

A CASE STUDY ON A FLAWED VISIONARY: PART 3: LESSONS LEARNED

In this three-part series, we have been discussing the leadership style of Bob Pierce, founder of World Vision. The same emotional dynamics that led Pierce to start World Vision eventually led to his downfall as its leader. In fact, Pierce described himself as sailing alone in stormy seas with poor visibility. What can we learn from this passionate visionary, who spent much of his adult life shaped by adversity and emotional need?

I've gleaned seven lessons from his life to share in this blog post.

1ST FIRST, CHARISMATIC NARCISSISTS ARE EXCEPTIONALLY POWERFUL AND INFLUENTIAL PEOPLE.

It is no exaggeration to say that the energy and vision of this one man brought hope and comfort to millions of the world's most desperately needy people.

Bob Pierce set the standard for serving the most vulnerable among us. His dedication and compassion were unsurpassed. It is of note that Pierce's work continues today on a scope and scale larger than even he could have imagined, through the work of World Vision and Samaritan's Purse. World Vision continues the child-sponsorship program begun by Pierce in Korea. It now facilitates the transformation of communities with water programs, health care education, agricultural and economic development, and Christian leadership activities. (More reflections on this in lesson # seven).

Second, Pierce's life is a cautionary tale on the ease with which charismatic narcissists can drift into destructive narcissism.

2ND IT IS A REMINDER OF THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONAL MATURITY TO GUARD AGAINST THIS DRIFT.

It is a sad fact that apart from Emotional Maturity, opportunities for public leadership, despite the protestations of the leader, is also an opportunity to meet one's person needs, just as much, if not more than it is an opportunity for service. Pierce "got something" for himself out of his travels and "need meeting," something he couldn't get at home from his family or friends.

Whether it was significance, a sense of self, a need for affirmation, or some other unnamed emotional need, Bob Pierce needed a needy world as much as the world needed Bob Pierce.

3RD IT IS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE TO "LEAD LARGE," TO BE PUBLICLY RESPECTED, EVEN REVERED—FOR A TIME, AND YET LIVE A PERSONALLY CHAOTIC AND EMOTIONALLY UNHEALTHY LIFE.

Or put another way, it is not possible to lead well over time if one leads out of a deficit Emotional Maturity. Without Emotional Maturity, one's life and leadership is inevitably shaped by emotional need, to the demise of one's leadership and the detriment of others unfortunate enough to be "close in" to the leader.

4TH FOURTH, VISION AND PASSION UNREGULATED BY EMOTIONAL MATURITY DEGENERATES INTO AN ABNORMAL, BLINDING INTENSITY BORN OF ONE'S EMOTIONAL DEFICITS.

This may be a fine line but it's not an invisible line, as in the case of Pierce. His global vision morphed into a grandiose vision. Blinded by the grandeur, Pierce was unable to see crucial but less spectacular needs close in and at home. The needs of others blinded Pierce to his own emotional needs, and to the needs of those closest to him. Oblivious to the contours of his emotional landscape, he isolated himself and left those closest to him isolated and alone.

5TH FIFTH, EMOTIONAL MATURITY IS REQUIRED TO PROTECT LEADERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE EXPOSED TO PRESSING AND INTENSE NEED, FROM WHAT COULD BE CALLED HYPER-RESONANCE.

As journalist Richard Gehman wrote of Pierce in 1959, Pierce was "uncontrollably honest." When asked by Franklin Graham how to "shake people out of their complacency," Pierce replied that he had "become part of the suffering. I literally felt the child's blindness, the mother's grief. ... It was all too real to me when I stood before an audience. ... It's not something that can be faked." Call it what you will, over-heated empathy or compassionate grandiosity, Pierce led from an emotional core that was unhealthily "fused" with the colossal and overwhelming needs of desperate people. As Richard Halverson observed, "Bob Pierce functioned from a broken heart." But,

lacking the recognition and regulation of his emotional life, Pierce was unable to cope with his own broken emotional landscape.

He had little sense of emotional proportion. He didn't know when to pull back and evaluate his emotional assets. He had no capacity to monitor and measure his emotional investments such that his output was sustainable.

Sixth, Pierce's life illustrates the truth that, lacking the realism grounded in Emotional Maturity a narcissistic leader won't readily face the "real world," or embrace constructive feedback.

6TH SPECIFICALLY, PIERCE SIMPLY COULD NOT FACE DISAPPOINTMENT AND FAILURE.

He hid from and denied any suggestion that his performance was less than perfect. Friends and colleagues stood by for years shaking their heads and silently predicting Pierce's inevitable demise unless he dramatically changed his schedule and outlook on life.

But they were too intimidated by his charisma, influence and personal power to be candid and forthright with him. People tiptoed around his unpredictable moods. And this reluctance was for good reason, as Pierce vigorously rejected anyone who brought a disconfirming message. He renounced his critics as “vision killers” and “foot-draggers.”

Pierce denied himself input from the people that loved him most, especially his wife. As a result, he sacrificed his family, as well as the sustainability of his leadership for days of glory.

Seventh, Pierce’s life and leadership does indeed raise some troubling questions. Yes.

7TH GOD INDEED WORKS THROUGH IMPERFECT, FALLEN, EMOTIONALLY BROKEN PEOPLE.

He is not dependent on our perfection, or even our progress in maturity to accomplish His work.

God specializes in using fallen, fallible and imperfect people like Bob Pierce to accomplish great things for His glory.

And yet, the price paid by Pierce, and especially the tragic price paid by those closest to him, his daughters and wife, leave us troubled and wondering at the paradox of Pierce’s “self-centered unselfishness” and the mixed blessing of his life and leadership.

(Marilee P. Dunker, Days of Glory, Seasons of Night, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984. The book has been recently updated and is now titled, Man of Vision).

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