

YOUR TURN

Beyond the Ego-System

BY CLAIRE NUER



The following is excerpted from a speech given to the World Business Academy by Claire Nuer shortly before her death earlier this year. Claire was the founder of Learning as Leadership, a fellow and trustee of the World Business Academy, and a consultant member of the Society for Organizational

Learning. As a survivor of the Holocaust and of cancer, Claire turned a lifetime of challenges into a commitment to creating a humane world today and for future generations. She pioneered a set of conceptual and practical leadership and personal mastery skills for teams, companies, families, and communities around the world.

I was born in 1933 in the Jewish Ghetto of Paris. Then, as today, many people were talking about re-creating the world. The communists, the capitalists, the nationalists, the fascists—and all the other “ists”—wanted to make a difference, and yet it led to unprecedented destruction.

Today as well, we all want leaders who make a difference. We talk about the need for clear vision, passion, enthusiasm, and commitment. Hitler provided that to millions of people, as did Lenin, Stalin, and Mao. These leaders, hoping to make a difference for their people—but *only for their people*—led us to some of the worst destruction in the history of mankind.

The perpetrators of these crimes were not barbarians, but well-educated bystanders like you and me. Millions of men and women—scientists, physicians, professors, artists, and business leaders—became killers. This tragedy has always resonated with me because it demonstrates that if we do not take a stand, then we become implicit participants. Witnessing the Holocaust has led me to ask myself, “If I had been

born in Germany in 1923, would I have been a Nazi?” I wish I could say, “Who me? Impossible!” The thought alone gives me vertigo.

Yet even today, when I fear that somebody is going to “make me wrong,” what do I do? What do you do? Every day in subtle ways we “kill” each other with our thoughts. Fearing for our own survival or loss of power, we kill with our anger, our prejudices, and our addiction to being right. How can we learn to heighten our self-awareness and become leaders who will not perpetuate this kind of destruction?

The Culture of Ego

Babies are born learners. They are constantly learning, and once they learn something, they let it go and move on to something else. But as we grow older, we begin to do the opposite—we hold on to our certainties. Our need for love and compassion is replaced by the constant search for other people’s acknowledgment. In a world driven by the need for external acknowledgment, equality is never enough. For our ego, “equal” means “more than,” which is what we think we need to be in order to be acknowledged. “More than,” however, means pushing others down, always being right, “killing” others by word or deed. It is foolish to think we can create functional teams or families when we operate in this “ego-system,” where we each want to be the star that shines.

Yet when we take stock and see that this is not what we want, we can say, “I’m fed up.” As long as we kid ourselves and disguise reality, as long as we do not look at the costs, why

should we change? Learning about the prison of our ego takes a lifetime, but the decision to change takes just one second.

Killing the “Killer” Instinct

As we work on no longer being killers, we enter into a very different place—that of the “eco-system.” In the eco-system, we operate beyond competition, where there are no stars. We are all a link in the chain, adding on each other’s strengths and giving support for each other’s weaknesses. We are safe, and we make others safe to express who they really are.

Creating this space of compassion, trust, and communication often requires confronting our greatest fears. Instead of protecting ourselves, as we do in the ego-system, we surface tough issues and communicate about them directly. We support others in a way that brings us toward our collective goals.

Do you want to remain a “killer”? Do you want to contribute to “killer” families, “killer” schools, “killer” companies, and “killer” countries? When you decide that you do not, that clarity will provide you with a starting point to experiment with something new—what I call a “noble goal.” A noble goal is one that supports all of humanity. When I am guided by my noble goal, I become vigilant moment by moment and can truly choose the context in which I put my thoughts, decisions, and actions. This state of choice is the first step toward bringing about the kind of radical change that will ultimately protect all living beings on the planet. ▀