

## Mitchell Ignores Defeat

BY MARY ELLEN MOORE



The fireball was about ten feet high and four feet wide. The flame was blue and searing, with the peculiar, intense heat of gasoline burning in the open air. Even standing fifty feet away, on the corner of 26th and South Van Ness, 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—a mysterious bonfire in the middle of an urban intersection 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. I was in it."

So begins W Mitchell's book, *The Man Who Would Not Be Defeated*, and the first of many twists in the life of the formerly good-looking, carefree, admittedly self-centered young man named W (by much conniving ) Mitchell.

Obviously, Mitchell, as he prefers to be called, survived the fire. He also survived a plane crash four years later, although it paralyzed him. Neither accident side-lined him—he's a successful businessman, sometimes-successful politician, environmental activist, speaker and author. But you can read all about that in his book, an irreverent walk through his life's tragedies and what he chose to make of them. Mitchell's sense of humor is just as inspiring as his accomplishments, and the lessons he's learned and passes on are as down-to-earth and memorable as is he.

So we caught up with him between activities and asked him a few questions. His reply:

"Just about all of us are born with the same set of equipment—hands, eyes, ears, ability to think, and so forth. Some people are brighter, some are dumber. The real question is, 'What are we going to do with this equipment?'"

I'm quite special—all of us have the ability to do what I've done. But often we can spend our lives deciding why we can't do something.

We can't adjust the wind, but we can trim our sails.

All of us have the ability to decide—it's hard to quit smoking, quit eating M&Ms. I understand that. Fact is, however, smoking is a very conscious effort. You have to choose to do it; you have to purchase the cigarettes. You have to open the pack, light the match. We make a choice to smoke.

I look at Olympic athletes. How many choices did that person have to make to stand up to get that gold medal. You're not a failure if you don't make it. You're a failure if you allow yourself to be limited in this world by others' actions and beliefs.

I talk a lot about responsibility, the ability to respond. But do we choose to respond? We must recognize that we are in control.

People tell me after hearing me that I've changed their lives I'm their excuse. I love it; fact is they used me to trim their sails. Everything I know , I've learned from someone else. Maybe I strung words together better than others.

Everybody uses this example-the baby walking. A baby attempts to walk millions of times, fails millions of times. The baby doesn't succeed, hits his head, smashes his face, looks ridiculous, silly and it's dangerous. Fail and fail and fail if you choose to call it that. Then one day, he'll take his first step.

It's not failure-it's learning; the baby is learning to walk. They're not mistakes-they're experiences. They're enough to either shut you down, or you'll make it to the goal line. There are tons of things I've given up on. The sad 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.

We're programmed. Tony 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.

All of us can make the decision to reprogram; we can make the decision to be responsible.

The key word is focus. When you take responsibility for your life, you can take responsibility for where you're going to go next. You need tools.

The people who are wonderful aren't the ones who wait for permission.

I don't know what caused me to 'take responsibility' after my accident. Morehouse helped a little. (In his book, Mitchell talks about his pre-accident encounter with the Morehouse philosophy, which consists of three basic tenets: First, you are perfect. In other words, even when you are doing asshole-and I do asshole excellently-you are perfect at that moment. You are fine. You are a human being, being yourself...Second, there is no absolute relationship between any two variables...Third, you are responsible for your life.)

Certainly, there was something else...the longest journey begins with a single step. By changing one small behavior you can make a huge amount of difference. 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 than anyone else's brain; the difference is what he chose to do with his brain.

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