

KEVIN SPAFFORD



# CHANGE HAPPENS

**H**ave you noticed? Business owners, corporate employees, government minions and consumers are whiling away the days in a state of prolonged noncommittal shock. We've witnessed some horrific business collapses, bankruptcies and failures. We watch idly as the government befuddles with bailouts, warns of pending doom and then promises brighter days. At times I find myself going through the motions in a fog, hesitant in purpose and determination. But I know that in adversity there is always the seed of an equal or greater benefit.

In 2006 I met Mike Penketh. His story was featured in a magazine and, after reading it several times, I wanted to hear his tale with my own ears. At the time, I needed to personally witness the events that had shaped him. Mike's life was forever changed by a near-death experience with irreversible consequences. But, he says, change is "for the better."

The article I read started, "People often go through life changes, but not at 250 mph." For Penketh, the change occurred in 1993 on the Bonneville Salt Flats when the Lakester he was racing crashed

at 263 mph. He can't recall what happened, but the car rolled several times and, as it crashed, disintegrated around him. The centrifugal force sent his arms outside the cockpit and caused his hands to be sheared off.

Ten days later he opened his eyes, vaguely aware of someone speaking to him. With tears in her eyes and a voice barely audible through crying gasps, his wife told him that his hands were gone.

His life would never be the same. Penketh told me, "When I woke up, I started a new life. What's done is done.

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I'll never grow hands back." He added, "It wasn't easy. There were plenty of dark days." He contemplated suicide, and like a stuck needle on an old 45 his thoughts repeated, Why? Why me? Why now? Why this? Why...

Penketh was a man's man, defined by the kind of experiences most people only dream of. He was a Marine Corps fighter pilot whose first trip aboard an aircraft carrier was also his first carrier landing. He was an airline pilot, flew aerobatic biplanes, competed in the Reno Air Races and flew firefighting air tankers. Needless to say, Penketh lived in the fast lane.

**Life-defining choice.** A disaster, tragic event or overwhelming challenge often becomes a life-altering grace. Penketh now serves as a volunteer for the nonprofit organization A Touch of Understanding, which educates children about the disabled. The organization has sparked in Penketh that inner fire known only to those who are deter-

mined to change the world through their vocation. He now has the satisfaction of deeper friendships, an enriched purpose and new goals, and he's admittedly "a much better, happier person."

Failures, disasters and overwhelming challenges are life-altering. Our response to them is life-defining. Our reaction forms who we are, creates character and grows our capabilities.

Whether it's an accident, economic catastrophe, job change or simply a sudden change in attitude, a life-altering event will clear your senses and focus your desires. A friend of mine often says, "What you do when you don't have to will determine what you'll be when you can't help it." It shouldn't take a disaster or cataclysmic event to change our lives. Our sole focus should be to wring satisfaction, joy and appreciation out of every day.

Consider these simple affirmations:

1. Success is a choice.
2. Innovation and ingenuity are most often born through adversity.

3. It is better to create than to conform.

4. A life of challenges met is more satisfying than a life of regrets.

5. The legacy you leave will be the lives you touch.

Penketh's story left a lasting impression with me. The human spirit is a wonder of survival, ingenuity and creativity. The only difference between the person you are today and the person you will be tomorrow is the decisions you make and the actions you take.

The current economic catastrophe will eventually run its course. Some people will come out on top; others may be less fortunate. It doesn't matter what happens, but how you respond.

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