for the “Ultimate Fighting Championship,” and Rick worried about his son’s “ultimate” safety.

Rick asked Roger to join him and his team at the seminars. “Instead of trying to force or convince Roger,” Rick says, “I asked him in a way that was clear and respectful. I told him how much he meant to me and how I wanted this opportunity for our relationship.” Roger listened carefully to his father and said, “Okay, I’ll go. You can make the reservations.” When Rick admitted shyly, “I already did,” they both laughed.

Rick knew he was taking a big risk. He knew he’d have to be honest with his team, including his boss—and all in front of his son. But he was determined to be in the “learning process” since this was too important for him. “What would I lose by taking risks, being vulnerable with people close to me?” Rick asked himself. “And how much could I gain by improving those relationships?”

When, during the seminar, Rick shared his struggles at work, and admitted his own shortcomings, his son was touched by his honesty. “Dad, you say what you need to say and do what you need to do,” he said, putting his arm around his

father. "If we end up in the ditch, I'll be there with you." The other parents in the room longed to get as close to their children.

After that seminar, things started to change. Today, Roger is a peaceful guy. His friends come to him for honesty and support, instead of for protection. He's on his way to medical school. "He's a great role model for his brother, Rabun," says Rick proudly, "and for me, too!"

Rick's team has also made remarkable progress: They've set new goals, one of which is to cultivate their "ecosystem." What may sound like soft ideals directed them to solid results. They completed the Ursa project four months ahead of schedule and \$40 million under budget. Their operating performance is "Best in Class," and their uptime performance of 99 percent leads the industry. Their safety record is outstanding, and they pride themselves on achieving aggressive environmental goals. "This tiny woman, who spoke only French, was one of the most courageous people I've ever met," Rick says. "She inspired me by always aiming for what she wanted to create and saying 'so what' to her fears."

Claire kept working to the end. She died in 1999, but her spirit lives in those who carry on her work. The Learning as Leadership team continues to offer seminars so that more people can thrive together in a global ecosystem. "Claire was not religious, but she was one of the most deeply spiritual people I've ever met," said her close friend George McCown, a founding partner of McCown De Leeuw & Co., at her funeral. "She taught what all the great prophets taught: the power of love and connection."

To learn more about **Learning as Leadership** training programs, phone 415-453-5050, or visit www.learnaslead.com. **The Nuer Foundation's** mission is to empower people, projects, and communities to make a difference for the future of humanity. Visit their Web site, www.nuerfoundation.org.