

Breaking the Barriers

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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 bummed and in a wheelchair – most can be surmounted through effort and a willingness to dig under them, go around them, hop over them.

*“It is courage the world needs, not infallibility,
courage is always the surest wisdom.”*
Sir Wilfred Grenfell

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 skeptical 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.

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 kilometer 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.