

By Ruth Ostrow

Sitting at dinner recently with friends, I was told we were being joined by the distinguished motivational speaker W Mitchell - millionaire, politician, friend of US presidents - who is currently touring Australia.

Mitchell arrived in a wheelchair. As he approached, I got a shock. Far from what I expected, his face was a strange collage of disfigured shapes; he had no hands, stumps for fingers. No-one thought to add that Mitchell is famous for his story and his book *It's Not What Happens To You, It's What You Do About It* - such a relevant title in these disturbing days.

Caught in a severe accident with a laundry truck in the '70s, he experienced burns to 65 per cent of his body. His face had to be completely recreated. So bad were his injuries that even after years of surgery kids would taunt him with "monster, monster" when he walked the streets. Not one to stop, he went on to make millions from his business and to start flying planes - which resulted in a plane crash four years later, crippling him from the waist down.

Despite a life that would ruin most people, Mitchell became mayor of his city in Colorado, started travelling the world as a motivational speaker, and influencing Congress and others on disability issues. I had many questions for the man sitting before me. What makes one person thrive in adversity while another crumbles?

My hero, Viktor Frankl, writes in *Man's Search for Meaning* that those who best survived the Holocaust had a deeper sense of meaning. Mitchell is without spiritual belief. "Stuff happens," he shrugs, "and there isn't more to it."

"But 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 ... I've had jobs that were prisons, I've had relationships with women that were like prisons. This wheelchair was a prison, but it's now a vehicle for me."

He says his disabilities don't stop him doing anything he wants; in his book he even writes about a renewed sex life after his grossly disfiguring accident - a great reminder to those of us who find a wrinkle humiliating.

Leaving the dinner, I felt an optimism that had vanished while watching world news each night. Ultimately, adversity catches up with us all. Being a positive thinker is a blessing worth more than all the beauty, health and riches in the world.

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