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Frank Lloyd Wright

Power, Powerlessness, and Charisma

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Frank Lloyd Wright was an architectural genius. In this essay, I will tackle two areas of his amazing career. First, how Wright established charismatic relationships with many he knew personally or professionally. To do that, I will explore how interacting with Wright transformed many people who had an unconscious sense of being passive or unappreciated into individuals who felt they were active figures of merit and importance. Sometimes this transformation occurred because they lived in a house that he had designed for them, or because they had commissioned one of his buildings. With his Taliesin apprentices, it was because they worked in his fields, ate in his presence, listened to the music he loved, and stood at his elbow as he worked. To yet others, it might have been the way he made them feel personally important. Brendan Gill, New Yorker writer and later one of Wright's biographers, gives us an example of this: Despite the half-century difference in their ages Wright insisted on the young writer calling him Frank. "When he came to New York he would ring me up from the Plaza Hotel and say 'Hello Brendan, this is Frank.' And I felt as if George Washington were telephoning me from Mt. Vernon and saying, 'Hello Brendan, this is George'" (Gill, 1998, p. 17). The second major area I will discuss is how Wright's use of space resonates with core aspects of the personalities of many of us who view or enter his buildings. Wright abhorred what he called "boxes." By doing away with traditional compartmentalization, he gives many a sense of freedom and soothing that often approaches awe. Wright removed boundaries in a way that served to blend his houses with their surroundings and the nature that lay beyond them and beyond the world as we know it. In larger buildings he removed boundaries between workers, turned office buildings into cathedrals and temples, turned an art gallery from the housing for art into the art itself. To those who feel confined by internal, over-strict unconscious demarcations, Wright's life and work has a special appeal.

Wright as a Charismatic Figure

Let me begin exploring the first topic, Frank Lloyd Wright's charisma, by tracing the concept of charisma (Winer, Jobe, and Ferrono, 1985; Winer, 1989). Modern scholarship concerning charisma began with the German sociologist, Max Weber, who was born in 1864, just three years before Wright. Weber described charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional qualities" (quoted in Eisenstadt, 1968, p. xviii). To Weber, "charisma may involve a subjective or internal reorientation born out of suffering, conflicts or enthusiasm." The University of Chicago sociologist Edward Shils (1965) took the position that the charismatic bond between leader and follower is not necessarily abnormal. Shils included scientific discovery, artistic creativity, and all forms of genius as instances of things charismatic. Although most psychologically oriented writers have construed charismatic leadership in exclusively pathological terms with respect to both leader and follower, Erik Erikson (1958, 1969) gave it a more balanced view, showing that a leader's personal conflicts and resolution can provide a new ordering force that is constructive.

The Greek word charisma conveyed that the gods had bestowed special gifts on an individual.

Instead of gifts of the gods, or the later Christian view that the power came from closeness to God, in previous work I posited that the charismatic figure's self-initiated reversal of enforced passivity and impotence into magnificent activity and power was an important aspect of his charismatic attraction. He is a magnetic personality who conveys to followers that by attaching themselves to him, his work, or mission, they can experience a similar reversal of passivity into activity, of weakness into strength. Of course, the charismatic leader also must possess great artistic, political, or spiritual qualities. His or her personality must convey greatness. Again and again, Wright turned extreme hardship, tragedy, rejection, and dismissal into triumph, thrilling accomplishment, adulation, and veneration. A quick example would be Frank Lloyd Wright's reversing his own six springs and summers of despised, exhausting labor on his mother's relatives' farms during his youth, into being the master of scores of Taliesin apprentices who worked his land exhaustively, trying their best to anticipate and to imitate his every action. "If he went to hoe, one should be hoeing; if he was going to work on the dam one rushed there" (Secrest, 1992, p. 407). Many of these apprentices were "dropouts" motivated to join the fellowship because they felt themselves to be lost and passive in a personal, subjective world that could not privilege them as individuals of merit and power. Merely to be in Frank Lloyd Wright's presence changed all of that, and offered a great sense of personal worth. Wright's charismatic attraction went far beyond his apprentices, however. It began with some of his early clients and has extended, in many ways, to the present day.

In order to better understand Wright's charismatic appeal, let's review Wright's family background. His father, William Carey Wright, was a handsome, rather small man, a university graduate, musician, preacher, lawyer, teacher, scholar, liked by everyone but incapable of making a solid living. After his first wife Permelia died, leaving him with three small children, he married one of the family boarders, the schoolteacher Anna Lloyd Jones, nearly a spinster at 24. He was 41. He needed considerable admiration, what psychoanalysts often call mirroring, from his new wife. Instead, he found her lavishing most of her attention on their first-born child, Frank. To Anna, this boy would actualize all of her unrealized hopes by becoming an architect, a builder of great buildings and great fame. If one believes Wright's autobiography (Pfeiffer, 1992), which is full of tall tales, she placed a picture of the great English cathedrals on his wall and bought wooden Froebel blocks of geometric forms to familiarize him with basic architectural shapes as a small child. His drive for greatness was inculcated by Anna from an early age, but she was a mother whose love and adoration was something he could not rely on since he had witnessed her fierce criticism and derogation of his father and stepsiblings. This reached such depths that William Carey Wright once asked the Lloyd Joneses if there was a history of mental illness in the family. Anna's clear favoritism of Frank over her husband contributed in a major way to William's obtaining a divorce and leaving his family behind. Frank never saw his father again. Wright both sought the approval of, and liberation from, his mother all of his life. When he married at 21 and designed his new home in Oak Park, she was ensconced next door before the house was even completed. When he deserted his wife and six children, it was in part to leave her behind as well. When he built Taliesin, his magnificent home and estate in Spring Green, Wisconsin, it was allegedly for his mother, although really for his mistress, Mamah Cheney. Anna had helped him obtain Lloyd Jones family land back in Wisconsin, to which Anna also returned. She was never too far away. When Wright fell ill in Japan, she was soon there to nurse him. Wright's six springs and summers on the Lloyd-Jones family farm in Wisconsin fills a large percentage of An Autobiography's description of his childhood and adolescence. The

recurring phrase "adding tired to tired, and adding it again" (Pfeiffer, 1992, p.115), together with the animal smells and disgusting daily food that sickened him, characterized a period that only the surrounding beauty of nature and Sunday picnics, with an array of wonderful food, could soften. His father resented his wife's preference of the son for whom lightning and thunder at his birth served as presentiments of his greatness at least according to her. The mother sharply rebuked any failings of the boy. The father, on the other hand, is represented as forcing a seven-year-old Frank to pump the church organ as he played Bach until Frank nearly fainted.

In one of the few anecdotes from his adolescence in the autobiography, Wright describes how he rescued the crippled 14-year-old Robie Lamp, whose shriveled legs dangled dead as he moved along on crutches. Schoolboys teased Robie unmercifully, once burying him in leaves until Frank drove them off. Why did he include this story? Fantasy or not, the story portrays exactly the paradigmatic relationship that lay at the heart of Wright's drive to be charismatic. I believe Wright felt that to his father, and at times his mother, he was a Robie Lamp. Now he is the rescuer. Once he was his father's suffering son; later he is artistic father and nurturer to those who want him to build houses or buildings for them, those clients whose sense of mediocrity or ordinariness will be overcome by owning a Wright House or building. In fact, later in life he hoped to rescue all of American architecture and civilization as well. Wright called his plan "Broadacres," a decentralization where the city would be "everywhere but nowhere" (Tafel, 1993). After striking some chords on the piano, Wright once said to the assemblage at Taliesin,"If I had followed music and not architecture I could have surpassed Beethoven" (Tafel, 1993, p. 144); this expression, as much a lament as a boast, was a far cry from pumping the organ for his father to the point of exhaustion. Identification with the "hero" who has reversed enforced passivity into exemplary activity is not enough to explain Wright's or any other charismatic figure's interpersonal power, however. Also important is the charismatic figure's empathic capacity to understand a person's wishes and needs in a way that gives that person both the feeling of being totally understood as well as the sense that these needs and wishes will be fulfilled. Over a period of several years, Chicago architect Wilbert Hasbrouck (personal communication, 2004) interviewed over 40 people for whom Wright built houses. Hasbrouck reports that Wright made the client feel he was building exactly the house that the client had wanted, that it was essentially the client's own design, that it was uniquely that individual's, and perfect. Each one also felt that his or her house was Wright's favorite. Psychoanalysts focus exclusively on the patient; the analyst is interested in hearing every thought, every fantasy, every desire that the patient expresses. As a result, patients often experience a regression. Old wishes that they rarely think of, let alone talk about, come out. Frozen conflicts embedded in character defrost. It becomes possible to discover instinctual drive derivatives and defenses and to interpret them so that the patient can find new solutions for them. Wright seemed to be able to rapidly induce similar regressions even in an initial interview, in which clients felt that they had Wright's total attention and that they were uniquely important to him. He made them feel that he was going to make their fantasies a reality, rather than interpret them, of course.

Here is an excerpt from the letter W. E. Martin of Oak Park wrote to his brother, Darwin of Buffalo. "I have been seen talked to, admired one of nature's noblemen Mr. Frank Lloyd Wright . . . a straightforward businessman with high ideals. I met his mother, a beautiful type of woman . . .You will fall in love with him in 10 min. conversation. He will build you the finest, most sensible house in Buffalo. You will be the envy of every rich man in Buffalo, it will be published

in all of the Buffalo papers. It will be talked about all over the East. You will never grow tired of his work" (Gill, 1998, pp. 141 142). Darwin Martin was to bail out Wright repeatedly from desperate financial straits over the next decades. Darwin convinced his boss, John Larkin, in a similar letter to give Wright the commission for the new Larkin Company office building. Darwin Martin reported to Larkin that he and his wife had visited four Wright houses and talked to the owners. "You never witnessed such enthusiasm. No one will admit a fault in their house. They will admit faults in other of Wright's houses but not in theirs. That, Mr. Wright says, is because he studies his client and builds the house to fit him" (Gill, 1998, p. 143). Another proud Oak Park house owner wrote to a German architect that Wright was one of the most remarkable men he had ever met and that he was proud to call him his friend.

Wes Peters, who spent his lifetime working for Wright and Wright causes after Wright's death, described their initial meeting. "I had thought he was tall and he wasn't, but he dominated the room. I can't explain what happened but something did. I felt my whole life would be changed" (Secrest, 1992, p. 403). Regression to old wishes includes the magical wish for reversal of passivity into activity, from being controlled by one's environment or parents into living in an environment that is a representation of personal wishes that have come true. No wonder Wright identifies himself with Aladdin in his autobiography.

Many of us wish we could be children again providing we have the power to make our own choices. We would love to play at the beach, at sports where we can decide when we arrive, when we can leave, where to go, and how to participate. Wright was described by many as a child who never grew up. He did not pay his bills, and bought luxuries when the necessities went unpaid for. He loved to party, to picnic, and tell tall stories in which he exaggerated his accomplishments. He reports in his autobiography that as a boy of ten or so he told several peers that they could come to his house for a party. Because this party existed only in his wishful imagination, his mother had to quickly improvise refreshments when the guests arrived. Again this is one of the few anecdotes he reports from his early life and its theme is much like the Robie Lamp story. I will reverse your state and enrich your
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experience. The fact that his mother immediately picked up on what was going on and supplied what was necessary to make the fantasy a reality demonstrates her role in Wright's lifelong pattern of great sensitivity to fulfilling the wishes of others and often charming outside sources to provide the wherewithal. In even the most compliant child, there lies beneath the constraints of ego and superego development the wish to have it my way, not the way parents or teachers want it. Wright, like the Welsh mythological magical figure Taliesin, with his seer's wand and cape, was the unbridled child. Wright's lifelong fondness for a cape and cane conveyed a touch of that magician. To this day we are enchanted by tales of Wright's childlike overthrowing of adult boundaries. The August 20, 2003, Wall Street Journal recalled his May 1957 trip to Iraq. Invited by King Faisal II to build an Opera House, Wright impudently introduced himself to the monarch as "His Majesty the American Citizen." We are charmed as this child of nearly 90 turns the expected passivity of commoner before royalty into a complete reversal. Wright asked for an island in the Tigris. Faisal replied, "The island, Mr. Wright, is yours." But to be childlike, alone, is not charismatic. To actualize childlike fantasies with artistic powers far beyond those of the ordinary artist is charismatic. Partly in a childlike way and partly out of a sense of narcissism, Wright considered

himself above normal constraints both in his personal life and in his work. A hallmark of a charismatic leader according to Max Weber is disregard and transcendence of the traditional and bureaucratic societal rules, the everyday routine ("Alltäglichkeit"). Wright held a press conference on Christmas Day 1911 at Taliesin, his new home in Spring Green, Wisconsin, two years after leaving his first wife and six children for the married Mamah Cheney, and stated: "The ordinary man cannot live without rules to guide his conduct. . . . It is infinitely more difficult to live without rules, but that is what the really honest, sincere, thinking man is compelled to do" (Gill, 1998, p. 222). Although his comment was used as fuel for ever more scurrilous newspaper columns, Wright was altogether sincere. He believed that he was the greatest architect of all time and therefore his charismatic mission, in Weber's sense, was to bring about a new order using his special gifts available to no one else. I cannot tell you whence Wright obtained the skills that led to putting onto paper the design for Fallingwater (considered by many to be the finest residence ever constructed in America) in only three hours, nor his waking at 4:00 am and designing three altogether different houses by the beginning of the regular work day. But nearness to such genius made those closest to him feel a touch of genius in themselves, too. This was especially true of Fallingwater's wealthy owner, E. J. Kaufman, who was sensitive about being the son of an itinerant peddler.

Max Weber claimed that "charisma knows only inner determination and inner restraint" (Gerth and Mills, 1958, p. 246). The capacity we have to identify vicariously with those who actively overthrow restraint brings us pleasure. In our tradition-bound passivity to societal rules, we delight in anecdotes such as the one told by biographer Meryle Secrest. She reports Wright talking the manager of Abercrombie and Fitch into giving him an expensive coat because it would be an advantage to the store to have him as a walking advertisement and then demanding a second coat for his friend, architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who was with him (Secrest, 1992, p. 441). Yet Hitchcock's own version of the story was that Wright insisted on seeing higher and higher officers of the company in order to have his personal check accepted, which was not allowed by store policy (Henry-Russell Hitchcock in Tafel, 2001, p. 223). How did the story grow? Is it an example of the biographer's own distortion or someone else's? No matter, for the small child's unresolved need to feel secure within the strength of another's strong presence, that is buried inside most of us, is quite likely at work (Kohut, 1971). When one has the capacity to deliver in the almost magical way the way that Wright could, charismatic attribution is borne out. Wright designed the Johnson Wax Building on thin pillars that no one but Wright believed could carry the weight they were to bear (figure 1). When authorities challenged the plan, Wright arranged a demonstration where ten times the necessary weight was added to a model pillar before it crumbled. When an earthquake destroyed most of Tokyo, Wright's Imperial Hotel remained standing; and he was not above spreading the word that it was the only building still in place. He also failed to credit the engineer who made the building's endurance possible. Hitchcock believed "Mr. Wright's entire life was staged. It was intended for an audience. It was above all, a projection of personality" (Tafel, 2001, p. 222).

Let us look at these facts psychoanalytically. A small child looks to parents for the sustaining "gleam in the mother's eye" that Kohut (1971) called "mirroring." The death-in-life produced by infants raised in impersonal institutions is an extreme example of the absence of this psychological nutrient. Although the young Frank experienced much of it from his mother, he certainly did not, according to his own account, receive it from his father. It also seems plausible

that Frank's perception of Anna's true delight left him with a sense that she was "using him" to elevate her own self-esteem. Frank was consequently left with a lifelong need for admiration and praise. Kohut postulated an additional need in the developing child, the need for someone to idealize. Those adults in whom this childhood need was largely unfulfilled are constantly seeking a Wright-like figure to admire, even in adulthood. Wright spent a lifetime offering himself as an object for admiration. If you do a Google computer search on the name Frank Lloyd Wright, 377,000 entries come up as of this writing. This great collection of citations exists because of the quality of Wright's work, not because of his charisma alone.
figure 1 (top). Johnson Wax Company.
figure 2 (center). Taliesin.
figure 3 (bottom). Guggenheim Museum.
Photographs   2005 by Thomas A. Heinz.

Wright's Work and the Core Aspects of Personality
Let me turn now to my second major topic, a psychoanalytic perspective on the compelling power of Wright's buildings. I will explore how Wright's work resonates with core aspects of human personality so as to yield a sense of pleasure, comfort, and serenity. On first seeing Fallingwater, the architectural critic Paul Goldberger said he could not find words for the experience, that all he could think of was wanting to sing (Burns, 1998). I would like to suggest that Goldberger's experience is not unlike that of many of us. Because Wright worked for more than seven decades, finding common themes in his work is most challenging. Yet Wright's oft-repeated hatred of "boxes" gives us a clue. The objects of his derision ranged from the rooms of Victorian houses to the work of the International School, whom he called the "glass box boys." From the Prairie-style houses of a century ago, to the Guggenheim Museum essentially free of any of the rooms where art had been traditionally hung, to the boxless ziggurat planned by Wright for Baghdad at age 90, Wright continued to free his buildings from compartmentalization. Wright believed that boundaries within a building, or between the inner space of a house and natural world, were as odious as were the constraints of bureaucratic society that hemmed in a creative, charismatic genius. (Of course, the boundary set by the anticipated cost of a project was another limitation that he frequently ignored.) Wright was acutely aware of the power that architecture can have on one's psyche and he was able to create a sense of liberation by the use of materials that blended with the natural world. This not only allowed the house to become part of its surrounding, but also enabled the person within the house to become one with nature, the essence of life that lay beyond the world before us. Wright's concept of nature, influenced by Emerson and Louis Sullivan, was not what is usually understood by that word. It was the unobservable experience of observable nature as processed through the human soul. For Wright, therefore, light was as natural as possible, windows were placed next to each other to provide a panoramic view; living space was above the street and its distractions; rooms coalesced; and colors were the green, gold, and gentle brown of the countryside. The hearth with its Inglenook served as the center of a Prairie house, enabling the family to live in unity, with even the boundaries between one another minimized. The architect, himself, is one with the natural world and especially capable of manifesting it for others through the houses and buildings he creates in a seamless fashion together with their furnishings which he designs. The architect/creator gives life and vitality to inert objects bricks, stones, wood, glass and in order to do so must have supreme confidence in himself (Samuelson, personal communication, July 2003). Huxtable (2004) describes the early Prairie house as "a low

horizontal structure. . . with a relationship to the land that the rigidly vertical dwelling had never acknowledged . . . The conventional formal parlor was replaced by a living room, dining room, and study that flowed together in a hearth-centered single space" (p. 74). The individual flowed into the surround.

I suggest that Wright's buildings which free one from the constraints of boxes, from borders between self and environment, appeal to the depths of psychic organization. That is because they put one in touch with that period in one's life when he or she was free of the boxes of "should" and "never," "right" and "wrong," and "me and not me" in other words, the serene preverbal state of human childhood before the anxiety caused by transgression exists. To my knowledge, Wright was in no way influenced by Freud; but Freud's concept of "the oceanic feeling," borrowed from his friend Romain Rolland (who in turn had discovered it in Rama Krishna), is quite pertinent: "it is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" (Freud, 1930, p. 65). Along with earliest childhood, typified by the infant at the breast, Freud tells us that there is only one state that approaches this loss of self-boundaries. "At the height of being in love the boundary between ego [self] and object [other] threatens to melt away" (p. 66). No wonder many who enter a Wright space such as Unity Temple, Taliesin, the Johnson Wax Building, or the Guggenheim Museum, feel a bit as if they are falling in love (see figures 2 and 3).
The workers in both the Larkin Building and the Johnson Wax Building were offered a compartmentless open space to perform their activities not a usual room, divided space, or the even more odious modern cubicle. At the same time as they were constrained by being at work, they were free and in many ways within a cathedral a subtle provision of an experience mildly reminiscent of an oceanic experience. Wright aimed to liberate them from the box that was their own work self with all its concerns.

The psychoanalyst Arnold Modell (2003) has defined metaphor as "the transfer of meaning between dissimilar domains" (p. 41). Wright's spaces can be seen as the metaphorical transferring of one's own wish for freedom from personal boundedness to the very space of the building or house light, limitless, in touch with the infinite that lies beyond nature and beyond the societal constraints we face as adults. This is what I believe Wright tried to convey when he so frequently used the term organic. Huxtable (2004) believed Wright meant by organic architecture "to unite man and his built world with nature, the human spirit, and the universe" (p. 28). Wright was quoted in his New York Times obituary (April 10, 1959) as denouncing the box houses of this country: "A box is more of a coffin for the human spirit than an inspiration." Wright liked to hide the entry to a house or building much like the tradition of having to seek to find the magic entrée to a different world. I do not claim that the freedom that at its utmost approaches the oceanic feeling is appealing to everyone. To many, such lack of boundaries suggests a kind of chaos that yields only anxiety. Good fences often do make good neighbors. In summary, I have examined the life and work of Frank Lloyd Wright from two vantage points. I have discussed his charismatic appeal to many as being rooted in the capacity to transform their own sense of passivity and powerlessness through the power of his personality. I have also discussed how Wright's abhorrence of compartmentalization and "boxes," and his merger of man-made structures with a greater natural world, produces a unique serenity in many observers because of its capacity to evoke the oceanic feeling. Hans Loewald (1978) has written of the aesthetic experience in the contemplation of art or "the proportions of a building" (p. 67) where rational processes continue to operate yet are overshadowed by the timelessness of the

unconscious or primary process. Given Wright's capacity to reach our unconscious sense of timelessness, of the absence of borders and boundaries, it is no wonder Frank Lloyd Wright seems so much alive today.

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