

Leadership lessons from experiences of innovation, trauma and grief

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Through my work experiences in innovation and through my on-going processing of the trauma and grief of my own country of birth, I have come to see that we each have a leadership journey that links our highest aspirations to our own healing hero's journey, connecting us more deeply to ourselves, to others and our planet.

I never thought much about leadership until 1994. I was a graduate student, doing research in molecular biology at the time. I had set aside my undergraduate aspirations of working with farmers in my native land of Rwanda, to explore a different frontier. I went to university abroad wanting to one day come home after I gained tools to help solve food security in the world. I had not expected that a civil war and a genocide would take place back home, far from my classrooms in Canada. In the years after 1994, I prayed for peace for Rwanda. I kept going, got my PhD and became an R&D director in the biotechnology industry but the horror that took place in Rwanda continued to feed my reflections on the role of leaders while I remained unclear on how to address this personally.

As a first time team leader outside of a volunteer setting, I realized I had funding to accomplish work I deeply enjoyed but that this work required a multidisciplinary team with different skills to work together in a harmonious way toward a common goal. Doing the research was the easy part; perplexing for me was figuring out how to address interpersonal issues within my team, the reality that I was the only African woman I knew in this sector in Montreal at the time, and the fact that I had not planned to work in Canada in a position of leadership. I looked for advice in the management literature and read Peter Drucker, Jim Collins and anything in between to help me understand how to lead and manage for greatness. I struggled with my sense of identity in corporate French North America. I ate up Ella L. J. Edmondson Bell and Stella Nkomo's *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*.

Long gone were my graduate years of wearing a lab coat. I dressed with intent depending on whether I was taking my team out for a casual lunch or was lobbying senior management for raises for my team. I loved the long days, the continuous innovation, and the camaraderie with my team. When my mother died suddenly in Rwanda around the time my nine-month old daughter was taking her first steps, I knew I had to reorganize my life to go back home to Rwanda. It had been 14 years since I left Rwanda and I wanted my work to allow space for me to spend time with my father who was still living in Rwanda, paralyzed following a stroke and in a wheelchair. I reinvented myself as an innovation consultant, started doing work in Africa looking at what was needed for cutting edge discoveries to translate into local products and services within thriving businesses. I met with scientists, politicians, business people, and academics. I quickly concluded that none of the skills I had acquired in graduate school and in the biotech industry could be effectively leveraged if I got more involved in Rwanda unless I gained a deeper understanding of the gaps that needed to be filled for vibrant, innovative ecosystems to prosper. This made me see how leadership was critical to visioning ways of incorporating innovation to create local prosperity.

As a scientist, my hopes were to turn research discoveries into innovations for the world. What my consulting practice taught me was that great scientific discoveries

have no value in bringing prosperity where poverty prevailed unless there is effective leadership to turn these into practical and accessible products and services. What is the value of a cure for HIV/AIDS without an adequate regulatory framework to release needed drugs safely and without pricing structures that allow businesses to thrive and local communities the ability to cover cost of care? What is the value of a new variety of rice that is resistant to pests and drought and has high vitamin A and great flavor, if there is no framework to get seeds, fertilizers, and other inputs at a reasonable cost to small holder farmers who do not have the means to easily bring their produce to market?

Thinking about these issues took me back to the 100 days of the Rwandan Genocide. I started wondering what if the same energy that produced immense tragedy could be harnessed for good, what would that look like, how would it be enabled? In *Leading Change* John Kotter writes that “Leadership is a set of processes that creates organizations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with that vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles.” I was eager to contribute to this kind of future, and leadership became my passion. I didn’t know that this inspiration would lead me 13 years after the genocide to become a member of Rwanda’s presidential advisory council, or 19 years later to chair a global conference on leadership for local and global resilience attended by over a thousand people from over 30 countries. What I did know is that leadership designed spaces for people to work well or badly together towards either greatness or abhorrent violence, towards either greed or generosity and anything in between.

Twenty one years after the genocide in Rwanda, I found myself with 10,000 others at the base of Mount Fuji, in Japan reciting “May peace prevail for every country on the planet” in each of their official languages. This gathering had been spearheaded in part by Masami Saionji for the Fuji Declaration launch to “light our way to a future that will witness the start of the conscious creation of a sustainable, humane, and spiritual civilization.” As the chairperson of the Goi Peace Foundation, Masami continues the work of her mentor Masahisa Goi who, after witnessing the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, devoted his life to pray for humanity and initiated the

prayer “May Peace Prevail on Earth.” Earlier that same week, a smaller group of had gathered in Tokyo at the United Nations University hailing from different corners of the earth, across different disciplines. What I hold most dear of this gathering is the importance of designing and facilitating spaces for wisdom to emerge out of the uncertainty and richness of bringing very different people together to reflect on a common purpose.

This smaller group had spent the day listening to what brought each of us together, reflecting on seeds of change, shared visions and ideas for action we could engage in nurture the Fuji Declaration’s intent “to revitalize our recognition of who we are, and how we relate to each other, to the earth, and to the cosmos”.

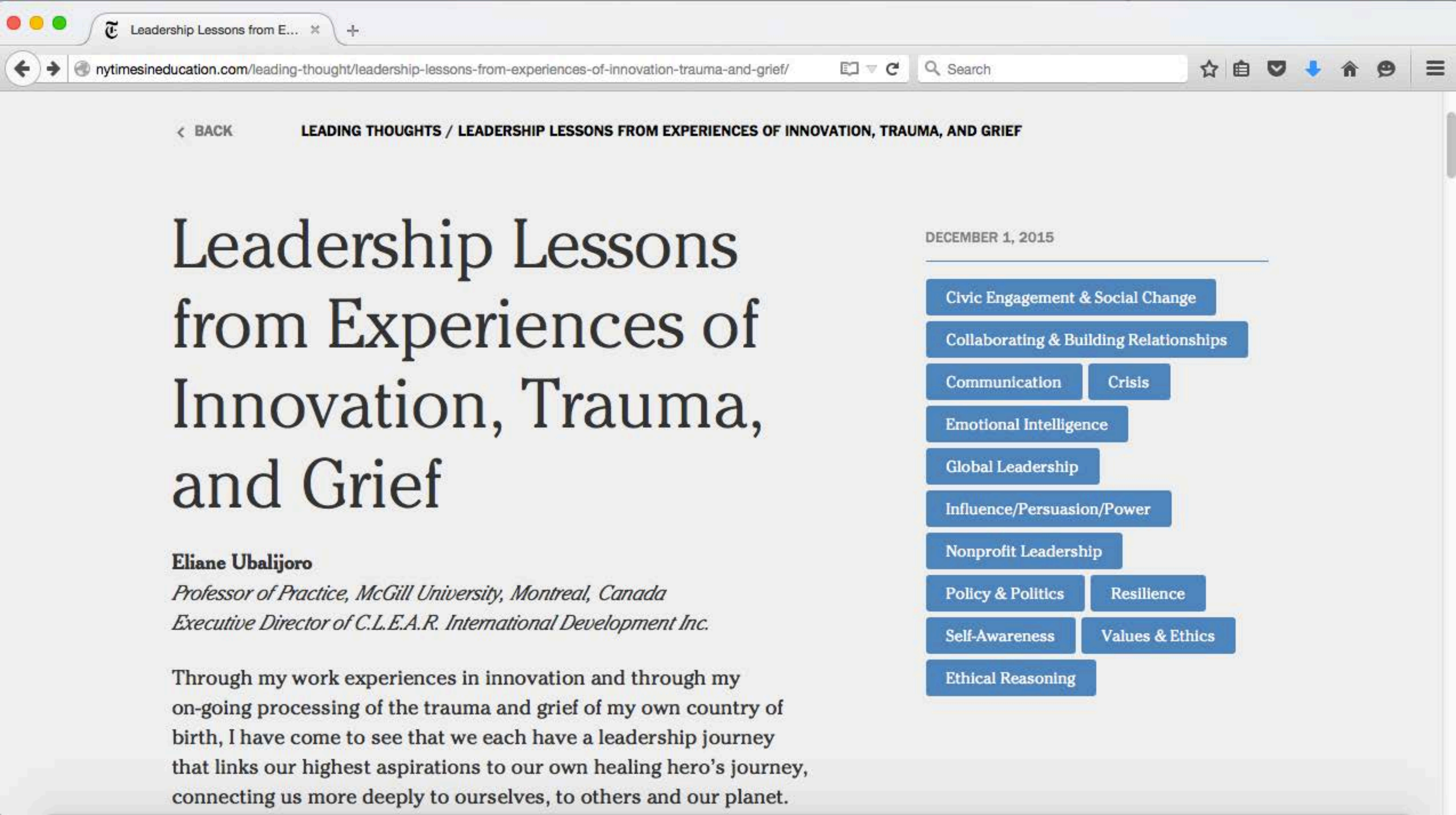
However we come into the world, we all face pain, loss and nudged we can all connect to a dream we have for ourselves and the world as well as the values we hold as a consequence. As I stood at the base of Mount Fuji reciting May Peace Prevail for each country in the world and watched the procession of flag bearers come down from the flanks of the mountain, and each at a time come on stage for the prayer recital in their official languages, different moments of my life rushed through my mind and heart. I saw myself in 1994, watching news reports on Rwanda feeling helpless. I saw myself stumble and move forward through the losses of my parents a decade later, going through career shifts, entering into motherhood and I felt myself connected to each person praying with me for humanity on this beautiful day in Japan as well as with the 7,000 others who joined with us through cyberspace. This made me realize that people have and will continue to gather in different places in the world praying for self and others for a wholeness aspired to that we sometimes have a chance to touch. Great leadership also holds the intent to bring wholeness, making each of us useful, in the roles that we can best contribute to without marginalization and through deeply revitalized connections. Great leadership helps us see systems in ways that are fully integrated where each can contribute.

Working recently on a book chapter on Women and Leadership in Rwanda, my editor John Eric Baugher, a sociologist with expertise in grief and transformational learning, helped me link my desire for a bright future for my country of birth with my own opening to a collective grief that is both a source of wisdom and compassion. I could

open to memories of horror and the sweet remembrance of those lost. In the space of wisdom, compassion and humility from embracing grief, I could recognize a fundamental interdependency, reciprocity, and mutuality of journeying with others near and far. When I am teaching leadership in executive programs, my interest is in helping the particular group I am working connect the internal and external dots of the systems they are in. My interest is in helping leaders become aware of the conscious and unconscious roles they hold and understand how that plays out in the systems they are in. My aim is for them to imagine how they would want to shift these roles in service of the organizations they are in while leveraging what their most cherished motivational values are. I am motivated by the strengthening of communities through meaningful connection, the creation of safe spaces for courageous conversations to take place and by innovations that promote sustainable livelihoods and environments. When I am grounded in this personal value system, I can practice holding fear with an open hand. I can invite others to move likewise towards and open to that which otherwise leads us to close down in aggression, greed, or indifference instead of allowing Peace to prevail. For the healing of Rwanda, myself, and all whom my work will touch, may I continue to grow my leadership capacities in ways that clarify how best what I value can serve me, others and the world. What leadership skills and practices do you want to grow that best amplify what you value in order to be of service to self, others and the world?

Eliane Ubalijoro is a professor of practice for public and private sector partnerships at McGill University's Institute for the Study of International Development, where her research interests focus on innovation and sustainable development for prosperity creation. Eliane teaches and advises in Executive Leadership programs. She has been a member of the Presidential Advisory Council for Rwandan President Paul Kagame since its inception in September 2007. She was a facilitator for the first cohort in the International Health Leadership Development Programme (IHLDP) commissioned by the Kenya Red Cross and the International HIV/AIDS Alliance offered by Lancaster University's Management School. She also teaches leadership in the International Parliamentary Executive Education program run by McGill University and the World Bank Institute as well as the French equivalent run by Laval University. Eliane is

currently the principal investigator on a Gates Grand Challenges Phase I grant looking at Innovations in Feedback & Accountability Systems for Agricultural Development. She is the founder and executive director of C.L.E.A.R. International Development Inc. She chaired the 15th International Leadership Association Annual Global Conference bringing a thousand leadership scholars and practitioners to Montreal from October 30th to November 2nd 2013. In 2014, she gave a TEDx talk on Reimagining the world from scarcity to prosperity. She is a Founding Signatory of the Fuji Declaration that was launched in Japan in May 2015. Eliane is currently working on a book for leaders and change makers.



< BACK

LEADING THOUGHTS / LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM EXPERIENCES OF INNOVATION, TRAUMA, AND GRIEF

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Self-Awareness

Values & Ethics

Ethical Reasoning

In this section, we invite leading educators, scholars, and practitioners to share their thoughts on leadership. The main purpose of this section is to spur new ways of thinking about leadership as they relate to these areas.

As you consider the ideas presented in this section, you may want to take a step further and bring them to the classroom for further discussion. "Leading Thoughts" is designed to open new avenues for dialogue among those interested in deepening their own thinking about the nature of leadership.



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Learning Outcomes: Ethical Reasoning

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