

Gordon Davidson

Every Experience Counts

Over the years, Gordon Davidson's style of entrepreneurship has deepened, integrating with his spiritual development path so the two are one and the same. A business is a monument to be built, and he finds his bricks in the integrity of his team, the values of his clients, and the lessons of his past. His faith, memories, and aspirations become the building blocks, allowing him to serve society and God with a commitment and drive that far surpass the empty vigor garnered solely by monetary incentive. "To me, success is more than prosperity—it's the whole process of building something," Gordon affirms. "Every experience counts toward this end. You can learn from everything that happens, and in that sense, there are no negative experiences."

While life has no negative experiences, it does have negative space that can, for better or worse, shape its subject. "You can try to run away from adversity, but it'll catch up with you," Gordon says. "It's better to face it. The question is, how?"

He first asked himself this question when he was eighteen and his mother's health was suddenly thrown into a state of emergency. Thankfully, his life up to that point had been blessed, forming a strong foundation. "I'm so grateful to have been born into a solid middle class American family," he says. "Like all families, it wasn't perfect, but my parents had very high standards for themselves and everyone around them, which taught me that character and integrity matter." If someone needed a hand, Gordon's parents always offered help. As the youngest of three brothers, he grew up learning from the core values of the people around him through his childhood. "I was a bit of a rebel for a while," he admits. "But I was inculcated with this value system that really enabled me to discern right from wrong."



These values became crucial when his mother's health crisis hit, causing such distress to his father that both parents became incapacitated. Suddenly, Gordon became the glue holding together the family as it dealt with grief and financial distress. He chose to take the challenge head on and stay off the streets, focusing on his family and continuing to excel at sports during high school. His high school basketball coach, Jim McDicken, inspired him to stay focused and positive, but the ordeal lasted far beyond

graduation. For the next six years he would become the main caretaker of the family, a weight that crushed what would have been the carefree days of his college years. Instead, Gordon found himself struggling through his biology major at school while living in a condemned house, warming Campbell's soup for dinner on a hot plate. He dropped out of classes twice to make some money at the paper mills, just trying to regain some footing. "Life can be difficult—sometimes exceptionally

so," he states, "but it is the difficulties that prepare you for your career, because business is not easy either."

While other people might have walked away, Gordon stayed, finding in himself a core strength he didn't know he had. "Nothing prepares you for those kinds of hardships, but I resolved I had to step up and deal with them," he reflects. "Through that exceptionally trying period, I came to God sometimes, but not often. We had been a churchgoing family, and my father had always had a quiet faith, but he wasn't demonstrative about it. My mother, on the other hand, never went anywhere without her Bible. She knew it backwards and forwards and prayed all the time with a faith so sincere that she was always trying to help people in need. She even helped start a church. I grew up in that environment, but I walked away from it for a while. I can certainly be

very strong-willed, and there were times I thought I was the captain of my own destiny."

When the relentless hardship subsided and his parents began to regain their health, Gordon finished college and then spent a year getting them settled before heading to Duke University to earn his graduate degree in environmental management. There, he did well and began to prepare himself as a professional. He spent several years working on cleanup sites before being contacted by an engineering firm to lead a turn-around. "I had no experience in turning around a business, but I jumped in head-first anyway," he recounts. "It turned out successfully and helped lay the groundwork for becoming an entrepreneur. It was hard and I learned many lessons."

From there, Gordon was recruited by the EPA to take on an unprecedented challenge. Congress had passed a law requiring federal agencies to clean up their sites under EPA oversight. The Agency formed a new enforcement program and selected Gordon to build it from scratch, and he became one of the youngest people in its history to serve in the Senior Executive Service. "Taking on the Department of Defense and the Department of Energy nuclear weapons complex was a daunting task, but the law was clear," reflects Gordon, "so we forged ahead to get these mega-sites cleaned up." Over the next five years, Gordon's program negotiated cleanup agreements at over 200 of the biggest sites, resulting in cleanup budgets exceeding \$6 billion per year. As Director of the federal facility program he also led a U.S. delegation to NATO to negotiate an agreement on radioactive releases from former Soviet Union sites, and he worked on several pieces of environmental legislation, including testifying before Congress. "Holding such a position at EPA was a huge honor," says Gordon. "It gave me an inside look from an executive level of how the government works."

Gordon viewed building the EPA program as an entrepreneurial experience, and once his skills were developed, he turned his attention back to the private sector. He left EPA to form Capital Environmental as a management consulting firm in concert with the mega-law firm Howrey & Simon. "We were profitable our first year, and I assembled a great team," he says. "The position gave me direct contact with Fortune 100 companies at the C level and allowed me to learn

the consulting and legal business areas."

By all counts, life was good, though in retrospect Gordon can identify that he was largely ignoring the persistent tug of God in his life through those years. "I knew the Bible, prayed, and was sincere sometimes, but I wasn't integrated fully into a spiritual life at that point," he reflects.

One day, Gordon received a call from an old friend and former colleague at EPA. "Some days you just never know what may happen, so be ready for anything," Gordon says, remembering that day with a smile. "My friend and I were working on similar assignments, and we recognized that there was a business opportunity for resolving disputes regarding environmental liabilities worth hundreds of millions." As a result of that conversation, Gordon went on to be cofounder of IES Corporation. "We had an amazing run at IES," says Gordon. "Everything just came together, and, the bottom line was that we created a whole new market. The key was the ability to price the risk and package it in a way that made sense for our clients, the Fortune 100, and the insurance carriers to settle rather than litigate. We bet on our ability to do deals, and over several years our settlements exceeded \$3 billion."

To Gordon, though, it wasn't just the financial success that was important to him—it was also his relationship to his partners and how they as a group ran the business. "We established a business model where two things were paramount," Gordon observes. "One was consensus decision making, and the other was dealing with internal issues right away in the context of honesty and love. I attribute much of our success to these two things. We were constantly on a high wire with no net so we had to be on it every day. In spite of this stress we always came together with full consensus decisions and issues never festered."

Having reached a point where business with their major corporations was winding down, Gordon felt the time was ripe to take a break and do some travelling. He took off for Bosnia, and from there explored Croatia, Turkey, the West Bank and Palestinian parts of Israel, and Egypt, all the while speaking with locals and enriching his world view every step of the way. He came home with a much deeper understanding of the Muslim world and the perspectives held by its inhabitants.

By the time he completed his geographic venturing, he had gathered knowledge and

experience from far and wide, but nothing could have prepared him for the ultimate journey that lay just ahead. Indeed, it was around that time that his decade-long sense of spiritual emptiness reached a fever pitch. “That spiritual vacuum reached such great proportions that, even though I looked like a prosperous American businessman from the outside, I was challenged on the inside,” he says. “Finally, on July 9, 2007, I got down on my knees and resolved to give my life to Jesus Christ fully. It was the start of the most important part of my life.”

Soon thereafter, Gordon began a descent into the deepest, darkest valley he had ever known. Mentally, emotionally, and physically, he remained there for seven years. His health, finances, job, and relationships all deteriorated, but he never once let go of Jesus’s robe. “Some time into that experience, I realized I was amidst a spiritual development process,” Gordon explains. “It dawned on me that this was on purpose, so I decided to go with it. I dove deeper into my faith, and I got the sense that Jesus was separating me from certain things in my life and building my character so I’d be ready for the big plans he had in store. There was very little space between Him and me, and that’s exactly where I wanted to be. I think of it as a training camp that changed everything—my life, my views, my thought processes, and my spiritual connection with Christ. It was by far the most difficult period of my life, but it was also the most important—a building process.”

As the pressure lessened, Gordon was connected to Terje Skotheim, one of the world leaders in infrared technology. “I knew that the world was moving towards measuring and detecting everything,” says Gordon, “and infrared technology was going to be in the forefront—in other words, a cornerstone of the Internet of Things.” Gordon spent time with Terje, and they decided to come together and form Lightsense Technology. “Our technologies and IP portfolio were breaking new ground,” Gordon observed, “and we felt that the business opportunity was very significant.” The opportunity also provided Gordon with another entrepreneurial challenge—one he was eager for. “To me, an entrepreneurial experience involves three things: creativity, impact, and reward,” says Gordon. “Lightsense offered all three.”

There was also another aspect of Lightsense that was important to Gordon in both a

personal and spiritual way. “There is no downside to application of our technologies,” he says. “Our technologies conserve energy, detect and control pollution, and improve a person’s health. It’s rare, I think, to find a business opportunity where there is such benefit to humanity and the planet. For this opportunity, I give the credit to God. My job is just to continue following Him.”

In advising young people entering the working world today, Gordon underscores the importance of business basics, especially in a tough employment climate. “Work hard, meet your commitments, expand your network, and always treat people with compassion, integrity, honesty, and character,” he advises. “Remember that every person on this planet has their own set of challenges, and that we’re all figuring it out. Persevere even when you have a hard day, even when you’re down and out, and even when an opportunity disappears right in front of you. You have to just keep moving forward, so it becomes really important to be grounded in something beyond yourself that can keep things in perspective.”

Beyond this, Gordon’s example demonstrates the empowerment and peace that comes from leading a holistic life that breaks down the barriers that so often segment a person’s lived experience. Indeed, for Gordon, entrepreneurialism and spirituality are one in the same. “My faith has deepened over time, to the point that I no longer see it as something separate from my work,” he explains. “When you build a business, you learn so much about yourself and others. This folds into my faith as a Christian. I bring a lot to the table in terms of tough, raw professional experience, and I can use it to help others. Even more, I can use it to build a better future for people like my two wonderful daughters. In these ways, prosperity is intertwined with a spiritual development that’s very important to me.”

“To me, Lightsense is a confluence,” he continues. “It’s the coming together of an ultimate entrepreneurial challenge, great products, and wide open markets, all against a backdrop of sustainability and making things better. This is where God wants me to be, and I’m blessed to be following this path that seems to only lead up.”

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