

## **David W. Gill A Brief Intellectual/Vocational Autobiography [www.ethixbiz.com](http://www.ethixbiz.com)**

For the curious, here are the broad contours of my intellectual and vocational autobiography. This is the story of how I came to the convictions, perspectives, and activities which became central in my life.

### **Family Formation**

I grew up in Oakland and San Leandro in Northern California. My father's whole career was spent as an accountant at the Crown Zellerbach (a large paper business) corporate headquarters in San Francisco. My dad was not especially bold or ambitious but he was a stickler for accuracy, hard work, and uncompromised values and ethics. My stay-at-home mom, along with my dad, made my upbringing a joyful, positive, warm, supportive experience so I naturally bought into their values and ethics as well. I always had jobs and made my own money from mowing lawns, washing cars, delivering newspapers, pumping gas, and factory labor from before I was age ten until I became a paid teacher after college. Our "Gill" way was "work hard, deliver value, be honest and reliable, give generously to those in need, save some, and enjoy the rest."

My parents raised me and my sisters in a small Protestant Christian sect called the Plymouth Brethren (Garrison Keillor is the most famous "alumnus" of this group; I left in my twenties, by the way). Like many little "perfectionist" movements, they were most critical of other churches, especially those most like themselves. This is an important part of the story because none of us in our church could or would ever go to a Christian or Catholic or religious school of any kind (or even participate in any student religious group!)--all of us were steered to public schools and universities where you would not be risking any exposure to "false teaching" and where you would always know where you stood. So I grew up to be a passionate, radical Christian in a pluralistic, diverse world—like UC Berkeley which I entered as a freshman in the fall of 1964. My takeaway for life was that one's values are essentially worthless if you can only adhere to them in some homogeneous "huddle" of like minds. It's all about being present in a positive, constructive way in a larger community where we embrace difference while staying true to our own foundation.

### **University, City, World**

Berkeley and Oakland in the Sixties and Seventies were in a constant ferment. Free Speech, Black Panthers, Vietnam, counter-culture, feminism, the environmental movement, etc.. Since I was not raised with a nationalistic, conservative, or reactionary political ideology, I was delighted to be in the middle of all this questioning of authority. This is when (and why) I migrated from engineering to history to ethics as my field of study. What's the right thing to do .... about Vietnam? about the Panthers' issues and demands? about free speech and advocacy at the state university? Ethics is the field that explores this kind of questioning. I knew that's where I wanted to end up. It wasn't just a theoretical interest but a practical one.

After Berkeley (B.A.), SF State (M.A.), and three or four years of high school and junior high school history teaching I moved to the University of Southern California to enter an exciting, interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in Social Ethics during the mid-Seventies. At USC we studied the whole "canon" of moral philosophy from the Greeks to the post-modernists. We also looked at issues in applied ethics as they related to business, politics, health care and other arenas.

### **Technology, Values, Jacques Ellul**

My own work came to a focus in my doctoral dissertation on the great French sociologist of technology, Jacques Ellul (1912-94). Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) and many others had been calling attention to Ellul in their own writings and interviews. I found Ellul's understanding of technology and its impact on our culture, politics, communication, business, entertainment, religion and other domains to be nothing less than brilliant. For Ellul it is not the technological "machines" that are most important; it is technology as a way of thinking, a method of subjecting every problem, every sector of life to scientific, rational, quantitative analysis. But the technological method that is so successful in building bridges can be enslaving and dehumanizing when it is applied to human relations, art, and other domains. The quantitative can obscure the qualitative. We live in an era of "raving rationalism," Ellul wrote. The problem is not "technology" but what we could call "technologism" or "technopoly" (Neil Postman's term). Ellul taught me that technology is not value-neutral but carries with it a set of values (efficiency, power, speed, quantifiability, rationality, artificiality, normality, predictability, etc.). These are not "bad" values but we must recognize them for what they are and make sure that our technologies serve our mission and purpose and don't become ends in themselves.

In addition to his great sociological works such as *The Technological Society*, *The Political Illusion*, *Propaganda*, *Autopsy of Revolution*, *The Technological Bluff*, Ellul also produced a series of fascinating challenges to the Christian church to fight against its conformity to some of the worst aspects of the culture (including the worship of technology, the appeal to the state to solve all our problems, and the idolatry of one's nation) and rediscover its radical, distinctive witness in the world. Ellul provided a very fresh interpretation of Jesus and the message of the Bible---which I analyzed in my Ph.D. dissertation *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* (1979, 1984). I exchanged many letters with Ellul from 1972 to 1982. I met and interviewed him in person in 1982, spent every other Friday afternoon of my 1984-85 sabbatical in discussion with him at his home in Bordeaux, and met with him many more times until his death in 1994. In 2000 I organized the founding of the International Jacques Ellul Society which adopted the *Ellul Forum for the Critique of Technological Civilization*, a semi-annual journal many of us "Ellulians" had organized and sustained since 1988. Visit [www.ellul.org](http://www.ellul.org) for more information.

Ellul's work followed a two-track "yin and yang" dialectic: the sociology of technique alongside a radical Christian ethics. Both poles (or tracks) have value and you can't just split the difference and take half of each, or mix them together in some simple formula. Ellul's favorite philosopher (and one of my top five philosophers) was the Danish "father of existentialism" Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55)—who wrote two parallel but distinct series of books: on the one hand the philosophical works like *Either/Or*, *Philosophical Fragments*, and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*; on the other hand "edifying discourses" on Christian faith such as *Works of Love*, *Training in Christianity*, and *The Attack upon "Christendom."* Kierkegaard was relentlessly "anti-modern" in the sense that he didn't believe that a rationalistic philosophical system could capture the truth about human existence (neither did Ellul, neither do I). But just as Kierkegaard "answered" his philosophical works with his creative theological works, so Ellul "answered" his sociological studies of technique and modern culture with his own very creative works on ethics, theology, and the Bible.

### **Opening the Christian Mind, Upgrading Christian Ethics**

My own career has two parallel tracks that I see as a sort of dialectic. "Business ethics in an age of technology," on the one hand; "Christian ethics in an age of diversity," on the other. It has been an important part of my vocation to reformulate a better, more biblically authentic Christian ethics to help Christians of any and all denominations and traditions better understand the ethics of Jesus and Scripture. Like my mentors Ellul and Kierkegaard it drives me crazy to see how "Christian" leaders teach and do things that are in radical conflict with what our leader, Jesus, taught. For example, the Religious Right, the "Moral Majority," the "health and wealth" televangelists, and the flag-waving American Christian nationalists are in radical contradiction to the ethics of Jesus and the New Testament as well as the Ten Commandments and the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. But a "Christian Left" that sells out Jesus to achieve political influence is no better. Thus, one major goal of my research, writing, and teaching has been to formulate a better, more authentic Christian ethics.

As I finished my doctoral studies at USC, I organized a group of Berkeley alumni and friends who shared my passion for a more authentic, holistic Christian way of thinking and working and we (bold and reckless children of the Sixties that we were!) founded a graduate school of Christian studies next to our beloved alma mater in Berkeley. Our view was that we needed a think tank at a post-graduate level, where people could earn an accredited master's degree and both deepen their Christian faith and thought and explore ways of constructively integrating it with their "secular" vocation in business, the arts, education, health care, etc.. We were not interested in training pastors or priests; our interest was in the "laity." We called our place "New College Berkeley" because we could never think of a name we all liked and after referring to it as "the new college" for many months, that name stuck.

I taught courses in Christian ethics and business and professional ethics from 1977-90, organized conferences and workshops for attorneys, managers, scientists, engineers, et al, and published *The Opening of the Christian Mind* (1989) as a kind of manifesto for our educational goals (no more narrow, closed, empty, or neglected Christian minds!). Three of my books that came out later were really a product of my passion for a better Christian education and ethics: *Should God Get Tenure? Essays on Religion and Higher Education* (editor, 1997) was a collection of essays (including my own, "Ethics With and Without God") on trying to think more holistically and creatively as Christians. My life-long work on Christian ethics

culminated in a two volume introduction: *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (2000) and *Doing Right: Practicing Ethical Principles* (2004).

### **Moral Philosophy, Ethical Business**

My experience with New College Berkeley was not just in the classroom. I was the primary entrepreneur, organizer, institution builder, marketer, and fund raiser over the fourteen years that it dominated my existence. I learned a lot about institutional mission and values, about culture and performance, and about competitive realities, financial constraints, and boards of directors. I have wished that I knew then, when I was Dean and/or President, what I know now, but that's not how things work.

From 1992-2001 I moved to Chicago to escape the administrative life for a while and refocus on teaching and writing. I was appointed Carl I. Lindberg Professor of Applied Ethics at North Park University in Chicago. This position put me in charge of an "ethics-across-the-curriculum" project. I taught in the philosophy and business departments. I was now primarily working on my other track, the "ethics and values in a diverse, global marketplace" challenge. I read and studied intensively the growing literature in business, technology, communication, and bio/health care ethics—created and taught courses, gave lectures, organized conferences, and began to do some organizational ethics consulting (e.g., I guided Swedish Covenant Hospital's code of ethics project and worked as subject matter expert for the emerging Cardean University/UNext.com online MBA project).

### **From Damage Control to Mission Control Ethics**

As I focused a great deal of attention on the growing business ethics literature I became increasingly dissatisfied with the way it was approached. The typical business ethics book or course consisted of an analysis and discussion of hard cases, such as the wreck of the Exxon Valdez oil tanker in Alaska or the Challenger space disaster, or the deadly explosion at the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal, India, or the scandal of Nestle's marketing infant formula to African mothers without a clean water supply---along with some obligatory discussion of sexual harassment and non-discriminatory hiring and promotion policies. Business students were given a quick summary of the ethical theories of Kant and Mill and two or three others and then urged to choose one to unpack the ethical dilemma and determine what went wrong and who was at fault.

My former colleague Al Erisman used the very apt phrase "damage control ethics" for this kind of approach. My criticism of this sort of ethics was that it never really addressed the causes and contributing factors to these problems. It was reactive, narrow, and negative. It was also not terribly practical to focus so much attention on spectacular exceptional cases that few managers would ever encounter.

I was deeply influenced by Prof. Alasdair MacIntyre's books *After Virtue* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1984) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (1990) which I still regard as the most important works in philosophical ethics in generations. MacIntyre shows why both Modernity ("Encyclopaedia," the rationalistic ethical theories of the European Enlightenment such as those of Kant and Mill) and Postmodernity (the cynical individualism of Nietzsche and most of our contemporaries) can and must fail to actually guide our moral discernment and action. The answer is to rediscover and appropriate in new ways "Tradition" (especially the approach of Aristotle). It isn't possible to pretend we are in ancient Greece and reinstate the Traditional/Classical approach to ethics lock, stock, and barrel. But the way forward will require us to learn profoundly from this classical, traditional approach.

What all this means is that ethics is not just a matter of figuring out a set of rules (even a set of universal rules) and a method by which to apply them to cases. Rather, ethics is always related to communities and purposes. What is our purpose (Greek, *telos*)---our mission and vision? It is this basic choice which will ultimately drive our ethical performance. Is it a purpose that will bring out the best in people (e.g., in our employees and owners)? After we figure out and commit to our purpose, we then ask "what kind of community---and what sort of individual character---do we need to enable us to achieve our purpose with excellence? This question points to our corporate culture and the core values and virtues we must seek to embed throughout the culture to optimize our prospects of achieving our mission and vision. In this light, our code of ethics is seen as our shared guidelines for "how we do the things we do" in our organization in order to succeed. Yes, it is, on first glance, a "relativistic" approach to ethics; we are not looking for some kind of universals and moral absolutes but for "rules of the game" and "principles of the village" in a sense.

However, everything is not, in the end, relative because we have in common our basic humanity which cuts across all organizations and world cultures.

I found that a few business ethics scholars such as the late Robert Solomon were on the same track in rethinking business ethics in terms of purposes, communities, and character. Business writers like Jim Collins, e.g., his *Built to Last* (with Jerry Porras) and *Good to Great* best-sellers, were also showing how “preserving the core” (purpose and values) was the starting point of great companies. In fact, as I thought about my study of the Ten Commandments I recalled how the great rabbis and Hebrew scholars had often insisted that the Decalogue was really one command and nine corollaries: first, get your god straight (“I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me”)---and the ethical guidelines will follow (i.e., get the Creator on the throne and he will guide you away from killing, theft, covetousness, false witness, idolatry, etc.). Same basic lesson: get your ultimate End, purpose, mission, or vision straight and the appropriate ethics will follow.

### **Into the Marketplace**

In the mid- and late-Nineties my main conversation partner on business ethics was a long-time friend who was an executive at Boeing in the Seattle area. Al Erisman had a Ph.D. in Applied Mathematics and was the Director of Boeing’s IT research and development team of 300 or so techies and scientists. Al was a technology-lover and creator, a big league business executive, and a guy of complete integrity who had a zero tolerance for unethical behavior in business or elsewhere. We rapidly escalated our conversation about business, technology, and ethics to a point where we co-taught a course in summer 1996 at Regent College in Vancouver BC and co-lectured at Penn State, University of Washington and elsewhere. By 1998 we had gathered a small group of business leaders around us and together decided to found the Institute for Business, Technology, and Ethics (IBTE) whose major product would be a bimonthly magazine called *Ethix*, for which Al would write a regular “Technology Watch” column, I would contribute a regular “Benchmark Ethics” column, and we would jointly interview some leader in the business, technology, or ethics domains. Three years later, in 2001, we decided to have a go at it full-time so Al retired from Boeing and I walked away from my tenured, endowed post in Chicago and moved back home to the San Francisco Bay Area. All of this happened just as the Silicon Valley economic bubble was bursting and just before 9/11 shattered the world. In 2003 I left the organization and became a sole practitioner business ethics educator, writer, and consultant under a new flag: EthixBiz.com.

I learned a great deal with Al Erisman and the IBTE as we debated and discussed the issues, read voluminously, and went around interviewing CEOs such as Jim Sinegal (Costco), Phil Condit (Boeing), Lew Platt (HP), and Jonathan Klein (Getty Images), and thought leaders like John Seeley Brown, David Korten, and Carl Mitcham. But my learning curve ratcheted upward even more dramatically after 2002/03 when I was able to test out all I had learned about organizational ethics in working on the ground with companies and organizations such as East Bay Municipal Utility District, Harris & Associates (construction and project management), Paradise Foods, Nikon Precision, and several others. I have had overwhelmingly positive reactions from business leaders that my holistic mission/culture/practices approach “works” and leads to sound ethics and business success.

From 2004 to 2010 I was almost totally immersed in (1) teaching business ethics to MBA students, two-thirds of them “Executive MBA students” (i.e., holding down experienced management posts while doing their MBA studies) – full-time at St. Mary’s College, which has the oldest and (in my opinion, the best) executive MBA program in Northern California, occasionally also in the MBA programs at the University of San Francisco and Seattle Pacific University; (2) working as organizational ethics consultant and trainer at Harris & Associates, a blue-chip construction and project management firm based in Concord. I also consulted and trained at EBMUD, Paradise Foods, and elsewhere, but Harris & Associates has been my monthly “ethics lab” and pilot plant for six years (and counting); (3) producing my general market organizational ethics manifesto and manual *It’s About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations* (2008); and (4) on a busy speaking circuit at Rotary Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, professional and industry groups, public affairs groups, and all manner of companies and non-profits promoting and describing what I have learned about building ethically healthy organizations.

In the fall of 2010, I accepted an invitation to move my primary base of operations to the Boston Area where I serve as Mockler-Phillips Professor of Workplace Theology and Business Ethics and Director of the Mockler Center for Faith and Ethics in the Workplace at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The fifth largest theological seminary in North America, interdenominational Gordon-Conwell, uniquely among theological seminaries, is committed to a direct and positive engagement with the business world and business school. This post has provided me with an incredible platform to work for business ethics and values in today's world.