

# And That's Why I Speak

BY W MITCHELL

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*He suffered burns to 65% of his body in a terrible motor cycle accident. Then, he was involved in a plane crash and paralyzed from the waist down. In spite of his fate today, Mitchell travels the world spreading his messages of hope and inspiration. He claims, "It's not what happens to you in life, it's what you do about it."*

*"Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure."*  
William Saroyan

I 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.

For the first time since the accident, I had found some hammer 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 check and a free meal to boot!

By the fall of 1987, I realized 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.