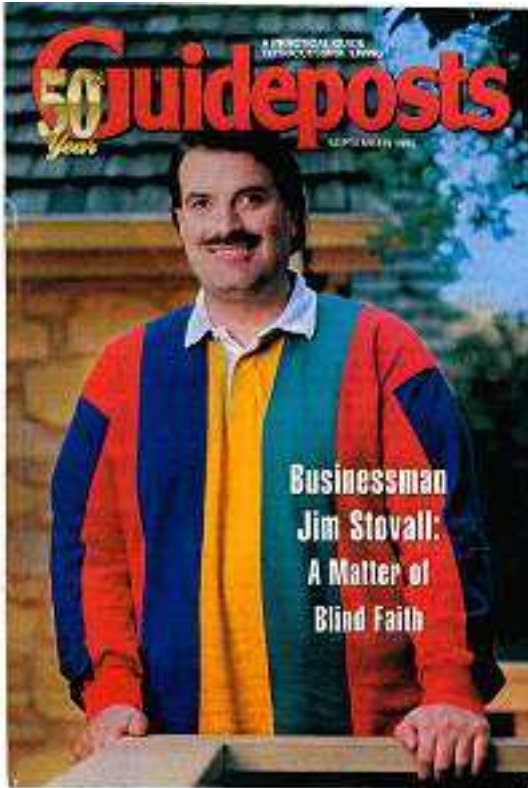


"Yes, You Can!"



I was at a Colorado Springs convention center in the quiet of late afternoon, preparing to speak at a dinner that night. It seemed that everybody else was off skiing as I stepped onto the deserted patio outside my room. As I took a deep breath of crisp air, I heard a deer rustling for berries in the bushes. I had been told the deer here were tame; maybe I could actually touch one. I moved quietly toward the sound, reaching out ...

Suddenly I was plunging downhill, tumbling down a rocky slope some 30 or 40 feet until I crash-landed in a heap. I had walked off the edge of the patio. There I lay, cold and wet in the snow. I'm a big guy, but I felt pretty beat up, as well as scared and disoriented.

No, I hadn't noticed how close I was to the edge of the patio, or that there was a steep drop-off.

I'm blind. I can't see a thing.

When I was 17, a normal all-American kid in Oklahoma, I went to the doctor for a routine physical. He shone a light into my eyes and sent me off for a battery of tests. The news wasn't good: I had a degenerative eye disease and would progressively lose my sight.

It's a devastating thing for anybody to face, much less a happy-go-lucky teenager. I had never even met a blind person. How did they act? What did they do?

As terrible as the news was, it focused my mind in a practical way. If I wanted to stay independent and make a living, college seemed a necessity. I enrolled at a local university, but it was the early 1980s and there were no facilities or arrangements for handicapped students. I always seemed to be groping around in a gray haze.

During this time, while I still had limited vision, I began volunteering at a school for blind kids. The teachers put me in charge of a four-year-old they thought was particularly difficult to deal with. They didn't have many expectations for this little boy; because of

multiple handicaps, they said he would never be able to tie his own shoes or climb stairs. I was determined to prove them wrong.

"You *can* tie your shoes," I told him. "You *can* climb stairs." The little boy was just as determined to resist. He said, "No, I can't," and I said, "Yes, you can." We went back and forth like that constantly.

The truth was, I was having trouble saying "Yes, you can" to my own life. Keeping up with college courses was increasingly hard, and the day came when I decided to call it quits. On my way to the administration building to drop out, I went to the school for blind kids and announced I wouldn't be volunteering anymore either. "It's too tough," I said. "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can!" a little voice piped up beside me. The four-year-old had been listening.

"No, I can't!" I said sharply.

"Yes, you can!"

Then it hit me. I had to keep on trying or admit I had been lying to this kid that the extra effort was worth it. And in that second I knew: It was worth it—for him, and for me.

I resumed college, listening even more attentively as other students read my assignments aloud. One of the sounds that kept me going was the gentle voice of a young woman named Crystal, who read to me patiently week after week. Three and a half years later I graduated. That same week I stood by as the little boy who had said "No, I can't" climbed three flights of stairs by himself, sat on the top step and tied his shoes.

My dream was to start some kind of business. When I talked this over with my dad, he said, "Come back tomorrow and I'll give you something." *Great*, I thought, *he's probably going to stake me to some money*. Instead Dad announced that he had made arrangements for me to have a series of visits with a local man named Lee Braxton. With only a grade-school education, Braxton had become an entrepreneur and made a fortune during the Depression, money he had then used to start and support many charitable and educational organizations. Now he was in his seventies, and I went to his house to listen to his philosophy of life.

One of his favorite biblical passages was, "God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7). Each time, I left his house

feeling built up and full of courage. I asked Mr. Braxton how I could ever thank him. He said, "Someday God will give *you* the opportunity to encourage other people—and you'll pay me back by doing just that."

I was able to start my own investment brokerage and I married Crystal. Then at the age of 29 I lost the remainder of my sight. Any shadings of light that I had previously seen were gone.

I set up a room in my house carefully arranged with everything where I'd always be able to find it. My business was successful, and it was my intention to operate out of this room, where events would be predictable and under my control, more or less forever. I wouldn't fear being awkward or embarrassed or hurt by unknown or unfamiliar situations. I believed that I could spend my entire life here—and for a while I did, mired in deep depression.

But my friends and family helped me work through my blackness. Slowly I started to get back in touch with activities I had enjoyed. I had always loved classic films, and one day I put a Humphrey Bogart movie into the VCR. Even though I couldn't see, I figured I could still follow the plot by listening to the dialogue and sound effects. But about 20 minutes into the film, a character in the movie screamed, there was the squeal of brakes and somebody apparently fled. What was happening?

As the movie went on, I realized there were many other moments when actions or images must have been on the screen explaining or advancing the plot—but I had no idea what they were! Extremely frustrated, I thought: *If the voice of a narrator could be added to describe what was going on, the millions of blind and visually impaired people in the United States could enjoy the movie too.*

It was time to come out of that room. Working with Kathy Harper, a wonderful friend and colleague who is legally blind herself, I started out in 1988 in the basement of a condo in Tulsa. We got permission from the owners of films to add descriptive narrative to the soundtracks of classics such as *The African Queen* and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Using borrowed equipment, we created a sound studio in a broom closet under my stairs, and I recorded the additional commentary about setting and action.

So far, so good. But now we were technically stumped. I called a Tulsa TV studio and asked for help. "Sure," was the answer. "Our most expert guy will work with you."

I showed up the next day with all our tapes and wires in a cardboard box, explaining that we hoped to splice our newly recorded material onto each movie's soundtrack.

"Forget it," the engineer said. "What you're trying to do is impossible."

So I went back to the head of the station and asked him, "You got anybody a little *less* expert?" Out came a kid, maybe 18 or 19, and I told him what I wanted to do. "Let's try it," he said. He fiddled around in the editing room—and it all came together.

The next step was to try to get our shows on TV. We took a less expert point of view on that one too; after a number of telephone calls, we reached a cable company that agreed to let us air several hours of films on one of their channels. We whipped off letters to "impossible-to-get" celebrities such as Katharine Hepburn, Jack Lemmon and Eddie Albert, asking them to appear on a half-hour show about the films—and they agreed. Every step along the way, it seemed we were too naive to know our dream couldn't work.

Officially launched in 1988, our organization was named the Narrative Television Network. As more and more cable stations picked up our offerings, letters from viewers started pouring in. "For the twenty hours a week that your shows are on," one lady wrote, "you make me forget that I'm blind." It made me all the more committed to continue doing things the "experts" told me were hopeless.

As we added our narrative to more and more movies, channels across the country signed up to carry our programming. In October 1990 I went to New York to pick up an Emmy from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for outstanding contributions to the industry, and other prestigious awards followed. Since I was onscreen a lot as host of many of the programs, offers arrived asking me to be a motivational speaker. That meant *really* coming out of my safe room, navigating airports and crowded rooms and coping with unfamiliar surroundings.

So there I was in Colorado Springs, scuffed up at the bottom of a slope, freezing cold and bone-tired. Nobody knew where I was, and I wasn't even sure myself. I thought longingly of that room in my house where everything was predictable and safe.

But I also remembered my friend Lee Braxton, and somehow I felt he was saying to me, "Tonight somebody is coming who needs to hear you, and you owe me. God's giving you the opportunity to encourage other people. Get back up this mountain and get ready to give that speech."

I started climbing the hill, hand over hand. Finally I came to the top and felt around till I found a place I could climb back on the patio, then worked my way from door to door—all locked—until I found the one to my room that I had left ajar. I got cleaned up, and

gave my speech.

It was a speech I give often, and one of the things I told the audience has become a theme for me: Whatever your situation in life, you too can step out of that safe room and proceed with faith minute by minute, hand over hand, not worrying about what lies ahead or what might happen, but trusting that God will supply you the energy and courage to cope with each experience as it arises.

Yes, there'll be times you will fall off the patio. And you'll feel like shouting, "No, I can't."
But I've got news for you: Yes, you can!