

Chapter 1

The Entrepreneurial Spirit

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back. Luke 6:38

In the dictionary, an entrepreneur is defined as “one who organizes, manages and assumes the risk of a business.” While the definition is valid, it seems sterile without a reference to the entrepreneurial spirit.

When I think about the big leap I took by venturing out on my own, I had more on my mind than just organizing, managing and assuming the risk of a business. My thoughts focused on Noah’s faith in God when he built the ark. In Genesis, 6:13-16 describes God telling Noah that He would destroy all flesh because the earth was filled with violence. Then God instructed Noah to build an ark measuring 300 cubits in length, or about 450 feet. The ark’s width should be 75 feet and stand 45 feet high.

Imagine how much Noah had to trust God to take on such a venture. Working with crude tools, Noah, a farmer from Ur, and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, constructed this huge vessel—the biggest ever built in its day. Noah built it exactly to God’s specifications, never deviating from his instructions. The ark was supposed to save Noah and his family from an impending flood, yet there were no clouds in the sky that showed any sign of even a rain shower. Still, Noah and his sons worked day and night on the ark. People came from near and far to see the four driven men build the

huge ark in the desert. Neighbors and visitors ridiculed and cursed Noah, yet he never abandoned his faith in God.

True, starting my own company was a miniscule task compared to Noah's venture. I was the son of a mechanic, who was also a man of the soil. My father worked a small farm—consisting of a couple of cows, a few chickens and some hogs—to feed his family of ten. Even though I had received my business degree from Central Missouri State University in 1973 and had held various sales and marketing positions with Union Pacific Railroad and Federal Express, people didn't hesitate to question me: "What do you know about owning your own business? How could you quit a good job to start your own company?"

When you dare to have ambitions, people tend to ridicule you; they become vocal about why you cannot and even should not attempt to pursue your dream. I suppose some well-meaning friends and family members are trying to protect you, while others may be jealous that you might succeed. Few have the same belief in you that you have in yourself. There will always be someone who wants to rain on your parade, but an entrepreneur can't be swayed by other people's standards. Don't let them put you into a box. If you buy into what's expected of you, you'll be restricted by others' limitations. Better you should be guided by God's unlimited promise. We've all been told: "Finish your education, get a good job, work for a good company, and you'll have a great life." In other words, work all your life, get a gold watch and retire.

This message is repeated and reinforced by people who are all too willing to tell us what they think we should do. Friends, teachers and even college professors continually reinforce it, and then parents confirm this message to their children by being

living examples of it. It takes a leap of faith to raise yourself above what others expect of you. The hardest thing to do is take that first step to overcome your fears and self-doubt, especially when you're surrounded by doubting Thomases who constantly reinforce those fears, based on their personal beliefs.

Becoming a player in the world of Information Technology (IT), which was a new revolution in the 1980s, presented challenges to all who sought entry, and, in particular, an African-American. To this day, I can visualize the frowns on the faces of friends and family who said, "You know they won't let you do that." I wondered, "Who are they?"

Following about 10 years of employment in corporate America, in 1984 I started my own company, Transportation Business Specialists. My transition to the role of sole proprietor was difficult; it meant no longer having a supervisor to rely on, no steady paycheck and no expense account. The umbilical cord was cut; I relinquished the safety net of a large corporation. Along with a second entity, a sister company I created called Transport Administrative Services, we provided services to the transportation industry by locating inefficiencies in the commercial freight industry. These auditing services revealed how much the railroads were losing for undercharges as opposed to overcharges. At the time, many companies provided overcharge services informing customers that ship by rail when they were charged too much, but nobody had ever taken our approach and worked the other end of the equation. Consequently, we were engaged to do an undercharge audit of three years worth of freight bills for Union Pacific Railroad, which meant that my company would manage \$15 billion of rate information for a single client.

The only way to handle that amount of information was through a local area network to link all of their operations, so we built the biggest one in St. Louis at the time.

After I learned the benefits of effectively integrating technology to solve business problems, I formed my present company, World Wide Technology, in 1990 with an investment of \$250,000, hard-earned money from my two earlier ventures.

WWT wasn't exactly an "overnight success." We had our peaks and valleys, and although I never missed a single payroll, many weeks I didn't receive my own paycheck. Employees always came first. At one point in 1993, things were so tight, a collection company repossessed my car right from our parking lot. Fortunately, I ran after the car and was able to stop it so I could retrieve my briefcase from the trunk.

When friends and acquaintances asked my wife Thelma about our new venture, and she explained what our IT company did, they'd roll their eyes. Once woman told Thelma, "Well, you guys must like living on the edge." We quickly learned to throw conventional wisdom out the window, knowing that what the world thinks is wise, God thinks is foolish.

It is always darkest before the dawn, and even in the most discouraging times, I never lost my faith in God. I was in His hands, and I always knew the Lord would look after me. I constantly reminded myself that when God told Abraham to take his only son to the altar to sacrifice him, Abraham did as he was told. Imagine the confusion in Abraham's mind—a man who was incredibly old when his son was born, and yet he was prepared to sacrifice him. At the time, Abraham didn't know God would have him sacrifice a lamb instead. If Abraham could have such faith in God, I believed I too could trust God to look after me.

Throughout my life, I have followed examples set by individuals in the Bible, such men as Abraham, Noah and David, who had been given a charge to do God's work.

And I, through my business and my daily life, have a charge to do God's work, to be obedient and find favor with the Lord.

As the Bible tells us, we are here to sow seed into people's lives. In St. Luke 6:38, Christ says: *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."* I live my life by these words. My objective in business is not driven by how much money I may make. I seek to serve and to give to others.

In business, my biggest job as CEO and owner of my company is to serve others. My charge is to serve the employees of this organization and serve them well. In my company, I strive to nurture service and commitment to others, an attitude that places others before us. We abide by this philosophy rather than a self-serving culture, and it permeates externally to customers and suppliers. Then, like a pebble cast into a lake, its ripples eventually reach the shore. Trust and loyalty communicated to others assures long-term success.

Jesus devoted his life to serving others. Even at the Last Supper, Jesus demonstrated that he was here to serve when he knelt to wash the feet of his disciples. In doing so, Jesus humbled himself, because Hebrew culture viewed the washing of feet as the lowliest of acts. Some of his disciples were so embarrassed, they argued and refused to have their Lord and Savior serve them. But Jesus was there to serve, just as he was there to sacrifice his life for us.

Similarly, the success of a business owner is dependent upon his or her desire to serve others. I believe this philosophy of servitude epitomizes the entrepreneurial spirit.