

The Choice Is Yours

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In July 1971, Mitchell was involved in a terrible accident when his motorcycle was hit by a laundry truck. The gasoline capped popped off and the fuel caught fire, he suffered burns to 65 per cent of his body. In spite of his misfortune, today Mitchell travels the world spreading his message of hope: It's not what happens to you, it's what you do about it...

"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

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 realize 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 penalizes 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.

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!