

The Pioneer's Way: Leading a Trailblazing Life that Builds Meaning for Your Family, Your Community, and You by Jennifer Hayden Epperson

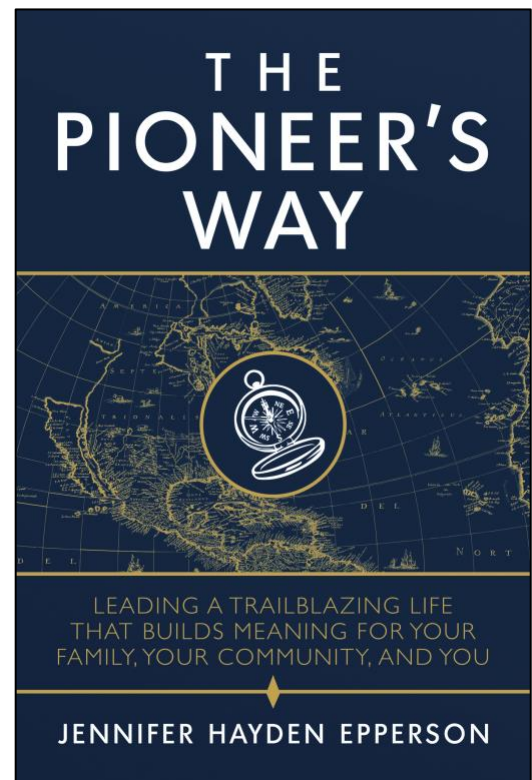
Senseless school shootings, cure-defying epidemics, threats of environmental disaster: these are the kinds of headlines that riddle the news every day. The challenges we face range from the horrific to the heartbreaking. We wonder, *when will it stop?*

Frustration and fear won't bring about beneficial change. Passionate men and women are needed to step into the gap and serve as change agents even though many assume that there are few areas left in which to innovate. While many advances have been made, there is still a need for everyday people to create, innovate, and impact their spheres of influence to advance the common good. Motivated by curiosity, conviction, and a conquering spirit, they can move to fill unoccupied spaces to nurture, persuade, understand, and solve some of society's lingering dilemmas. Those who do the initial significant work in these areas are the ones who bring about such needed change. They are pioneers.

The Pioneer's Way establishes a working definition of the pioneer, explores pioneering versus leadership, and offers essential characteristics of the pioneer. These are illustrated by colorful examples of pioneers both past and present—motivating readers with inspirational, frontiering stories, while equipping them with the journey's essentials for moving forward to make needed, significant change. Readers will journey down a systematic path that will help them navigate unfamiliar territory so they too can respond to the pioneer's call and answer it through effective, beneficial action in both their lives and the lives they touch.

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Since childhood, **Dr. Jennifer Hayden Epperson** has been motivated by stories of those who have gone “where no one has gone before.” This fascination became more personal when she learned that many pioneering people—pilgrims, inventors, and church and state founders—were nestled among the branches of her own family tree. Motivated by her own bumpy pioneering experiences as the first female manager in two media organizations, she has become more ardent about sharing valuable leadership insights and inspiration with others, including in the university classroom and through professional training overseas in Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe.



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A Conversation with Jennifer Hayden Epperson:

Q: What inspired you to write *The Pioneer's Way*?

A: Surprisingly, my first steps on the journey of creating the *The Pioneer's Way* began as more of a feeling of frustration than one of inspiration! In the workplace, I found myself in situations where I wanted to try something new: perhaps a creative technique or a method that would help improve a process or outcome of the organization. I have spent the majority of my career in radio, so for me this meant that my context was a local station, its on-air product or its relationship with the community.

Generally, the pattern I went this way: There was at least initial talk of addressing a nuisance situation. If leadership wasn't out and out hostile to a concept I surfaced (that has happened!), we might move to the next phase by investing time to develop a plan to address the problem, and sometimes even make plans for implementation. But the overall undercurrent remained one that was resistance to change.

In essence, fear of change on some level appeared to be the driver. So many organizations and people are unwilling to take measured risk for fear of negative fallout. On the surface stakeholders are hearing "Yes!" to helpful change, but in reality, the experience is "No, we prefer the status quo means of operation." It contributes to a lot of morale issues and stifles the creativity we need in society to advance.

Here's the important thing: the frustration I felt in these situations brought me to problem solve with the situation at hand, which sometimes worked, and sometimes didn't. These nagging situations eventually led me to leverage my own feelings of frustration and parley it into something positive, like writing and thinking about pioneering. If you have similar feelings of frustration with a situation in your life, who knows? Your solution to the problem may not only be life-changing for your, but for many other people.

Q: What do you hope is the biggest takeaway from the book?

A: While many advances have been made in science, social arenas, technology, and so forth, there is still pioneering work to be done, and some of us—even those of us who consider ourselves everyday people—are needed to join in the work. Look,

human beings have been to the moon, and visited the very lowest part of the ocean. Now we're talking about going to Mars, and I'm all for it. However, there's work to be done in our own communities to make life better. There are educational disparities, systems that need to be improved, inventions that need to be made, and many of them are created by people we consider to be quite ordinary. They are people like us who see a need in our areas of influence and want change. They think about the best way to implement change, who is needed on the team to make it happen, and they persevere until that change is realized. A very current, high-profile example of this is represented by the many pioneering people who are working on a vaccine for Covid. We don't know who they are necessarily, but they are working very hard on it. They're reporting to work every day, all around the world. We may see them at the grocery store picking up half and half for their coffee on the way home from work and they look like just another stranger in the supermarket filling a grocery carriage. Ultimately, my hope is that readers would be struck with the fact that pioneering leaders are needed in every realm of life and that just maybe, they might consider becoming one of them.

Q: Why is it important to maintain a sense of curiosity as we age? Do you have any tips?

A: I'm glad that you used the word "maintain" in this question because it suggests that all humans begin life as naturally curious beings. As children, we're trying to learn about the world around us, and so we ask a ton of questions. Curiosity and learning work together. If we're curious about something, we're more likely to remember the knowledge we receive about the subject. In a TedX talk, Dr. George Land, who developed a creativity test that identified innovative engineers for NASA, said that divergent thinking "lights up" the creative part of the brain. There's also evidence that being curious about learning new things is linked to our neurotransmitters. It gives a person a sense of anticipation, like when we are awaiting a reward. And of course, when we get that reward it's a great feeling.

As we age, we find that we must be more intentional about maintaining our curiosity, just as we need to be more intentional about our own physical flexibility to be able to function well. For example, I might have been an excellent musician when I was younger, or spoken another language quite fluently, but if I am not intentional about keeping it up, will be hard pressed to recall it when I might need it.

Some practical things I would suggest include:

1. **Break the routine**: Something as simple as driving a different way to work in the morning can give you some different views of your local landscape. Likewise, you can try other ways to disrupt your daily routine that will rouse allow you to have different experiences
2. **Try a new experience**: Have you ever been in a hot air balloon? How about a planetarium or walking on a bouncy rope bridge? Maybe you're not interested in the stars, but something else seems interesting to you. Go for it. Try it. Learn about that funny fish that you never had seen, or compare your

experience in a hot air balloon to a plane ride. What was similar, what was different. Try writing about it. A new experience need not be an expensive endeavor, just make sure it's different.

3. Ask questions and listen: Sadly, we're in a very opinionated and socially hostile climate in our society. What I mean is that dialogue between people has become more limited to those with whom we agree. One of the ways I've been able to communicate is just by asking questions and listening to someone's perspective. By keeping my mouth closed and learning to listen more, I have come to understand another person's viewpoint better. In the end, I still might not agree, but I have increased understanding.
4. Do some dreaming: Finally, I would suggest some day dreaming. Spend time exercising your own imagination. One of my neighbors loaned me a knitting book full of beautiful sweaters. I imagined that one day, I might be able to make my own sweater. That dream prompted me to buy some knitting needles and yarn. I watched videos on techniques and persevered through several gnarly looking scarves. Today, I am knitting a sweater that I intend to give away to someone else and I can't wait to experience her surprise when she receives it. In his TedX talk, Dr. Land suggested finding twenty-five to thirty ways to improve a table fork as a way of activating the innovator within all of us.

And the good news is that science seems to indicate that we can all improve our curiosity quotient if we just put some effort into it. Again, I might not be the most flexible person in the world physically, but I will be more so tomorrow if I stretch myself today.

Q: Who would you say is the most influential modern-day pioneer?

This is nearly an impossible answer, as there are people pioneering all over the globe in different disciplines, and many of them may as yet be unknown to us. I will give you a look at two who I consider to be highly influential. One who comes to mind is Don Larson who is the Founder and CEO of the Sunshine Nut Company. Don was a whiz at corporate problem solving and was known as a successful turnaround guy, who largely spent his time in the food industry. He was also a bit of a daredevil personally and a measured risk-taker. As a successful individual, he was rewarded well for his work, and had every toy that you could imagine. Eventually, he came to a point, as some successful people do, where he thought, "Is this all there is?" With his faith leading the way, he told me that he sought God's direction, which eventually led him to the war-torn country of Mozambique. There, they had had a flourishing cashew growing business. Don and his whole family sold everything they had and moved to Mozambique and founded the Sunshine Nut Company.

Today, they operate the company with the guidance of an innovative quadruple bottom line. Many companies operate with a triple bottom line in that they seek to be sustainable, holistic, and integrative in their approach, but Don has added the element of transformation to his model. For Don and his family, this means that Sunshine Nuts serves to maximize their profits as a portal to help the less fortunate:

from the cashew farmers to the widows and orphans in the community, to the national workers in his factory, some of whom are being trained up as leaders. The goal is that all the people in and around the Sunshine Nut company have the opportunity to reach their full potential, and that's why their company slogan is, "hope never tasted so good."

Another person I really admire is Dr. Carol Ferrans. When Carol began her graduate studies, medical treatment for kidney failure--specifically we're talking about dialysis, was available to everyone. This was, by far, better than only having a few dialysis machines and having to choose who would receive treatment and who would die. However, there was a very important element missing from the treatment equation that we take for granted today, and that was the patient's own perception of his or her quality of life. Ferrans believed this to be unethical and was determined to include the patient's voice when considering treatment options. In her doctoral work, she set out, along with her academic advisor, to rectify this by developing the Ferrans-Powers Quality of Life index, which has now been adapted and used by patients who are suffering a variety of afflictions. It's also translated into multiple languages and is in use around the world. Dr. Carol is still pioneering. Her work has had an impact in reducing the disparity of breast cancer death rate in Chicago, which as one time was the worst in the U.S. In addition, her efforts resulted in statewide legislation that tackle the underlying reasons there is a black/white inequity in deaths from breast cancer.

Q: What is the best piece of advice anyone has ever given you?

A: A memory comes to mind: It was test day in ninth grade algebra. As I turned the exam over and began to read through the word problems, I had trouble pulling out the math equations from the sentences. I think I especially wrestled with these because I was more into creating a story of what might happen to those two trains speeding toward each other at a certain rate, than I was when they might actually cross paths, if you know what I mean. As the clock ticked, I had a growing, sick feeling that this wasn't going to roll well for me.

After trying to muscle my way through, I looked around the room and saw my peers busily scribbling away. At that point, I was overwhelmed with feelings of failure, put my head down, and gave up. I think so many of us have a memory like that from our youth, where we've tried, and failed, and felt humiliation. It's like being in the gym, when you're bench pressing and giving it your best effort, only to feel that weight on the barbell coming back at you. That's why we have spotters. That day, my algebra teacher was my spotter.

He saw what had happened, and knelt down by my desk so he could look me in the eye. After sharing some initial words, he asked, "Do you know what the word 'resilience' means?" I nodded that I did, at least on a basic level. But, he went on to share in a rather inspiring way that the trait of resilience in a person gives him or her the ability to not just "bounce back," but to persevere, have grit. He may have even shared that he saw that quality in me, because I came away determined to be

more resilient and to not give up. This lesson has served me well in life, and it is a quality that pioneering leaders all possess.

Q: What is something readers would be surprised to learn about you?

A: You might think that someone who wrote a book about pioneering might be gung-ho to try *anything* new and different, but I'm actually pretty hesitant in certain areas. One of those areas is food. I've heard it said that food is culture. While I love to travel and visit new places, I generally pass up on the part of culture that goes into my mouth. I come from an old New England family where culturally, the cooking is rather bland and identifiable, and that's fine with me! When I'm in more exotic contexts, I typically seek out chicken, beans, and rice, and the rest I get from my suitcase.

The worst experience I had in this area is when a travel companion insisted that I try grilled octopus in Portugal. I took one look at it and refused. After repeated attempts to get me to try, I gave in and put the blue, slimy portion of leg in my mouth. It was as horrible as I imagined it would be: the rubbery flesh, the mouth feel of the suckers on the leg...never again, no seconds for me. My curiosity about the taste of octopus has been satiated. Apparently, I have poor taste because most of the group of us traveling together loved it!



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Praise for *The Pioneer's Way*:

“If you have ever felt like you had an idea that might change the world, but were too timid to share it, Jennifer’s book is a must read for you. She has captured and analyzed the stories of pioneers across time, identifying key takeaways from their journeys that will inform and encourage you to explore your inner pioneer.”

—**Ken Schuetz**, CEO and Founder, Aligned Influence Consulting, Author of *Aligned Influence: Beyond Governance*

“Dr. Epperson brings a fresh perspective on the process of innovation and the creative people who generate it. Her novel insights encourage the development of the nascent pioneer in us all.”

—**Carol Estwing Ferrans**, PhD, RN, FAAN, Harriet H. Werley Endowed Chair for Nursing Research, Professor, Biobehavioral Health Science, College of Nursing, University of Illinois at Chicago

“This fascinating book marches us onto the stage of a New Frontier—presenting the old term ‘Pioneer’ and highlighting its new relevance for today. All Pioneers are clearly leaders; however, most leaders are not Pioneers. Yet if by God’s design you are one, your eyes will be opened to the freedom to live as a Pioneer and your mind will be challenged to be both a life changer and culture changer He created you to be.”

—**June Hunt**, Founder, HOPE FOR THE HEART and The Hope Center, Author, *Counseling Through Your Bible Handbook*

“Dr. Jennifer Epperson’s *The Pioneer’s Way* is a fascinating look at pioneering leaders—a topic that is not often covered in leadership books. Dr. Epperson is a wonderful storyteller, and she uses them to highlight the characteristics of this rare breed and to make a convincing case for their importance. The result is a thoroughly delightful book that is simultaneously informative and enjoyable.”

—**Prof. Glenn Sunshine**, Central Connecticut State University

“Jennifer’s book highlights the branched winding paths that true pioneers traveled to achieve their goals. In telling the stories of these pioneers, she gives us insight into her own journey as a pioneer through a profession riddled with roadblocks and inequities—yet she is successful. Using the incredible feat of landing a man on the moon as an opening scenario, she intrigues the reader to ‘go where no one has gone before’ and illuminates the path with the tools to get there.”

—**David W. Shellman**, Ed.D., Dissertation Professor and former Executive Leadership Studies Chairman, Gardner-Webb University

“*The first*. Who me? Yes, indeed, perhaps you. That’s the message of Jennifer Epperson’s book about some of the extraordinary men and women who fit the description: pioneer. Whether a familiar name or, perhaps even more intriguingly, an *unknown* trailblazer, this book reveals the secret of those who were willing to forge a new path and achieve significant accomplishment in a wide span of endeavors. It’s fascinating reading and an ideal guide for any pioneer who is grappling with how to move from an inherent passion to the fulfillment of life purpose.”

—**Peggy Campbell**, President, Ambassador Advertising Agency

“Get ready to take a captivating journey into the world of pioneering leadership. This is not your ‘run of the mill’ leadership book. Rather, this book is for those who have a passion to affect change in some way for the common good and are willing to take the risks to achieve their vision. A pioneer leader herself, Dr. Epperson shares her exceptional talent at storytelling, weaving together cleverly written tales of leaders from all walks of life who have realized success through great resilience and persistence. It is through thought-provoking questions and the parallels drawn between these inspiring leadership stories that Dr. Epperson connects the dots for us and distills the ‘Points for Your Compass.’ These insightful nuggets are essential

tools for the leader's toolbox. And, as the author so aptly points out, 'You need the right tool for the right job.' This unique book is definitely that tool."

—**Kathy Hartley**, President, Friends of Hearthside, Inc., Former President, Leadership Rhode Island

"The term *pioneer* typically evokes images of prairie landscapes, covered wagons, trailblazers carving out mountain trails, and trappers catching various critters for food and fur. But the pioneer spirit and drive goes far beyond those things. Pioneers have advanced medicine, space exploration, sports, mental health, mapping, engineering, business, and virtually every other field of study and practice that most of us take for granted. What motivates such people? What process do they go through in order to accomplish all that they do? What personal and professional standards do they typically adhere to? In short, how do they bring about such surprising and welcomed change? Jennifer Epperson answers these questions and more in her timely and insightful book, *The Pioneer's Way*. Do you want to be a change-maker? Do you want to be on the cutting edge in whatever is your passion? Follow *The Pioneer's Way*. You'll find that Epperson is just the guide you need."

—**William D. Watkins**, Award-winning author, speaker, and founder and president of Literary Solutions

"I've read many books on leadership, but none quite like this. Jennifer Hayden Epperson's book methodically and creatively maps out a path for pioneering leaders. It's full of relevant examples, fascinating anecdotes, time-proven principles, practical tips, and deep-dive self-assessment tools. Yet, it doesn't read like a dry college textbook. It stirs your imagination as you step into the lives of pioneers past and present. I think you'll enjoy it and find it very helpful."

—**Drew M. Crandall**, President, Keep In Touch, Former President, Friends of the Prudence Crandall Museum

"*The Pioneer's Way* is a thought-provoking book offering encouragement to any entrepreneur as they blaze their own trail. Dr. Epperson captures the essence of the pioneering spirit in today's complicated culture and offers a calm assurance to the reader that, though our individual contexts may differ, we can indeed find common ground with notable world changers. This work offers timely truths especially in light of the monumental challenges modern leaders face. A must read!"

—**Heidi Bogue**, Entrepreneur, Wife, Mother of Six, Owner, Coach, and Director of Operations, CrossFit HighGear, Owner, Creekside Labradors

"In *The Pioneer's Way*, Dr. Epperson has produced a seminal work of leadership literature that counterbalances today's mentality of managing risk. With beautifully

descriptive prose, she helps us understand the gamechangers the world is indebted to. Through recounting pioneering stories (including her own) in fields such as science, civil rights, and exploration, she inspires us to see we all can be a pioneer in something we feel called to—if we will only answer the call. Thank you, Jennifer, for being the example of a pioneer to the rest of us and for writing this essential work to call forth the next generation of pioneers!”

—**Robert McFarland**, President,
Transformational Impact LLC, Bestselling
Author, *Dear Boss: What Your Employees Wish
You Knew*

“If you want to know what a pioneer looks like, this book takes you on an exciting, full-color adventure! Jennifer has exhibited a tone and style that immediately launch the reader into a ‘kaleidoscope of pioneers.’ She weaves real and relatable examples of men and women into this masterfully crafted book. Jennifer has demonstrated how everyday people have gone into uncharted territory, carving out a niche for themselves, not just out of mere curiosity, but as a result of their own dogged passion for discovery and transformation. I am convinced, like Jennifer, that ‘once you know the truth, you cannot unknow it.’ So, I am recommending this book to anyone who must take on what may seem like gigantic barriers and tread rough patches in order to pioneer change. Once you hop on this adventure, there is no going back.”

—**Bishop Dr. Sunday Ndukwo Onuoha**,
President and Founder, Vision Africa