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W Mitchell

*It's not what happens to you,
it's what you do about it*



INSPIRATION & CHALLENGE, MOTIVATION, CHANGE

• Television Host • Author • Businessman • Public Speaker

"He could no longer walk, so he learned to fly." *Paul Harvey Radio Commentator*

Who is W Mitchell? One of the top keynote speakers in the world. Fun-loving, professional and easy to work with--a partner for meeting planners. He is a "wow 'em" presenter with lasting content and substance. You'll meet the internationally-recognized mayor "who saved a mountain"; the co-founding chairman of a \$65 million dollar company; a pilot, river rafter and sky diver.

Challenge We all face challenges of varying degrees every day, whether it's professional or personal, large or small, immediate or over time. And change -- some invited, some unasked for -- is our biggest challenge.

The title of W Mitchell's newest book is also his philosophy on life -- "It's not what happens to you...it's what you do about it." This expert on taking responsibility for change shows his audiences not only how to gain perspective, but how to cope, and even better, to prosper with personal and professional change.

W Mitchell knows about challenge, change and courage--all first hand. He speaks to you about the battles and the victories of life. From co-founding a metal casting company that put thousands to work, from his election as mayor and congressional nominee, from a fiery motorcycle accident that left him burned over 65% of his body, and from the airplane crash that took away his ability to walk, Mitchell now soars above the rest with grace, good humor and gumption. Mitchell speaks with passion about the human spirit. He focuses on the positives of change--taking responsibility- - and the proven result - himself.

"Before I was paralyzed there were 10,000 things I could do; now there are 9,000. I can either dwell on the 1,000 I've lost or focus on the 9,000 I have left."

His personal story is of life's challenges in the world of business, politics and day-to-day living; of a new understanding of your inner strengths and abilities. Through his speeches, books, tapes and television appearances, Mitchell has enthralled over 60 million people worldwide. Are you asking how "mental wheelchairs" are holding back your organization? Listen to this powerful story. Across the globe, from the Indian Ocean to Indiana, from Presidents to Parliaments and from non-profits to multi-national giants, audiences herald his thought-provoking words about perseverance and becoming more than just a survivor. He delivers from the heart, with warmth, wit and wisdom. You'll hear an unforgettable speaker with an invaluable message.

It's Not What Happens to You, It's What You Do About It...

All of us are blessed with inner strengths. It's just through circumstance, some of us have to use them more than others...

Life is what you make it," some people say. But most of us don't really believe that. "If only," you might say, "If only I weren't so old. So broke. So saddled by my mortgage. If only I had less pressure in my job. A family that understands me. There's nothing I can do, Mitchell."

To which I simply say, "Look at me." My face looks like a badly made leather quilt. It has literally made children chant, "Monster, monster," as I pass by. I have no fingers. I cannot walk.

Fate struck twice

Furthermore, all of this did not happen at once. I did not have the 'luxury' of one great, grand accident to get over. First, I was burned nearly to a crisp. There is probably not one person in a billion who has endured more physical pain than I have. Then, four years later, in an entirely separate accident, I was paralysed from the waist down. The average person might call me the unluckiest man alive.

But, what I hope to do in these articles—and in my speeches—is to teach you not to think like the average person. To show you that nothing, absolutely nothing is absolute. Your life is entirely what you decide it is. The universe starts in your head and spreads out into the world. Change what happens in your head and the universe changes.

Really. I hope to be a touchstone for people, a route to a new way of thinking. Symbols are potent. In America, the liberty bell conjures the concept of freedom in a single image. In India, the Taj Mahal shows us, at a

glance, the depth and extravagance of human love. In San Francisco, my adopted hometown, the Golden Gate bridge is a testament to engineering ingenuity that speaks volumes.

What I want, is to be a symbol for you. With my scarred face, my fingerless paws, my wheelchair—and real, genuine happiness in my heart—I want to be your mental image of the power of the human mind to transcend circumstances. As I say in my speeches and my book, "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it."

"In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer."

Albert Camus

When you feel you have met an insurmountable obstacle, I want you to think of me. And, then say to yourself, "If he can be successful, I can, too."

What kind of success are we talking about? I can rattle off my resume if you like: millionaire, Mayor, member of many boards of directors, environmental leader, media personality, political commentator, commercial pilot, international public speaker, even river-rafter and skydiver.

These may, or may not, be your measures of success, none the less, I know that whatever you want, you can achieve it—just as I have. You can because you are not that different from me, believe it or not.

I don't have any special powers, any

magical gift of birth that has allowed me to create my own happiness in the face of tremendous trials. I am no stronger or smarter than the average person. I am a long way from ever being a 'saintly' guy. In fact, one of the secrets I share is that being pushy, even obnoxious, at the right times, has been crucial to my success.

The only difference between us, is that I had the good fortune to learn a few important points along the way—both before and after my injuries—that helped me immeasurably.

Inner strength

All of us are blessed with an inner strength, buried inside us somewhere. It's just that most don't get the opportunity to use it as much as I have.

I have a favourite quotation that I have thought about often and it has helped me through some tough times. I'd like to share it with you. It's from a man called, Albert Camus:

"In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer."

Isn't that beautiful?

In subsequent issues of *Corporate Trends*, I'd like to share some of the things I've learned. If they have kept me happy, imagine what they will do for you. I have a great life. You can have a great life, too!

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Never Ever, Say Never...

Nothing splendid has ever been achieved, except by those who believed that something inside of them was superior to circumstances.

Bruce Barton

At the age of 28, I suffered a very serious motorcycle accident. The resulting fire burned most of my face and body and left me without hands. Yet, when I looked back just four and a half years later, I felt better off than I did before my accident.

Lessons of life

Through my recovery, I'd learned things about myself I never would have learned otherwise. I'd grown in ways unimaginable without the lessons life had taught me. Not only had I become successful financially (having started a major new business), more importantly, I had become successful emotionally. I now liked who lived inside Mitchell. It had come with enormous struggle but I'd made it.

In the years before the fire, I'd learned to fly. On recovery I returned to the skies. Even with my new stump-like hands, I finished all my pilot's training, from commercial to multi-engine to sailplane. This gave me a new freedom and enabled me to fly above it all, like Jonathan Livingston Seagull. I even bought my own plane. However, soon I was to learn that fate had not finished with W Mitchell, yet.

I remember the morning well. It was one of those crisp, clear, gorgeous Colorado mornings. I was going flying and four others had come along for the ride. Taxiing to the end of the runway, we lifted off into the air. The plane was climbing fine: 25 feet. 50 feet. At 75 feet, something was wrong...terribly wrong. The plane was not rising as quickly as it should.

Unbeknown to me, the wings of my aircraft were covered with a thin sheet of ice. This slowed the normal climb rate of the plane. Directly ahead of me, there were huge rocks. I had to make a quick decision and there was no choice but to get back down on the runway as soon as I could. I pulled the power and — the plane stalled, falling like a rock. It smashed into the ground rupturing the gas tank and spilling fuel all over the wings. All I could think about was fire. I yelled at my passengers, "Get out now!" They wedged a door open and



Mitchell continues his love of flying in Australia — seen here in his friend Max Hitchin's plane. Photo: W Mitchell collection

managed to crawl away.

It was my turn to get out and I had to hurry. Starting to climb out, my feet seemed stuck under the pedals so I lifted harder. It was then I realised that I couldn't move my legs.

For several days, doctors did every test imaginable. On the third day, the neuro-surgeon came to deliver the news. "Mitchell, you may not walk again. You're going to have to use a wheelchair now to get around."

"Why me?", I thought. "WHY ME!!! What had I done to deserve this plane crash, this motorcycle accident?"

I lay there on that hospital bed, once again wondering what future there could possibly be for me.

Yet again, friends came to see me. Phone calls, letters, and cookies arrived from Crested Butte, my home town. One day, nearly four weeks after the accident, a young woman called me. She said, "Mitchell, I hear you're not doing very well. I wonder if you remember when I had some problems, you told me something I'll never forget. You said, it's not what happens to you — it's what you do about it. Do you still believe that, Mitchell?"

Don't you hate it when people do that? That advice was for her! Leave me alone; I'm enjoying being miserable!

A world of impossibilities

The next morning, when the orderlies came in my room, I asked them to put me in a wheelchair. I hated it. It was impossible. I couldn't make it go places that had been so easy just a few weeks before. Even if I could, I might fall. Objects were too high. Steps were in my way. My whole world was filled with obstacles; filled with impossibilities.

But every morning, they put me back in the chair and I'd go back into the gym. Every morning, thanks to the nurses, technicians, volunteers, friends and yes, thanks to me, another obstacle would disappear. Another opportunity would appear. Every day, the thing that

had been utterly impossible the day before became a little less impossible. And, every day, I hated myself a little bit less and I learned to love myself again, a little bit more.

You know, it's true. It isn't what happens. *It's what you do about it.*

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My Biggest Fee Ever...

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You might be surprised to learn that my favourite speaking jobs are not for a large corporations that happily shell out my standard fee, (more than most people earn in a month). Rather, it's the barn at the Griffith Centre, near Denver, where I speak for free.

It's a centre for kids who have literally been thrown on the junk pile. They have been beaten, abused, neglected, thrown out and this centre is their last chance. Many of these kids have been 'programmed' in a million ways, both direct and subtle, to believe that life has stacked the deck against them and that only a chump wastes time trying to learn how to make a contribution.

And then they see me A mutilated face. No fingers. A wheelchair. And I am a happy man. A man who had every excuse in the world to be miserable and refused them all.

Bringing back memories

Every time I stand in front of kids, I am transported back in time to that day years ago when I walked by the playground and heard the chant of, "Monster, monster." How I longed to speak to those kids and gently show them how wrong they were.

I take a moment and catch my breath, because my dream is coming true. I'm here. I'm talking to them. I've got their attention. I tell them about my accidents. I explain, in great detail, the many opportunities I had to quit and how and why I refused to take them. But I don't just talk about myself.

I tell them about John Thompson, the 18 year old North Dakota farm boy who was on the farm by himself while his parents visited a friend in hospital. He was doing his chores, which included loading grain into the barn. He remembers turning on the auger, a huge screw inside a cylinder that carries grain into a silo. His shirt tail was hanging out. It got caught in the auger and began pulling him into the machinery.

He resisted, he fought but it pulled him harder and harder. He doesn't remember much else but he was spun five times and

then thrown to the ground. He looked to his right and saw that his right arm was gone. He struggled to his feet, standing there, shaking. He looked to his left. Most of that arm was gone, too. Still he didn't quit. He ran 400 yards up the hill to his house. With what little was left of one of his arms, he tried and tried again to open the sliding glass door. He couldn't but once again, he refused to quit. He ran around to the side door and managed to open the screen door; he still doesn't remember how.

**"Adversity reveals
genius."
Horace**

Once inside the kitchen, he knocked the phone off the cradle and tried punching the buttons with his nose but when that didn't work, he didn't quit. He looked around, found a pencil, and picked it up in his teeth, and pressed buttons on the phone with the eraser. He called his cousin's house, and when the cousin answered, he shouted, "This is John! Get help, quickly, I've had a terrible accident!" Then, he had the presence of mind to pick up the receiver with his teeth and hang up, remembering that on their party line, if he didn't break the connection, his cousin couldn't make a call.

Then, John Thompson, this 18 year old high school senior, this average kid who got Cs in his classes and had never impressed anyone as anything special, went into the bathroom and sat in the bathtub so that he wouldn't bleed on his mother's rug.

When the paramedics pulled back the shower curtain, they were so shaken that he had to calm them down, telling them where his arms were and where there was ice in the refrigerator and garbage sacks in which to pack them. His arms were re-attached in

a six-hour operation. When, weeks later, a reporter asked him how it felt to be a hero, the question seemed to baffle him. "I'm no hero", he said sincerely. "I did what anyone would have done."

He had a point. He was and is a regular kid, who has the same resources any of us have. And I'm a regular guy, who has the same resources you do. The point I make to these kids is that we are not heroes, we are not different from you. We just chose to do what we needed to do.

You can, too. I can't help everyone. But some of these kids, these beautiful kids, with strong bodies and active minds, have just enough sensitivity left to see the significance of what I am and what I am saying to them. Sometimes (and they are magical times), I know that I have gotten through to them in time. The core memory is not entirely buried under reams of negativity. There is a chance for my message to get through.

My biggest fee ever

The biggest fee I have ever been paid as a speaker was at the first talk I ever gave at the centre. I didn't know much about the place and I agreed to speak without a real clue. As I drove there, I worried. Here I was, starting my speaking career, unsure of myself, unsure if this speech that I had crafted for adults, would mean anything to kids, particularly hardened kids like these.

When I finished my talk, I could plainly see that I had made an impact. I could see it on those faces looking back at me. But the final confirmation — the greatest fee — was the reaction of a 13 year old kid, clearly from the inner city, who came up to me after the speech with tears in his eyes.

He told me that he had tried to commit suicide three times. I was amazed at his story but from the way he told it, it was clearly true. Then, he said, if he ever felt like doing something like that again, he was just going to stop and remember what I had said that day.

Now both of us had tears in our eyes.

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And that's why I Speak...

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Remember the day I decided to make my message the focus of my life. I was walking past a primary school playground. One kid spotted me, shouted something to the others and soon they all ran to the fence to stare at me. By twos and threes, soon en masse, they chanted, "Monster, monster, monster..." And they were right. I did resemble a monster. The type they might have seen in the movies — because of my accident some months before.

Hell on earth

If hell on earth really does exist, mine started on July 19, 1971.

Strangely enough, I started the day on top of the world. In the morning, I had fulfilled a lifelong dream of soloing in an aeroplane for the first time. That afternoon, I was riding my new motorcycle. It was the biggest, snazziest, meanest cycle on the market. I had bought it just the day before and I adored it.

A writer once wrote that life is a twisting river. None of us knows what's around the next bend. In my case, it was a truck. A laundry truck turned suddenly in front of my motorcycle and I hit it squarely in the side. As I went down, the lid on my gas tank popped open and it all went up with a WHOOSH! The fireball was visible for several blocks.

When I arrived at the hospital, I was judged to be at the low end of survivability, having been burned over 65 per cent of my body. Doctors were not sure I would survive. And my face had been burned almost beyond recognition.

The comeback

I must have looked gruesome. A succession of visitors who grimace and/or pass out at the sight of your face, quickly gives you that impression. But through incredibly loving care, multiple skin grafts, stubbornness,

determination, and many small steps to take back control of my life, I did recover.

One of the turning points came two months after the accident, the afternoon the plastic surgeon came to see me. "Mitchell," he said, "your original face has been burned off. We need to make you a new one. Do you have any pictures of what you looked like before?"

Someone gave him my driver's license. Staring at the photo for a long time, he finally said, "Man, I know we can do better than this."

And I laughed. It hurt like hell but I laughed.

Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure.

William Saroyan

For the first time since the accident, I had found some humour in my life. And with it I gained some perspective: "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it."

How I started speaking

When I first started speaking, I had no set 'speech' as such. But I had always been pretty good at speaking off the cuff. So, I started out by simply telling groups my story — the funny parts, the tough parts, the triumphant parts. People loved it.

Most people have scars, too. Of course, they are not always as visible as mine — maybe they were scarred by abusive parents or dyslexia or some other invisible malady — but that doesn't mean they are not real or that they can't learn from someone who has overcome his own, more visible scars.

That was the real start of my speaking career. The hundreds and hundreds of political speeches, talks I had given on disability issues, my testimonies before Congress and other committees and countless interviews, all came together.

The cumulative experience worked. Doing things again and again breeds a familiarity, a competence. So often, we ignore life's little homilies. It is sad, because practice often really does make perfect.

More and more, I was being asked to speak to various groups. I spoke before environmental groups, handicap advocacy groups and several congressional committees considering environmental legislation. What flipped the switch for me was a woman approaching me in a supermarket. She was putting together a convention for temporary employment agencies and knew of me and wondered if I would speak. I was lukewarm, until she mentioned it paid two hundred dollars. Imagine, I thought. A two hundred dollar cheque and a free meal to boot!

By the fall of 1987, I realised that I had a wonderful opportunity. I saw that I could make my living by doing something that I had previously gladly done for free — sharing the lessons I had learned about life, telling people that it's not what happens to you — it's what you do about it.

A vital truth

By the time those children in the school yard saw me, I had already achieved many small and large victories. I had recovered my self respect. So I was actually not offended when they called me a 'monster'. But I did have an overwhelming desire to show them a vital truth: that someone who looks monstrous on the outside can be good, warm, funny and caring on the inside. Someone you might even like as well as you like your best friend.

I knew that chewing out those kids would not be half as effective as gently and personally showing them who I was inside.

And that's why I speak...

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Take Responsibility for Your Life...

When you take responsibility for your life, you take responsibility for where you are going to go next...

The fireball was about three metres high and a metre wide. The flame was blue and searing, with the peculiar, intense heat of petrol burning in the open air. Even standing fifty feet away, on the corner of 26th and South Van Ness street, you would have felt the increase in temperature on your face and hands – a warmth that easily cut through San Francisco’s gentle, early summer.

And, you would have had company, too – a mysterious bonfire in the middle of a suburban intersection, definitely draws a crowd. But this is only what I’ve been told. I can’t comment, personally, on the fireball’s external dimension and characteristics.

You see, I was in the middle of it!

That’s how my book, *The Man Who Would Not Be Defeated*, starts. It tells of my experience of being involved in an horrendous motor cycle accident, which left me with burns to 65 per cent of my body, my face and fingers literally burnt off.

Life has many twists

That was the first of the many twists in my life. Obviously, I survived the fire or I wouldn’t be here writing this. I also survived a plane crash four years later, although it left me paralysed from the waist down and permanently in a wheelchair.

What surprises most people is, neither accident has held me back from living a full and fruitful life. In spite of what happened to me, I went on to become a successful businessman, (sometimes) successful politician, environmental activist, a speaker and author. And today, I travel the world spreading my message of hope: *It’s not what happens to you in life, it’s what you do about it.* You can read all about my experiences and the lessons I learned, in my book (**Editor’s note: now available through this magazine – see centre pages*).

Just about all of us are born with the same set of equipment. Hands, eyes, ears, the ability to think and so forth. True, some people are brighter than others but the real question in life is, ‘What are we going to do with this equipment?’

People tell me I’m quite special but I believe all of us have the ability to do what

I’ve done. But all too often, we spend our lives deciding why we *can’t* do something. As Jonathan Swift said, “*You can’t change the direction of the wind but you can adjust your sails.*”

All of us have the ability to make those important decisions that can change our lives, in a big way or a small way.

For instance, it’s hard to quit smoking or quit eating M&Ms. I understand that. Fact is, however, smoking is a very conscious effort. You have to choose to do it. Firstly, of course, you have to make a conscious decision to purchase the cigarettes. You then have to open the pack, light the match and inhale. We make a choice to smoke – nobody forces us to do it.

Look at Olympic athletes. How many choices did that person have to make before they were able to stand up there and receive that gold medal? You’re not a failure if you

“You can’t change the direction of the wind but you can adjust your sails.”

Jonathan Swift

don’t make it. You’re a failure if you allow yourself to be limited in this world by other people’s actions and beliefs.

I talk a lot about responsibility, the ability to respond. But do we choose to respond? We must recognise that we are in control. People tell me after hearing me that I’ve changed their lives – I’m their excuse. I love it but the fact is, they simply used me to trim their sails. Everything I know, I’ve learned from someone else. Maybe I just string the words together better than others.

Many professional educators use the example of the baby walking. A baby attempts to walk millions of times and fails millions of times. The baby doesn’t succeed, hits its head, smashes its face, looks ridiculous and it’s down-right dangerous. In fact, the baby fails and fails, if you choose to call it ‘*failure*’. Then, one day, he or she will take their first step. It’s not failure is it? It’s called, learning; the baby is learning to

walk. They’re not mistakes – they’re experiences. They either shut you down or you make it to the goal line.

Truth is, there are tons of things I’ve given up on in life. But to me, the saddest thing is people who don’t do anything; nobody does everything. Instead of people focusing on what they can do, they focus on what they can’t do.

Focus on what you can do

Before my accident I could do 10,000 things. Now I can do 9,000 things. I can either spend the rest of my life focussing on the 9,000 things I can do or the 1,000 things I can’t do. The choice is mine – it’s up to me.

We’re all programmed at birth. Anthony Robbins tells about the little computer each of us gets when we’re born. It’s blank. Then somebody programs it for us, with programs like ‘*totally worthless*’, ‘*relationships suck*’ - all kinds of inconsistent messages. Nobody gives us an owner’s manual. It’s amazing we’re not all lemmings. However, all of us can make the decision to re-program.

We can make the decision to be responsible. The key word is *focus*. When you take responsibility for your life, you take responsibility for where you are going to go next.

The longest journey begins with a single step. By changing one small behaviour, you can make a huge amount of difference. You also need tools. All of us have the same tools; it’s how we choose to use them.

Experts once chopped up Einstein’s brain, to see if it was different. It was no different to anyone else’s brain; the difference is what he chose to do with it.

If I was to point out one beacon, it is simply that I take responsibility.

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The Choice is Yours...

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I am told the lawyers began swarming around my hospital room long before I regained consciousness. It's no wonder. This was no 'stiff neck from whiplash' case – the pain and suffering were abundantly clear. Eventually, we shooed away the ambulance-chasers and got a referral from a friend to a guy named, Pat Coyle. So by the time I knew what was going on, my case was well underway.

He was convinced we had a good case against both Honda and the company that owned the laundry truck. So, we sued them for a total of \$2.75 million. That figure was based on the idea this poor, ruined, hideous heap of flesh (me), would never be able to drive a car, hold a job or do anything but vegetate and that amount of money would compensate me for a lifetime of lost earnings.

We went to trial in June 1973, two years after the accident. By then, there was little I couldn't do, but the lawyers insisted I go out of my way not to look too able. They wanted someone to attend to me at all times.

Unexpected company

I remember going to the men's room in the courthouse alone one time and as I came out, Coyle saw me and his face became ashen. He practically grabbed me, dragged me to the side of the hallway and demanded, "What in hell do you think you're doing?"

"I had to take a leak," I said.

"Did you realise that one of their lawyers was in there at the same time as you? From now on, I'll go in with you."

The opposition focused on the fact that I was flying planes again and seemed to be fairly competent. Coyle responded by having a film made of me, highlighting all the things I could not do. This highlights the strangeness of our legal system, which rewards helplessness and penalises success.

I had no problem with suing. My life had been interrupted, and getting fried was not how I would have chosen to spend that afternoon. What we finally discovered, however, was that it was not my apparent

helplessness but my friendliness and charm that were our greatest legal allies. The jury liked me; I think they even admired me. That, more than anything else, made the opposing attorneys eager to settle.

The settlement offer

Two weeks into the trial, the judge decided there should be a settlement conference. He feared extremes: I would either get no money or too much money, either of which would lead to endless appeals.

"In my youth," said his father, "I took to the law and argued each case with my wife. And the muscular strength which it gave to my jaw, has lasted the rest of my life."

Lewis Carroll

After this conference, my lawyers gave me the news. The defendants had offered \$450,000 apiece. My share of the \$900,000, after the lawyer's fees, would be about \$500,000. I had to decide: should I shoot the dice and go for more, with a chance of getting nothing or should I take the offer? That was a big decision. But right from the start, I had decided that this was "found" money. I knew my life was okay so it seemed pointless to get greedy. I took the money.

One final note on the psychiatric front. Around the time of my trial, my lawyers could not believe that I was not seeing a shrink, so they got me one. If ever anyone needed a shrink, it was this guy! He had serious psychological problems, most notably a God complex. He was convinced he had all the answers and his therapy group participants knew nothing. Several group members had bought into this charade; there were a bunch of people who had been seeing

this nutcase for four years, convinced they could not survive without his omniscience. These people were dearly addicted to the idea that they were sick.

I agree that psychiatry has its place in the world and some people have scars that are so deep that they need more than a Swedish massage. But I could not understand this brand of group therapy at all. Sure, sometimes things don't feel good, you get pissed off, nobody likes you... to which my reaction is, welcome aboard, nice to have you here on Spaceship Earth!

The choice is yours...

You can spend your whole life focusing on the worst aspects of your life if you choose to. Do you want to spend all of your time focusing on how bad your relationship, job, appearance is or do you want to focus on how good it can become? Do you want to talk only about how bad smoking is, or shall we focus on how wonderful fresh air and health can be?

The idea of self-help groups should be just that – to help people understand that the decision is up to them. As I see it, you can also sleep on a bed of nails and wallop your forehead every half hour with a two-by-four if that's your desire. But wallowing in angst is not my thing and that's what these sessions were all about. So after a few sessions, I quit. I pointed out that I didn't want to spend an hour a week thinking about problems I considered to be relatively minor, when there was so much positive stuff to do and be in the world. I even threw them some Morehouse (the idea that we are all perfect) because, while I resisted that idea for quite a while, it does make some sense.

I got a lot of major-league hostility from the group but what stands out is a letter I got from the shrink. The gist of it was, sure, now, in 1973, I was doing well. But if I didn't get long-term therapy, sooner or later I would jump out of a window.

It's now 2001 and I haven't jumped!

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Why I Travel the World Speaking to People...

W Mitchell was involved in a terrible accident when his motorcycle was hit by a truck. The fuel caught fire and he suffered terrible burns to 65 per cent of his body. He was later involved in a plane crash that left him unable to walk. Despite these setbacks, today Mitchell travels the world spreading his message of hope to others – it's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it...

After my first accident, when I got out of hospital, I walked quite a bit to build my strength back up. It must have been quite a show.

I had Puppy, my huge, male Great Dane. He walked with me everywhere. And because the plastic surgeons kept emphasising that I shouldn't get too much sun, I would always wear a hat – usually my *Smokey the Bear* hat.

Well, the sight must have been unbelievable. This monster dog, and this emaciated, burned up, fingerless guy with long hair and a drill instructor's hat, strolling the boulevards of San Francisco. In a city full of weird looking people, especially in those Haight-Ashbury days, I must have ranked among the weirdest. The sight obviously did overload a few circuits. I remember a couple of cases in particular.

How it started

Once, I walked to the hospital to visit some patients. The nurses had actually put me to work, making the rounds of bum patients. I told them things like, "Man, you're the only guy in this place who's as funny-looking as I am," as a way to help them gain some perspective. This was probably the start of my sharing the message: "It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it."

Anyway, on this particular trip, I told Puppy, to stay at the entrance. He was very good about this. He simply would not move and at 125 muscular pounds in weight, few people were inclined to move him.

When I came out a man staggered up, obviously drunk and started to berate me. "God, you're a mess. Jesus, you're the ugliest thing I ever saw. What the hell do you think you're doing here? I'm gonna beat that ugly face of yours," he railed at me.

Despite the guy's condition and the fact

that he was probably twenty years older than me, there was simply no way I could have defended myself. I had been a superb physical specimen, an excellent skier, a cable-car gripman, a guy who never had anything to fear. To feel so defenceless was a new and not so pleasant sensation.

When I said nothing, he got more abusive as he realised I was not going to fight back. Just as he was ready to begin, I noticed my dog had reappeared. So I said, "Look, I'm pretty messed up. I won't be much of a match for you. But would you like to fight my buddy?"

He said, "Sure."

"The chief cause of human error, is to be found in the prejudices picked up in childhood."

Rene Descartes

I said "Puppy, come, I want you to meet this guy because he wants to fight with you." The fellow took one look at the dog, froze for an instant and then took off so fast even Puppy couldn't have caught him.

It was an early, but classic example of what was to become my overriding philosophy: *Do whatever it takes*. In this case, the simple solution – pounding the guy into hamburger – was denied to me, so I had to get creative. What would I have done if Puppy had not bounded up?

Perhaps I would have started a conversation with the guy. Maybe I would have enlisted the aid of a bystander. I could have zipped

back inside the hospital. At every moment, we have more options than we can imagine; and one good thing that comes from handicaps is that it opens one's eyes to the reality of that.

In any case, this guy was an example of the kind of garbage that gets poured into some unfortunate people's brains, usually when they are children and can't ward it off. Fortunately, such profoundly insensitive people are rare.

The worst was yet to come

But the most distressing situation arose as Puppy and I walked passed a primary school playground. One kid spotted me, shouted something to the others and soon they all broke off their playing and ran to the fence to stare at me. Then, by twos and threes at first, but soon en masse, they chanted: "Monster, monster, monster, monster..." Teachers swooped down on them immediately, herding them inside, admonishing them for such behaviour.

But I was struck by a feeling of loss. I was not offended by what they had said. I did, indeed, resemble a monster that a child might have seen in a movie – rather like Freddy Kruger with a few Frankenstein stitches thrown in.

But I had an overwhelming desire to show them a vital truth: that someone who looks monstrous on the outside can be good, warm, funny, and caring on the inside, someone you might like as well as you like your best friend. I knew that chewing out those kids for their boorishness would not be half as effective as personally showing them their honest mistake. That there was a good person under all that scar tissue. I wanted to tell them something that a wonderful speaker and good friend shared with me much later. That the wrapping might have been damaged but the gift inside was still in good shape.

I think at that moment I subconsciously resolved to make sharing that message with people, especially kids, the focus of my life.

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Breaking the Barriers

So many barriers we are told are real, don't exist at all. And even the real ones can be vanquished through sheer effort. Things like picking up a quarter with no fingers or having a wonderful, accomplished life though you are burned and in a wheelchair – most can be surmounted through effort and a willingness to dig under them, go around them or hop over them...

I first met Tony Robbins when I spoke at a seminar he was running in Phoenix. The highlight of the seminar was to be the firewalk, where you stroll barefoot over red hot coals.

Three days after I arrived, firewalk night rolled around. Three beds of mesquite coals were prepared, ranging from twelve to forty feet long. This was the hottest fire Tony had ever used. I was about eight feet away and the heat was so intense, I was worried it would somehow mess up the plastic surgery work that had just been done on me, so I had them back me up.

I planned only to watch, for a couple of reasons. First, I don't walk. Second, I had had my fire experience. Third, I didn't need this routine anyway. The whole idea behind this is that if you can walk on fire, you prove to yourself that you can do damn near anything, that any limitations in your life are probably self-imposed. I had already figured that out in my own way, so who needed this?

My first fire 'walk'

People started walking through the coals. As they emerged, they were exultant. No one was burned. I'd guess 250 people did it.

I don't even remember how it came about but suddenly, there I was at the end of this bed of coals in my wheelchair, taking off my shoes and socks and saying to Tony and another friend, Tom Crum, "One of you grab me under the right arm, one under the left, lift me up and turn me around, because we are going to do this backwards.

And that's what we did.

I had more contact with the coals than anyone else. While the other workshop participants had stepped through the coals, I was literally dragged through them. When we got to the other side, I could see the two dark trails where my heels had gone.

I did not have a single burn.

What did it mean?

A lot of scientists are sceptical that anything mystical is involved. There are

elaborate theories about perspiration on the feet repelling the heat, through a principle similar to touching a wet finger to a hot iron and not being burned. These theories might be true – although I was in contact for quite a while.

But even if it is not literal magic, it certainly is a potent metaphor. It is a visible illustration of the power anyone has to face when confronted by a frightening barrier and discovering that there was no real reason to fear it at all.

"It is courage the world needs, not infallibility, courage is always the surest wisdom."

Sir Wilfred Grenfell

I firmly believe that most barriers are self-imposed. We first get them from society – you can't do that, that's immoral, that's crazy, no one in our family does that and so on. But we forget that we have the power to accept or reject these barriers. We treat them as if they are immovable, immutable, when, in fact, they may be silly, cause unnecessary misery or just be plain nonexistent.

To illustrate this with one more vivid example: back in the 1950s, it was widely accepted that no one would ever run a four-minute mile – that was, simply, something that human beings were not capable of doing. Then, in 1954, Roger Bannister ran one in three minutes, fifty nine and four-tenths' seconds. The next year, some fifty people broke the four-minute "barrier." Now, high school athletes break it routinely. Bannister demonstrated that the barrier was not real, but the remarkable thing is that any of those fifty people could have figured it out on their own. They didn't need to wait for Bannister to show them the fallacy of it.

An even more poignant example, and one closer to all of your hearts I'm sure, is the story of Cliff Young, a rather unsuccessful sixty-five-year old farmer from Australia, who showed up at the starting line of the annual five hundred kilometre Sydney to Melbourne race. Hundreds of people show up at the start of that race every year, but this was the first time anyone had arrived in his gum boots and bib overalls, causing the more polite of the bystanders to smile and the ruder ones to ridicule the old guy.

They were still hooting as the gun sounded and the runners zoomed ahead of Cliff. He didn't even run correctly. He just shuffled along in his gum boots. And at night, when the six hour break came (which everyone knew you had to take to have the stamina to win), Cliff was too stupid even to understand that. When he finally arrived at the break point, he just kept running. And that was the last any of the other runners ever saw of him. Cliff Young broke the Sydney to Melbourne record by some 12 hours and no one was laughing anymore.

Now, everybody's shuffling

By the next year, everyone was shuffling like Cliff Young. It became the preferred style of ultra-long distance running. Quite a few people broke Cliff's record, thanks to what they learned from him.

I had already discovered this: it's the folks who don't pay attention to what "everybody knows" who often succeed in life.

But it was wonderful to see the faces of the 250 people who walked through the firepit that night. I suspected that, from that point on, it would be difficult to convince any of them that he or she faced an insurmountable obstacle. This is not to say that every obstacle can simply be "walked across" like that firepit. Often, tremendous energy and hard work are required, and the obstacle may need to be surmounted in a way no one could have guessed.

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The Man Who Would Not Be Defeated...

W Mitchell (or just Mitchell, as he prefers to be called) was born in Pennsylvania in 1943 to an upper middle-class American family.

After dropping out of school and serving briefly in the Marines, he became a cab driver and then a gripman on the San Francisco cable cars. Mitchell claims, for a man with a love of mechanical things and an eye for a pretty girl, this had to be the ultimate job in the world.

Mitchell was a good looking young man with a zest for living life in the fast lane. He had a passion for fast moving sports, including snow skiing, flying light planes and riding motor bikes. It was this love of fast moving machines that led to the events that so dramatically changed his life.

An appointment with fate

On 19 July 1971, Mitchell jumped on his motorcycle and headed off to visit his girlfriend. That morning he had made his first solo flight in a light aircraft. He was working in a job he loved, with plenty of friends and plenty of money. He was riding his new Honda 750 motorcycle, purchased the day before and life was looking pretty good.

Mitchell didn't see the laundry truck until it was too late. He hit it squarely in the side and went down. The petrol tank on the motorcycle popped its lid, pouring gallons of petrol onto the bike's hot engine and all over Mitchell. The ensuing fireball was ten feet high and four feet wide.

His life would probably have ended right there, except for a nearby car salesman who grabbed a fire extinguisher and literally put him out. The ambulance arrived minutes later and raced him to the San Francisco General

Hospital. He had suffered horrific burns to sixty five per cent of his body and his survival chances were judged to be extremely low. His crash helmet had saved his scalp but most of his face and hands were literally burnt off. Fortunately for him, he passed into a deep coma and, aided by massive doses of drugs, the next two weeks remain a fuzzy blur.

The ensuing months were spent undergoing extensive plastic surgery. Surgeons virtually re-built Mitchell's face but even the best plastic surgeons can only do so much. The end result was a patch-work of grafted skin that once caused a group of children to run away screaming, "*monster, monster.*"

Feelings of hopelessness

Apart from his physical appearance, all his fingers and thumbs had been burnt off in the accident and he was left with two stumps where his hands used to be. One can only try to imagine the pain and feeling of hopelessness that he must have gone through in the next few years as he tried desperately to learn to live with his disabilities and rebuild some sort of life for himself.

He recalls that initially the pain in his hands was so excruciating he couldn't even bear a breeze on them, let alone use them for any worthwhile purpose. He was virtually helpless and even relatively simple tasks like opening a door seemed insurmountable.

Probably many people faced with his pain and problems would have given up. But Mitchell is no ordinary person. Despite his seemingly overwhelming disabilities, he continued on, not only learning how to adjust to the problems but actually returning to doing most of things he had done before. He even managed to fly a plane again.

Because of his appearance, Mitchell



decided to move from San Francisco. He figured that in a small town people would soon learn his story and after a while forget his appearance and look beyond that to see Mitchell the person.

His eventual choice was Crested Butte, a small mining town 20 miles from the ski fields of Colorado. He used part of his accident settlement money to establish himself in business and he opened a bar in the town which enjoyed good trade. He also made some real estate investments in the area and eventually invested with friends in a project manufacturing a new type of fuel burning stove, which was to eventually return him a tremendous profit.

Entry into politics

He also made a name for himself in politics. His successful environmental battle with a giant mining company made him a popular local identity and he went on to eventually become Mayor of Crested Butte. He even ran for Congress and went very close to being elected. All in all, life looked pretty good. But fate was not yet finished with W Mitchell.

Mitchell now held a commercial pilot's licence and had bought a Cessna 206 aeroplane, regularly taking passengers to different destinations to help pay his fuel bills.

One morning in November 1975, he was preparing to fly with three friends to San Francisco. It was a fairly routine flight and one he had made countless times before. This morning it had been snowing and it was extremely cold.

Mitchell thought that all the ice had melted off the wings. Unfortunately, he was wrong. The plane reached a height of about one hundred feet and the engine stalled. The plane fell for around two seconds and then slammed back onto the runway belly up, bursting open the fuel tanks.

Fearing his dreaded enemy, fire, Mitchell yelled to his passengers to get out of the plane and tried to free himself. He could not move. He thought his feet must be have been jammed under the rudder pedals. Then, he noticed the numbness in his legs and the pain in his back and realised something was terribly wrong.

Later, in hospital, the doctor told him he had crushed his spine and was paralysed from the waist down. He would be confined to a wheelchair for

the rest of his life. For a man who had just spent the last four years of his life recovering from incredibly devastating injuries, it seemed just too much to bear.

“It's not what happens to you in life that counts, it's what you do about it.”

However, once again with amazing courage and determination, Mitchell managed to overcome his problems. Despite his many disabilities he continues to live a full life.

Director of the board of a number of companies, an environmental leader and a successful businessman, he still lists amongst his hobbies white river rafting and skydiving! He says simply, before his accidents he could do 10,000 things — now, he can only do 9,000 things. He can either spend his time

focusing on the 1,000 things that he can no longer do or the 9,000 things that he *can* do. Mitchell says he simply prefers to do the latter.

These days, he spends much of his time travelling the world spreading his powerful message of hope and inspiration to others. And, as Mitchell says, disabilities are not always physical. Often our biggest disability is our failure to recognise our problems and to learn to deal with them.

Mitchell's philosophy is simple: “It's not what happens to you in life that counts, it's what you do about it”.

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