



Learning as Leadership: Humanizing Business

Lara & Claire Nuer

San Francisco & Paris

Lara Nuer was an ordinary teenager living in Paris with her family. She applied herself in school, had a close network of friends, and got along with her younger brother. Behind the appearances, however, Lara was resentful. “I was in the throes of a teenage crisis. I was easily annoyed by anything my mother said and felt oppressed by her sense of responsibility and sacrifice. I was on the shy and introverted side, so most of my rebellion was internal rather than voiced. But she knew it, and it hurt her.”

Then, one day, everything changed in an instant. Lara’s mother Claire was diagnosed with a terminal cancer and given three months to live. “When this happened, my teenage crises vanished overnight,” Lara says. “I immediately became determined to help her conquer this cancer. It was a very pure, naïve sense of hope and possibility. I was only 14, but I was on a mission to keep her alive. My father and I became her copilots on her quest for healing.”

Claire knew what it was like to lose a parent. When she was nine years old, her father had been deported to Auschwitz, never to return. When Claire was only seven, she had been sent into hiding, away from her parents. She had faced hunger, abuse, and disease during the dark years of the Holocaust. Now she ferociously wanted to see her children grow up – and to be there for them.

Her type of cancer was very rare and there were no treatments for it at that time. But with her husband Sam’s, and Lara’s help, she became determined to try anything, look anywhere, even in the most unconventional places, for healing.

One of those places was *inside herself*. Claire and Sam became obsessed with this thought: “If we only have a few months left, how can we make the most out of them, in our relationships with each other, our kids, our community?” This propelled them into an adventure of self-discovery, as they learned how to “show up as their best selves” with their family, since time was now so precious.

They devoured self-improvement books, travelled the world looking for the latest medical treatments, and in the process met pioneers in the field of human potential of the 1970s and 80’s in the U.S., like Gerald Jampolsky and Dr. Carl Simonton.

They slowly became more conscious of all the internal barriers people create instead of living each moment in joy, aligned with a sense of purpose. A big one, they came to discover, is the underlying fears and insecurities that stem from painful experiences in our childhoods. Claire realized as a “hidden child”, she had developed fears of being excluded, abandoned and betrayed. That led her to lose her temper when she perceived someone was not keeping a promise, or didn’t tell her the whole truth.

Through these new insights - while she was still battling her cancer – Claire’s life’s work was born: to give people the tools to discover this kind of self-awareness back to the world. Claire and Sam created workshops to help others to bring their best selves to their projects and their relationships. “Don’t wait until you have a few months to live to work on yourself!” was her motto.

Awareness of one’s own fears, the origins of those fears, and their impact on behavior are at the core of the educational seminars that Claire developed over time – with Sam, and a growing number of volunteers. Reflecting back to these

early days, "I was fascinated by how this work was allowing people to transform their lives, helping them become more who they wanted to be. It was very empowering."

From the very beginning, Lara attended every seminar she could. She too was eager to work on her own issues of shyness and her defensiveness. "I'd complained about how my mother always needed to be right," she says. "Turns out I had my own need to be right!" .

"Like my mother, I was convinced that if people could learn to bring their best selves to their relationships, their work, their lives, that this would curb their need to demonize the 'Other'," she says. "Ultimately, we hoped we could prevent another Auschwitz."

So now Lara was on a mission, not only to keep her mother alive, but to spread this work. Her friends in school, her boyfriends, her teachers, her boss and her manager in the marketing department of Evian: "They all attended, drawn by my enthusiasm," she says. "They were all transformed."

After graduating from high school, Lara attended one of the top business schools in France. "I saw how teams, though wanting to innovate and create great things, ended up in 'us vs. them' dynamics, 'I have to win over you' mentalities, and turf wars."

"After I graduated from college, I felt a calling," Lara says. "I didn't want to climb the corporate ladder of a major company; I wanted to help spread this work to the business community. Because if the business leaders can work on themselves, then we will *really* change the world, one ego at a time!"

It was then that Lara decided to join Claire's organization full time, where she was in charge of outreach to executive leaders. The programs continued to develop, infused by encounters with pioneers in related fields, like Dr. Maxie Maultby, the founder of Rational Behavior Theory, and Peter Senge, the co-founder of Learning Organizations, and author of *The Fifth Discipline*.

Claire was now being invited to speak at major conferences and offer her programs in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. Because Lara was fluent in English she became Claire's translator, and she worked feverishly to translate her work, enroll and coach business leaders around the world, and help build media campaigns for special community dialogue projects.

Meanwhile, Claire's audience kept growing: she was asked to speak in prestigious venues like the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco and at Brenton Woods. Leaders like Deepak Chopra, Willis Harmon, and George McCown wanted to meet her. They were all curious how this petite woman who spoke only French and barely had a sixth-grade education could have such a powerful impact on so many people.

By the late 1990s, Claire's curriculum had evolved into a one-year program that included several seminars, one-on-one and team coaching, and consulting, to help leaders in business, government, the nonprofit world and academia bring their best selves to their work, their families, and their communities.

"I discovered my ego's hot buttons, how they are rooted in ways I felt victimized in my past," one CEO admitted to Lara in a coaching session, "This became a lens I project onto the world, and now when those buttons are triggered, I react and become, inadvertently, the victimizer, thus perpetuating onto others the very pain I suffered from. I am committed to stop perpetuating this cycle. I now have a Noble Goal."

By now corporate executives, nonprofit leaders, consultants, and academics were all seeking out Claire's training programs. "I am so proud that my mother, this little Frenchwoman, deprived of schooling in her childhood, developed a methodology that has been taught to thousands of people around the world, and is the basis of curricula now taught at Harvard, Stanford, Darden, and other universities," Lara says. "It's having an impact in the fields of leadership and organizational behavior, social psychology, and inter-group relations."

Claire lived for 17 more years after that auspicious day that changed her life: when she was told she had only three months to live. She would come to call cancer her “dear friend” because of the changes it had brought about in her life and in the lives of so many others.

By the time Claire passed away, Lara was 31 years old. Her brother Noah, for years inspired by his parents’ journey, gave up his film career to devote himself full time to the continuation of their work. “At first when my mother died, I was crushed,” Lara says. “But little by little I found meaning to her departure. It pushed me, my brother, and others to suddenly grow to a whole new level. We had to find a way for the work to continue! We had to step up to the plate and facilitate the seminars, run the organization on our own. It was time for us, and for me, to step into a new level of responsibility.” She pauses, and reflects, “My reverence for my mother might have prevented me from finding my own voice. But she had told me more than once, ‘One day you will continue this work in your own way, and it will be different—and better.’ That gave me the courage to continue on the path she had started.”

Since Claire’s passing, under Lara and Noah’s leadership, Learning As Leadership (LAL) has become a leadership training of choice for Fortune 500 companies. Featured on NPR, and in the award-winning book *Ego Free Leadership*, the organization is committed more than ever to helping organizations shape a more humane culture.

Today Lara is married to Shayne who, as a rebellious teen had come with his parents to one of Claire’s seminars. He is now president of LAL, and father to their two children. “I’ll always be grateful for the model my mother set for me,” Lara says, “for her boundless selflessness and generosity. For her passion for life, and for *Tikkun Olam*.”

“Just as my mother confronted her demons with the onset of the cancer, her death has pushed me to confront mine. Just as she faced her fears in order to pursue *her* noble goals, I am finding the courage to confront mine. It is an enormous privilege to be a recipient of her legacy. And I am committed to carrying it on. It has become my life’s work.”

Today Lara’s extended community is working together to support major corporations in becoming more humanistic - and in the process, more successful too. Together they are carrying on Claire’s legacy... to humanize the world of business, starting with their executives, their families ... and one day, the world.

*When you say ‘so what’ to your fears, when you reach for the stars,
the magic of being human unfolds.*

Claire Nuer

Call to Action: Go beyond our Ego to create a context for humanity together.
Learning as Leadership: www.learnaslead.com • Nuer Foundation: www.nuerfoundation.org

Stone Soup Leadership Institute
www.stonesoupleadership.org
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