

A CASE STUDY ON A FLAWED VISIONARY: PART 1

In our book, *The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership*, Jim & I discuss a leadership model that inspires us to lead from the heart of character. True transformation happens not because of leadership skill, but because of what is in a leader's heart. Ultimately the leader's exercise of virtue is the critical factor in his or her success. Today we will see how a visionary, Bob Pierce, had the vision, yet displayed enormous emotional inconsistency. We will take a look at his vision and downfalls. We can learn more about transformational leadership by looking at this man of contradictions.

Bob Pierce was the founder and first president of World Vision.

His Vision. Born on October 8, 1914, Bob Pierce was a man of

unparalleled passion and moral imagination.

He was a

visionary

with an independent, maverick edge,

an innovator

and organizational pioneer,

an entrepreneur of extraordinary gifting

and unusual physical and emotional energy.

Pierce lived out his world class gifting on a global stage. He led an unusually inspiring and yet profoundly tragic life writ large across three decades and six continents.

Pierce's early adult years were marked by an unquenchable restlessness coupled with a gnawing sense of futility. He lacked a life-direction. This changed dramatically, when in 1947 at the age of 33, Pierce, then a worker with Youth for Christ, left the United States for China to shoot a movie about the work of Christian missions in that country. Pierce began his trip with just enough money to get as far as Honolulu. He eventually made it to Shanghai, China, where he witnessed the hunger and abject poverty of the average Chinese citizen. Pierce was especially distressed by the sad state of children. Communism threatened to take over the country, which it did two years later.

In May of 1948 Pierce returned to China where he stumbled across some courageous German sisters running a mission school for orphans near the Tibetan border. Pierce was especially upset by the situation of a young girl named White Jade. She had been physically abused by her father and rejected by her family because she had visited a local mission school. Pierce pleaded with the sisters to take her in but school could not afford one more mouth to feed. Pierce objected,

“That’s crazy, ridiculous. A child can’t come asking for help and be turned away at the door. Why isn’t something being done?”

One of the sisters picked the little girl up off the ground and thrust her into Pierce’s arms, and posed a question that would shape the remainder of his life. “What are you going to do about it?” Pierce gave the principal five dollars and promised to send more each month to help support her. (This incident was the inspiration for World Vision’s individual child-sponsorship program.)

Shocked and outraged by the darkness and suffering he saw, Pierce purposed to do something about it. His daughter, Marilee Pierce Dunker wrote,

“My father went to China a young man in search of adventure. He came home a man with a mission.”

In 1950 Pierce made two trips to Korea, the second after the Chinese had entered the Korean War. The ravages of war left thousands of families homeless, and without food or medical care. The compelling needs of orphans especially moved him—there were tens of thousands of children orphaned during the war. After visiting the suffering children of the Korean island of Kojedo, Pierce wrote on the flyleaf of his Bible,

“Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God.”

Pierce caught the humanitarian crisis in all its ugly reality on film in an emotionally compelling work titled 38th Parallel. He showed the film to church groups across America, using it as an opportunity to invite individuals to make monthly contributions to Korean orphans the way he had helped White Jade. Money poured in and it became obvious that Pierce would need to start an organization to properly account for its use. On September 22, 1950 Pierce founded World Vision, an international Christian relief and community development organization with the mission

“working for the well being of all people, especially children.”

In its inception, World Vision supplied hospitals, schools, clinics—anyone who needed help with medical supplies, jeeps, trucks, wheelchairs, anything they needed to alleviate suffering. Today, World Vision is one of the largest organizations of its kind in the world. Over five million monthly donors support the work of over 20,000 full time staff in 90 countries on six continents.

Bob Pierce envisioned a world where children and families would be free from hunger, disease and homelessness.

IF HE SAW A NEED THAT NO ONE ELSE WAS MEETING, HE MOVED HEAVEN AND EARTH TO MEET IT.

He pursued his vision with tireless dedication and unhesitating responsiveness to the plight of orphans, widows and the poor. This unquenchable passion for meeting needs shaped the remainder of his life. Life-shaping adversity.

THE ADULT LIFE OF BOB PIERCE WAS SHAPED LARGELY BY ADVERSITY AND EMOTIONAL NEED.

As a young, newly married man, Pierce found himself in the throes of a crisis of faith. He left his wife Lorraine and their first child when she was two months old. He didn't communicate with her for weeks, and eventually sent word to her that he wanted a divorce. They managed to reconcile, but this incident was but the beginning of a life-long pattern of emotional instability.

The early post World War II years was an era when many in the ministry preferred to

"burn out, not rust out."

Pierce lived by that motto. He did nothing half way. He was always on the go. He kept a breathless pace and expected others to keep up. He had an insatiable hunger for risk and adventure.

HE BECAME KNOWN FOR SPECIALIZING IN THE IMPOSSIBLE. BUT PIERCE AND HIS FAMILY PAID A DEAR PRICE FOR HIS ALL-CONSUMING PASSION.

As Tom Howard observed,

"But the man whose heart was aflame for God and for needy people was himself burned by that flame."

This flame scorched Pierce's family. Pierce's eyes burned with visions of starving and homeless people around the world, but he could not see the needs of those in his own home. Pierce's daughter, Marilee Pierce Dunker shared the story of the high price Pierce's family paid for his passion and emotional instability in the book, *Days of Glory, Seasons of Night*. As the author reflected,

"A play by play description of the disintegration of a life or a family is neither easy to write nor easy to read. Certainly it was a nightmare to live."

Pierce's daughter described him as a man of enormous emotional inconsistency and troubling contradictions. Pierce's passion, at least in part, was shaped by his inner, emotional need and turmoil. He was, in his daughter's words,

"helpless to understand himself."

She described him as

"...a rowboat racing a windjammer...like a swimmer floundering in the surf, he seemed unable to do anything to resist the tide of emotions that threatened to carry him away...he was flying on empty and any strong winds of opposition could cause him to lose control."

A MAN OF CONTRADICTIONS.

While Pierce would only take on the most complex and highly difficult projects on the grandest scale, nevertheless, he was highly sensitive to the slightest criticism, and especially susceptible to discouragement and despair if he failed.

For instance, as a young man just starting out in ministry, when a major meeting did not go as planned Pierce disappeared for days, unable to face family and friends.

Pierce was at ease with presidents and royalty, lepers and orphans, but rarely at ease with his family.

HE BROUGHT REST AND COMFORT TO OTHERS, YET REFUSED TO GET THE PHYSICAL REST AND EMOTIONAL REFRESHMENT HE NEEDED TO SUSTAIN HIS EFFORT.

He quickly endeared himself to people. Yet he kept those who loved him at a distance. He had a legion of admirers and many colleagues, but few close friends.

This concludes Part 1 of “Man of Vision Bob Pierce: Flawed Visionary”. Check back next week for Part 2.

Also, consider purchasing our book “The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership” for yourself, or a friend.

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