

FIND ADVANTAGES IN ADVERSITY



GAMENESS

Land on your feet,
not on your feelings

DAVID DENNIS

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT *GAMENESS* . . .

David Dennis is not only a man of integrity but also a man of action, who walks his talk and teaches others how to do the same! In this book you will learn how he originally wrote the book as a love letter and instructional guide for his children and grandchildren, and then others learned of it and wanted to glean the pearls of wisdom for themselves. You will want to do the same! Read it, share it, and watch how it transforms your life and the lives of others! David, thank you for sharing this wonderful book with the world!

Dr. Willie Jolley

Hall of Fame Speaker, Sirius XM Radio Host and best-selling author of *A Setback Is a Setup for a Comeback* and *An Attitude of Excellence*

When Willie Jolley's father died when he was in high school, he put himself through college singing in nightclubs and recording jingles for radio and television ads. He became a celebrated performer, but he was replaced when karaoke machines became the rage. Not to be undone, Jolley turned this setback into a comeback as a motivational speaker. Since this career turn, he has been named "One of the Outstanding Five Speakers in the World" and "Motivational and Inspirational Speaker of the Year" by Toastmasters International. Jolley has spoken to some of the biggest corporations in the world and is the host of his Sirius XM radio show. He uses his platform to empower and encourage people to rise above their circumstances and maximize their God-given potential.

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We all succeed or fail based on making good or bad decisions. Good decisions are a result of experiencing life and learning its lessons. David Dennis is ready, willing, and able in these pages to share pieces of his life that will help us all make better decisions. Read, learn, and succeed.

Jim Stovall
Olympic weightlifter, entrepreneur, and best-selling
author of *The Ultimate Gift*

Jim Stovall was a national champion weightlifter and aspired to play professional football, but when he was seventeen, a diagnosis rocked his world. He was told that he was gradually and inevitably losing his eyesight. Several years after graduating from college, the dreaded day came. Later he remarked, "Sight is a precious thing, but compared to vision, it's really nothing, because people perish for lack of vision. People can live well without sight." And he has proved it. He launched Narrative Television Network, which provides the sight impaired with descriptive narrative about what's going on visually in movies. He was named National Entrepreneur of the Year, received the U.S. Chamber of Commerce National Blue Chip Enterprise Award, and was chosen as the International Humanitarian of the Year, along with President Jimmy Carter, Nancy Reagan, and Mother Teresa. His best-selling book, *The Gift*, has been made into a major motion picture.

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Gameness is full of life lessons about turning adversities into advantages. David Dennis knows something about this lesson because he has lived it. He endured a difficult early childhood but was adopted by a loving family. As often happens, his pain and heartache gave him tremendous compassion, and he has devoted his life to helping young people who feel overlooked and desperate. Today, David is

CEO of a company that has served hundreds of thousands of youth and families in twenty states. In this book, we find out what it means to “be game.” I strongly encourage you to pick up this book and read it. David’s message will inspire and challenge you.

Darol Rodrock
Entrepreneur, founder of The Rodrock Foundation, and
author of *Out of the Shadows*

Darol Rodrock is a successful entrepreneur in real estate and homebuilding but with a heart for troubled kids. His parents were abusive, and when he was thirteen, they told him they didn’t want him any longer. He was lost, abandoned, and desperate—not a recipe for stability and success. It appeared he was destined for a life of deep resentment, violence, and loneliness, but Lavon and Ray Robinson welcomed him into their home. He explains, “Through the Robinsons’ unconditional love, and the care of many others along the way, I was able to turn what I experienced as a child into a passion for helping others.” He uses his autobiography, *Out of the Shadows*, to raise funds for his childcare nonprofit, The Rodrock Foundation.

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DAVID DENNIS

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*To the most unforgettable woman I have ever known, my
wife Becky, and our five game children: Dillon, Dalton,
Dryden, Dabney and Daxon.*

*You always remind me of how God loves by showing me
there was nothing I could ever do to make you love me
any more . . . or any less . . . forever.*

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INTRODUCTION

“He was hard and tough and wiry—just the sort
that won’t say die—
There was courage in his quick impatient tread;
And he bore the badge of gameness in his bright
and fiery eye,
And the proud and lofty carriage of his head.”

A.B. PATERSON

What, exactly, does it mean to be *game*?

This entire book was written to answer that question, but I’ll try to give you a good head start with this introduction and opening chapters. In my study of this concept, I came across a related word that I’d never heard before, and I quickly realized it’s at the heart of what I’m trying to say—the word is *gameness*. The term isn’t commonly used today, but it would do us well to start using it again because it has layers of meaning.

The quotation above is from Australian poet A.B. Paterson’s 1890 poem, “The Man from Snowy River”—one of the few examples I could find where the word is used in literature. I think it’s high time a new generation begins to appreciate both the definition and the power of gameness.

I like this definition from the online Free Dictionary (which I trimmed down considerably) because it suggests how many attributes are included when you use one simple word:

gameness, *n.* The quality of mind enabling one to face danger or hardship resolutely: bravery, courage, fearlessness, fortitude, gallantry, heart, intrepidity, mettle, nerve, pluck, spirit, stoutheartedness, undauntedness, valiantness, valor.

This dictionary even provides the informal and slang synonyms of *spunk*, *gutsiness*, and *moxie*. I like those words a lot.

Another dictionary identifies four defining attributes of gameness:

- A never-quit mindset;
- Resoluteness to a purpose;
- A fighting spirit; and
- The will required to act.

These four characteristics explain what it means to be game, but I hope to challenge us to go beyond mere definitions and begin to infuse gameness into everyday life. So . . . the four sections describe the specific choices we can make to live according to these attributes:

- *Upgrade Your Perspective* to develop a never-quit mindset;
- *Fulfill Your Potential* to solidify resoluteness to a purpose;
- *Tackle Your Problems* so you always have a fighting spirit; and

- *Master Your Performance* with the tenacious will required to act.

We hear a lot these days about gaming, being on your game, gamesmanship, having skin in the game, and so forth. *Gameness*, however, is a term that appears to have been left in the past along with horse-drawn carriages and rotary telephones. It's the word you search for, but seldom comes to mind, when you want to describe the strongest of never-say-die emotions. No other word carries quite the same weight.

It doesn't take long to discover that every moment of our lives is filled with varying degrees of unknowns, irrationalities, and adversities. Life is uncertain, unfair, and often unpleasant. Consequently, we will never achieve greatness without a fighting spirit. No one who has ever lived had anything to do with being born, yet each of us has final say about how well we live our lives (or if we do at all). Regardless of what we fight to change about ourselves, there's one thing about life that we can never change: We will live each day in the face of adversity that demands something of us.

It's this universal truth that makes gameness life's most important attribute. Regardless of who we decide to be, where we decide to go, and who we decide to bring along, a lack of gameness will keep us from living to our fullest potential.

That same quality of gameness that enabled a nineteenth-century Australian frontiersman to survive in a hostile environment can make for very real improvements in each of our twenty-first century lives. Your "frontier" may include an unknown future, self-doubt about your survival skills in a chaotic world, spiritual droughts, and unprovoked personal attacks. It's far too easy to withdraw, retreat, change course, or find some other option to cushion the difficulty. But gameness keeps us moving forward . . . into the wind

... confronting each obstacle . . . to arrive finally at the best possible life we can experience. The chapters that follow will promote the life-changing significance of developing a mindset of gameness.

But before we delve into this great topic, let me tell you a few things about myself and why I'm writing this book. If you met me today, you would see a man happily married for thirty-five years and the parent of five amazing children. Vocationally, I am a Licensed Professional Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, and the long-time CEO of one of America's largest social services organizations. You would be likely to presume I've had a secure childhood, a comfortable life, and a lot of positive breaks along the way. But those who knew me as a child never imagined my life would ever turn out so positively.

Just before my fourth birthday, my dad died, and what followed was a long and frightening year under the sole custody of my alcoholic mother, with my sister by my side. It wasn't long before Child Protective Services removed my sister and me from our home, and we were placed with two different families. I lost everything that was precious to me, every source of security a child needs. Thankfully, my sister and I were eventually reunited around my sixth birthday, at which point we were permanently placed together in the same home. It was a second chance at having a family that we both dreamed of.

Once you've been orphaned or abandoned, though, you're never really the same. A trauma of such magnitude on the psyche of a young child is hard to overcome, and the scars are a constant reminder of a hard truth: "Once an orphan, always an orphan." After the very people on whom you most depend let you down, it's difficult to imagine that any place can be safe.

Mine was no isolated incident, either. Trauma exposure for youth in foster care is estimated at ninety percent¹—not an ideal way to begin a life.

Even though my sister and I were reunited, I was never able to set aside the harsh awareness that life provides no guarantees for even the things that seem most certain. In every subsequent relationship, opening up and allowing myself to feel secure felt out of the question.

Psychologists call this phenomenon “attachment disorder.” I’m not crazy about the clinical term because I think it can be overly ascribed to include issues that otherwise normative people have within relationships. While some such experiences are severe enough to earn a proper diagnosis of a “disorder,” others can be much less intense natural struggles within human relationships. I faced mountains of challenges, but I was able to deal with them over time through intentional self-work. Still, it wasn’t automatic, and it certainly wasn’t easy.

As I got older, I remained overwhelmed by the loss of my family. I wanted to make sure I never felt that kind of rejection again, so I tried to develop coping skills that would enable me to make it through life unscathed. I became well-liked and popular in school as a class clown and life of the party—but inside I remained insecure and eager for acceptance. I made everyone laugh and was voted “Most Witty” in my senior class, where I also served as the vice president. Yet I wanted to please others so much that I made many reckless, careless decisions, leading to my own drug and alcohol abuse. I wasted my first two years of college partying, and failed so many courses that I even lost my probationary status. I surrounded myself with superficial friends who were also living empty lives without purpose or direction.

The summer after my second year of failure in college found me doing the same old things with the same old people—some of whom went on to die tragic deaths, ended up in prison, or continued down the same hedonistic path we had come to embrace. As I began to feel the weight of my utter emptiness and self-consumed lifestyle, I hit rock-bottom, hollow to the core. I found myself not even able to look in the mirror for fear of facing what I hated, the very thing I had become. I finally began to come to grips with some of the residual damage and effects of my dysfunctional family experiences that I hadn't yet examined.

More than anything, what I felt was worthlessness. I had no hope, no peace, and no direction. In desperation, I reached out to God in my own simple way: I bought a Bible and sat down with it each night after I came home from working in the hayfields. I read a lot that I didn't understand, and I had to look up many words in the dictionary, but after a while I began to understand enough of the message to be convinced that God did love me unconditionally and forever . . . and that despite how I had been feeling, he did have a purpose for my life.

The first verse that captured my attention was Hebrews 13:8, which said that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” For a kid who wasn't sure that anything could ever be “the same” for long, these were the most important words I had ever read. Learning that God has a purpose for me, and that no one and nothing could ever take me away from God changed everything.

By the time I turned twenty, I was finally finding healing for my past experiences, a renewed self-identity, and a compass for my life through my newfound faith in God. But I still hadn't determined a specific career or vocational interest. I wasn't particularly interested in academics, yet I intuitively knew going back to college was

probably a good thing to do. Because of my newly begun faith pilgrimage, I decided to study religion since it was the only option that I was interested in on the list of degree majors when I re-enrolled for the upcoming semester.

I began attending a local church which led to my volunteering to assist the youth minister working with junior high and high school aged youth. I also became a volunteer at a shelter and counseled kids who were struggling. I volunteered through the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Foundation and later became a foster parent. I eventually became a fulltime youth minister myself, and enrolled in graduate school at a seminary to study theology. I fully expected to find my vocation in church work of some kind, but I ultimately decided to change my seminary degree to Marriage and Family Counseling.

I felt a strong calling to help people, and I couldn't imagine giving up the direct involvement I had with the children and families I was working with. I was frequently invited to step into management positions, but the timing never seemed right. Sitting behind a desk while others did the "real" work felt, for a time, like a recipe for discontentment. But after my wife and I began to have children, I made the move to management—not because I changed my mind, but because it was a mercenary decision. More responsibility meant more money, and for someone with more mouths to feed, the decision became a no-brainer.

It took me a long time to see myself as a leader, but thankfully my boss saw something in me that I hadn't yet discovered. As it turned out, he was right, and I was a fit. That reality blossomed in my heart as I became fascinated with organizational systems and realized, to my genuine surprise, that I could make a bigger impact through my leadership than I could "in the trenches." As the architect of solutions with the ability to fix problems at a macro level, I

could liberate those on the ground to multiply their impact in program services.

Putting more effective processes into place and deconstructing the status quo fit me like a glove, and a theme began to emerge in my life as I moved through my career: I became known as “the turnaround guy.” Nothing has ever brought me greater joy than knowing my efforts were helping others advance their potential and purpose in life, as I was now having the opportunity to do through my work—first as a counselor, and ultimately as a leader. For the past fifteen years, I have been the President and CEO of Eckerd Connects, a pioneering youth services organization founded by Jack and Ruth Eckerd in 1968 after their successful launch and growth of Eckerd Drugs. This position has taught me much about change, growth, purpose, and gameness that I will share throughout this book.

The faith pilgrimage that began when I was twenty is the path I continue today as I gradually discover who I was created to be in this world. While I’ve experienced the mountaintop joy that comes with a faith journey, I’ve also experienced deep valleys of sadness throughout my life. The days of victory and days of defeat work in tandem to ground me in my purpose. My faith is no panacea; it is my anchor and my compass.

In my spiritual growth, I began to find a healthy detachment from the trauma of my past. Even though my feelings about what happened in my life are valid and helpful tools to understand myself, they are not my current reality. For me, dwelling on past events became a futile way to spend my time. I was (and remain) powerless to change what happened. But I learned the power and the importance of having a vision for my life that would focus me, almost supernaturally, on where I was going instead of where I had been. It was this realization that informed the way I live and lead.

“Therapists talk a lot about how the past informs the present—how our histories affect the way we think, feel, and behave, and how at some point in our lives, we have to let go of the fantasy of creating a better past. If we don’t accept the notion that there’s no redo . . . our pasts will keep us stuck.”

LORI GOTTLIEB

Most people I know who have succeeded in life can identify a moment when they decided that what happened in the past wouldn’t define them any longer. Instead, they learn to reflect on their experiences of the past not in terms of loss and failure, but in terms of what was gained through the pain. This isn’t a one-time decision that comes easily after a faith experience—it’s a daily commitment to remember that every story is still being written.

Let me say up front that I am writing this book from a spiritual perspective. It is not intended to be a Christian book per se, but I’m writing from a personal vantage point where my faith has been instrumental in healing and recovery. You’ll see an occasional biblical reference that I have found particularly appropriate, yet regardless of your beliefs (or perhaps lack of them), I trust this book will be helpful for you. As a counselor, I have learned to start wherever the client is, and that is what I’m hoping to do for each reader.

I believe gameness is a characteristic that anyone can and should develop. In my personal life, gameness has a spiritual element. It is, to me, a key to putting my faith into action and not remaining merely a shallow profession. But that doesn't mean you have to believe everything I do to see vast improvements in your life. I just can't help but acknowledge that my developing faith was a major factor in helping me transform from a youngster with a bleak future into an emotionally healthy and happy adult.

I doubt that the CPS caseworker who removed me from my mother's home all those years ago ever expected that I would grow up to become who I am today. I sometimes wonder what she thought of me . . . if she had big hopes for my future . . . if she said a silent prayer for me when she laid her head down that night. I owe her a debt of gratitude. Had she not been courageous enough to step in and intervene in my life that day, my life could have gone very differently. You might call this a "right time, right place" encounter, but I believe something much bigger was going on. Because she was living in her calling, she was paving the path for me to one day pursue mine.

Tragically, years after I was removed from my home, my mother fell asleep while drunk and smoking a cigarette. She burned to death in bed from the ensuing fire. It isn't lost on me that this could easily have happened while my sister and I lived with her. It's by the grace of God that I received a second chance. My whole adult life, I have been striving to give others a second chance as well, in hopes that they would no longer be held back in life by painful memories of their past, but find purpose and hope instead.

After counseling and therapeutically intervening in the lives of thousands of individuals and families over the years—first as a psychotherapist, and then later at an executive level—I have witnessed

only one guaranteed, sure-fire, never-fail way to find fulfillment. Not only is this book about the importance of being game, it's about the possibilities that gameness unlocks in your life. Learning how to “live certain” in an uncertain world and “live sure” in a world where there are no sure things is arguably the most important attribute you can have. I don't want you to go another day without it.

Note: At the end of each of the following chapters, you will find a few questions to help you apply the content to your own life. Don't rush through these. If possible, find a trustworthy friend, family member, or small group with whom you can discuss them. The insights of others can often be quite helpful in better understanding ourselves.

UPGRADE YOUR PERSPECTIVE

A NEVER-QUIT MINDSET

Do you have a never-quit mindset?

Our understanding of ourselves, our relationships, and the world in general begins with our perspective. That perspective is always limited, and is often changing (hopefully improving) as we grow and undergo new experiences that teach us valuable lessons. Just as we see an optometrist periodically to ensure our vision is still good, we need to make regular assessments of our perspectives.

This opening section will challenge you to consider the clarity of your perspective and, if needed, start seeing your life through a new, upgraded lens and discover the difference it can make. It will also ask you to assess the scope and strength of your perspective. If difficult situations don't go as you hope they will, what do you do? How quick are you to give up on one perspective to adopt an easier, more convenient one? Gameness never quits. It keeps you engaged, and the longer you stay, the clearer your perspective becomes.

CHAPTER 1

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF GAMENESS

“Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit.”

NAPOLEON HILL

How would you play a game that you knew you couldn't lose?

Suppose someone walks up to you before a sporting event and assures you, “I can see the future, and you're going to crush it today and come out on top.” If you were convinced the person was telling the truth, would it affect the way you played? Would you dive a little harder for the ball? Would you be less likely to lose heart if you fell behind in the scoring? Would you refuse to despair or panic as the clock began to wind down? Would your increased confidence fuel passion and intensity every minute you were on the field or court? That's what it feels like to press into life.

That anticipation of success is an example of gameness, and it is always a game-changer. It shifts your perspective, which in turn provides you with a fresh new sense of confidence, purpose, and motivation. The stories we tell ourselves about life have the power to shape our everyday experiences in the world. They can hold us back, or they can propel us forward.

For the first two decades of my life, I had a rather bleak perspective on the world. Even after being partially reunited with my sister at age six, the initial separation I experienced from her and my mother had done its damage. I was plagued with fears and uncertainty, and I went another dozen or more years with the anticipation that my life could fall apart again at any moment. My attempts to deal with that likelihood led to unintended and damaging habits. Only after I gradually transformed my perspective was I able to first make wiser choices about my physical well-being, and then set a more positive course for my life.

Some people mistakenly equate gameness with *resilience* or *resoluteness*. I'll say more about that later, but for now it's enough to point out that resilience means we have just enough gas in the tank to grin and bear our sufferings for a smidge longer. We figure if we lose the match, it'll be okay as long as we just make it out alive. This is not the gameness I'm referring to.

The gameness that makes a difference is a deeply held confidence that our purpose is found not only at the end of a long journey, but is revealed all along the way on whatever path we are traveling. When we have gameness, every challenge is a shiny new opportunity to learn something about ourselves, grow from the experience, and keep moving forward.

LANDING ON YOUR FEET: A DEMONSTRATION

When I imagine what it means to land on your feet, I instantly think of a cat. When I was a kid, I remember hanging out with a friend of mine. One day a neighborhood cat walked by and he reached down to pet it. After holding it briefly, he told me to watch. With no warning, he flung the cat high into the air. I was shocked, but before I could close my dropped jaw to ask why he'd done that, the feline had gracefully landed on its feet, unharmed, after a few acrobatic gyrations in mid-air! My friend laughed and told me, "Cats have nine lives."

From that point on, I began to pay more attention to cats. I must confess: a couple of times I personally confirmed my newly discovered cats-always-land-on-their-feet theory (all in the interest of scientific research, of course). Most often, however, I just watched them leap from place to place, fully confident in their abilities and not even momentarily fearful of yet another difficult challenge. I was fascinated by their amazing agility.

I am still astounded at the natural abilities that allow a cat to be tossed in any direction and still land nimbly on its feet. It is their composure, adaptability, and resourcefulness that allows them to survive under stress.

When cats encounter curious children like me, they often literally have their world turned upside down. One moment they are just fine, with their paws on the ground and their heads on straight, and the next they are totally disoriented, with no warning. Faced with a split second to respond, they have two choices. They can panic, close their eyes, and hope for the best, or they can employ all their innate skills to remain alert and begin to scan, assess, and realign themselves. While they're up in the air, cats don't spend any precious time looking to see who is responsible for the disruption

or attempting to lash out at the disruptor; rather, they make every effort to stay calm and reorient themselves for a safe landing. Their mental dexterity and agility is ultimately more impressive than their physical strength as they focus exclusively on responding well.

There's a difference between responding and reacting. When we react to something, we follow a gut-level drive to defend, deflect, or destroy. But if we have predetermined that we will surely face occasional unpleasant circumstances in our lives, we can be ready with a course of action for how to best respond and get our lives back on track. A lot of us go our whole lives never responding with intentionality to anything; we simply react instinctively (and ineffectively) to every inconvenience, challenge, or wrongdoing we experience.

When life trips us up or otherwise disorients us, I've detected at least four options among the people I have counseled:

- (1) *Denial*—Some people passively ignore the problem and hope the situation works itself out. They leave it up to fate where they end up, desperately hoping that perhaps there's a mattress at the bottom when they finally land.
- (2) *Panic*—Many give in to their rush of emotions and react with fear and dread. It's a natural reaction, but they never attempt to countermand their panicky thoughts as they anticipate the inevitable crash.
- (3) *Assigning Blame*—Some enjoy playing the role of victim. They waste tremendous amounts of energy looking for who, or what, they can blame for their situation.

(4) *Reorientation*—This option is the wisest choice (or the cat's pajamas, as your great-grandparents might have said). It's definitely the option cats choose. It's the immediate decision to redirect yourself, make timely adjustments, and land on your feet. Then you can keep moving on in life, all the wiser.

Cats by their very nature come to expect the unexpected, no matter what's causing it. How does your perspective on life compare to that one? We all will experience unplanned, unexpected, unfair, and unpleasant disruptive change in our lives. That is a guarantee. What isn't guaranteed is whether we will respond with catlike reflexes and land on our feet. It is a challenge to be mindful that each day holds the potential for great achievements, yet each day also holds the threat of uninvited, unwelcome turbulence that can create debilitating anxiety (or worse) if we drop our guard. Those who enjoy lives of deep fulfillment, accomplishment, peace, and enduring joy are the ones who have learned to adapt adroitly to the adverse demands of life and gamely move toward what's next, blazing new trails when a detour to their dreams is necessary.

HARD (BUT LASTING) LESSONS

If you're a little alarmed to read these first few pages and discover that I'm comparing your life to a cat being flung into the air by a thoughtless child, you shouldn't be. As you consider your perspective on the problems you'll face in life, you may as well know up front that as beneficial and powerful as gameness will be to guide you through those problems, gameness is developed only through the difficulties of your life.

By no means am I suggesting that you should feel guilty if you're reading this book while lying in a hammock on a warm, sunny day while drinking an ice-cold lemonade. When those rare and perfect days come along, enjoy them for all they're worth. But the moment you come to believe that you *deserve* a lifetime of sunshine and lemonade, and start to expect it, I suspect you're in for a huge disappointment.

What I'm saying is that when you're confronted by unavoidable painful and unexpected challenges, you should learn all you can from those experiences. That's the power of gameness. I want your perspective to be one that sees every difficulty not as something to be despised or avoided, but a potential lesson and opportunity for personal growth.

Your perspective makes all the difference in the world. We've already acknowledged that everyone goes through undesirable and difficult circumstances. But clearly, not everyone uses those experiences as opportunities to become stronger. Otherwise our prisons, substance abuse treatment centers, and other mental health facilities would be essentially empty. Instead, they are overflowing. Tragically, such places, as well as graveyards across the country, are populated with far too many people who didn't believe in their own power to overcome.

The good news is that it's never too late to become stronger and more capable of handling crises (provided you're not yet a resident of the cemetery), but you have to *want* to. Emotional growth and peace of mind during difficulties is not automatic. Adversity and uncertainty carry the potential to walk us down different paths, depending on the attitude with which we're able to meet them. They can become our tormentor, haunting us about every wrong step we've taken and blaming us for just how far off track we have gotten. Or they can become our teachers.

We don't automatically become more game because we're living in an imperfect and uncertain world. Some people become *less* game! Their inability to overcome what's in front of them doesn't drive them to work harder; it leads them to give up. They ask themselves, "Why waste my time with all this effort of getting better when it's futile? I'll probably be just as happy devoting my life to becoming a couch potato." This group of people tend to live unhappy, unfulfilled, and often completely miserable lives because of their lack of gameness.

When we remain tuned in and awake to what is revealed about us in trials, and commit to holding a true compass that won't lead us astray, we can muster the courage to live a game life. Gameness, I believe, is the art of being unconquered . . . of staying in the game until the very end.

"She stood in the storm, and when the
wind did not blow her way . . .
she adjusted her sails."

ELIZABETH EDWARDS

ZOMBIES, NINJAS, AND NAVY SEALS

When I was a kid in high school, I spent a lot of time in the football locker room. I'll always remember a quote painted in large, bold, red letters on the inside of the top of the doorway where the players would see it each time we left for a practice or a game. It read, **WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH, THE TOUGH GET GOING.**

Stated simply, gameness is successfully rolling with the punches of life, bouncing back when we get knocked down, and finding ways to grow smarter, stronger, and more successful as a result. Since life throws plenty of punches and we all get floored at times during our lives, what concept could be more relevant to our lives than gameness?

When my boys were growing up, I got them a giant, life-sized poster for their bedroom that I know they now remember fondly. It was a poster of Garfield the cat, with his arm extended, pointing right at the viewer. The poster read, **YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOU.**

I want you to know, from someone who didn't come from much and needed the very same social services that I now help provide to others, that opportunity is not what most people think it is. Reader, *you* are the opportunity. Don't bide your time looking for a special circumstance or environment or impressive connection that will almost magically provide a one-time chance for you to get ahead in life. Don't get sidetracked by joining networking groups, buying status symbols you can't afford, or praying for a family member to hit the lottery. The only consistently reliable way to get ahead is for *you* to become a better person.

I never regret the time I've spent improving my value as a person in the world—those are the opportunities I don't pass up. Keep making yourself better and you'll see the path unfold before you. And don't stop when you begin to face resistance. Although we can lean away to avoid or block some of life's punches, let's face it: if we're in the fight, we will not only take some blows, but we'll get crushed at times. Getting knocked down is never fun, yet staying down is worse. We can't accomplish our life's purpose on our backside. Take responsibility for your choices and refuse to quit—*that's* your opportunity.

To this day, the words from the wall of my high school locker room remain a great daily life mantra of sorts, especially on my most arduous days or during my most adverse situations. This quote has always reminded me of the importance of gameness in my life and has served as a reminder that things being tough is only my cue to get going.

Getting going, I've discovered, involves much more than merely withstanding the blows of life. *Gameness* is a whole other level beyond *resilience* and requires more from us. Resilience means being tough in moments of adversity, standing up again after getting knocked off our feet, and enduring difficult circumstances. While such qualities are inarguably desirable over the course of one's life, more is necessary if we really want to live purposeful lives. To be pliable, durable, tough, and even flexible only means that we are not easily destroyed. Neither were the zombies in *The Walking Dead*, for that matter, but that didn't mean they were contributing much to the post-apocalyptic society.

Resilience is certainly a survival tactic, so don't hear me saying it's not at all important! Sometimes the best we can do is grin and bear a situation before we earn our sea legs and can respond appropriately. But if resilience is the only tool in our tool belt, we will merely exist in spite of our circumstances. It's better than being decimated by them, but not as good as leaning into them.

Gameness, in contrast, goes beyond resilience and enables a person to become a better and stronger individual *because of* adversity. When we dedicate ourselves to seeing challenges as opportunities, something in the universe (I believe it's God) makes a way for us. While on the journey laid out before us, we will discover the lessons we were meant to learn, but only when we commit to thriving in their midst.

“Concerning all acts of initiative [and creation] there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too.”

W.H. MURRAY

I picture the unrelenting revival of those blow-up clowns with a weighted bottom that many of us had growing up. You could punch them incessantly, kick them all around the living room, and try your best to hold them down, but once you removed the pressure, they would bounce back up erect, still smiling and ready for whatever was next. It was a law of physics; it was what the doll was made to do. In the same way that you can't keep the clown down for long, you can depend on a game person to get up and be ready to go after each new challenge.

Yet gameness demands more than persistence and toughness. It's not uncommon to see people who have experienced repeated setbacks in their lives who, as a result, became tougher. Each new round of difficulties made them a little more “hardened,” which conditioned them to endure even greater hardships. This repeating cycle only means that they've adapted to the world in front of them. They've developed resilience and persistence, sure, but they've lost the fire in their eyes and appear drained of the joy of life. That's not the gameness I'm describing.

Although becoming “tougher” is a step in the right direction, it’s not the bullseye on the target. Emerging from adversity, we should aim to be stronger, wiser, and better able to apply what we’ve learned to new and different challenges.

To me, ninjas are ideal models of gameness. Historically, ninja warriors were the ultimate survivalists. They needed those tenacious survival instincts as they opposed the oppression of the powerful warlords and the upper ruling class of Samurai warriors of their day.

Ninjas train to become resilient and persistent, yet with each new unexpected disruption they also become more agile and adaptable. They expect the unexpected. They don’t panic. They are poised and always prepared for whatever comes their way. While cats have an instinctive natural ability to adjust, compensate, and land on their feet when thrown off-balance, ninjas endure rigorous training to develop similar reflexes—to become nimble and quick. I don’t know how nimble and quick you can be if you’re so callused from life that you’re basically a walking boulder.

Ninja training involves more than just a stringent physical regimen. Even today, with the popularization of the televised *American Ninja Warrior* (adapted from a Japanese game show), you can see that being crowned a champion is just as much about balance, stamina, composure, tenacity, and problem solving as it is about muscles and physical strength.

This skillset isn’t one that privilege can buy. Ninjas came from the lower socioeconomic class in their country, aware that if they wanted to rise above their adverse circumstances and enjoy the freedom and independence that some of their countrymen enjoyed as a birthright, it would be up to them to find a creative way to achieve a better life. Through creative invention and resourcefulness, they learned that their perceived powerlessness from the bottom of the

totem pole didn't hold them back after all. The imaginative nature that arose in their spirits enabled them to not only survive, but also thrive in the face of their adversaries. They became the ones who were feared. Even though they weren't the biggest or most powerful warriors in the room, they were the ones no one wanted to mess with.

Perhaps the closest cultural equivalent to a ninja warrior that we have today would be a Navy SEAL, arguably the most elite level of special warfare classification any soldier can aspire to. Candidates are required to complete some of the most grueling tests imaginable to attain this status, many of which occur in the third week of SEAL training. That week is appropriately referred to as "Hell Week."

The Navy SEALs website says: "Hell Week tests physical endurance, mental toughness, pain and cold tolerance, teamwork, attitude, and your ability to perform work under high physical and mental stress, and sleep deprivation." It goes on to state: "*Above all, it tests determination and desire.*"²

I've always found it interesting that while many people depict Navy SEALs as rare physical specimens with otherworldly strength and unrivaled stamina, the Navy SEALs' own website tells us that's not what they're looking for. What the Navy hopes to uncover during Hell Week is not their sailors' strength and stamina (alone). It's not even their intelligence or quick thinking. Even though those are necessary elements, it's determination and desire that count most when push comes to shove.

I talked to one SEAL who told me that when he went through training, he began alongside 212 other candidates. Only twelve were selected for the SEAL program. He described the group lined up on the beach, side by side, at the beginning of the week. They had all already demonstrated expert marksmanship with weapons,

superior swimming and running endurance, and all the required academic prerequisites. Wearing shorts and no shirts, they all looked to be in almost identical superior physical conditioning.

So what made twelve of them stand out from the pack? He told me that what they had articulated as the primary reasons for their success, the motivations that gave them the determination and desire to succeed, were internal and altruistic—not physical, or even intellectual.

“Over the years, it’s always been the same,” he said. “The ones who succeed will all tell you they stayed and finished because of their purpose—their ‘why.’”

Those few conquered Hell Week (and themselves) because of an unrelenting commitment to their vision that allowed them to subdue their feelings of pain, exhaustion, and frustration while doing what seemed impossible to all the others. The ones who gave up were trying to just make it through the tough part of the training—to “get over the hump.”

Navy SEAL Hell Week is an ultimate and extreme example of adversity, and a profound example of the importance and relevance of gameness. Most of us will never encounter anything quite so challenging, but we all will experience our own versions of Hell Week that will require all the gameness we can muster. Success is simply not possible without it.

THINK ABOUT IT

1. What project or challenge would you undertake right now if you knew it couldn't fail? What is currently preventing you from attempting it?
2. When it comes to responding to unanticipated chaotic situations, are you more cat-like or sloth-like? On a scale of 1 (least) to 10 (most), how agile and nimble would you say you are?
3. When life disorients you in some way, what is your usual go-to response: Denial? Panic? Assigning blame? Reorientation? Or something else?
4. Do you typically have a perspective that allows you to see the benefits of undergoing problems or struggles? What are some steps you can take this week to begin to develop a clearer and more advantageous perspective?
5. What event in your life has come closest to being your personal "Hell Week"? How well did you handle the strain of the crisis?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Dennis is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Eckerd Connects, one of the nation's largest non-profits providing workforce development, Job Corps, juvenile justice, and child welfare services across the country.

When David became CEO of Eckerd Connects in 2007, the organization was serving 9,500 youth per year across primarily residential programs in 8 states on annual revenue of \$79M. Under his leadership, Eckerd Connects has grown to serving over 43,000 clients each year through more than 160 programs across 20 states and the District of Columbia, employing nearly 2,000 people with close to \$240M in annual operating revenue. David's career includes decades of directional leadership experience across each sector of the human services industry, including workforce development, behavioral health, juvenile justice, and child welfare.

After experiencing the death of his father, David watched the struggle of his uneducated, unemployed mother who cratered under the weight of raising two children. Because she was unable to overcome her battle with alcoholism, David was ultimately removed from his home by child protective services as a young boy. However, he was given a second chance after being adopted by a new family, and it was their stability and care that paved the path for his future.



These early childhood experiences motivated David to devote his life to strengthening families, and it was the catalyst that fueled his vision to move Eckerd Connects upstream, stopping the flood of poverty that ravages so many communities across the country. Though he spent his entire professional career working with children and families in crises similar to his own, David grew weary of seeing the pain in their faces and has become firmly convinced that poverty's flood of misery will never be stopped by sandbags of social welfare programs or prison. Helping youth and adults get a job and education are the most powerful things society can do to move upstream in the fight against poverty and ultimately provide each child an opportunity to succeed. This will prevent children from entering the child welfare and/or juvenile justice systems, experiencing homelessness, or worse.

David's leadership and vision has led to Eckerd Connects' growth in workforce development over the last five years via mergers & acquisitions and through the winning of competitive procurements. Three mergers have occurred in the past five years



including Paxen Learning in 2015, Henkel's and McCoy Training Services Group in 2016, and Odle Management Group in 2020. Today, nearly 60 percent of Eckerd Connects clients are served in workforce development and Job Corps programs.

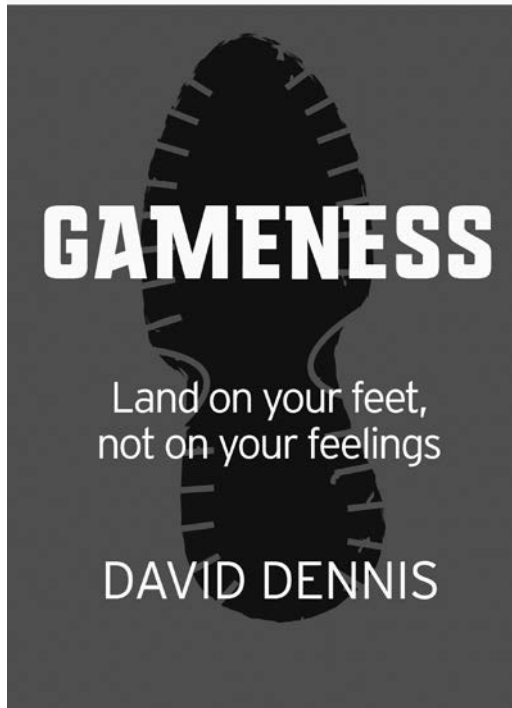
David has earned certifications as a licensed professional counselor, marriage and family therapist, and childcare administrator. He holds a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma Baptist University and a master's degree in marriage and family counseling from Southwestern Baptist Seminary.

David enjoys working out at his gym, playing with his American Pitbull Terrier, reading books that inspire him, and hanging out with his family. He and his wife Becky have five grown children, Dillon, Dalton, Dryden, Dabney, and Daxon.



RESOURCES

FIND ADVANTAGES IN ADVERSITY



Go to

GamenessLeadership.com

to order more copies of this book,
as well as find information about ebook versions, the audiobook,
and opportunities for David to speak to your business,
non-profit organization, civic group, or church.

WHAT'S GAMENESS?

We often hear the cryptic question, "Got game?" But gameness isn't just about sports . . . it's about life. It's a person's ability to live beyond the inevitable problems and pains that threaten to derail us from our fullest potential. It's realizing that God didn't put us on earth merely to survive . . . but to take charge of our lives! Gameness means living each day with a *never-quit mindset, resoluteness to a purpose, a fighting spirit, and the will required to act beyond our feelings.*

What is it about those who face life's biggest heartaches and find a way to bounce back and turn setbacks into breakthroughs? They've found the secret of making life work, and in this book, David Dennis explains the secret to all of us.

These aren't academic concepts to David. He has lived them, refined them, and now, he's imparting his wisdom to the rest of us. Buckle up, hold on tight, and be ready to be challenged like never before.



David Dennis is the President and Chief Executive Officer of Eckerd Connects, one of the nation's largest nonprofits providing workforce development, Job Corps, juvenile justice, and child welfare services across the country. He

has earned certifications as a licensed professional counselor, marriage and family therapist, and childcare administrator. He holds a bachelor's degree from Oklahoma Baptist University and a master's degree in marriage and family counseling from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He and his wife Becky live in Clearwater, Florida. They have five grown children.

In this book you will learn how David originally wrote the book as a love letter and instructional guide for his children and grandchildren, and then others learned of it and wanted to glean the pearls of wisdom for themselves. You will want to do the same!

- Dr. Willie Jolley

Hall of Fame Speaker, Sirius XM Radio Host, and best-selling author of *A Setback Is a Setup For a Comeback* and *An Attitude of Excellence*

David Dennis is ready, willing, and able in these pages to share pieces of his life that will help us all make better decisions. Read, learn, and succeed.

- Jim Stovall

Olympic weightlifter, entrepreneur, and best-selling author of *The Ultimate Gift*



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