Great Success Stories

Twelve Tales of Victory Wrested from Defeat

Featuring Jim Stovall

Alan Farnham

Chapter 11

Jim Stovall

Co-creator of the Narrative Television Network

"I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life."

The television room in Jim Stovall's Tulsa, Oklahoma, home was the sort of sanctuary that many a tired businessperson only wishes that he or she had—tranquil, comfy, and stocked with tapes of favorite films and television shows. It was just the kind of place, in fact, to which a person might want to retreat after a tough day. And Stovall—an entrepreneur and onetime stockbroker—had indeed retreated there. The problem was he hadn't retreated to it for an hour, or an evening, or even a long weekend. At the age of only 29, he had retreated permanently. The room that once had been his respite from the world now *was* his world.

Stovall and the room made an unlikely pair: He was big—6 feet, 4 inches, 240 pounds. The room was puny—scarcely 9 by 12 feet. Since youth, Stovall had been strong and powerful. He'd been a national champion weightlifter and had worked summers in construction jobs, carrying loads of concrete. If anyone had tried to restrain him physically or to block his egress from the room, Stovall could have muscled his way out. If anyone had tried to lock Stovall in, he easily could have broken down the door. But there was no human jailer; the door remained unlocked. Still, Stovall sat there, hour after hour, week after week, chafing at his self-imposed confinement. Even the videotapes he used to watch, which previously had brought him pleasure, now only frustrated him. He found once-familiar storylines and plots impossible to follow.

His problem with the tapes could not be ascribed to wandering attention. Stovall was concentrating on them hard. His intelligence was as acute and disciplined as when he'd graduated from college summa cum laude. Nor was he suffering some kind of psychosis. His mental health was fine; he was socially well adjusted and happily married. And behind him lay a string of successful accomplishments in both business and athletics.

Stovall's problem was simple: He'd gone blind.

Ignoring His Problem Instead of Dealing With It

Stovall had been going blind, by small degrees, since the age of 7. Yet so gradual had been the deterioration of his sight that he'd always managed to convince his family and friends (and most of all, himself) that nothing especially bad was happening. "I bought into the popular notion," he now

explains, “that a problem ignored is a problem dealt with.” As he got older and his vision worsened, he simply got better at making normalizing compensations.

On his sixteenth birthday, he insisted that—like every other kid his age—he ought to get his driver’s license and begin driving. He opted against taking driver’s education, because he figured an instructor might notice his impairment. Instead, he went straight to the Department of Motor Vehicles and took the physical and written tests. When the moment came for him to read the eye chart, he listened carefully to the answers given by the man ahead of him in line. Then, when his own turn came, he repeated them verbatim, and passed. Against his parents’ wishes, he spent an entire summer’s wages buying his first car. And finally, late one hot Tulsa night, after his folks had gone out to an evening function, Stovall hopped into his car and motored off. He drove to the end of his block, turned left, and before he had gone a quarter of a mile, drove into the back of a parked car. Not just any car. A parked police car. The incident marked the beginning of the end of his career behind the wheel.

His sight remained fairly good in daylight, so such embarrassments were few. He managed to excel in football (night games excepted). It was while he was applying for a football scholarship to college—one requiring him to take an eye exam—that doctors first found and diagnosed his problem. Stovall had macular degeneration—a disease common in older people, but rare in kids. “Jim,” said the specialist examining him, “we’re not sure when, but we know that someday you're going to be totally blind. And there’s nothing we can do about it.”

In response, says Stovall, he redoubled his efforts to “escape reality.” Was football out? Then there still were lots of other sports in which he could compete. He switched to weightlifting, where his size and strength mattered more than visual acuity. He trained hard, working his way up to becoming National Weightlifting Champion and a favored contender for the 1980 Olympic Games. (He never got a chance to compete in them, however, because the United States withdrew from the Moscow games in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.)

Earlier in his weight training, Stovall’s response to a setback proved prophetic: Two weeks before he was to compete in a crucial qualifying event, he broke three fingers of one hand in a practice lift. Not only did he still compete (with three fingers bandaged), he won a gold medal. Clearly, this was one determined guy.

He embarked on college with equal determination and, eventually, despite a few missteps, graduated with honors, thanks to the aid of volunteers who read his text books to him. One of these readers—a pretty young woman named Crystal—he asked to marry him. She assented, and by 1988 the Stovalls had settled down in Tulsa, with Jim earning a comfortable living as an investment broker and entrepreneur. He had a wife, a career, a house. And he still had a small measure of his eyesight. Life, he felt, could be a lot worse.

Then one morning, suddenly it was: Stovall woke up, opened his eyes, and saw absolutely nothing—only blackness. What his doctors had predicted had finally come true. He was completely blind. There was no refuting it now, no compensating for appearances’ sake. This was it. “I realized my worst fear,” he says. “The thoughts and doubts that came over me that morning would be almost impossible to

describe." He groped his way into the bathroom, where he put his face close against a light bulb. "Up to that moment, I'd had at least some sense of light—a sense of shadow and of forms. Now everything was dark." *It's happened, it's happened,* he remembers saying to himself. He'd never even met a blind person. He had no idea what they did. He'd always considered himself sighted. "I was 29 years old and had no contingency plan for the rest of my life."

More Denial: Retreating from the World

It was then that Stovall returned to his television room. After his first panic had subsided came a more lasting, deeply rooted fear: "I was scared to think about going outside my front door. I'm not too proud to admit that. I was more scared than I'd ever been in my life. My overriding thought was that I was never going to leave my house again." To venture out, he reasoned, was to invite further hurt—or worse, embarrassment. Stovall imagined himself awkwardly tripping over all the things he could no longer see: garden hoses, kids' bicycles, curbs. His overwhelming desire became "to insulate myself from anything else bad happening." Having done well in his brokerage business, he could afford to insulate himself for years, if he wanted.

In the television room, everything was comfortable, warm, and familiar. All the resources he might ever need were organized close at hand. "I thought: This is it for me, this is the rest of my life right here, with my little radio and my telephone and my tape recorder; and I'll never leave this room again." This room would be his fortress, his redoubt, his bastion against further upsets. "This was my whole world, and I really fully intended never to walk out of that room again." To while away his time, he started playing his collection of videotapes. And then, as day followed day, his exasperation grew.

He'd pop in a tape—something he'd watched many times before. But even with familiar films, the audio track seldom if ever supplied enough information for him to keep up with the action on the screen. His supreme moment of frustration came courtesy of Humphrey Bogart: "It was an old Bogart film entitled *The Big Sleep.* I had seen it enough times that through the sounds alone—and my memory—I was able to follow along fairly well until, in the middle of it, somebody shot a gun, and someone else screamed, and a car sped away, and I forgot the plot of the movie."

Stovall then uttered seven words he'd later come to see as golden: "Somebody ought to do something about that!"

"The only thing you have to do to have a great business idea," he says today, "is to go about your daily life and wait for something bad to happen. When it does, you ask yourself: How could I help other people to avoid that?" Voila! An idea for a potentially great business: Somebody needed to provide a service that would make tapes "watchable" by blind people, by adding narration that would explain what was happening onscreen.

To take action on that idea, though—or to do anything else—Stovall first would have to leave his room. And he was having none of that. He didn't feel he could suffer any more disappointments or embarrassments. There would be no tripping, no walking into walls. He was better off where life was safe, predictable, and free of unpleasantness. His fear held him prisoner.

As days turned into weeks, he sometimes grappled with it, but the fear always won. Meanwhile, friends and well-wishers tried hard to help him—none more so than his wife. Yet Stovall steadfastly refused to be coaxed out. "I'd decided," he says, "to insulate myself permanently. I literally believed I'd never leave that room again."

Looking back on this awful period, he ascribes his own intransigence to what he calls the spider-monkey syndrome. "Spider monkeys," he explains, "are very small, approximately four to six inches tall, and look very much like humans. They live in the tallest trees in the most dense jungle in the Amazon basin." For years, he says, outside people tried without success to capture them—until a native showed them the proper method:

> To capture a spider monkey, you simply put one peanut inside of a small glass bottle, which you leave at the base of a tree. While you leave, the spider monkey will climb down the tree, put his hand inside the bottle, and grab the peanut, making his fist too large to get out of the bottle. You have now captured a spider monkey. You can return and put a whole bag of peanuts right next to the spider monkey, and he will not let go of the one peanut he's holding onto that he can't eat and maybe didn't especially want in the first place. You can take away his freedom, but he will not let go of that one peanut.

Ignoring, for a moment, the question of *why* the monkey won't let go (stupidity, pride, and sheer frustration seem to be top contenders for the reason), he's helpless to achieve a better situation for himself until he lets go—literally—of the present one. "Failure and success," muses Stovall, "cannot occupy the same space. You must let go of one to begin enjoying the other." In Stovall's own case, he eventually was *forced* to let go.

"I hit bottom," Stovall says, finally sinking to a depth of despair so low it grabbed him by the lapel. And in that moment came a kind of epiphany: "It was true that nothing bad had happened to me while I stayed there in the room. But where nothing bad happens, nothing *good* does, either." It became a question which was the worse hell: remaining a prisoner of his own fear or risking the knocks he might suffer if he were to venture out. Stovall remembers saying to himself: "*This isn't living. This is only existing. I'm' not going to lose any more of my sight; but if I continue to sit here, I'm going to lose my life. Blindness has happened. Deal with it.*"

He decided he would risk the knocks.

Building a New Life—and a New Business

"The process of getting myself out of that room was not easy or swift. It happened a little at a time. But it all began with the decision." The first day he walked 52 feet to his mailbox, then returned indoors. From the humble start, he says, his whole life began to change. "I got a new vision of who I could become." All at once, it seemed, he was launched on a new path.

Daily, progressing by small increments, he gained confidence.

> The first time I stepped out of my house and walked to the mailbox, I was tentative—scared stiff might be the better description. But the 500th time, I was anything but that. I could just as easily have stumbled on the 500th trip as on the first. A neighbor could have left a tricycle in my path, or a tree limb might have blown into my driveway. But by the time I'd made 500 trips, I knew that if I tripped over something, I could get back up. Nothing about the driveway or the potential hazards had changed. I had changed.

His confidence had strengthened. "And in that," he says, "lies all the difference in the world."

He ventured even further out and began attending a support group for the blind and visually impaired. There, he met Kathy Harper, a partially sighted legal assistant, who, like Stovall, was attending the group for the first time. They hit it off, and Stovall shared with her his Humphrey Bogart frustration. The two began discussing various business services that could supply audio-enhanced movies and other programming to the blind.

Their idea, originally, was to produce videotapes with the voice of a narrator inserted during lulls in preexisting dialog—tapes that would let people "hear what they couldn't see." If, for example, the existing sound track offered only a thud followed by a squeal of brakes, the added narration might say something like, "The crooks try and fail to run down Philip Marlow with their car."

A little preliminary research showed that the audience for such a service was potentially vast. There were some 13 million blind or partially sighted consumers in the United States alone. Neither Stovall nor Harper knew anything about the business of movies or television, nor about the technicalities of recording. But they didn't let that faze them. Instead, they felt spurred on by a shared sense of excitement and by an optimism born of total inexperience. Because they didn't know what they couldn't do, they moved forward experimentally, by fits and starts. "If you look back at any great success," says Stovall, "you'll see it hardly ever begins with some supremely self-confident guy who says 'I know I'm going to make it.' More often than not, it begins with a bit of fear and trembling and some such statement as, 'Well I'm willing to try and try, until I get there.'" Alluding to the fact that Harper herself is only partially sighted, he jokes that the two of them represented, "in more ways than one, a case of the blind leading the blind."

Their First Office: the Basement and the Broom Closet

They established the Narrative Television Network (NTN), with Stovall as president and Harper as minority partner. (Today she serves as vice president for strategic planning.) They then sought and got permission from producers and syndicators of such hit shows as *Matlock* and *The Big Valley* to insert NTN's added narration.

Working from their own makeshift recording studio, the pair began trying to produce an example of the kind of tape they thought their audience would want. "Actually," says Stovall, "I'd use the term *studio* a bit loosely. We were working out of the basement of a condominium, here in downtown Tulsa, which, as you may know, is not the entertainment capital of the world. There was a broom closet underneath the basement stairs, and we took the brooms out of it and hung up some boat cushions to help

soundproof the space. *That* was our first studio." They got their electronic equipment by cold-calling manufacturers and explaining they were working on a new idea—television for the blind. After a few such calls, Stovall says, "I realized that one of our first obstacles was going to be getting ourselves taken seriously."

At last they found one manufacturer who offered to loan them what they needed for free. As Stovall explains it, "The guy said, 'Obviously I'd like to sell you a whole lot of expensive equipment, because that's how we make our living. But we feel it would be embarrassing to us to have a blind guy buy all this stuff and then find out his idea doesn't work. So we'll loan it to you. As soon as you find out your idea doesn't work, you call us, and we'll come pick it up.'" Good enough.

In their studio beneath the stairs, Stovall and Harper got to work. Harper, sitting at a card table, ran the recording equipment. Stovall handled the narration—or tried to. First, Harper would read him the lines that he was supposed to speak; then, he would run into the room with the boat cushions on the wall and talk into the microphone. He'd then run back out, so Harper could read him his next line. It wasn't what you'd call a smooth arrangement. "Then one morning," he says, "Kathy told me that, as chief recording engineer, she had come up with a breakthrough that would improve our efficiency tremendously." Harper had removed the handle from one of the brooms that previously had been stored in the closet. She told Stovall that under the new arrangement, he was to sit still in the closet and wait for her cue. "When the moment came for me to talk," he says, "she stabbed me in the back with the broomstick. Then I'd know it was time for me to deliver my next line." Sitting there, waiting to be poked with a stick, he remembers thinking, "I wonder if Ted Turner got started this way?" (Turner now serves as a member of NTN's advisory board.)

Creating a Product and Getting It on Television

By such haphazard means the two eventually managed to tape new narration for seven programs. They then sought the services of a professional broadcast studio, which, they hoped, could help them merge their new narration with the original sound tracks.

Stovall contacted the manager of what he believed to be the best recording facility in the area, and asked if NTN could have a meeting with its chief engineer. He explained that he and Harper needed an engineer who was "truly an expert," because the idea that NTN was pioneering had never been tried before. "Sure," said the manager, "come on over." So Harper and Stovall arrived, with the contents of their own "studio"—tapes, wires, and recording machine—in a large box. They explained their idea to the manager and his engineer. A long pause followed.

"Jim," said the engineer, "I've been in this business 21 years. I have seen everything and done everything, and I can absolutely tell you, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that what you want to do won't work." The engineer wasn't even interested in taking the lid off NTN's box.

Stovall, disappointed, refused to let things end there. Keeping his composure, he turned to the studio head and said: "I need to apologize to you. I know I asked if we could meet with your best expert—and

apparently this is he, right here. But do you have anybody we can talk to who's maybe a little *less* expert?"

The less-expert expert was a college kid who told them that he was working at the studio just to earn a few extra bucks. "But if you want," he said, "we can wire 'er up and see what happens." Confided Stovall to Harper, "I think this is the expert we've been looking for."

Frame by frame and word by word, the two soundtracks melded together seamlessly—just as NTN's proud parents had hoped they would. And six months later, Harper and Stovall were presented with an Emmy for having "expanded the scope of television" by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Not only did NTN's cofounders come away with a prestigious award, they gained a reluctance to take no for an answer from experts ever again.

Their conviction was only underscored by an experience they had shortly afterward with a man described to them as being "the gorilla of cable television"—a guy with the ability to get *any* kind of programming on television.

Stovall and Harper understood that NTN could reach only so many viewers by providing its tapes directly to consumers. But if they could somehow get the same tapes played on television, they could reach a much wider audience. Toward that end—and before their meeting with the gorilla—Stovall approached his local cable operator, Tulsa Cable Television, to see if it would be interested in carrying NTN's wares. Stovall and Harper lugged their studio-in-a-box over to Tulsa Cable's office, and again did their stuff. *Presto!* They were on television. Said the program director, "That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen!"

The following week, they had their meeting with the gorilla—who turned out to be a smallish, rather unprepossessing man. He listened to them for two hours, then announced politely that he was sorry, but NTN didn't have a prayer of getting on cable. "Not even onto one station?" Stovall asked provocatively. No, said the gorilla, shaking his head sagely, not even one. "Well," said Stovall, "we may never get onto *more* than one station, but we got on one last Friday."

Their final problem was coming up with enough product. In order to persuade stations to carry NTN, Stovall found that he usually had to commit to delivering solid 2-hour blocks of programming. That's what stations wanted. But the running time for NTN's movies averaged just 1 ½ hours. How to fill the 30-minute gap? Stovall decided, pretty much on the spot, to produce and host a talk show, which would run for 15 minutes before and after every 90-minute feature. He figured he could interview some of the old stars featured in the films, plus television celebrities and other luminaries.

But how was NTN to get these stars? Stovall and Harper went to the Tulsa Public Library, where they found a reference book call *Addresses of the Stars*. They jotted down the addresses of Katherine Hepburn, Jimmy Stewart, and Jack Lemmon, among others, then started banging out letters requesting interviews. The letters explained that the stars—for no money—should agree to appear on NTN for an "incredible career opportunity": the chance to be interviewed by the blind host of an as-yet-mythical

talk show on an as-yet-nonexistent cable network. And, oh yes, asked the letters—could the stars please *hurry along* their acceptances? The interviews had to be taped in the next few weeks.

"Less than two weeks later," says Stovall, "the first response came back. The return address said 'Katherine Hepburn, New York City.'" The note inside read, "Dear Jim: If you will call this number, we can discuss the interview" and it was signed *Katherine Hepburn*. Stovall phoned, and Hepburn herself picked up. When he told her he was surprised that she answered her own phone, the great lady replied (in the inimitably patrician tones): "But Jim, don't you answer your own phone? I've always felt that when one's phone rings, one should answer it."

The Hepburn interview became only one of more than 80 that now are played before and after every feature. Photos of the guest celebrities line the walls of NTN's Tulsa headquarters, as do NTN's many awards, which include an Emmy, the Evan Kemp Entrepreneurship Award from the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities, and a Blue Chip Enterprise Initiative award (bestowed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and MassMutual on entrepreneurs who have surmounted great adversities).

Finally, a Profit

Today, NTN is thriving. Its programming, carried on 1,300 cable systems and other outlets throughout North America, reaches an estimated 35 million homes. (It can also be found in 11 foreign countries.) Amazingly, 60 percent of NTN's audience consists of fully sighted people who simply like having extra narration. The company is profitable, debt free, and enjoys annual revenues of around $6 million. Says Stovall:

> "I'm very proud of the fact that we're a for-profit business. A lot of people, I know, spend their time doing charitable, nonprofit work. But I feel that in our business, it's really one and the same. I don't' know of many charities that do as good work as we do. I'm especially proud, as a blind person, to have been able to create a company that makes a profit and pays taxes, since that only legitimizes the commercial power of our audience, in my view. It shows that these are people who spend money, who buy things; that they're worth advertisers' dollars."

The company's growth potential, Stovall maintains, is limitless. NTN has begun carrying new kinds of programming, including Broadway shows, and has just finished work on its first big-screen project: narration for an IMAX film on the life of writer Ernest Hemingway, which should be in theaters sometime in 2000.

NTN has branched out to the Internet. "We have a partnership with Broadcast.com/Yahoo!," says Stovall. "You can go to our Web site—narrativetv.com—24 hours a day, seven days a week, and watch narrated movies on demand, for free. They start when you want them to start. You can pause them, back them up. It's almost like instant home video delivery. The Internet gives us a global audience, access to all visually impaired people around the world." For the fully sighted, he notes, video delivery on the Web is premature, "because although the audio is perfect, the video is bad. That's why

Broadcast.com was interested in us—we have a huge audience of people for whom good video is not critical."

Research, Stovall says, shows that visually impaired people actually own and operate computers at a rate higher than that of the general population. The blind are able to navigate the Web fairly easily, thanks to software that reads text aloud. "So, we feel that, long term, that's the delivery system for our audience. We're not giving up our broadcast or cable or satellite delivery, but with this we can be an around-the-clock source for movies and television."

There's one other promising development: The FCC, according to Stovall, is poised to *require* broadcasters to offer the kind of narration that only NTN and public television currently provide. "From a business perspective, that's a wonderful thing. It's like being an automaker and waking up one day to find the government is about to mandate universal car ownership." NTN, he thinks, is going to have to get much bigger soon, to meet increased demand for narration.

A New Direction: Motivating Others to Achieve Their Dreams

Running NTN is but one facet of Stovall's burgeoning career. He's an author, writing a weekly newspaper column called "Winners' Wisdom," which appears in a number of papers nationwide. He's also written books, including *The Way I See the World* (GSN, 1999), *You Don't Have to Be Blind to See* (Thomas Nelson, 1996), *Success Secrets of Super Achievers* (GSN, 1997; a compilation of his on-air celebrity interviews), and a novel, *The Ultimate Gift* (Executive Books, 1999). "It's a very creative working environment," he says of NTN's offices. "We have our core television business, of course. But we also have a personal development business. We provide content for people who read my books or columns, or audiences who come to hear me speak."

He's much in demand as an inspirational speaker, addressing upwards of 500,000 people a year at business meetings, sports events, and conventions. He has even addressed a meeting of optometrists. As keynote speaker, he's shared the podium with the likes of General Colin Powell, Tony Robbins, Robert Schuller, Paul Harvey, Christopher Reeve, and Barbara Bush.

Many who see Stovall onstage would never guess that he was blind, if he didn't tell them himself. Explains friend and fellow inspirational speaker Dr. Denis Waitley:

> I was spellbound the first time I saw Jim speak. After he was introduced, he walked to the podium confidently and with a strong stride, took the microphone from its stand, and proceeded to walk about the stage unassisted, occasionally coming right to the edge of the platform to peer into the faces of those who sat before him. Then he walked down the steps from the stage to speak directly to the people in the front rows. He remembered not only what each person said, but also where each person sat, so that he might continue to have a dialogue with several of the audience.

There's not trick involved here. Everything that Stovall does is the result of his having arrived hours before an event to pace the stage, get the feel of it, and practice every move. In his mind, he visualizes

his whole performance—a discipline taught to him by Waitley. Stovall's years as an on-camera interviewer have imbued him with all the grace and self-assurance of a fully sighted speaker. "Working in television has helped me a lot," he says, "because I have to look at the people I'm talking to and look as normal as I can, so people around me will feel comfortable."

He closes speeches by giving people two things: his personal phone number and a showstopping offer. When you are willing to make a commitment to your destiny, I will be your partner in success. Any time you're depressed, discouraged, or any time you're not sure your dreams are going to come true, you pick up the nearest telephone and call that number. We have people who answer the phone 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and they know there's always one kind of call I'll always return.

The number is (918) 627-1000.

Having surmounted his own blindness, and having rubbed elbows as a professional speaker with some of today's best-known uplifts, Stovall has become something of a connoisseur of popular self-help advice. Much of it he finds lacking.

> You know, I do three speeches a month now that usually get billed as inspirational, and I find myself sharing the same arenas with a lot of motivational speakers. I've learned to tell the difference between the ones giving out useful advice and the ones dispensing only theory.
>
> What kinds of advice does Stovall automatically dismiss?
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> I've heard many motivational speakers say, with a bit of a strain in their voice, "You've got to pay the price for success." I don't necessarily believe in that. I believe when you follow your passion, you will enjoy the price of your success. If you don't follow your passion, you will pay the price for failure. In the final analysis, what you pursue is more important than how you pursue it.

Stovall also dismisses any advice that discounts "the seriousness or size of obstacles that struggling people have to face. Those personal obstacles are real. They're intimidating."

Stovall has also come to accept the fact that people seldom heed advice, good or bad. He makes an analogy to the in-flight safety instructions read regularly to passengers by flight attendants. "I fly two or three times a week, and they give this speech about the oxygen masks dropping down," he says. "No one ever pays attention. It's just a voice, talking." The only time you wish you'd listened, he says, is when your plane is crashing. "I think it takes a while for us to realize that self-help information really does apply to us." Absent some catalytic crisis, most people are content to sit buckled in their seats, eating salted nuts, leading lives that are at best mediocre.

Choosing the Life You Want to Live

"Bad," Stovall says, "is often not the enemy of good, so much as *mediocre* is. If something is bad enough in life, we will change it or deal with it. But when it's okay or just good enough, we often will suffer with conditions far below those to which our destiny could lead us."

As someone who once allowed himself to sit for weeks in a 9- by 12-foot room, Stovall understands that setbacks have the power to vitiate life and stop it in its tracks. But he also has little patience with people—disabled or otherwise—who allow their setbacks to hold permanent dominion over them. "You and I only have one right in this world," he says, "and that is the right to choose. We can't always choose what happens to us, but we can always choose what we are going to do about it. You are where you are in every area of your life because of the choices you have made in the past."

In his public speaking career, Stovall travels the world telling many thousands of people each year that they are where they are in their lives—both personally and professionally—because of their own past decisions:

> A lot of people don't like to hear that, because we have become a society of people that loves to blame someone else for our condition. So when I show up and tell them they are where they are because that's what they chose, the tell me things like: "*I know my life's messed up, but if you knew my spouse, you would know why I'm in the shape I'm in.*" Or they will tell me things like: "*My boss is an idiot*"; "*The weather's too hot*"; "The taxes are too high*"*; *"I'm a middle child*"; or whatever the current excuse is that they use to justify their life of mediocrity.

Only when we accept the fact that we are where we are because of choices we've made in the past can we live every day of the rest of our lives in the certain knowledge that we can do anything we want to do if we simply make the right choices.

When Stovall addressed one of the largest organizations of the blind in America a few years ago, what he said to them was blunt: "*If many of you miraculously received your sight again today, you would have to come up with another excuse for the lousy way you live your lives.*" ("I doubt," he says, "if I'll be invited back to speak to that group anytime soon!")

The most severe disability of all, he insists, is having low (or *no*) expectations of one's self. "We always live up to the expectations that we have of ourselves, or that we allow others to place upon us." For this reason, well-intentioned efforts by friends and well-wishers often exacerbate the problem faced by someone struggling to surmount a setback and forge a new life. Your friends' interest usually is in helping you get back to where you were, before misfortune struck. "What they do, by trying to protect you, is confirm your tendency to stay inside your comfort zone, to live with your existing limitations, rather than to challenge them and move on. They want to help you stay in your 'little room.'" The biggest mistake a person can make, thinks Stovall, is trying to get back to where he or she was.

"Once you come face to face with whatever it is—blindness, alcoholism, bankruptcy, whatever—your immediate thought is to get back to normality, to ground zero." Instead, Stovall says, you must force yourself—alone and without friends' support, if necessary—to risk further pain, uncertainty, and embarrassment. "Otherwise, you will sit at your house waiting for all the lights to be green before you start." And that, quite simply, never happens. Start now, no matter how awful the sensation. Stovall himself thinks he was blessed to have been blasted from his television room by the crisis of despair he suffered. If not for it, he might still be there. It forced him, for the first time in his life, to realistically

confront himself. "Many people never have to do that. They roll through life without ever giving too much thought to what they can and cannot do. I knew I had to make some choices."

"Ask Yourself 'What Really Matters to Me?'"

True recovery from a setback, Stovall thinks, has to start with rigorous and unsparing self-appraisal: Who are you? *Where* are you, in comparison to where you want to be? "As a blind person," Stovall says, "I am always intrigued with the way that sighted people get—or fail to get—from point A to point B. It is fascinating to me that people who can see perfectly spend a great deal of their time being lost." The reason they do, he argues, is that they too often have only the haziest idea of the point from which they're standing. "The single most vital piece of information necessary in order to get to where you want to go," he insists "is knowing where you are." There are millions of people who want to have a certain bank balance, weigh a certain amount, or achieve any other business or personal goal, he says, and most are happy to fantasize for hours about where they hope someday to be. But how many of them take the elementary and necessary step of seeing where they really are? The Chinese proverb that "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" indeed is true; but if the pilgrim wants to reach a specific destination, he or she must be sure that step is pointed in the right direction. "Think about all the things you want in the personal and professional areas of your life," says Stovall, "then take account of where you are today. You may find that you're closer than you think. But, in any event, you will have taken the first step in the right direction, and you will have reduced an ethereal dream into a practical goal."

If he could presume to modify the Ten Commandments, Stovall says, he'd add Stovall's Eleventh Commandment: "Thou shalt not kid thyself." It's a rule that applies with special force to people coming back from failure. "We always live up to the expectations that we have for our own lives," he explains, so it's important for us not only to set goals high, but to make sure they're *really ours*—not some friend's or well-wisher's. "If we're not careful, we can find ourselves winning someone else's battle while we lose our own war." Having the courage to follow one's own goals carries with it an excitement, strength, and passion that are lacking when one tries to follow someone else's.

Stovall tells a story by way of illustration:

> There were two warring tribes in the Andes, one that lived in the lowlands and the other high in the mountains. The mountain people invaded the lowlanders one day, and as part of their plundering of the people, they kidnapped a baby and took the infant with them back up into the mountains.
>
> Although the lowlanders didn't know how to climb the mountain, they sent out their best party of fighting men to bring the baby home. They first tried one method of climbing and then another. They tried one trail and then another. After climbing only a few hundred feet after several days of effort, the lowlander men decided that the cause was lost, and they prepared to return to their village below.

As they were packing their gear for the descent, they saw the baby's mother—with the baby strapped to her back—coming down the mountain that they had been unable to climb. One man greeted her and said, "How did you climb this treacherous mountain when we, the strongest and most able men in the village, couldn't do it?"

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "It wasn't your baby."

Stovall recommends that goal seekers regularly review their objectives, weighing the passion that they feel for each one. "Take everything you want to do in your life and either do it now put it on your calendar for a specific point in the future, or write it off as something you are never going to do." The single most important question seekers can ask themselves, he says, is "Does this really matter?" Before wasting time, effort, and energy on a host of exigencies, first ask yourself: "What really matters to me? Which of these demands, if met, will transform me into who I want to become?" "Great people down through the ages have demonstrated one consistent trait: That is the ability to focus all energy and their entire being on the elements of their life that they deem to be important." When we do this, Stovall says we live our lives "on purpose" instead of at random, no longer distracted by whim or circumstance.

To achieve his own comeback, Stovall had to acquire what amounts to a second kind of sight—one he now considers superior to the ocular kind he lost when he was 29. He uses mental visualization not just for preparing speeches but for every other aspect of his life. He has used it to draw for himself, figuratively speaking, a mental map that he can consult regularly to see where he is in relation to his goals. Says his friend Waitley, who has written extensively about visualization, "Jim may not have his eyesight, but he's never lost his vision."

Anyone, Stovall believes, can acquire this same facility if they define, very simply and clearly, their core objectives. "You have to reduce your life's goals to what I call an 'elevator speech.' If you can't explain it to a total stranger in 20 seconds, then you really have not defined it in your own mind." Formulating a personal mission statement helps. Stovall's own? He says his grandmother once expressed it as well as he ever could himself: "My grandson helps blind people see television, and he travels all around the world telling people they can have good things in their lives."

"Failure Is Not Defeat. It Is Merely a Stepping Stone to Your Destiny"

What messages would Stovall want to convey directly to readers of this book? He gave five:

- *The fear never leaves.* Even today, after all he has accomplished since being a depressed blind guy trapped in a 9- by 12-foot room, Stovall still suffers episodes of the kind of doubt and fear that originally immobilized him. The persistence of fear in the lives of people who have successfully staged comebacks, he says, is a fact glossed over by most self-help books. "I think that there's this myth around that once you get to a certain level in your life, it's all downhill and shady. That's not been my experience." He recommends people read Richard Nixon's book *In the Arena: A Story of Victory, Defeat and Renewal* (Simon & Schuster, 1980) for its realistic

treatment of this issue. "It's probably the best book I've read on the subject, because Nixon talks about the fact that, ok, you can come back, but the former defeat is still there. Nixon went to his grave as a maligned figure; he never quite left the legacy he wanted to. The same is true for me. I can have the best life I can possibly have, but I'm still a blind person." Though blindness, he insists is the single best thing that ever happened to him (because it opened new doors and pointed him in new directions), it's still an inconvenience and source of occasional frustration. "There are days when the life I lead, at its best, still is not as good as being able to see. It's not like I ever get over that. There are days when I'd love to be back in that safe little room. A lot of them."

- *To begin a comeback, first change your mind.* The reason he's *not* back in his little room is that the Stovall of today is a different person—a person who won't allow himself to go there. "When you change your mind about who you are, everything becomes possible. The difficulties are still there; the obstacles still exist. I don't see any better today than I did when I walked out of that TV room. But my whole world has changed, because I changed my mind about who I am and what I do. My difficulties are no more than yours or anybody's who will read this book. We're only as big as the smallest thing it takes to divert us from our goal." What sets the new Stovall apart from the old is attitude: He made a conscious decision to be brave, to get up out of his chair and venture forth, even if the cost was that every now and then he'd step on a rake. He pushed himself. He sums up the difference between his old and new selves this way: "Failure feels fear and retreats. Success feels the same fear and moves forward anyway."
- *Pursue your passion.* "I have never met anyone I felt was lazy or stupid." Stovall says "I have, though, met people who are pursing the wrong course. We all know people who can barely drag themselves through a substandard performance each workweek, but who will jump out of bed at 4 a.m. on Saturday to go fishing, skiing, etc. Find the right game, and everyone is a winner." He says he's read, on tape, the biographies of some 1,500 "great men and women" who achieved their personal and professional goals. "I can find very few things that these people had in common except a sense of their own destiny, their own place in history. They believed they were put on this earth to perform a certain task, and that this task would not be accomplished without their best efforts. This kind of personal accountability will lead to greatness in any area of life."
- *Liberate "Someday Isle."* This is Stovall's whimsical name for the place to which adults consign the "unrealistic" ambitions of their youth. "It's a picture-postcard kind of place where the weather is always perfect and everything is always wonderful, except that nothing ever happens. Every time we think of our long-forgotten dreams and goals, we say to ourselves, 'Someday I'll do this' or 'Someday I'll do that.' But someday never comes." That's a tragedy, he thinks, because people brave or imaginative or just plain persistent enough often find ways of making the "unrealistic" entirely practicable. If a dream still has the power to motivate you, liberate it. "I defy you," says Stovall "to find a statue or a monument erected to anyone because they were realistic."
- *Don't quit!* It's true, Stovall says, that success breeds success. "But failure also breeds failure. Once you've had a setback and embraced it, it's easier to opt for failure a second time." So

don't embrace it. Keep swinging. In his most recent book, *The Way I See The World*, Stovall writes: "Failure is not defeat. It is merely a stepping stone to your destiny. As a totally blind person, I believe I could hit a baseball thrown by the best pitcher in the major league if you would allow me to keep swinging until I got a hit. Sooner or later, I would hit one, as long as I kept trying. So, in the final analysis, the only true failure is to stop trying."