“My definition of an enterpreneur is ‘one who has a dream, and who resiliently builds an organization to achieve it.’ The size and nature of the dream varies from time to time and from person to person but the operative is the action word ‘build.’”

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The United Arab Emirates is today one of the most technologically enabled nations in the world, and has embraced ICT as a pillar to support its rapid growth and development during its first 35 years. These hold promise to position the UAE as a leading producer of intellectual property, to transform a resource economy into a knowledge economy and enhance the global leadership position of the country. I am confident that this imaginative and energetic nation will achieve all of these.

However, technology alone, while a necessary component of competitiveness, is an insufficient enabler of social and economic development. Now, as in centuries past, it will be the enterprising behavior of ordinary people that will determine whether the extraordinary, transformational potential of knowledge can be realized.

Fifty years ago the sound of entrepreneurship, in what was to become the United Arab Emirates, was that of waves slapping against dhows heading to sea at 4.00 a.m. in Umm Al-Quwain. It was the whisper of camels stirring to begin another odyssey in the southwest desert of Liwa or the clang of pearls into collection pans at Dubai Creek and Abu Dhabi. It was the thunk of the boatbuilder’s hammer; the bustle of traders; the cry of the Falcon at hunt. It was the harmonic voices of enterprising people. Few knew the word, but life of that time demanded the full “entrepreneurial” experience. Enterprise was the natural order; an inescapable, seamless seeking of returns from a reluctant land and sea. Life wasn’t easy nor was
it glamorous. The demands were relentless, and the entrepreneurial endeavor, just as it is today, was risky business.

Given that 70 percent of a nation’s GDP is the output of small to medium-sized enterprises, the phenomenon of entrepreneurship makes for fashionable academic study these days. The entrepreneurial spirit is clearly a fundamental engine of the economy. Today our technology has burgeoned, communication is instant and ubiquitous, and the globe is a village. But with increasing technological and global competitiveness there is a growing imperative to understand, characterize and encourage entrepreneurial behavior. Why does it occur? Is there an entrepreneurial DNA; a genetic predisposition? Can entrepreneurs be made? Or cloned? Or cultivated?

No doubt some of the answers will be found in social research, but much again may be found through a return to the behaviors of our enterprising roots. The past generations of this region may have had no familiarity with words like “entrepreneur”, ‘return on investment’, “value proposition”, “price point” or the thousand other expressions of the business vocabulary. They were doers. Whatever they lacked in assets or technology they compensated through compound effort. Today, worldwide, we have an entire generation of people who can talk the talk. The defining element of achievement is whether they will choose to walk the walk.

Some argue that traditional life was enterprising but not entrepreneurial. This distinction is rooted in the notion that real entrepreneurship requires exceptionality; exceptional ideas, invention, innovation. That is part of it. But I argue that the ability to sustain effort over time is itself an essential and illusive entrepreneurial quality. The reality of entrepreneurial life is days and days of ordinary things, done diligently and often repetitively, with an occasional moment of inspiration (or good luck) that lifts things another notch. Much of the time “innovation” is a modest variation — a new way of doing an old thing. It can grow incrementally, but the increments may be imperceptible until months or years later.
There are some of our young and brilliant who are waiting for the flash-bang before they actually do anything. There may be no flash-bang . . . just an opening into which the determined and committed might step. There are some high achievers of course, and we rightly celebrate those. But even empires start modestly. The backbone of an entrepreneurial culture is determined, enterprising behavior in the face of uncertainty and obstacles. In that respect traditional life held an essential piece of the picture, and one that must not be lost in an age of invention and wizardry.

My definition of an entrepreneur is “one who has a dream, and who resiliently builds an organization to achieve it.” The size and nature of the dream varies from time to time and from person to person but the operative is the action word, “build.” When the way is convoluted and filled with uncertainty there is great power in simply doing the things that are within one's power to do. Behaving decisively is infinitely more productive than thinking endlessly. We need to think of course. We need the best knowledge, the most relevant data and the most effective “head” we can muster, the kind of technical knowing that was in short supply a half century ago. However, every entrepreneurial journey is to some extent a foray into the unknown. It is an exercising of the “hand” of faith. Browning put it eloquently when he said, “Let the reach exceed the grasp, else what’s a heaven for.”

In venture-taking one can never have all the answers in advance. The way, no matter how well anticipated, will twist and wind into unknown territory. There will be blind alleys, obstacles, poor harvests, and storms. If you wait until everything is within your reach, you may never grasp a thing.

A couple of years ago, I attended an international entrepreneurship conference in Canada. Inside the Delta Hotel, experts, thought-leaders, teachers, students, potential entrepreneurs, and economic development professionals were discussing things. There was a lot of good thinking, and good talking going on. I stepped outside at
mid-morning to get some air and prepare my head for a keynote address. It was bitterly cold that day, with snow squalls flying off the harbour. On a street corner a young lady tugged my sleeve. Along her right arm was a string of wire coat hangers on to which she had woven yarn to form a green cloth coating. The coating would keep my shirts from slipping off the hanger, she explained. They were two dollars each; a Toonie. There was no high impact sales pitch. From her speech and demeanor I detected that she might have had some cognitive disabilities. But she was clearly a doer. Here she stood, nose blue with cold and eyes bright with expectation, the manufacturer, the packager, the marketer, the sales person and the cashier; the consummate sole proprietorship. Whatever her entrepreneurship lacked in knowledge (and I’m not sure there was much), she lacked nothing in heart. While we studied entrepreneurship; she was living it.

We had some deep discussions about entrepreneurship at the Delta Barrington that cold February day, most of it long lost to memory. But what I will not soon forget is coat hangers, green yarn and luminous, resolute eyes.

In the distinction between thinking about things and doing things, lies one of the simple secrets of enterprise. The hallmark of historical community life was that of simply taking action-building the best one could with the resources available. Their dreams were small by today’s standards; often the simple dream of keeping body, soul and family together. Today’s world of vast technical, material, financial and human resources offers bigger dreams, with infinitely greater potential returns on investment. But passivity a companion of our time may be the greatest inhibitor of real progress. Television, computers, and the devices of convenience encourage a society of observers; reactive watchers of a passing parade. The global village tends to be a convention of planners, thinkers, and strategists. This is all well and good; but not nearly good enough. As my grandfather would have said, “good kindling, but not much of a fire.”
I have learned enough in my own entrepreneurial journey to suspect that while it is an advantage to be brilliant or educated or inventive, entrepreneurship is not reserved for some elite class of people. It is certainly not exclusively a gift of genetics, nor a derivative of great genius. Those who reach further than they can grasp, day after ordinary day, are living the entrepreneurial life. Mistakes will be made and returns will be illusive, but whatever they might lack in gifts of nurture and nature, those who behave like entrepreneurs, are entrepreneurs.

Knowledge has exploded since 1957. Our collective heads are chock-a-block with learning and our technology is bursting with possibility. But now, like yesterday, not much happens until somewhere in the community of man someone has the courage to put out to sea at 4 am.