The Age of Charisma

Understanding the Charismatic Personality

By

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Introduction

There is something peculiar about the charismatic personality: they both live in our world, but also apart from it. They float, seemingly above humanity, but in the end, are buried beneath it. Invariably, when traced back to their childhood, charismatics share the unique experience of not bonding with their caregiver. The love that every baby and toddler deserve is not present, or is denied, or removed, or short-circuited. The toddler is not able to articulate this lack of bonding and authentic love, and, instead, grows up in a state of perpetual neediness for a substitute found not within but outside of themselves in the messy, everyday world of humanity.

It is upon this fertile ground that the charismatic tries, and ultimately fails, to replicate the love denied them as youngsters. Often this substitute is fame and renown, or money and power, or sex and addiction, or some combination thereof. But these elements are never fulfilling in and of themselves, so the charismatic lives in a perpetual hamster treadmill with authentic fulfillment always just out of reach. Metaphorically speaking, it is captured by painter Marcel Duchamp's *The Large Glass* in which the men in the bottom half of the painting are forever being teased and tempted by the woman in the top half but never finding satisfaction. Even if the satisfaction was available to them, it would not satisfy. The inner wounds are too deep for complete fulfilment. That awareness of a lost Eden, one never possible to be retrieved, burns inside them, and ultimately sets them on a path of destruction. Still, in the time they command the global, nation or regional stage, they glow with power, wisdom, agency, connection and, most important of all, charisma.

This is the path of the charismatic personality and the central core of this book. It examines a variety of personalities and a city that in one form or another exhibit or reify or exemplify the charismatic spirit. One matter must be cleared up: use of the term "charismatics" does not simply refer to religious personalities, but also encompasses secular figures. Charismatic individuals usually refer to religious

figures (typically Christian Protestants), but this work suggests all such personalities, in whatever field and belief, should be included under the "label charismatics."

Why this book? I am not a psychologist. A great deal of discussion on charismatics involves expertise in human behavior, or at least, a semblance of it. I am or possess neither. My interest in the field began when exploring one of the 20th century's most vivid and textbook example of charisma in action: Aimee Semple McPherson, popularly known as "Sister Aimee." Born on a farm in Ontario, Canada and having found God as a teenager, McPherson evolved into a powerful orator, entertainer, and spokesperson for Christ. She knew her Bible well, and in the beginning when she set out on the road to fame, driving from one dusty roadside pitstop to another, there was no guarantee that anyone would listen. Yet, she knew how to attract a crowd.

Early on, she discovered that she could take advantage of people's natural curiosity. For her first preaching, an unknown and a woman to boot (in a decidedly man's world), she needed to attract a crowd and she did this by standing on a chair on a sidewalk, frozen in prayer. Passersby stopped to watch this strange figure. When enough of the curious had gathered, she promptly jumped off her chair and led them inside an auditorium. Her reputation and fame spreading, Sister Aimee's brand of Christianity took her to various stages and arenas across the United States. For a period, she commanded more newspaper headlines and stories in Los Angeles, her adopted home, than any other public figure in the city. More so than Hollywood stars, powerful politicians, and sports figures. She was at the top of her game.

But it was not enough. McPherson was raised by a tight-fisted mother, decades younger than her spoiling father, and she veered towards God as an escape, rather than as spiritual devotion. She needed God to bring a tender love into her life she had not always received in the quantities she deserved. Once she found God, she found the salve to leave her difficult home life behind and set out on the road

to fame and, strangely, even some wealth. But it would not, could not, last. As if obeying a law of the universe, from highs there must follow lows, Sister Aimee experienced both. Love relationships never fulfilled her; except for her first lover, Robert Semple, a Jesus figure to her, whose early tragic death devasted her being. Like the love she lacked as a toddler, her first husband's demise felt like a stab in the back by a remorseless universe. Such was her charisma; underneath the adulation, revelry, stage glory rested a bitter, angry, and unhappy center. In the end, she died young and perhaps from suicide.

But while she strutted the national and for a while the international stage, her brand of charisma led to the founding of a powerful, and currently growing, religious sect. Even as she lacked a basic understanding of personal finances, McPherson developed a different art, one devoted to satisfying some inner urge of her audience. This urge is difficult to define; it may be some desire on the part of society for answers or guidance during times of social stress, as often happens when society undergoes big changes in a short period of time. In McPherson's case, the United States in the 1910s and 20s was a nation transformed: a growing political, economic and media power the likes of which it had never witnessed before. And an increasingly diverse one, with millions of immigrants flooding our shores. McPherson not only preached the Gospel, but provided a comforting salve in a disorienting time. This was the gift she gave to her followers, in perfect charismatic style. This is what great charismatic personalities do.

This book is less about psychology (although I occasionally dabble in it) and more about the social and personal circumstances that incubate charismatics. I chose the charismatic personalities and city found within not out of any specific or clear mandate, but because they fascinated me. The examples chosen bring charisma into sharp focus: the good, bad, and tragic. They offer salutary lessons for the rest of us non-charismatics. By a strange and visible process of human physics, charismatics are condemned to brightly light up the night sky, reaching heights unmanageable to mortals, only (often abruptly and without warning) to collapse in one tragic fate

or another. Suicide, early death, mental collapse, and, perhaps worst for such personalities, anonymity. The worst fate for charismatics is to be ignored, much like malignant narcissists. It literally kills them.

I encountered Sister Aimee while researching my book on the life of Greek American movie theater mogul, Alexander Pantages. Both were doyens of Southern California, and both had charmed trajectories but, in the end, tragic falls. After completing the Pantages book, I explored Sister's life. At the time, I had no clue about charisma other than like most of us what I knew from popular culture. The more I read, however, the more it felt as if I had entered another dimension, one full of mystery, suspense, drama, thrills, and tragedy. The term that often comes to mind is "Shakespearean," as if such personalities can only be dreamt, explained and dramatized by literary geniuses. Sister Aimee was not a character in a play, nor did she occupy the rarified space of a secret society or top-secret governmental entity. She walked amongst us, seemingly normal and "everyday," but also nothing like the "us" that we all know ourselves to be. She was different. Her daily rhythm was not ours. She lived above our social laws. Ordinary human strictures existed beneath her respect or even attention. She glided above the quotidian, because her life was always – it had to be this way – glorious and otherworldly and impressive and historically shattering.

I was hooked. A book emerged about Sister's extraordinary life (set against the backdrop of a competing preacher in Los Angeles) and with my curiosity wetted, I researched more. There was a fair amount of literature on charismatic personalities, and it occurred to me to start a small journal devoted to these figures, hence the tiny online *Journal of Charisma Studies*, perhaps a fanciful title beyond my limits of research. It was from contributing a few articles to the *Journal* that this book emerged. Most scholars, when embarking on journeys of knowledge discovery, do so knowing that their contribution is part of a larger effort to bring attention to a worthy topic, in this case charismatics. This is the certainly the case here, perhaps even in my case clumsily so.

In that vein, this book is more exploratory than theoretical. I offer case studies, not causalities. Just as charismatics develop from deprived backgrounds, so can ordinary, loving and reasonably happy human beings under the exact same circumstances. There is no rule that connects unhappy upbringings to charismatic development. Charismatics develop from unhappy early years, but not all unhappy lives end up as charismatic personalities. The personalities and the city assembled here represent no specific agenda; they came from personal interest as well as random discovery. Some I knew about prior to working on this book (Sister Aimee, Robin Williams), others were completely foreign to me (Ron Popeil, Mark Hughes, Father Yod). All fascinated and captured my attention. Placing the label "charismatic" on them brought an understanding to their life's arc, a rhyme to their actions and being.

All the charismatic personalities in this book, except for my personal take on Athens, are based on secondary sources. There was no need for me to replicate the work of others; I took the secondary material on faith that it was accurate and sincere. If I am wrong, I take full responsibility. Any omissions or errors are also mine. I also tried to cite scrupulously; if I fail in this regard, I offer my deepest apologies and I appreciate knowing about it so I can correct a future new edition, if it ever comes. It was a conscious decision to rely on secondary sources; I did not have the personal, professional, and financial wherewithal to do otherwise. Even if I did, the outcome may not have been substantially different. This is an act of transparency, not a justification. I worked with the given material and circumstances; I tried my best.

Lastly, about the lack of diversity in the chosen personalities. This concerns me, and one that glares at me each time I think about it. Except for one, all the personalities in this volume are white and came from privileged backgrounds. No one grew up in severely dire circumstances, nor were they abandoned on someone's front doorstep. There is more written and visual material about white charismatics than those of color, different sexualities, gender orientations, or differently abled. I regret I did not spend more time

in finding secondary or even primary sources on a more diverse set of charismatics. I leave it up to others to fill in this glaring omission; doing so suggests charisma cuts across gender, race, creed, economic condition, and sexual orientation.

This is a mass media, difficult upbringing, agitated souls and fame story. It begins with challenging upbringings that for one reason, or another do not allow the baby/child/toddler/youngster to develop proper bonding with caregivers. Many children who experience such circumstances grow up with a determined, voraciously, one might add and single-minded purpose to find a worthy substitute. Usually in the form of love-seeking attention and fame, both of which turn out to be dead-ends and counterproductive. Neither can replace the love that the child should have developed with their caregiver. These attention-seeking devices are weak substitutes for "healing" one's self through professional assistance (therapy, counseling, etc.), introspection, self-examination, and the like (or some combination of the above). Such healing work is much more difficult and requires years if not decades of sustained effort to find some kind of resolution. The substitute – fame, attention, emulation, etc. – is the quicker, although ultimately tragic, route that often ends in self-delusion, suffering, toxicity. The shoals of charismatic personalities are all around us – broken marriages, wayward children, alcohol, and drug abuse – and all add up to the stockpiles of human misery.

Not all deprived children grow up to become full-fledged charismatics. A separate study could be done to explore their characteristics and the conditions that led them to avoid the dead-ends of full-fledged charismahood's unpleasant trails they often leave behind. It is unlikely that individuals with difficult upbringings who escape the charismatic's fate is simply based on chance. In Viktor E. Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, involving his experiences in a German concentration camp in World War II, he makes the point that those that survived made conscious efforts to do so, or at least did not allow the harsh conditions of the camp to be the last word on their lives. This involves reflection. Deprived children who grow up into normal lives likely have this capacity for

reflection that charismatic personalities do not. I doubt charismatics give themselves even a few minutes of reflection, or professional therapy to change the course of their lives. This inability to reflect plagues their lives: there was a way out, it was not destined that they become charismatics but they consciously or unconsciously chose charisma over ordinary, stable lives.

The charismatic routes that hard upbringing invariably pave way may do social good in some cases (Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, to name two powerful American presidents), but these are the exceptions, not the norm. Other examples (Huey Long, Joseph McCarthy, Donald Trump) are less exemplary and even create deep, long-lasting political divisions. These types burn themselves out and torch their acolytes at the same time, a toxic brew that slide societies backwards.

All the personalities discussed in this volume are historical figures, except for one, Rev. Billy (William Talen) is still alive. While there are a bevy of current charismatics, too many in fact, I chose the dead over the living for the simple reason that I could discuss their ending. How they died is an important part of their story. It can fit into the pattern of tragic ends that often accompanies charismatic personalities. They don't go down easily or quietly. They demand our attention, their oxygen. They need it more than they need us.

There's a strange infantilizing aspect to charismatics; they do our thinking for us, making us dependent on them for direction in our lives. They don't let us reason. They make us depend on their minds, not ours. At the same time, we "consume" charismatics the same way we consume products and services, and this consumption represents our very core, our deepest-seated values. This consumption is us. We are no longer who we think we are. In many regards, it's an anti-democratic process.

While charismatics may be an expression and representation of our deepest fears, wants, concerns, dreams, etc., they absorb our attention and emulation, while we absorb them as sheer entertainment and

escapism. They take over our lives because we, unwittingly invite them to do so. This is the world in which both charismatics and their followers conduct their complex dance, one that leaves us with a gross misunderstanding of the relationship. We are cogs in their machines, and they take delight in fostering a climate of playing us in their hands.

I will end with a personal story, since charismatics are found not only in the public domain but can reside amongst our friends and family members. I met him in Los Angeles, both of us chasing the same dream of making it in the movie industry. Except he succeeded. He was smooth and funny, always confident, seemingly fearless and glib. Nothing phased him. To all life's problems he had easy answers. The trauma of his parents' divorce when he was young, he buried in a vault deep in his psychic underground.

Normal human rules meant nothing to him; he said and did things that were beyond my capabilities or even imagination. Then he died of Covid. I knew he had medical problems, but I wondered how seriously he took them. He reminded me of Apple co-founder Steven Jobs (Chapter 4), a monumental charismatic who denied early surgery for pancreatic cancer that might have saved his life. And if my friend did take his medical situation seriously, whether he took responsibility for his own actions that led to them. He blamed others for his suffering or for his mistakes. One of his ventures involved investing huge sums of money; when it failed, he blamed me for his loss.

He had his own grand ideas, and he always considered himself right, even if it meant preventing others around him – his family, his friends – in meaningfully engaging with reality. I grew passive around him, letting him lead, so when he suddenly passed away, I felt empty, disillusioned, betrayed even.

In true charismatic fashion, he had cast his beguiling spell on me and it was difficult to break it. Even now years after his passing. I idolized and was jealous of his success in the entertainment industry.

He made boatloads of money while I scraped by. He lived a charmed life. Only once, and for a split-second, did he confess about his troubled marriage. He could not let down his guard; it'd wreck his hermitically-sealed "perfect" image.

That unsustainable image wore down his psyche; he became a hermit. I miss his wit. His vitality. His friendship. He could've been a great man.

Farm to Fame: Sister Aimee's Charisma and The Rise of Pentecostalism

Aimee Semple McPherson *gave new direction to millenarianist Christianity in America. She rose from the depths of despair and tragedy to establish a new Protestant church in the United States and became a hero to tens of thousands of faithful. She was also a woman in a field dominated by men, by "muscular Christianity," and an authoritarian hierarchical system that had little to do with the precepts of Jesus of Nazareth. Her unusual upbringing, caught in the webs of a loveless marriage, nursed a charismatic personality that found expression in her ultimately successful ministry that since has evolved into a thriving domestic and international Four Square church. She died relatively young and alone.*

Salford, Oxford County in Ontario, Canada at first blush seems an unusual spot to produce one of the 20th century's great religious pulpiteers. A rugged farming community of tough-minded, hard-scrabble personalities where mere survival in harsh winters stands supreme above all other human goals, it also endowed Aimee Elizabeth Kennedy with a pugilistic spirit that served her well in a life of deep tragedy and spectacular triumph.

Conditions for the flowering of the charismatic personality were in place from the start: an unusual upbringing, often one that lacked the proper love and attention the child deserved, traumatic events or a rupture in the caregiver-baby relationship ("When negative affect prevails during early development, the consequences can be dire"[1]). At the time she was born on October 9, 1890, her mother was fifteen and her father fifty (each lied on their marriage certificate; he younger and she, older; even the local newspaper, that always published marriages, singularly avoided mention of this one). Her mother, Minnie Kennedy, experienced the death of both her parents as a young teenager, and came into the marriage to escape life with a foster family. James Kennedy, on the other hand, needed help on the 100-acre farm after his wife passed away and found Minnie from an ad. The escape that Minnie sought soon turned into the harsh reality of tending to a thriving farm while facing the barrenness of a cold marriage. Minnie found her almost obsessive escape in the Salvation Army church. This Bible-centered focus rubbed off on Aimee, who took it to heights no one in the family, least of all her mother, could have imagined. Unfortunately, Aimee also served as a crutch if not a diversion for Minnie in a life of living hell.

[1] C. Heim, D.J. Newport, T. Mletzko, A.H. Miller, C.B. & Nemeroff, "The link between childhood trauma and depression: Insights from HPA axis studies in humans." *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 2008, 33: 693-710 cited in Jaak Panksepp, "How Primary-Process Emotional Systems Guide Child Development: Ancestral Regulators of Human Happiness, Thriving, and Suffering" in Darcia Narvaez, Jaak Panksepp, Allan N. Schore, and Tracy R. Gleason, *Evolution, Early Experience and Human Development: From Research to Practice and Policy* (New York: 2013), p. 76.

Aimee developed a hearty appetite for physical work (her physical prowess as an adult was legendary) and didn't seem to mind the rigors of farm life. In spirit and energy and devotion to farm-life, she was closer to her father than her mother, even though the latter held powerful sway during her adult life. In James the young Aimee found a devoted "grandfather," who dotted on her with patience and tenderness, while her mother's militaristic attention to the Army bred in Aimee a chummy regard for the drill sergeant's life. Both elements were central in Aimee's later missionary work. Did Aimee have a happy childhood? The question hangs over all charismatic personalities, for whom the common bonds of ego-satisfying love from parents are short-changed, not fully developed, or sabotaged in one form or another and who spend the rest of their lives seeking to substitute this all-important human need through fame and renown. This substitution rarely works, least of all satisfyingly, and usually ends in tragedy. Aimee, later Sister Aimee, followed this fateful trajectory to the letter.

Two personality elements stand out in Aimee: a moth's magnetic pull towards the warmth of fame and attention and a stubbornness and determination that when a decision had been made was unstoppable. She took to acting and performing as a teenager, displeasing her mother. Then she discovered Pentecostalism by falling in love with an Irish-born minister, Robert Semple, that rocked her family's religious traditions. She fought her mother's beliefs over this conversion and won. She had to be both right and victorious. Doubts (the ability to accept paradox as a fact of life) did not settle well with Aimee. When confronted with the unresolvable dichotomy between accepting evolution theory versus creationism, she brought these doubts to a national audience through writing a letter to a prominent Canadian journal, and also prayed about it. In the end, God "revealed" himself to her and she was satisfied that creationism, God's creationism, was the right path. And then she married and ran off with Robert.

On the surface, the marriage to the handsome Semple replicates her mother's own marriage to James: an escape away from an unhappy

came home and announced that they would do missionary work in China. The narrow vistas of Salford that once dominated her life now ceded to newer, more expansive and worldlier ones that were both exciting but terrifying. For all her intellectual curiosity, Aimee also was a homebody that needed the ballast of domestic comfort to normalize her bearings. She would not find them in China, where the sights, sounds, smells (and lavatory conditions) frightened her.

Even so, their progression from domestic to international missionary work followed the spread of American imperialism. Rather than dealing with the "new social problems of vast magnitude" the Industrial Revolution wrought upon the United States, religious sects found it less burdensome and more photogenic to "save [heathen] souls in distant places" that smacked of both religious intent but also racial supremacy.[2] But whilst in China, both Aimee and Robert fell ill; she recovered but he passed away. Her life was shattered. She was now a widow; a month later, a mother with a baby daughter.

In his classic account of the archetypal hero, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell recounts the journey of the leader who undergoes an exile (*departure*), confronts her inner demons (*initiation*) and finally, having been tested in the anvil of her fears, is ready to face the world (*return*).[3] Jesus is the classic case. On the threshold of his ministry, he exiles himself to the desert for thirty days and nights where he faces his inner demons and the guile of the devil. Having succeeded against these powers, he returns to begin his ministry.

Aimee Semple follows this trajectory: her *departure* from her community, then her *initiation* when she battles the forces of fate and tragedy. Only much later, when she exercises some power over her demons, can she *return* to the world and commence her extraordinary mission. With the death of her beloved Robert, Aimee's initiation had tragically begun. Not only did she have to take care of herself, she had to also feed a baby. She was broke. It is not clear if it was a

[2] John A. Garraty and Peter Gay (eds.), *The Columbia History of the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 933.

[3] Joseph Campbell, *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949).

benefactor from Chicago or her mother, Minnie, that answered the call and wired her some money, but she managed to leave Asia and make her way to San Francisco. From there she took a train to New York, where Minnie had settled after divorcing James Kennedy. It was a new life, but not a salvation. She struggled with depression and a listlessness that left her numb and jealous of the "happy" world around her. As her tragic year of 1911 closed, she wondered if life could get any worse. In a certain sense, it did; she had yet to touch the bottom of her misery.

As previously took place in Canada and what would devastate them both in Los Angeles, Aimee fell out with her mother. There was always a tension between the two women, and in the most inopportune moments it blew up into fights then flights. Minnie promptly left New York to return to Salford to look after her farm (she had purchased the farm from Kennedy, then leased it back to him). Aimee now had to fend for herself and baby Roberta. She handed out literature and collected donations for the Salvation Army, and it was at one such moment that a shy accountant named Harold McPherson happened to wander by. One look at Aimee and he was smitten. Soon enough they had met, and he was walking her home from her Army duties. Then he took her on outing and dates, including to an automat where they sat side-by-side to lively theater people. Unbeknownst to her, this initiation was laying important seeds in her imagination; seeing theatergoers enjoying the shows revealed to her how human beings needed the escape, warmth, cheer and good times that entertainment provided. A lesson that paid dividends in her later ministry and temporarily lifted her spirits.

The relationship was a mismatch from the start. Clearly Harold was in over his head; he never fully understood the type of person he was soon to marry. The 19th century was about to marry the 20th. He saw in Aimee a wife, homemaker and mother of their children (a second, a son named Rolf). She was nothing of the kind. A mother, yes, but the home was not big enough to contain her personality, which needed the spark and battery power of adulation and fame to sustain. Without this attention, she became a physical and emotional

cripple. He packed the family to Providence, Rhode Island, thinking the escape from New York might do them all good, only for Aimee's mood to worsen. There were illnesses and surgeries, but she could never get well. She complained of too much light and noise in the house; the children remembered having to be quiet around their mother. Then she fell ill and, as she later claimed, came close to death. It was the climactic moment of her initiation.

She later explained that she heard God telling her to take up the ministry, a call she had heard before but to which she could now no longer ignore. Late one night, when Harold was at work (the graveyard shift at a local bank), she packed her bags, got the kids ready and called a taxi for the train station to take them back to Canada. When Harold arrived home the following morning, his family had vanished. A telegram from Aimee soon arrived: "I have tried to walk your way and have failed. Won't you come now and walk my way? I am sure we will be happy."[4] Stunned by this, he followed the family to Ontario, to witness the blooming of her ministry. At first with smaller crowds, then with larger ones, Aimee Semple McPherson had found her footing. When he watched her at one tent revival meeting, her ease with the crowd and her bubbling charisma in full display, he knew that he had lost his wife, no matter what the marriage certificate might say. Her initiation was over; she had embarked on what would become a magnificent return.

Being an itinerant preacher brought its own struggles, least of all caring for her children while trying to feed the family. The return stage does not automatically confer boons and success, in fact, often the opposite. The valuable wisdom the hero acquired during the struggling initiation stage must now be converted into knowledge easily understood by audiences. Skeptics abound but she had to deal with all types, including those jaded and made cynical by too many snake-oil "preachers." How was she to stand out and make a sustainable career as a pulpiteer?

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[4] Edith L. Blumhofer, *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdman, 1993), p. 99 cited in Taso G. Lagos, *Charisma and Religious War in American: Ministries and Rivalries of Sister Aimee and 'Fighting Bob'* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2020), p. 34.

The stubbornness that featured so strongly earlier in her life now provided an important boost. The hardy physical prowess developed on the farm now came to good use as she fought fatigue, cynicism, lack of resources and homelessness. A voice in the wilderness. Drop by drop, and through sheer tenacity, she did not give up, even if the odds were heavily weighed against her and even when it seemed the prudent thing to do. Husband Harold hung around for a while but pitching a tent for a revival meeting one day and losing it to a strong wind, brought home that this was not his life's mission. He gave up and walked away.

Once more, Minnie Kennedy came to the rescue. And at a crucial time. She righted a sinking ship but brought discipline and rigor that Aimee desperately needed. Strangely, Sister, as she was by now called, lacked true intelligence for money and displayed a horrible understanding of finances. Under her mother's tutelage, Aimee's missionary work began to grow. Each revival meeting brought new adherents, new followers and one by one, the word spread about her message. And what was that message?

In a field dominated by male preachers, who often espoused a "masculine" Christianity – Jesus as a stern taskmaster – Sister Aimee sold a different, softer message: of love, redemption, forgiveness and hope. She was less interested in the wretched ways of Satan and more Jesus' enveloping love. She offered a powerful antidote to a deeply ruptured society, one riven by immigration and growing secularism, and the industrialization that came with it. She offered listeners a respite from rapid social change, from traditions upended and minds lost to a growing mass society where the individual American was a cog in an ever more complex mechanical machine of which no one could fully explain its operation. People desperately yearned for answers, and she gave them ones with simplicity, clarity, and compassion. "Sister" did not simply refer to her profession, but a moniker reflecting her impact on her acolytes. She became a kind of "national mother" to the dispossessed.

And then came Los Angeles. Itinerant life may have its own attractions, namely the retail work of being on the ground and meeting new people in everyday life, but it is not a hospitable environment to raise two children. When Roberta caught the influenza during the pandemic that raged in the U.S. beginning in 1918, Sister and Minnie recognized that this lifestyle was no longer sustainable. And it was on this hope that she arrived in paradise by the Pacific, to lemon and orange fields and the easy sunshine. No more battling road floods, windstorms, hurricanes, snow. She was to settle down now, but more significantly, she had also arrived at a style if preaching that was uniquely hers. She had learned well under Robert Semple, but now she surpassed him. Her ministry seemed to some observer less about religion per se and more about pop psychology that audiences could easily understand and glom onto.

Los Angeles provided her a unique stage. Not only a hotbed of religious sentiment (Pentecostalism itself got a boost from the African American-dominated 1906 Azusa Street Mission Revivals there), but also the center of the growing entertainment industry. Both fed into her internal meat grinder and produced astonishing results: church services that included powerfully produced spectacles on par with those being filmed in nearby movie studios. Even her healing services (most spectacularly displayed in nearby San Diego) had touches of theatricality. Charlie Chaplin, who became an admirer, called her a superb actor. Her renown grew along with the building of the Angelus Temple Church in Los Angeles, her spiritual and in time her physical home (she lived next to the sanctuary). She was a national figure and dominated newspaper coverage locally (she is said to have produced more headlines in L.A. papers in the 1920s than any other figure).

Underneath the spreading fame and glorious success lay the charismatic personality: the outward glory but the inner turmoil. After the many church services, the radio station shows, the business of running a megachurch, she trudged lonely and exhausted to her adjacent home, to the bitter noise of silence. She openly confessed to reporters on occasions that she was tired and lonely, as if saying it

might expatiate this demon that never seemed to go away. After years of struggling on the rough roads of America as an itinerant preacher, she had settled down into fame and even fortune (according to some critics), yet in the bosom of her own heart, she was a miserable wreck. Is this what her return from China had done for her? She craved an escape, and it came from an unusual source.

Radio in the 1920s was an expanding medium. Originally created as a wireless telephone, until it was discovered that anyone could listen in on a phone call if the frequency was known, it was the Russian-born, electronic communicator, David Sarnoff, who recognized in 1916 its potential as an entertainment medium. Soon the airwaves were filled with musicians, news reporters, preachers and hucksters. Media was coming home, given its own furniture and part of the living room. Sister joined the revolution, adding a radio tower to Angelus Temple with the call letters KFSG ("Kall Four Square Gospel") that went on the air in February 1924. All her services were broadcast over the air, with the help of an engineer named Kenneth G. Ormiston. Soon listeners were hearing the too-friendly banter between Sister and Ormiston that set tongues wagging. Minnie heard them and warned her daughter about the implications. To little effect.

On January 1, 1926, Ormiston resigned as radio engineer. Eleven days later Sister took a boat to the Holy Land. On January 22, 1926, Ormiston was reported missing by his wife (who was aware of possible infidelity on his part). On March 15th, with Aimee still overseas, a wire transfer of $1,500 was sent from a "James Wallace" in Venice, California to Ormiston in Seattle, using the name of Aimee's dead half-brother. This "James Wallace" used to money later that day to purchase a blue Chrysler coupe. A few weeks later, with Aimee back from her Holy Land tour, there followed a series of hotel check-ins – separately – by Sister and Ormiston in the Los Angeles area. Then came May 18, 1926: the day in which Aimee disappeared, initially thought to be dead (a funeral service was even held the following month), and eventually to reappear in Arizona after a hike through desert terrain claiming she had been kidnapped.

There were those who believed her side of the story, there were a growing group of others who found the entire episode preposterous (including her supposed hike in the desert in ordinary street shoes with little wear and tear on her clothes). Using the power of her radio station and her church services, she convinced many of her innocent. But not enough to avoid indictment by the L.A. District Attorney. Yet, what followed was almost theatrical in its tone and execution; a replica of one of her service performances but with real life stakes. With the help of a newspaper reporter who knew the power levers in the city, she managed to get her case dismissed. Yet her career suffered; not again would she gain the heights that she managed prior to the affair. She continued to preach, helped feed tens of thousands during the bleak Great Depression, suffered through a brief but tempestuous marriage, and ended her days in a hotel room in Oakland (perhaps) accidentally overdosing on pills, including sleeping pills and barbiturates.

She reached amazing heights yet also great despair. A hugely successful ministry, but at the expense of what she truly wanted – to settle down with a normal family and a functional marriage. While her fame and power spread, so did her gnawing internal emptiness that led her to destructive choices. Had she had the courage to openly accept her relationship with Ormiston, she might have shocked polite society but may have lived a happier, less strained existence. This is the plight of the charismatic: they lived above the clouds, but their feet are buried deep in the mud. The differences are irreconcilable, circumstances they are not willing to face nor alleviate. It is a constant searching to satiate thirst but with salty water.

It is a mistake to suggest charisma studies, as a conceptual framework, are predictive rather than descriptive. A dysfunctional childhood does not automatically set the charismatic personality into motion; unstable childhoods may suggest later charismatic behavior (in the case of Aimee's "kidnapping" plot, for example), but do not entirely predict it. Many human beings have suffered from the impact of unhappy upbringings but did not develop full-blown charismatic characteristics. Instead, visible patterns in examining charismatic

personalities from birth to adulthood provide compelling evidence of links between events in childhood and later behavioral choices as an adult. There are tendencies, and these forces can explain the choices the adult charismatic makes. Since charismatic personalities gravitate to the public limelight, their behaviors can and do impact society, often in profound ways. Thus, their study attempts a comprehension and explication of an important thread in societal behavior, particularly when this behavior is destructive.

Today we may regard Sister Aimee as a prophet, one who heralded a new Christian sect with millions of followers around the world, and growing. Yet, what was her inner world like? The farm girl became a famous personality, hobnobbing with Hollywood elite, living a lavish lifestyle, undergoing plastic surgery, losing weight to make her lithe and suave, yet none of these brought her solace for what seemed an insatiable thirst for human love and embrace. The goal that she most wanted most alluded her; the goal that fame could not quench left her emotionally impoverished and bereft.

This is the charismatic's paradox: one the one hand achieving great social success, on the other, finding little personal psychic rest. Aimee gained much from this world, but she once she lost her beloved Robert Semple, she was never able to find a worthy substitute. She focused her mental and physical energy on Jesus instead, but as a mortal she yearned for more. Lest we think that hers was a tragic life, it might be useful to keep in mind that her misery did not prevent her from gifting so much to this world, for which millions today rightly pay homage. It's tempting to see her faults without also recognizing her accomplishments despite the inner struggles that so bedevils charismatic personalities.

Religion of Diet: Mark Hughes's Corporate Spirituality

Mark Reynolds Hughes *was a highly successful American entrepreneur who single-handedly started the American nutrition and health company, Herbalife. He was 24 at the time, and the product of an unstable upbringing and reform school. He mastered the ability to sell, and he used its emphasis to build Herbalife into a powerful, multi-level marketing juggernaut that today has spread around the globe and is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Yet, behind the façade of success lay a troubled personality whose own personal habits (drug and alcohol abuse) contradicted the studiously nurtured image of health and wealth. He died of drug and alcohol overdose at 44, leaving behind a more complex legacy than his success suggests. Today Herbalife carries on his work, but this messiah-like figure seems forgotten.*

Nobody outsold Mark Hughes. And few outwitted him. He had a comeback for every grenade thrown at him. Facing a Congressional committee while his diet-products company was investigated for improper health claims and diet experts showered him with darts, he stared at the senators straight-faced and retorted, "If they are such experts in weight loss, why are they so fat?!"[5]

The supreme evangelist of greed, success, wealth, and superficial happiness, Hughes professionally sold the rarified dream of privilege, status, glamor, and basket loads of money. He touched the lives of millions, even as he bankrupted many along the way. The company he founded, Herbalife Nutrition, an international brand, lists on the New York Stock Exchange and is either a multi-level marketing juggernaut, or a pyramid scheme. His financial success extends the particularly American tradition of visionary, rule-bending uber-entrepreneurs dotting the country's history; personalities that either enliven or manipulate (or some combination of both) so long as the ethos they represent – success, wealth, social mobility – revs the minds and guts of many Americans desperate for income injection and the societal approval that goes with it. Even as he led a controversial life, Hughes exemplifies the part of the American experience that places a premium on cheerful, militaristic determination, unabashed triumphalism, and relentless sales and marketing.

Like many charismatics, his early life is lost in a fog of mystery, enigma, and contradiction. Mark Hartman (his birthname), according to the Social Security Administration, was born on January 1, 1956.[6] He was either birthed into poverty, or a rising middle-class family with all the accoutrements of the aspirational life.[7] And there is either the hard-scrabble upbringing he ebulliently sold the public

[5] Matthew Heller, "Death and Denial at Herbalife: The Untold Story of Mark Hughes' public image, Secret Vice and Tragic Destiny," *Los Angeles Times*, February 18, 2001. Found at: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-feb-18-tm- 26780-story.html

[6] From the NNDB website, https://www.nndb.com/people/641/000103332/ The website suggests he likely was born sometime in February, 1956.

[7] Sources vary in the listing of his birthplace, indicating either Lynwood or nearby La Mirada.

and breathlessly echoed in his company's public face, or a more privileged life exposed by investigative journalists that didn't fit the storybook humble origins. The Mark Hughes Story was a charming, health-devoted tale glossed with a happy ending whose pedigree has long been lionized by certain conservative segments of American society. Except his happy ending was a life cut short at 44 to drug and alcohol overdose.

Americans seems vulnerable to well-honed narratives of overcoming difficult circumstances and family tragedy that are also the seedbeds of the charismatic personality. Mark contended he experienced his youth in "the gritty streets of a Latino neighborhood" in La Mirada, near Los Angeles. In his Dickensian self-portrait, his father, Stuard Hartman, is missing and instead he is raised by his maternal grandparents, Lawrence, and Hazel Hughes, when not in the custody of his mother, Jo Ann Hughes, who he said suffered from obesity. "My mom was always going out and trying some kind of funny fad diet as I was growing up," he shared at one of the many Herbalife rallies that were part revival meeting, part marketing exhortation, and part confessional aimed at cementing the Herbalife ethos.[8] He "fused Elvis Presley, Reverend Billy Graham and Horatio Alger."[9]

The mother likely hid a drug habit under the guise of being on a diet, yet somehow the young Mark internalized her plight, at least so far as the public side of Herbalife was concerned, and so he vowed to "develop an organization that would put the kind of reliable information and safe, effective products his mother never had into the hands of millions."[10] All because of Momma. By her death, she could never contradict him and even those that tried, like Stuard Hartman, were simply shunned or marginalized. As will be repeated often in these chapters, there is a relationship between an unstable upbringing and the development of a charismatic personality that

[8] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

[9] Stadiem, *Telegraph*, p. 43.

[10] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

lacks "affectively positive personality development."[11] All "emotional primes" of the human brain are born without preformed pathways but instead are shaped by either positive or negative "life-affirming experiences."[12] The charismatic person results from the latter.

Los Angeles Times reporter, Matthew Heller, uncovered a different picture than the humble one Hughes publicly painted. In his 2001 investigative piece on Hughes and Herbalife, Heller noted the young Mark did spend some years in La Mirada, but it was in a "new tract home in a neighborhood sprinkled with citrus groves and mostly populated by upwardly mobile white suburbanites."[13] His mother died an addict to painkillers, not diet pills as Hughes claimed.

Jo Ann Hughes and Stuard Hartman were Mark's biological parents, yet in several sources, including Herbalife's own website, the biological father is said to be Jack Reynolds, a plumber. When Hartman offered to test his DNA to prove he was the real Dad, it was refused.

There were two other boys in the family, Guy and Kirk. Stuard Hartman owned an aircraft parts company that supplied the U.S. government, and provided a comfortable life for the family, including a new "custom-built ranch-style home" in Camarillo, a housekeeper and fishing trips on the California coast in Hardman's cruiser.[14] "'They always had the best toys, the best stuff, the best clothes,'" claims a boyhood friend.[15] Hartman denies his wife had a weight problem. She popped the pain pills Darvon and Percodan to "prolong the high."[16] Marital problems were visible to outsiders,

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[11] Jaak Panksepp, "How Primary-Process Emotional Systems Guide Child Development: Ancestral Regulators of Human Happiness, Thriving, and Suffering" in Narvaez, Darcia; Panksepp, Jaak; Schore, Allan N., and Gleason, Tracy R., *Evolution, Early Experience and Human Development: From Research to Practice and Policy* (New York: 2013), p. 81.

[12] Panksepp, Emotional System, p. 81.

[13] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

[14] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

[15] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

[16] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.

and according to Heller revolved around how much to discipline the three boys.

In February 1970, Jo Ann filed to divorce Hartman. By then, the "quiet" but "intense" Mark was drinking and doing drugs. Jo Ann took the boys and moved in with her parents, where, Haller claims, she spent most days bedridden. The divorce gave Stuard custody of Guy and Kirk, but Mark remained with his mom. Five years later, Jo Ann died of an overdose.

Mark took a divergent path from his family's. It led to a new name, a new lifestyle and to being "one of the greatest of all modern American success stories."[17] Hughes dropped out of the ninth grade, by his own admission, from delinquency. No stranger to encounters with police officers, teenage Mark found himself at CEDU high school in Running Springs, California (its motto: "'See yourself and do something about it.'"[18]). The school was associated with Synonon, described as an "anti-drug cult" group established in 1958.[19] Synonon inspired many "emotional growth boarding schools" like CEDU, all using a variety of brutal techniques involving isolation, humiliation, hard labor, and sleep deprivations. Yet, these operations became entangled in accusations of physical and emotional abuse, in some rare cases, even death, were temporarily shut down only to resurrect themselves with new names and logos. Second chances in America, even by those that broke the laws if not the bounds of ethics, always prevail. Rather than a school in a bucolic setting, Mark in his Herbalife presentations preferred to call it a "'drug rehabilitation center.'"[20]

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[17] William Stadiem, "Herbalife's Mark Hughes," *Telegraph Magazine*, nd, p. 43. http://williamstadiem.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/02/HerbalLifesMarkHughes_TelegraphMagazine.pdf

[18] Stadiem, *Telegraph*, p. 45.

[19] Maia Szalavitz, "The Cult That Spawned the Tough-Love Teen Industry," *Mother Jones*, September/October 2007, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2007/08/cult-spawned-tough-love-teen-industry/

[20] "Mark Hughes: The Mind of a Mental Giant," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube. com/watch?v=g3K0pDKQl60

Hughes found his element at CEDU, not in the harsh punishment meted out, but in selling raffle tickets to support the school's meager finances. He discovered his true purpose in life – sales – bound to happen in an economy completely based upon marketing. More than stumbling onto his true calling, the social capital that came with it – approval by the school's administration – meant more to his battered psychic needs. He shed his T-shirt and jeans for a suit and a compelling story that he sold to upscale communities in the Southland, including one visit to Beverly Hills that netted a cheque for $500 from then ex-governor Ronald Reagan.

Whether the story's true is impossible to verify; how the lanky teenager got through the Reagan's security detail is never included in the narrative, nor even getting a private audience with the former governor. Another story seems even more apocryphal. Hughes visits a Beverly Bills attorney's office, only for the lawyer to suddenly grab him by the collar and toss him out the door. "'I don't see anyone without an appointment,'" he barked. Unruffled, Hughes found a pay phone in the lobby of the building that housed the law office, called, and made an appointment with the lawyer, and made a sale.[21]

The emphasis on appearance and storytelling was not lost on Hughes. CEDU's harsh rehabilitation methods were meant to break down resistant psyches and replace them with a determination, vision, and hard work to turn addicted lives around. That the process resembled methods associated with totalitarian regimes was lost on Hughes; he regarded his time at CEDU in finally completing the transformation from Mark Hartman to Mark R. Hughes. Herbalife became an extension of CEDU, if not a corporate version of it. The up-by-the-bootstraps story he sold to his customers brought equal measures empathy and sales, but also satisfied a need for attention.

Hughes was 19 and ready to apply the skills learned at CEDU into a money-making career. When asked what the school had done for him, Hughes replied, "'They help you realize your goals. My big

[21] Heller, "Death and Denial," 2001.