

A CASE STUDY ON A FLAWED VISIONARY: PART 2

PIERCE WAS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE IN OTHERS, EVEN ON A REMARKABLE SCOPE AND SCALE, YET HE RESENTED AND RESISTED ANY ATTEMPT BY OTHERS TO MAKE EVEN THE SMALLEST CHANGE IN HIS PERSONAL OR PROFESSIONAL LIFE.

He was driven to meet the needs of a world, especially children, in pain and despair, hunger and homelessness. In fact, he said at various times that he actually felt the pain of others to such a degree that he could do nothing other than work tirelessly to meet those needs and relieve their pain.

However, Pierce's resonance with the needs of the masses insulated him from the need and pain of those closest to him, especially his wife and three daughters.

At the core of these contradictions was Pierce's emotionally impulsivity. As his daughter observed

"It was a paradox to see the same man who gave so lovingly explode over the most unexpected things." Pierce seemed helpless to understand himself, and he let no one into this life close enough to increase his self-awareness. He was a stranger in his own emotional landscape. Consequently, he lived most of his adult life as an angry, frustrated man, who habitually lashed out at others, but didn't know why."

His leadership.

Pierce was energized by a big challenge, and so was not one to be intimidated by the magnitude of the world's need. In fact, deep and pressing needs and a heroic challenge energized and embolden him—a sort of call to battle. For example, in 1956 Pierce single-handedly transported 26 Korean orphans to California for adoption. (Pierce was presented the Medal of Public Welfare Service by the government of South Korea for his humanitarian efforts). He was the quintessential "man on a mission." As his daughter noted,

"No need was too great for him to tackle, or too small for him to bother with."

An aura of awe and reverence surrounded Pierce, especially when he traveled in the Orient. Wherever he went he was met by reporters and flashing cameras, and welcomed as a "great man of God."

But there was a dark and tragic undercurrent in Pierce's life. Pierce was a man of vision and creative insight blessed with a bottomless reserve of physical energy. He was full of charm, wit and contagious enthusiasm. He possessed unusual confidence in front of large crowds, holding them spellbound with his clear and compelling messages.

But, in my opinion, Pierce was a classic example of a charismatic narcissist who succumbed to the dark undercurrents of destructive narcissism.

THE SAME EMOTIONAL DYNAMICS THAT LED PIERCE TO START WORLD VISION EVENTUALLY LED TO HIS DOWNFALL AS ITS LEADER.

Pierce carried the full, backbreaking load of the world on his shoulders. He kept a hectic pace, often working himself to exhaustion. In fact, Pierce preferred that his schedule never let up. Whether it was Korea or the slums of India, Afghanistan or the Soviet Union, the compelling needs of the world's most vulnerable, especially children drove him to travel and directly meet these needs with every waking hour of the day. In spite of pleadings from his family and warnings from his friends to spend more time at home, Pierce traveled ten months a year over a fifteen-year period.

He rationalized his absence, saying

"I've made an agreement with God that I'll take care of his helpless little lambs overseas if he'll take care of mind at home."

As his daughter observed, this was his agreement and not God's. His daughter noted that he preferred "occasional marriage by correspondence," and was always more comfortable expressing his emotions to his wife and children when he was thousands of miles away.

Pierce allowed no one into his emotional space. He had no peer partners and allowed no one to enter his emotional space. Over the decades, even as his success increased, he became increasingly isolated and insecure. He resented and resisted those who challenged him or asked him to modify in the slightest way his approach to life and ministry.

Finally, the years of eighteen-hour days, the burdens of international travel and his emotional isolation took their inevitable toll. Pierce began experiencing the symptoms of a physical and emotional breakdown. In 1963, now running on empty, his personal and professional life began to unravel. His physical health deteriorated. His emotional life was on a razor's edge.

The World Vision board felt they had to take strong action. They took away his cherished radio show, which had been on the air since 1956. This marked the first time anyone had challenged his authority and absolute control. As his daughter noted, relational conflict brought out the worst, not the best in him. Pierce was not known for his diplomacy, especially in times of stress. Pierce did not embrace the candor of his board. He felt betrayed and emotionally wounded. He became suspicious and bitter, and blamed the board for his problems. Later that year the board placed him on a medical leave of absence and appointed a new acting president. At the age of 49, Pierce left his family and isolated himself in Asia for the next nine months, emotionally unable to face the reality of his situation.

PIERCE DESCRIBED HIMSELF AS SAILING ALONE IN STORMY SEAS WITH POOR VISIBILITY.

Pierce eventually returned to his World Vision responsibilities, but the next three years were marked by a turbulent relationship between Pierce, the World Vision board and his family. Pierce continued to clash with the board, especially around his many unilateral financial decisions. As his daughter described him, he was a free spirit who checked only with the Holy Spirit before he made important decisions and commitments.

In 1967, as conflict with the board continued, in a fit of rage, Pierce threw away his life's work like a petulant child in a fit of temper. He challenged the board's authority and when they refused to give him his way, he resigned from World Vision, bitter and angry at what he felt was undue interference with the day to day running of the organization. In the months following, his daughter described him

“like a mother bereft of her only child or a king exiled from an empire of his own making.”

Pierce crumbled emotionally and retreated into a stormy, silent isolation, shutting himself off from the input and comfort of others. His raw emotions were manifested in physical symptoms of uncontrollable shaking and choking spells.

His uncontrollable and unpredictable moods caused others to step lightly, mince their words and walk on eggs to protect his fragile emotions. His daughter remembers the impact on his marriage.

“They (Pierce and his wife Lorraine) found themselves on either side of a raging river of hurt, accusation and misunderstanding. Neither dared to step out too far for fear they would be swept away by the current.”

In 1968, Pierce and his wife embarked on a good-bye tour of Asia. Their daughter, Sharon, desperate for her father's emotional support, reached him by phone and asked him to return home. Pierce refused saying that he was extending his trip to Viet Nam. Lorraine started home immediately. By the time she returned to California, Sharon had tried to commit suicide. Later that year, on November 30, 1968, Sharon tragically took her life at the age of 27.

Pierce flew to Basel, Switzerland to get medical and psychiatric help at the famed University Hospital. He was diagnosed with nervous exhaustion, the very core of his nervous system depleted of emotional energy and so unable to cope with the slightest emotional stress or personal or professional responsibility. The doctors prescribed “emotional disengagement” from his day-to-day life, and heavily medicated him with insulin for almost a year. As his daughter put it, “emotionally, he was “a mass of bloody, open, wounds” made even more severe by the shock of his daughter's suicide. Pierce would live the next twelve months insulated from emotional stress of any sort. If something hurt or upset him, it was drugged away.

As Pierce put it,

“I can only survive by living from day to day.”

A year later, in 1969 with steadied nerves, Pierce returned home to California to become President of Food for the World (the predecessor of Samaritan's Purse). Pierce set about the task of launching Samaritan's Purse, but his emotional problems continued. His relationship with Lorraine was still charged with tension and unresolved emotional issues. In 1970, still on an emotional roller coaster, Pierce continued the pattern of cutting himself off from those he needed the most when he abandoned his family. He flew into rages at the thought of his wife, the World Vision board or Sharon—those who he felt had hurt him. He made his wife a symbol of all his failures.

He legally separated from Lorraine and cut the family off financially. Ironically, the separation seemed to release him from emotional pressure, as he now was free to pop in and out of his family's life as he saw fit.

In 1976 Piece found he had leukemia and might have less than a year to live—though he did live for almost three more years. The news seemed to invigorate him and fill him with determination to pack every remaining moment of his life with significant work. He traveled extensively between chemotherapy treatments. And his family became strangers to him. By 1978 he had completely alienated himself from his wife and two remaining daughters.

On September 2, 1978 the family gathered for a final evening intended to bring some measure of reconciliation. As Marilee wrote,

"It was like the past ten years hadn't happened at all. There were no apologies or attempted explanations; they weren't necessary. We loved one another. We loved being together. We were a family."

Four days later, on September 6, 1978, Pierce died of leukemia. Thousands turned out for his funeral, which was a testimony to his powerful ministry and how God had used him to touch the lives of tens of thousands of the world's needy and vulnerable children.

Check back for the final blog in this series, where I will outline the 7 lessons learned from this flawed visionary. Also, take the time to read our book, "The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership", if you haven't yet. Consider giving it for a gift this holiday season.

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