

THE PLACE OF CHARISMA

*A first conversation on this subject in 1995
with five persons active since the inception of Pioneer Girls
exploring the way it had changed in both form and core philosophy*

Charismatic Elements in the Founding of Pioneer Girls

Our conversation around the table generated discussion about the charismatic nature of Pioneer Girls as we had known it. We were familiar with the common sociological wisdom about institutions: that vibrant young movements are often launched by charismatic persons with an impelling vision and idea and when they gather enough followers to support it during the initial phases of existence, the movement may continue in an orderly way.

But we also knew that charismatic leadership is inherently unstable, depending on the continuing energy emanating from the pioneers of the new vision. Some form of “routinization” has to take place in order for there to be an orderly succession of leadership to carry on the vision and embed it in the culture in which it is situated. The next generation of leaders must be seen to wield legitimate power.

Some of our conversation centered around the question of how routinization had taken place in Pioneer Girls. We were struggling to discern whether or not this process had taken place in a way that had allowed the original vision to crumble, or become distorted, or even disappear. We had been an important part of Pioneer Girls’ growth in the 1950s and 1960s. We didn’t recognize the organization in its form in 1995, and maybe would find it even less recognizable in 2014, with two of the conversation group having died.

Who Were the “True Founders”?

The true founders of Pioneer Girls wielded the necessary charismatic authority in the beginning in order to challenge the status quo. The church of the 1940s was not reaching youth, and even in the 1950s the church was quiescent, reeling from the impact of the war.

In this case, credit belongs first to Joe Coughlin for the original vision for Christian Service Brigade for young men, and by extension a parallel organization for young women—Pioneer Girls. In both cases, charismatic authority came by virtue of the spirit of pioneering in which both organizations came into being, and the trail of dynamic leadership that followed.

Joe’s charisma was undeniable; his Brigade clubs attracted other college students as leaders, but every summer the venture seemed to collapse, and every time, he went back to the drawing boards and revamped his program to improve it and he began anew, indefatigable and determined. But he lacked the insight and skills needed to preside over the essential developmental stages of an enduring institution. Fortunately, capable others stepped in, and Brigade continued.

Joe’s vision never strayed from its focus on the growth of boys and young men. He freely admitted he didn’t know what to do with the girls who began clamoring for a club program similar to the one their brothers were enjoying. So he first went to Betty Whitaker Bouslough, a

fellow student on Wheaton College campus, and asked her to provide something for girls parallel to his work.

Betty was not to be the charismatic founder, as it turned out. She responded to Joe's request somewhat reluctantly, by her own admission, for she did not see herself as an initiator or visionary. She patterned her little program closely after Brigade, with its roots in ancient heraldry and knighthood. She named it Girls Guild, with its notion of becoming "ladies"—the relevant term in her mind. It would require another person to set forth the bolder more contemporary concept of becoming "women"—even pioneer women.

Even the Scripture verse Betty chose as motif, "The king's daughter is all glorious within," taken from the St. James version, was even more problematic, since later versions would more accurately translate this phrase as pertaining to what the princess was wearing—"cloth of gold" rather than referring to the development of inner character, so primary in Pioneer Girls' philosophy. Christ was to permeate every phase of a girl's life, not worn as adornment outside.

I knew Betty when I was a ten year old, living down the block from her on Lincoln Street in Wheaton, and I was friendly with her two younger sisters closer to my age. I attended the first few meetings of Girls Guild at College Church; Betty was probably the leader, in fact, though I don't recall.

Betty did not want to continue with Guild after a year; she was engaged to be married, and wanted to devote more intensive time to her studies as well as support her husband who was entering seminary. She quickly bowed out of any leadership role, and turned everything over to Joe in 1940, who sought out Carol Erickson Smith. Carol's charismatic influence was instantaneous—drawing in a college friend, Louise Troup, who came alongside to support and strengthen the working out of the original ideas developed by Carol. The two of them devoted their energies sacrificially for the next two years to bringing Pioneer Girls into existence as a national organization with a distinct vision and philosophy.

Carol Erickson Smith was an instinctive pick, Joe Coughlin said. He claimed that he had been sitting in the Frost library at the college, and heard through an open window the sounds of a girls' field hockey team playing in the distant athletic field. One voice soared above the others in volume. It was Carol Erickson Smith, and he knew she was his choice to undertake the project of creating a club for young girls. Carol was a student majoring in the hard sciences, and bent on becoming a doctor, and as such was an unlikely person to conceive a philosophic vision that fit more suitably into the "softer" sciences, like Christian Education. But Carol plunged seriously into research, seeking in America's pioneer history a motif suitable for a program that could fire the imagination of young girls. The statue of a "pioneer woman" that stands in Ponca City, Oklahoma fascinated her. The image fit her own sensibilities as a woman able to forge her own future and make independent decisions. The new club program would be called Pioneer Girls and would incorporate the hardy values that were associated with women on the early frontier of this country. It was also characteristic of her unconventional style and process that while sitting in Biology class one day trying to come up with the right "catch phrase" for materials she was preparing for Pioneer Girls club leaders, the right words came to her in a flash of intuition: "*Christ in every phase of a girl's life.*" She instantly knew this embodied the aims she was trying

to achieve with a younger generation of girls. It was more important to her in that moment than passing the biology exam.

I had majored in Christian Education, saturated in a philosophy that fully and explicitly undergirded Carol's intuitive perceptions. Therefore, when Joy Mackay came in from her field post in Philadelphia to direct the organization, my presence in the national office as Publications Director gave some assurance of continuity of Carol's original vision. Also, I was living in Carol's home at the time and Carol always had her eye on me, and trusted me to communicate her vision in its pure form in ways others might hear. I knew the spirit behind her vision firsthand. I was acquainted with several of the women college students whose fire had been fueled by Carol's energy and vision. Many of these women took the Pioneer Girls club idea with them when they graduated and spread it quickly across the country. I had attended one of the first camps in Illinois and Michigan run by those women. When I came on staff in 1950, it was as Publications Director, and thus it was incumbent upon me to articulate the program's philosophy—a natural continuation of core ideas, now embedded in materials used to train guides.

Small wonder, then, that the five of us seated around the table, referred to Pioneer Girls' real birth as occurring in 1941, when Carol started anew to shape the vision and its outworking on her own terms. I have no quarrel with including Betty's work in the founding, but Pioneer Girls was based on Carol's vision for girls—and consonant with Joe Coughlin's for boys. We did not carry on the motif set by Betty.

I know that my junior high friends and I characteristically rebelled at the idea of changing the name to Pioneer Girls, and we initially told Louise Troup, our 8th grade literature teacher that we were refusing to continue. My relationship to Betty felt personal. What changed for me was Louise Troup's infectious enthusiasm about coming to camp. It was Pioneer Girls camp that made the difference.

It was my first time away from home and with peers, and the experience introduced me to a new world of possibility. I didn't yet know the theory behind it; it was the people—not expert professionals, but vibrant college age counselors brimming with energy, and loving nothing more than simply being with us campers and having fun. The joy was contagious. As I would later learn, “more things are caught than taught.”

An atmosphere of charisma continued, and was often embodied in Pioneer Girls' camps, directed by staff members. Pioneer Girls attracted enterprising young women for field staff with a flair for independent functioning. The atmosphere of camp accentuated strong emotional and spiritual connections with others likeminded and equally altruistic. The camp director who was field representative came sailing in a few days before camp, trained the staff, and directed the program. There was often an aura around field reps, much as they might try to deflect centrality of focus.

The Influence on Staff Culture and the Camp Environment

There was another side to the charisma, and that was the distinctive staff culture that arose. Its history is familiar to me, as someone involved as a 16 year old in the Conestoga Caravan—a

summer project where four of us teenagers, accompanied by two adults traveled to five areas and constituted the core counseling staff for one-week camps in each area. We created a kind of magic as we came onto the scene. We had a store of camp songs to teach, lots of dinnertime skits and act to present, campfire stories to tell—and contagious youthful enthusiasm.

In between the camps, we bonded as a team, and certain characteristic quirky preferences became ingrained. As often happens in such situations, we had an inside language and humorous references peculiar to us; and these sometimes drifted into common parlance, especially with the young campers gathered adoringly around us. The source of some of these characteristic tags was our attachment to the stories and characters in Winnie the Pooh. We found endless possibilities in references to those stories.

Talking together that day around the table, we acknowledged all this had persisted in the early days of staff.

Phyl: A whole culture that went with being a field rep. Winnie the Pooh was part of that!

Eunice: Joe Coughlin was the genesis of the Winnie the Pooh fad, and it was continued by Rachel Hartman—and with us on the Caravan. I remember being a camper at Gull Lake and seeing all the counselors lounging by the lake during rest hour, engrossed as one of them read from Winnie the Pooh. Campers thought it was ridiculous. Anyway, it was useful for Phyl because she could call me “Rabbit” and we both would know all that would signify!

Mary Ann: You didn’t have the feeling it was any kind of women worship. It was grounded and everybody allowed people to be themselves. It wasn’t this sense of being something else ever and the camp made it even more so.

I was among those who felt the charisma present on the field, and especially in camp, where the glow of the campfire and the aura of life in the out-of-doors heighten the experience for young girls away from home for the first time. We were in contact with vibrant young women teaching us to canoe, to cook over an open fire, share quiet talks in the cabin at nightfall.

It is interesting to note why after 1970 and so much changed, the organization began referring to Betty as the founder, rather than Carol. Betty was always honest and humble about her role.

“Routinization of Charisma”—or Firmer Foundations?

The routinization of charisma considered essential for stabilizing and continuing the original vision began to take place with the arrival of Joy Mackay as director in 1951. Coming from outside the “Wheaton cocoon” in which Pioneer Girls was birthed, yet having a grasp of the basic philosophy, and gifted in program implementation, Joy saw ways in which the organization could develop its foundations more firmly. The most radical contribution she made two years after arriving was to persuade a board of women inexperienced in such initiatives that we could afford to buy a headquarters building.

Boards are an interesting phenomenon, and this was the case in Pioneer Girls. Incorporation as a non-profit in 1943 necessitated an appointment of a board. The founders were thrilled to be able

to secure as chairperson a woman of distinction, Dr. Rebecca Price, head of the Christian Education department at Wheaton College, and someone whose philosophy of Christian education coincided with Pioneer Girls' core thinking and practice. But Dr. Price remained a distant figure, appearing occasionally, but often living across the country, and increasingly disabled physically and unable to be present. The other women chosen were inexperienced in work outside the home—suburban in outlook, model mothers and wives.

When it came to financial reports and decisions, they relied on H. J. Taylor, the man who had formed Christian Workers Foundation and was using his phenomenal financial success in re-making Club Aluminum to support Christian work meeting the need of young people—Young Life, Inter-Varsity, Child Evangelism, Christian Service Brigade, and Pioneer Girls. Taylor would come to Board meetings and wait until the financial report was read and discussed, then leave the other matters to the women. But when Joy made her case for buying a headquarters building, he instantly recognized her acumen in this area and encouraged the board to proceed, though the women on the board were more timid about this bold move.

Joy's leadership was "soft" in some ways; she relied on me to articulate the philosophy, and produce the materials for leaders. But she had a "hard" edge, and could establish and apply standards—for example for camping. This was an area where organizational acumen for the rules—the "law"—can undermine the spirit, as occurred in the ironclad insistence on a ratio of one counselor to six campers in a cabin with one of the camps. Joy's tenure was cut short later when Louise Troup, one of the original founders, came back from a tour of missionary service overseas and who sensed a need for repairing some of the rough edges of the way Joy implemented the vision. It was a loss to the organization, a loss to be succeeded later in the loss of Louise as well—a loss that underlay some of the conversation we were having in Louise's home that day in 1995. Charisma had not only been routinized over the years; it had been routed, displaced by distrust.

Unintended Effects of Institutionalization

There is an intricate history here. As the organization began to mature and face the challenge of routinizing its charisma, it needed to build institutional structures that would incorporate the charismatic impetus. Of immediate importance, it entailed hiring support staff in the national office, establishing programs, materials, and procedures for training new staff and volunteers, and figuring out how to build a solid financial support base. It had to do all this while maintaining the core goals, and just as important, the philosophy underlying those goals. My leave of absence from the organization in the mid-1950s to get a Master's degree was designed to articulate that philosophy. At the time, I was not clearly focused on its role in being a guide to future decisions. A sad omission. I was caught in the "charisma" and unconsciously assumed that vital energy so alive in the organization out in the field would serve to preserve the program's vitality and strength.

In the decade of the 1960s so many strong people left—Mary Ann, Zondra, Eunice, Phyl, Louise—the group sitting around the table conducting this conversation. It left a vacuum, and forces could seep in that were unrelated to the original vision. Ken Hansen bears the brunt of responsibility because he wielded the authority, using the Brigade director as the axe, and his quiet, demure wife as foil. Coming from success in the corporate sector, Ken perpetrated his

vision on this nonprofit organization for women and girls. He thought success lay in combining Pioneer Girls with Christian Service Brigade—and emphasizing the sponsorship by local churches to steady the finances, but thereby destroying the power of a single sex enterprise. He failed in seeing the merger take place but what he did not complete, his handpicked successor did—destroying the possibility of completing the “routinization of charisma” necessary for stability. Instead subsequent leadership gouged out the guts of that charisma as manifest in the field staff and the entire structure of training and developing local leadership, along with the camps that served as dynamic locus of leadership development, along with North Star. The field reps were fired, and camps let go. The main thing left standing was the Program Division that produced written materials. A two-dimensional entity was left; the vital three-dimensional core of living personal representatives in the field was gone. Soon the organization changed its name—to include boys—and its age range. The 12-14-year old early adolescent had always been a focus with the range being 8-18. Now toddlers were admitted, sure death to attracting teenagers to the program.

A View in Hindsight from Afar (2019)

It may be important to note that a somewhat different organization emerged, Pioneer Clubs, “a Christian non-profit organization that equips churches in ministry to children to help them follow Christ in every aspect of life.” It produces carefully thought-through training and program materials for conducting weekday activities within local churches.

The cadre of field staff that characterized Pioneer Girls in its first quarter century and by which it maintained personal contact with clientele as well as direct experience with its constituent girls and leaders in summer camps they directed was let go, and therefore most of the considerably vital camping program—for which Pioneer Girls became known within the larger Christian community—disappeared.

The new program’s inclusion of both girls and boys removed one Pioneer Girls distinctive in meeting the needs of girls for separate space and attention during a crucial part of their growing years. Its brother organization, Christian Service Brigade, continued to exist separately in order to preserve that distinctive value for the boys and young men it serves—both in weekday clubs and in summer camps.

The new program attempted to forge a philosophy with a similar emphasis as the originating work—“Christ in every phase of a girl’s life. And it did this in part by buttressing it with solid and sophisticated educational philosophy, bringing that aspect up to date.

The more important take from this very uncensored conversation by persons who were wary of change has to do with the original title about *charisma*. Was this, indeed, an example of Weber’s “routinization of charisma”—by which he implied a bureaucratization of an organism?

I cannot answer that question definitively, not having kept track of the inner workings of the new entity. I only know that a few persons active in the organization in the times familiar to me, still live on and have a limited “say” in the new work, and can support it with wisdom and care.

*A second conversation about founders and charisma
as Life/Work Direction was transitioning in 2017*

Life/Work Direction's Gradual Transition

In a 2017 conversation about “founders” and “charisma” with Will Messenger, founder/director of Theology of Work (TOW) as well as a board member of Life/Work Direction at a time when I, as its co-founder, am moving away from upfront leadership, we exchanged our thoughts. He wrote:

I have the sense that experiencing the work as pleasure/play and the suffering endured without regret—these begin as doing whatever it takes to make the birth succeed, but eventually become a kind of dam blocking the stream. This idea concerns me more and more in the TOW Project. The antidote that I've found so far is bringing new people into the organization. But how do I both give them freedom yet preserve the commitment to the mission?

I explored my own experience in turning over the reins of Life/Work Direction to Scott and Louise Walker. They had joined us in 2005 but were being asked to take on a more directing role now:

When they joined us, we knew that at heart they were in accord with our basic philosophy and aims; they had asked us for help in devising the Threshold curriculum. Both had been through the vocational process with us. We had lots of lived experience in their environment. Yet we knew there were important emphases and perspectives that were different.

So we embarked on a five-year “learning process”—a transition. We made a variety of mistakes; the movement was slow and consensual, with openness on both sides. A lot of it was below consciousness; and we felt guided.

It took a while before Walkers felt they were genuinely in charge—even to the extent that we continued to do a lot of the behind-the-scenes work (preparing the space, filling the tea kettle, keeping the cupboard supplied with various things, buying flowers, answering the door when they were late coming downstairs.

I think we each had to “win” our appropriate place eventually. There is no doubt now that the initiative is in their hands, not ours. And this year Scott has taken hold of the framing of the conceptual design and content in a way that is both very much his creative input, but also stretches my own vision in ways that are symphonic with the basics, but definitely speak to new vision. It is delightful to see the basic vision expand and deepen.

Now I am watching the way Scott takes initiative in working to draw a new staff member into the circle. It requires a new and different skill, and he seems energized by it.

I wrote Will:

About your dilemma with TOW: what can be said about the process required to sustain the

vision and the reality, and maybe even expand it beyond your own vision? I only know the way we took has to do with something that may be more like discipling than any other term I might use. Like Jesus, you draw someone alongside and your vision becomes contagious and begins to knit with the new person's potential and actual skills and concerns—until it becomes clear that they can find a place to insert themselves into the structure you have available. And their presence in that structure may change it a bit for a variety of reasons. But it is finding the right person to walk beside you until they are in step enough to trust, and also that their stride and pace contribute something new and valuable to what you have in place.

I also added that it is also important to examine the distinctiveness of each person's motivation in the founding process. I speculated here, using Obama as example:

I went mentally around the Enneagram circle to speculate on various motivations that might arise. As I came to Obama, and his probable Five-ness, and realized his natural focus on “legacy” at this point in his life and career will likely direct him in two directions—the writer he is (he certainly will have thoughts about the presidency and his experience in this era), and the activist he also is (community organizer) and the very nature of his being the first black president and his complicated history as an African American with strong ties to both parents and cultures.

So maybe legacy is a useful term to explore what “founders” are concerned about, ultimately. Not just what they begin, but equally important, how they end, or what they birthed continues.