
Gordon Bell R.I.P.

2 messages

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Gordon Bell [passed on](#) this month.

I was a latecomer in Gordon Bell's life. But he made a lasting impact on mine.


The first time I laid eyes on Gordon Bell was in 1984 outside a restaurant in a Boston suburb when he pulled up in a Porsche. I was the head of Marketing for [MIPS Com](#)  a [RISC chip startup](#). The entire company (all of five of us) were out visiting the east coast to meet [Prime Computer](#) who would become our first major customer. (When Gordon was CTO of [Encore Computer](#) he encouraged the MIPS founders to start the company, thinking they could provide the next processor for his [Multimax](#) computer.)

My West Coast centric world of computing had been limited to custom [bit-sliced computers](#), [HP 2100 and 21MX](#), [Interdata 8/32](#) minicomputers and [Zilog microprocessors](#). Gordon was already a legend – as VP of Research and Development at [Digital Equipment Corporation](#) (DEC) he designed some of the early minicomputers and oversaw the creation of the [VAX 11-780](#). His work at DEC revolutionized the computing industry, making powerful computing accessible.

Even so, as we talked over dinner at first I couldn't understand a word he was saying, until I realized that he had three or four levels of conversation going simultaneously, all interleaved. If you could keep them sorted it was fun to keep up with each thread. By dessert I became another member of the Gordon Bell fan club.

Two years later, on a lunch break in downtown Palo Alto I ran into Gordon again. He was out to attend a [Teknowledge](#) board meeting. I invited him over to meet the founding team of [Ardent](#), our new startup, whose founders he knew from DEC. By the end of the day Gordon had joined our team as founding VP of Engineering and another phase in my education was about to begin.

As an entrepreneur in my 20's and 30's, I was lucky to have four extraordinary mentors, each brilliant in his own field and each a decade or two older than me. While [others](#) taught me how to think, it was [Gordon Bell](#) who taught me *what* to think about. He could see the destination clearer than anyone I've ever met. The best part of my day was hearing him tell me about 3 ideas at a time and me do the same back to him. He had an extraordinary instinct for guiding me away from the purely dumb paths that would lead nowhere and nudge me on to the [more productive roads](#). (He had this warm laugh, a kind of a chuckle when he was listening to some of more dumber ideas.)

At Digital Equipment Gordon had [developed a heuristic](#) that attempted to [predict the evolution of the next class of computers](#). And when he left DEC he created the [Bell-Mason diagnostic](#) to help predict patterns in successful startups. The idea that there  a [pattern about startup success and failure](#) would stick in the back of my head for decades and shape the second half of my career. And as he was brainstorming about some of the early ideas about what became his My[LifeBits](#) project I was inspired to start a [small version of my own](#).

For the next 15 years Gordon would help me understand how to think critically about the possibilities over the horizon. Yet at the same time Gordon was looking forward, he was teaching us to [respect and learn from the past](#).

Gordon and his wife Gwen started a [computer history museum](#) and by 1983 moved it into renovated warehouse next to the [Boston Children's Museum](#). In 1986 I spent two weeks making a short movie about the history of high-performance computing at the museum. Gordon and Gwen put me up in their guest bedroom overlooking Boston Harbor and a

short walk across the Congress Street bridge to the museum. This not only began my long-term love affair with the museum but also made me realize that computer history and the history of innovation clusters were missing the story of [how the military and intelligence community had shaped the trajectory of post WWII technology](#).

Seven years later, in [my next startup](#), I would end up in their apartment again, this time with my wife and two young daughters, to attend the [MacWorld trade show](#). I vividly remember the girls running around their living room decorated with many of the artifacts the museum didn't have room to display (with Gwen patiently telling them that the [Arithmometer](#) and [Napier's Bones](#) weren't toys.) For the next few years, we'd return (with the artifacts safely hidden away.)

By the time I started my final startup [Epiphany](#), Gordon was at Microsoft, and he became my most valuable advisor.

Gordon was not only a mentor and inspiration to me, but to countless engineers and computer scientists. It was a privilege to know him.



2004

I'll miss him.

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